
Chapter 1

“That’s a gorgeous ring!” exclaimed Maisie as she studied Jenny’s hand. “You can see those are top-quality diamonds.”

“Did you think Reade’s mother would have a ring from Shopping Network?” asked Mandy with a laugh and then added, “Is this the permanent ring or just a place keeper?”

“It’s permanent unless I want something different,” replied Jenny. “Reade said we can get whatever I want, but I’d kind of like to keep this one. What do you think?”

“I’d keep it,” said Maisie, and Mandy nodded her agreement. “Me too.”

“It’s nice to have a family ring,” added Maisie, “and anyway, it’s a nice size. You won’t have to worry about anyone planning a heist.”

“It’s not that small!” objected Jenny. “In fact, for me it’s almost a bit on the big side. You know I like really simple jewelry.”

Then, before either of her friends could answer, she exclaimed, “You should have seen the ruby ring his mother was wearing the day I met her. It was definitely heist-worthy!”

“I wonder who gave it to her?” asked Mandy. “Who did you tell us she’s married to now?”

“Some French marquis named de Faucher.”

“Marquis de Faucher,” said Maisie. “Sounds totally French, doesn’t it? What’s he like?”

“He was off in Africa on some kind of hunt when we were there, so I didn’t meet him.” The look on Jenny’s face made it clear what she thought about hunting. “They’ve been married for a long time, though, and Reade likes him.”

The three women were huddled around a corner table in Pancho Villa’s, their favorite Tex-Mex restaurant in Edinburgh, drinking margaritas and enjoying nachos. They were all there with drivers today, so they could indulge if they wanted and in fact had just ordered their second pitcher of drinks.

Catherwood, the estate where Jenny was living, was in a neighboring county a good hour away, so Reade had put a car and driver at her disposal shortly after she’d moved back to Scotland with him. Mandy and Maisie normally drove themselves into the city, but since they’d decided ahead of time to indulge in a pitcher (or two) of margaritas, Mandy’s husband Quinn, had sent them with their own car and driver today, too.

“I can’t believe all this is happening,” said Maisie now as she shook her head slightly. “You came over for a couple weeks to visit Mandy, bumped into Reade in the woods totally by accident, and then left again having somehow caused Reade Ramsay, the mysterious young Earl of Cranford who just happens to be heir to this enormous estate and fortune, to fall madly in love with you. Do you have any idea how high you’re going to be?”

“What do you mean, how high?”

“I mean rank wise. My God, Jenny, he’s going to be a marquess, which will make you a marchioness. Mandy and I will be left trailing behind you in humble subservience.”

Mandy laughed, but Jenny looked uncomfortable. “I don’t like to hear that stuff.”

“You’d better get used to it,” returned Maisie. “It’s going to be your new life.”

“But she’s kidding about us trailing behind,” Mandy reassured her good friend.

“Well, literally, yes,” admitted Maisie, “but Reade’s father is really old and could die at any time. You’ll be a marchioness while Mandy’s still a viscountess. That’s two ranks higher.” Then she added, “And of course there’s me, with no rank at all.”

Mandy’s husband Quinn was a viscount, making Mandy a viscountess, and someday he’d inherit the Morleton earldom, making him an earl and Mandy a countess. Maisie, Quinn’s much younger sister, was married to the second son of an earl, so while she had the courtesy title of ‘Lady’ because her own father was an earl, she had no title through her husband.

“But what does it matter?” persisted Jenny. Knowing she wasn’t all that comfortable with the peerage system, Reade usually underplayed the rank system with her, so she still didn’t begin to understand it as well as her two friends did.

“It’s hard to explain,” Mandy said now, sloughing it aside. She’d known Jenny for years back in Houston and knew how unassuming she was, and on a few occasions Mandy and Maisie had even privately laughed good-naturedly at the idea of Jenny being a marchioness. She was an all-American girl—cheeky, irreverent and not afraid to crack jokes about the peerage. Evidently Reade was okay with it, but it was an unusual match.

“So what’s this you said about moving into the manor house?” asked Mandy.

“Reade had a really long talk with his mother while we were in France, and she thinks he should go back to living there and bring me with him. She said now that we’re engaged, he shouldn’t be hiding me from the world.”

“I agree,” said Maisie.

“Maybe, but he’s dragging his feet because he doesn’t want his father to meet me.”

“That’s really weird that you haven’t even met the marquess yet,” said Mandy with a little frown.

“Reade said he’s getting senile. He calls for him a lot and then just yells at him when he’s there. He never really wants anything except to be bossy and abusive.”

“According to the rumors, he’s always been bossy and abusive,” commented Maisie with a little laugh.

“Well, I suppose bossy goes with the territory,” agreed Jenny, “but it would be nice to be bossy *about* something. Every time Reade comes back after being summoned, he says his father didn’t really want anything. He just yells and accuses him of lying or stealing from him. He waves his cane around and threatens him, and once he caught Reade’s cheek with it. Reade just wants him to hurry up and die.”

“Did he say that?” asked Mandy, surprised.

“Yes.”

Mandy looked shocked, but Maisie nodded. “You know, if someone’s been abusive to you all your life, you’re not exactly going to be their biggest fan. I probably wouldn’t be wild about someone who’d thrown me in a dungeon.”

