
Chapter 1

Jenny Hanson and Mandy Stuart were best friends in Houston, but then Mandy fell in love with Quinn Douglas, a visiting Scotsman who turned out to be a viscount from an old aristocratic family. Mandy moved to Scotland where she married Quinn in a pageant-filled wedding that included Jenny as a bridesmaid and that turned unassuming Mandy from Houston into Lady Amanda, a viscountess.

Three years later Jenny flew to Scotland again to visit her good friend, and while there she quite by accident met Reade Ramsay, known to most as the Earl of Cranford and the future Marquess of Catherwood, a troubled but enormously wealthy estate. Reade was fascinated by the spunky and outspoken young Texan and followed her back to Houston, where they fell in love.

Jenny returned to Scotland with Reade, who needed to deal with the demands of his aging and increasingly senile father, the Marquess of Catherwood, a man whose cruelty and perversion had not faded with age. The situation was complicated by Reade's two much older half-brothers, sons of his father's mistress of sixty years. While the Burton brothers had no legal standing, the marquess had always given them free rein of the estate to indulge their unsavory appetites, and as the marquess' final days approached, the brothers' resentment of thirty-seven-year-old Reade, the legal heir, became more apparent.

When the marquess finally died, Reade inherited not only the title of Marquess of Catherwood but also the difficult task of ridding the vast estate of the brothers' sordid activities. He was determined to make Catherwood once again a place to be proud of—a place where he and Jenny could marry and raise a family.

Reade gave his full attention to what the lead solicitor was saying.

“We’ve examined your father’s records in great detail, my lord, and I’m happy to say we’ve found no illegal activity under the laws of primogeniture. No entailed property has been given away or sold. However, as you already know, large sums of money were passed to the Burtons in your father’s final months, and over the years he also signed over a number of entailed properties to the Burton brothers using long-term leases. While those leases can of course be broken, it will take some time.”

Reade frowned slightly as he listened. “How many properties are we talking about?”

“Aside from the three properties used as residences by Mrs. Burton and her two sons, there are nine houses we’ve identified, my lord.”

“Nine!” Reade’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“Yes, my lord. Each is fairly close to the estate’s perimeter and has its own gate, but that may be just a coincidence.”

“Do the leases mention what the properties are being used for?”

“No, my lord.”

“Can you collect that information for me please, Byers?”

“Of course, my lord, although the accuracy of our information will depend in large part on the Burtons being forthcoming with us.”

Reade made a small sound of distaste. “That’s not their strong suit. Perhaps we should hire some investigators to see what they can uncover.”

“If you wish, my lord.”

“Yes, please do so, and don’t worry about the cost. At this point, I need to have as accurate information as possible.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“In the meanwhile, please have your office begin drawing up the papers necessary for eviction on the nine non-residential properties.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And one other thing, Byers. Please prepare papers for my signature barring the Burtons from use of the old dungeon. Give them a few days’ notice in case they have personal belongings they want to remove, but I’d like to have the letter prepared this week.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Adair and Harold Burton, in their mid-fifties, had been using the centuries-old dungeon in the huge manor house for a personal S & M playground, a situation Reade intended to put an end to as soon as possible.

Because the two Burton men were acknowledged sons of Reade’s father, he felt they were entitled to some consideration, meaning he wasn’t sure he wanted to completely cut them off from the enormous Catherwood estate. If they were going to continue to be there, though, it would be simply as residents, and their other assorted activities would have to cease. Once Byers had collected information on the nine houses they were using, he’d have to decide how to handle the situation.

“I’ll look forward to your further report,” said Reade as he rose and took his leave.

“Did you have a nice day?” Reade asked several hours later as Jenny entered the living room of his apartment in Drummond Court, the huge Catherwood manor house. He’d been back from the solicitor’s for several hours now, but Jenny had gone to

spend the day at Morleton, the estate where her friend Mandy lived.

“It was great!” she replied, her face glowing.

“Poor Quinn! What kind of mischief did you three ladies get up to today?”

“It was only Mandy and me. Maisie couldn’t come.”

