

PRINCESS CHARMING by Nicole Jordan

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE:

London, May 1816

The flash of amber silk intrigued him, although not as much as the lovely woman wearing it.

Lounging negligently against a column in his crowded ballroom, Ashton Wilde, eighth Marquis of Beaufort, narrowed his gaze as the blond beauty disappeared through the French doors onto the terrace beyond.

Maura Collyer, his younger sister's bosom friend. What the devil was she up to?

Curiosity warred with odd disappointment as Ash speculated on her intent. It appeared that Miss Collyer was trysting with one of his noble guests, Viscount Deering.

For all her beauty, he would never have taken Maura for the scarlet woman sort. As far as he knew, she didn't even *like* most men, and at four-and-twenty she was long on the shelf. And yet she had pursued Lord Deering onto a moonlit terrace in the middle of a grand ball for what looked like an assignation.

His boredom suddenly evaporating, Ash pushed away from the column and forged a path through the glittering, bejewelled sea of company. He had expected better of Miss Collyer—

Wry amusement twisted his mouth at the quaint thought. How the leading member of the scandalous Wildes could condemn a lady for flouting propriety with a lovers' tryst was the height of irony. The Wildes were legendary for their passionate exploits, their surname synonymous with a blatant disregard for the rules governing the *Beau Monde*, and Ash himself was currently his family's worst offender.

Still, he couldn't banish his contrary stab of displeasure at the notion of his sister's closest friend taking Deering as a lover.

The terrace doors had been flung open to alleviate the heat from the chandeliers and the crush of perfumed bodies. Upon reaching the threshold, Ash paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimmer light on the terrace and focus on the couple near the stone balustrade.

Although not embracing, they were standing close together – or rather the lady was standing before the gentleman. Her position offered Ash a view of her profile, so he could see that her delicate jaw was set while her hands were tightly clenched.

It did not appear to be a romantic tryst but a confrontation, he decided. He could overhear her low, impassioned voice imploring the viscount, although the noise from the chattering, dancing throng behind him drowned out most of her words.

Ash moved a step closer just as a momentary lull in the music brought Miss Collyer's urgent declaration to him.

"Emperor did not belong to her, I tell you! She had no right to sell him to you."

"I have a legal deed of sale that says otherwise," Deering responded in an arrogant drawl that evidently grated on her nerves.

The beauty inhaled a deep breath, as if striving to maintain control of her emotions. "Then allow me to buy him back... *Please*."

"You cannot afford my price, Miss Collyer."

"I can raise the funds somehow. I will sell the entire stables if I must."

When Deering laughed in that supercilious way of his, Ash felt the same grating irritation.

He knew Rupert Firth, Viscount Deering fairly well. Of similar ages – a year past thirty – they had attended Cambridge at the same time. Like Ash, Deering had dark curling hair, a noble title, and a significant fortune. But there the similarities ended. Most notably, the viscount was a head shorter, with a body that was turning to flab from an overindulgence of fine port wine.

Ash had never liked Deering, mainly because of his attitude of snide superiority. That dislike only increased now as the discussion continued.

"I might be persuaded... for a price," Deering said with a smirk that made Ash itch to intervene.

"What price?" Miss Collyer asked warily.

In answer, the nobleman reached out and trailed a languid finger along her bare throat to the low neckline of her gown.

When she visibly gritted her teeth, Ash felt some satisfaction that she wasn't soliciting the viscount's advances, far from it. Yet he was surprised by his own violent reaction: The urge to wrap his hands around the man's throat speared through him.

Then Deering gave a low, seductive laugh that raised his ire even further.

"I see you take my meaning, Miss Collyer. If you are truly interested in regaining your property, you will accommodate my wishes. You are quite lovely. I find I want you almost as much as I coveted your magnificent stallion."

Flinching, she took a step backward, out of reach, distaste written in every line of her face. "I regret I must decline your proposition, my lord."

"You should realize that beggars cannot be choosers."

"I am not a beggar quite yet, Lord Deering."

The viscount moved closer, but she stood her ground. When his fingers covered her breast and squeezed, Ash took a reflexive step toward them.

But Maura Collyer evidently did not need defending, for she brought her heel down hard on the viscount's instep. Even with her soft evening slippers, the impact must have hurt.

It did, if the viscount's pained growl was any indication.

"Your stubbornness reminds me of your damned father!" he ground out through his teeth. "I could not persuade him to sell, but I found a way to win in the end. Your stepmother was far more accommodating."

For a moment Miss Collyer froze, her expression one of devastation. Only then did Ash recall the bad blood between her family and the viscount. Deering had accused her father of cheating at cards two years ago, but Noah Collyer had died before the matter could be resolved.

