

PRINCESS CHARMING

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PROLOGUE

Kent, England; August 1804

Pausing hip deep in water, Ashton Wilde watched protectively as his four younger siblings and cousins frolicked in the lake at Beauvoir, the ancestral seat of the Marquises of Beaufort. Shrieks and squeals and peals of laughter filled the air when their game of water tag devolved into a pitched battle.

It was nearing summer's end, but this was the first time in many months that Ash could remember feeling totally carefree.

He'd carefully arranged the outing – riding and fishing and swimming with an alfresco picnic in between – partly because the day was too glorious to spend indoors, but mainly because he wanted to re-create a sense of normalcy for his family, especially the two girls, who were much younger than the three boys.

A smile curved Ash's lips at the tableau: Eleven-year-old Skye pushing seventeen-year-old Jack's head under water and Jack magnanimously permitting her victory. Katharine, age twelve, joining in the fray, pelting eighteen-year-old Quinn with scoops of lake water. Quinn pretending to sputter and beg for mercy before turning for his revenge, which sent Kate racing out of reach, her mirth echoing around the shoreline.

They deserved to feel joyous again, Ash thought with satisfaction. In the past hour, two different servants had come to summon them home for tea, but he wouldn't allow anyone to spoil this golden afternoon. For a short while at least, he was determined to restore the innocence of childhood that had been wrenched from them with the devastating deaths of all their parents in a shipwreck the previous winter.

Ash, who was almost a year senior to Quinn, had the heavy responsibility of being the eldest orphaned Wilde cousin, in addition to prematurely inheriting the illustrious Beaufort title and fortune.

Just now his own heart felt immensely lighter than at any time since the tragedy. Grief still remained a strong undercurrent in their lives, but for now it had been banished by cool water and hot sunshine.

Ash knew Quinn felt a similar bitterness toward the cruelties of fate after becoming the Earl of Traherne far too soon. The Beaufort and Traherne estates were situated in adjoining neighborhoods in Kent, so that even though Quinn and Skye hailed from a separate branch of the Wilde family, the distant cousins had grown up together as close as siblings. The proximity had also eased the merging of their two households under the legal guardianship of their middle-aged bachelor

uncle, Lord Cornelius Wilde.

The anguishing loss of both sets of their parents had turned Quinn into a cynic at an early age, yet even he had gone along with Ash's plan to provide some much-needed moments of happiness for the girls, and Jack as well. Jack's familial status was the oddity in the bunch – a first cousin to Ash and Katharine, but also their adopted brother.

"Take care, Ash! Quinn is coming for you!"

The screeched warning from young Skye interrupted Ash's reverie just as he felt a hard tug on one leg and realized that a submerged Quinn had snuck up on him.

His balance upended, Ash went down with a mighty splash while swallowing a mouthful of lake water. When he surfaced, hacking, Quinn flashed him a wicked grin of triumph, which only provoked Ash into launching his own counterassault.

The two of them wrestled in the shallow water for a time, their flailing arms trying to find purchase on slippery bare torsos. Rather than bathing costumes, the boys were shirtless and garbed only in breeches, while the two girls wore sleeveless smocks and leggings.

When eventually Quinn broke free and dove for the deeper middle of the lake, the other Wildes set out after him in hot pursuit, shouting gleeful cries of "Catch him, catch him!"

Some twenty minutes of hard play later, the five of them clambered up the grassy bank and collapsed upon their picnic blankets, where they lay spent and panting beneath the blue summer sky.

Sprawled there with his siblings and cousins, the healing sunlight beating down on his wet skin, Ash felt almost content. Admittedly, his need to protect his family had become a compulsion for him, like a fire burning in his chest. He would die before letting any further harm come to them – and yet he wanted more than mere survival for his family. He wanted them to *flourish*, which meant contriving special days such as today to dull the pain.

His feeling of lazy warmth and contentment, however, was soon dashed by Kate's unexpected musings.

"I have been thinking, Ash," she announced in a dreamy voice. "You need to marry and bring us home a mama."

His eyes flying open at the startling comment, Ash somehow managed to choke again, even though he was a good distance from the lake.

"*Marry?*" he repeated when his fit of coughing subsided. "Just what put that maggoty notion into your head, minx?"

"If you wed, we would have a mother to raise us, and then we would not have to go away to boarding school in a fortnight."

Skye's ears perked up. "That would be famous, Ash. I don't want to be sent

away to school."

At least he understood Katharine's rationale for wanting a new mother: She hoped to prevent the breakup of their close-knit family. Throughout their privileged childhood, the Wilde cousins had been given superior educations with the best tutors and governesses, but that would soon end. Ash was to return to Cambridge shortly, having sat out the last term in an attempt to help the younger Wildes rebuild the shattered pieces of their lives.