Maisie was Quinn’s much younger sister and a very close friend of both Mandy and Jenny. Her marriage to her childhood sweetheart hadn’t dampened even slightly her high spirits and ability to find mischief wherever she went.

Reade picked up a house phone and asked the kitchen to send some tea and then patted the cushion next to him. “Come sit over here and tell me about your day.”

Jenny came over and sat down on his lap instead and then wrapped her arms around him.

“I missed you,” Reade said as he kissed her.

“Oh, you were probably too busy with your lawyers to think about me.”

“I can do both.”

Jenny readjusted herself on his lap and then announced, “There’s something I need.”

Reade’s eyes twinkled. “I totally agree, but we may not be thinking of the same thing. What is it *you* think you need?”

“Dancing lessons.”

Reade looked surprised. Of everything he’d expected to hear, dancing lessons wasn’t even a possibility.

“Dancing lessons?” he repeated. “Where did that come from? I thought you knew how to dance.”

“Well sure, in Houston, but this is different over here. Mandy was talking about the Morleton Ball today. It’s almost time for it again, and she was telling me that the dancing here is really different from what we did in the States.”

“It’s probably more formal,” he conceded. “Is that what she meant?”

“Yes. She said it’s like something in a Disney movie or an old opera ball in Vienna. You know, waltzes and all that.”

Reade looked amused. “Are you telling me you can’t waltz?”

“Well, I kind of learned back in junior high, but she said this isn’t at all the same thing. It’s Disney-movie dancing, and I don’t know that. She had lessons before the first ball she went to, and she says I should have some too.”

Just then a young woman entered and set down a tray with tea and a selection of afternoon snacks. Jenny’s eyes lit up, and she slid off Reade’s lap, took a tiny cookie and popped it into her mouth.

“Hungry?” asked Reade, amused as so often by Jenny’s lack of protocol. Her easy-going manner was the complete opposite of his own strict upbringing and had been one of the major reasons he’d been so fascinated by her from their very first encounter.

“It looked good,” she replied with a guilty little smile.

Reade leaned forward and fixed a cup of tea for Jenny and then one for himself. Then he passed Jenny the delicate porcelain plate with the treats and watched as she put several more little delicacies on her saucer.

“Now that your energy is being refreshed, why don’t you tell me more about the dancing lessons you want,” he said. “Is it something I can teach you?”

“I don’t know. Are you a dancing instructor?”

“No, but I plan to be your dancing partner, so that counts for something.”

Jenny frowned slightly. “Actually, Mandy said that we won’t get to dance together most of the time. Other men will keep cutting in and also asking for dances in advance. She doesn’t like that part of it, but Quinn said it’s normal here.”

Reade nodded. “It is. I fully expect to have a hard time dancing with my own fiancée.”

“Not if I don’t get some dancing lessons. No one will want to dance with someone who keeps tripping over their feet.”

Reade chuckled. "Well, there's the solution. We won't get you any lessons and then I can have you all to myself that evening. By the way, when is the ball this year?"

"It's still two months away, but we'll be in the States for some of that time, so I need to start now. I also need a ball gown. Mandy said they're not the same as what I'd find in Houston."

"You want lessons *and* a gown?" asked Reade with faux outrage. "What kind of woman have I got myself entangled with?"

Jenny giggled and helped herself to a second round of goodies.

"Perhaps we should look for a gown with an elastic waist," joked Reade. He enjoyed Jenny's relish for life, which included an open appreciation for most food.

"So when can I start lessons?"

"We need to get the name of an instructor first."

"I have the name of the person who taught Mandy."

Reade nodded. "Did he come to the house or did she go to him?"

"She went into town to his studio, but Morleton is a lot closer to Edinburgh than we are."

"Let me have the number and I'll set something up. Maybe you can use the ballroom here."

Jenny's face lit up. "That would be so cool. Do you think you'll ever give a ball here?"

"If it's something you'd like, of course we can, but the ballroom would need to be redone, just like most of the formal areas would."

"Do you have the money to fix it all up?"

"I'll manage," replied Reade with a small smile.