When Reade was fourteen, he’d run away, and when he was dragged back, his father had thrown him into the old dungeon that still existed in the huge manor house. There’d been rumors about the episode for more than two decades, but Jenny had found out it was a true story. The marquess had kept his young son locked up in a dank cell for two weeks, coming every few days to beat him so viciously that there were still a few faint scars on his back.

“Getting back to your ring, what are you going to do about a wedding?” asked Mandy.

Jenny shrugged. “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it.”

“Isn’t that the point of having a ring?”

Jenny giggled. “Yes, but I don’t know what I want, and I really don’t think Reade does either. I can’t quite imagine a

wedding with his father there. I don't even know if he'd come. He's like some crazy old recluse. I'd just as soon go elope somewhere, but Reade mentioned once that if we're married, his father has some control over me, and he doesn't want that."

Mandy laughed. "So are you two just going to sit around hoping his father dies soon?"

Jenny shrugged again. "Maybe."

"It would be a pity to waste your titles on no wedding," declared Maisie. "I mean, come on, we want some pageantry here."

"If you wait until his father dies, you can have even more," Mandy reminded her, but Maisie shook her head.

"It's not necessary. Everyone knows the Earl of Cranford is about to become the Marquess of Catherwood, not to mention all the other titles that float around in that family. I've heard they have titles from the Continent too. Has Reade talked about them at all?" Maisie turned to Jenny with the last question, but her friend was frowning.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here. I'm not at all the right person to be dealing with all these titles."

Mandy nodded in agreement. "If you remember, that's exactly what I used to say. It can be really scary coming into all this."

"At least Quinn's family talked to each other," replied Jenny. "We can't have some big wedding with Reade and his father barely speaking and no mother there to plan anything."

"Maybe you could go to France and get married," suggested Maisie. "I'll bet his mother and old de Faucher have a lot of friends, and her own family is from there, too, so you could have all the trappings *à la française*."

"I just don't know," answered Jenny, sounding a bit down about all of it. "I want to *be* married but not go through all the hoopla. Actually, I was quite happy just being together almost unofficially, but Reade's mother told him he needs to set the right precedents now for when he inherits."

“She’s probably right,” agreed Mandy.

“We could put a huge splash in the paper all about the Earl of Cranford’s new fiancée,” offered Maisie with a big grin. “How’s that for a precedent?”

Jenny gave her a threatening look. “It won’t do much for keeping the news from his father.”

“If he’s senile, maybe he doesn’t even read the paper anymore.”

“Reade thinks there’s someone feeding him little tidbits, especially ones that stir the pot,” replied Jenny. “When Reade first came back, his father knew he had a girlfriend in Texas.” Then she laughed. “Of course by the next day he’d forgotten again.”

“You need to meet him so you can tell us all about him,” said Mandy.

“I don’t think so,” answered Jenny. “I figure if Reade wants us apart, there’s probably a good reason.”

“Your coming to live at Morleton was absolutely boring compared to what Jenny’s dealing with,” Maisie said to Mandy. “I remember those early days, the family dinners with my father sitting there stone-faced and you looking terrified, but at least you two were at the same table and on speaking terms.”

“I *was* terrified, but at least I wasn’t worried your father would start screaming abuse and threatening people with his cane.”

Maisie laughed at the idea of her father, the ever-proper Earl of Morleton, losing control of himself in public and then said to Jenny, “You know that Chinese saying ‘May you live in interesting times’? I think you’ve got that part down pat. Maybe you should start a journal so that you can remember everything someday if you want to write about Crazy Catherwood and the Mad Marquess.”

“How was your outing?” asked Quinn that evening as he and Mandy shared the sofa in their private sitting area.

“It was fun. I love having Jenny here now, but I wish she wasn’t so far away.”

“She’s a lot closer than she was in Houston.”

“Thank you, Dr. Geography.”

Quinn raised his eyebrows in surprise. He could always tell when Mandy had been with Jenny, because the Houston cheeky gene popped up.

“What’s going on with Reade and his father?” he asked, changing the subject.

Mandy told him some of what the women had talked about, and Quinn shook his head.

“I don’t envy him, that’s for sure,” he said with a serious look on his face. “He’s in a really tough spot.”

“You mean because his father yells at him all the time?”

“I expect he’s used to that. I was thinking more of the fact that ordinarily his word would already be law on the march, second only, of course, to his father. He should have tremendous power, but if he and his father are at odds, that leaves the staff not sure what to do. They dare not disregard the marquess, even if he’s not always in his right mind now, but I’m sure it’s clear to everyone that his days are numbered, meaning they can’t afford to alienate Reade either, who will himself be the marquess in the very near future.

“I gather from what you say that until now Reade’s basically gone his own way and didn’t involve himself too much in march affairs even though it’s his birthright. Now though, if he agrees with his mother’s advice and wants to begin establishing his authority there, it could lead to some interesting situations which won’t be easy for anyone.” He shook his head again in commiseration.

“Maisie said that in comparison to the Catherwood saga, my coming here was downright easy,” said Mandy with a tiny giggle as she scooted closer to Quinn.

“I’d have to agree. My father may have been cool to the whole thing, but he was certainly in his right mind and always openly supported me as the heir.”

He wrapped his arms around Mandy and pulled her against him. “It will be interesting to see how this plays out. Reade has his work cut out for him, that’s for sure. I just hope Jenny’s up for whatever happens.”