When Deering reached for her breast again, she broke out of her paralysis with ferocity. Uttering an audible curse, she brought her knee up to contact the viscount's satin breeches at an especially vulnerable point.

Deering gave a harsh groan and doubled over, clutching his ballocks. Then Maura stamped down on his other instep for good measure.

Ash didn't know which of his emotions was strongest just then -- amusement, admiration, or anger.

Amusement because he'd wanted to do the same thing to Deering for years.

Admiration because very few females outside those in his own family had the spirit or courage to engage in a physical brawl with a significantly larger man.

And anger because a genteel young lady had been accosted in his own home. Specifically this young lady, who was Katharine's friend and therefore deserved his protection.

Deering was clearly angry also; in fact, he was in a fury. "You... will regret this... you damned vixen!" he panted, still bent over.

"The only thing I regret is thinking you were honorable enough to let me plead my case! I was fully prepared to purchase my horse back, not sell myself to you!"

She was panting as much as her suffering adversary, but her breathlessness stemmed from outrage instead of pain. Even at a distance, Ash could practically see sparks flashing from her eyes. When she balled her fists as if she might strike a blow at the viscount's sneering face, Ash decided it was time to intervene.

"It is time you took your leave, Deering," he declared, striding across the terrace toward them.

At his sudden appearance, Miss Collyer gave a start, while the viscount straightened painfully.

"This is none of your affair, Beaufort!" Deering snapped.

"It is very much my affair. You assaulted one of my guests."

"I assaulted *her*?" he sputtered. "That she-devil was the one who assaulted me!"

Ash bit back a smile. "I would not advertise that fact if I were you, Rupert. You will only invite scorn and make yourself a target for the cartoonists. Do you need assistance calling for your carriage?"

"Bloody hell... no, I can summon my own infernal carriage."

"Then pray do so. You are no longer welcome here."

The viscount shot Ash a look of extreme dislike. "This is no way to treat a man of my rank, Beaufort, ordering me to leave while taking that witch's side."

"Spare me your protests. You got exactly what you deserved. I would have hurt you myself if she had not."

Deering's expression only darkened. After another fierce glare at Miss Collyer, though, he limped off in the direction of the ballroom.

Alone on the terrace with her, Ash turned and found his gaze arrested by the enchanting picture she made. Maura stood with her fists still clenched, her cheeks flushed with anger, her bosom heaving softly. In the candle glow spilling from the ballroom windows, she looked fiery and beautiful, her honey-colored hair only a few shades lighter than the gold-embroidered amber silk gracing her tall, lithe figure.

He was not accustomed to seeing Miss Collyer so stylishly garbed. Her ball gown was an elegant confection, with short puffed sleeves and a low décolletage that offered meager coverage for the ripe swells of her breasts. Usually she wore plain muslin or kerseymere or – since her father's unexpected death from heart failure two years ago – black bombazine.

Her long, white kid gloves shielded her arms from the cool night air, but she was still shaking, no doubt in the aftermath of rage rather than from the chill.

Seeing all that trembling intensity, Ash could imagine her in his bed, shuddering in the throes of passion.

Aware of the primal surge of lust streaking through him, he tamped down on his inappropriate urges at the same time he noticed that one sleeve of her gown had been pulled down to bare her pale white shoulder.

Stepping close to Maura, he straightened her sleeve, trying to make his helpful gesture appear casual and brotherly.

Her flush deepened, as if she suddenly recognized that he'd witnessed the entire event, including the viscount's ignoble sexual advances.

When Ash finished repositioning her sleeve, she turned quickly toward the French doors. But he stayed her with a light touch on her gloved arm. "You should remain here for a moment. You cannot return to the ballroom looking so disheveled and distraught."

"I am not distraught! I am furious."

"Don't quibble. It amounts to the same thing. You are breathing fire. You will frighten all my guests."

She grimaced in frustration but apparently agreed with him, for after a short hesitation, she

went to stand at the balustrade, her gloved fingers clutching at the gray stone. "Why are you even out here, Lord Beaufort? You are supposed to be hosting your sister's ball."

Joining her at the railing, Ash answered honestly. "You roused my curiosity when you followed Deering here. I thought you might be having a liaison with your lover."

"With *Lord Deering*?" She sounded appalled, disgusted. "I would sooner take a snake as a lover-- Not that I would ever take a lover of any kind," she hastened to add. "Or that it would be your concern if I did."

Ash let her intriguing denial go unremarked. "I realized your dislike of him when I overheard your conversation."

"Did no one ever teach you that it is impolite to eavesdrop?" she muttered.

He smiled at her question. "Any number of people have tried to teach me polite manners, but I fear little of their instruction took hold. In your case, however, it was not rudeness that led me to eavesdrop."