Catherwood was enormously wealthy, but some of the public areas of the manor house hadn't been completely kept up during his father's long rule as marquess. In addition to his permanent mistress, he'd been married twice, once for six years to a woman who had given him two daughters and then for fifteen years to

Reade's mother, but they'd divorced almost twenty-five years ago, and after that, there'd been no marchioness to give balls or host gala soirees. Instead, the sordid activities of the Burton brothers had been the source of many rumors, and Catherwood's reputation had suffered.

Now Reade hoped to return Catherwood to its former place of prestige among the grand estates of Scotland, but he would follow Jenny's wishes. He had no desire to force her into a life she didn't want, but he'd been surprised to discover that balls and ball gowns held interest for his normally casual Texas fiancée. He'd seen the stars in her eyes as she'd described Mandy's first ball at Morleton and shown him pictures of her friend in her gown and tiara.

Once Reade and Jenny were married, 'his' Jenny could preside over her own ball as the Marchioness of Catherwood. Imagining her with a tiara atop her sun-streaked blonde hair always brought a smile to his face. She was going to be a marchioness like none before her!

"Would you try to set something up as soon as possible?" asked Jenny, still nibbling on her little treats. "Mandy said it wasn't so easy learning to dance like a princess, especially knowing the earl would be watching her all evening."

Quinn's father, the stern Earl of Morleton, had only very grudgingly agreed to the marriage of his son to a 'commoner' from the United States, and it had taken Mandy some time to win him over. Her flawless comportment and then the birth of an heir had finally gained his approval, but it had been a long road.

Reade laughed. "Fortunately, you only have to learn to dance like a future marchioness, and there will be no one standing in judgment."

"Oh, I expect I'll be noticed. You know the name Catherwood still raises a lot of eyebrows, at least according to Maisie."

"Ah, Maisie and her opinions. Whatever would we do without them?"

"But you know she's right."

Reade sighed. “Yes, in this case I do, and my goal as marquess is to change that. I hope to erase all the damage the Burtons have done to Catherwood.”

“Your father’s own behavior didn’t help any.”

“I know.”

“So on that topic, how did your visit go with the solicitor?”

“We’re not done yet, but I did find out that my father leased Adair and Harold nine houses besides their own homes.”

“Nine!” Jenny rolled her eyes. “I’ll bet they’re running a full-menu sex operation here.”

“Operation?”

“I don’t mean medical operation. I’m talking about activities. You’re lucky you’re not in the States or someone would bust this whole estate.”

“Let’s wait and see what the solicitor finds out.”

“What are you going to do about the dungeon?”

“I’m having papers drawn up to bar them entry.”

“They’re not going to be very happy.”

“I’m not here to make them happy.”

The last was said in what Jenny had dubbed early on as his ‘earl voice’. Of course, that was when he *was* an earl—the Earl of Cranford, a title his father had given him when he was only six. Now, although he still had that title, the title of marquess outranked it, and so he was no longer referred to as an earl.

Jenny had finally stopped nibbling, so she got up and returned to Reade’s lap, one of her favorite places.

“Are you a good dancer?” she asked, resuming their earlier topic of conversation.

“I can do my duty.”

“That’s not what I asked. Are you *good*?”

“You’ll have to tell me after you’ve tried me out. I’ve never had any complaints.”

Jenny giggled. “Well, according to Maisie, this area is full of women who would have danced in mud if it would have gotten your attention.”

Reade frowned slightly. “She’s a bit prone to exaggeration.”

“Not so much. It just bothers you because she calls a spade a spade.”

When Reade didn’t answer, Jenny continued. “You should always remember that we only met because of Maisie.”

Reade tickled her ribs slightly before pulling her tightly against him. “That and the fact that you got yourself lost in my woods.”

Jenny giggled again. “But I was only in your woods because of Maisie. However you cut it, it comes back to Maisie, so I think you should appreciate her more.”

“Right now I’d rather appreciate *you*.”

“So do it.”

He moved her off his lap, stood up, and then turned and scooped her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, resisting slightly.

“Taking you to the bedroom so I can fully appreciate you.”