"No?"

"No. I relish a mystery, and I was suffering a near fatal case of ennui. When you slipped away, I was delighted that finally something interesting was happening this evening. And then I remained here on the terrace because I thought you might need my protection."

She shot him an irritated glance. "I did not need your protection. I can defend myself."

"Obviously," Ash said with dry amusement. Her hazel eyes were still shooting daggers. "If looks could kill, Deering would be six feet underground by now. As it was, you temporarily unmanned him."

"I wish it could have been permanent," Maura said through gritted teeth.

Her agitation was still visible, and she seemed intent on shredding her kid gloves against the rough stone.

Just then, voices from the ballroom grew louder, wafting through the open doors behind them. Not wanting an audience, Ash reached out on impulse and peeled Miss Collyer's fingers away from the balustrade.

"Come with me," he ordered, catching her hand in his. Turning toward the terrace steps, he tugged her behind him.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, trying to pull back.

"Only down to the garden so you can cool off. You need time to recover your composure."

She accompanied him then, although rather unwillingly.

As he led her down the wide marble steps, Ash tried to analyze why he felt so protective of Maura, and more inexplicably, why he felt this unexpected possessiveness toward her.

Her statement moments ago about not wanting a lover of any kind gave him a strange satisfaction. He'd never heard of Maura Collyer engaging in any romantic affairs, yet that

didn't mean she hadn't indulged discreetly.

He supposed his protectiveness was a result of her close connection to his sister Katharine and his cousin Skye. The three girls had become fast friends years ago at an elite boarding academy.

Like Katharine, Maura was unique in that she enjoyed more masculine pursuits than was typical of their peers. Breeding race horses was most assuredly not a ladylike profession either. After losing her father so unexpectedly, Maura had retired to the country and thrown herself into improving the breeding stables she'd inherited so that she could support herself.

Ash had always been impressed by her fire and spirit. Yet he'd kept his hands off her because he considered her off limits.

Unquestionably he had noticed her, though. From the time she had turned sixteen, in fact. What red-blooded male wouldn't? He'd have to be dead not to feel the rush of attraction for a beauty like Maura. But a gentleman – even a Wilde – did not go around seducing innocent schoolgirls, particularly a classmate of his sister's.

Maura was clearly no longer a girl. Ash was intently aware of her lithe, ripe body as they reached the gardens below the terrace. She was also out of mourning for her father now, which made her fair game if he chose to pursue her....

The notion intrigued him, yet he set it aside for now as he guided Maura along a path illuminated by the occasional lantern.

"Perhaps you should sit down," he advised, leading her to a stone bench shadowed by a lilac tree.

She took no notice of his suggestion but pulled her hand from his grasp and began to pace back and forth along the flagstone path.

Amusement tugged at Ash's mouth as he settled on the bench in her place. Prepared to indulge her, he stretched his long legs out before him and crossed his ankles. Despite his pleasure in watching her, though, he knew it would be more gallant if he attempted to distract her from her agitation.

Consequently, he broke the silence after a moment. "Allow me to offer you my apologies, Miss Collyer."

"For what?" she asked absently.

"I regret that you had to suffer Deering's lechery."

"You are not to blame for his disgusting behavior."

"No, but this is my home, and I am responsible for the actions of my guests."

"Perhaps, but Deering is as far from a gentleman as it is possible to be. The gall of him," she muttered under her breath, "thinking I would have any interest in selling myself to him."

"You handled him well. I am all admiration. Where did you learn that trick of incapacitating a man?"

"From my steward, Gandy. There are some unsavory characters in the racing world, and Gandy wanted me to be prepared should I encounter any."

"I thought Katharine and Skye were the only gently-bred females who were skilled in self-defense. I taught Kate that move myself."

When that brought no response, Ash continued casually. "I should thank you. Your altercation spiced up my evening and saved me from excruciating boredom."

His admission seemed to gain her attention for a moment, or at least she paused to glance at him. "Why did you even hold a ball if you are so jaded by them?"

"You know why. Because Katharine asked it of me."

"And you can never refuse her?"

"Oh, I regularly refuse her, but in this instance, I was doing my duty as her elder brother. She claimed she was finally ready to look for a husband, much to my surprise."

"It surprised me also," Maura allowed, resuming her pacing.

Frankly, it had startled Ash two weeks ago when Katharine suddenly announced her desire to find a husband and requested a ball to aid her search for eligible candidates.

But he was not interested in his sister's matrimonial prospects just now. Instead, he wanted to know what had led to her closest friend's confrontation with one of his noble guests. Most particularly, why Deering would assume that Maura Collyer's charms were for sale....