Quinn, whose razor-sharp mind needed a challenge that no normal tutor could provide, would accompany Ash to university this autumn, and reckless, roguish Jack would follow a year later. As for the girls, they were to attend an elite academy for young ladies, against their heartfelt objections.

"Attending school is not the end of the world," Ash tried to reassure them.

"It will be the end of *our* world," Katharine insisted. "You have to save us by finding us a mama, Ash."

Wincing at her ardent tone, he raised himself on one elbow. "I am barely nineteen. That is too young to marry."

"Well, Uncle Cornelius is too *old* to marry," his sister countered, "so that leaves you."

"Uncle is only one and fifty," Ash replied, although knowing a half century would seem ancient from her perspective.

"But he does not want to raise us any longer," Kate complained.

"That isn't so. He merely believes you deserve better than to be brought up under the guidance of a reclusive scholar."

Ash was certain their uncle's motives were quite selfless, although granted, Cornelius wished to return to his intellectual pursuits. He'd given up his studies completely these past eight months to care for his late relations' unruly offspring.

Skye interjected a heavy sigh. "Uncle Cornelius says when we are older we will thank him for broadening our horizons, but I don't want broad horizons. I cannot bear to leave our home for so long."

"Nor can I," Kate said, pushing herself up to a sitting position.

At their lament, Ash glanced at Quinn for assistance. In response, his cousin reached over and tugged on Kate's red-brown braid. "Uncle fears we are turning into a pack of savages, Katie-love, and savagery is inappropriate for a young lady of your high station. You and Skye have run wild with us boys this entire summer."

Kate shook her head, evidently not willing to accept his logic. "If Uncle thinks a boarding academy will improve my conduct," she muttered, "he is greatly mistaken."

Then, like a dog gnawing a bone, she returned to her previous argument. "Why can you not simply find someone to marry and fall in love, Ash? It should not

be too difficult for you. We Wildes are always lucky in love, everyone says so. Mama and Papa were madly in love, and so were Aunt Angelique and Uncle Lionel."

"I will never marry," Skye declared to no one in particular, "unless I find my one true love."

Bolstered by that loyal show of support, Kate warmed to her theme. "Mama always said someone special is waiting out there in the world for me – indeed, an ideal match is waiting for each of us."

Jack rolled his eyes at Katharine's claim. "You have been reading too many romantic fairy tales, bratling."

Kate made a face at him. "Perhaps, but Uncle Cornelius says that reading of any kind will strengthen my mind, even fairy tales. And at least," she added defensively, eyeing the small book of Greek myths she had brought with her, "fairy tales usually have happy endings, unlike those violent Greeks and Romans in literature–"

Ash held up his hand to cut off their dispute, knowing his headstrong sister wouldn't let go of her romantic notions or cease her desire to problem-solve without a firm rebuff. "I've vowed to look after you all, Kate, but marriage is out of the question just now."

"If not now, then when?"

"Someday."

Clearly disappointed, Kate flopped back down and gazed up at the sky overhead. "I wish it would happen soon. You could find us a mama in a trice if you would only bother to look, Ash. We know how all the ladies swoon over you."

"She does have a point," Quinn offered, amusement lacing his drawl. Quinn was smirking, enjoying his discomfort, Ash realized.

He skewered his cousin with a piercing look. "If you think bringing home a mother for the girls is such a capital idea, why don't *you* volunteer to find a wife? You could marry just as easily."

"No, I couldn't. I haven't sown enough wild oats yet."

"Why would you want to sow oats?" Skye asked.

Jack let out a snort of laughter. "Never mind, puss."

"You are clutching at straws, Katie," Ash said finally, although softening his tone. "I love you more than life, but I won't wear leg shackles simply to spare you boarding school."

Additionally, he was convinced the girls would benefit from a new environment, where they wouldn't be so isolated and insulated as they were here at Beauvoir or Tallis Court, the nearby Traherne family seat.

"You will meet new friends at school," Ash added consolingly. "And of course

you can come home for the summers and every holiday. We will all be together again before you know it. And I mean to visit you frequently at your new school—"

"You had better, or I will never forgive you," Kate threatened before glancing away. "Even so, it will never be the same ag-gain...."

On that last note, her voice broke, a show of weakness that Ash knew was anathema to her.

With a huff of self-disgust, Katharine climbed to her feet and stalked off a short distance to stand with her back to them, trying to control her sniffing.

Feeling inadequate, Ash rose and followed her. When he touched her shoulder comfortingly, she suddenly turned and flung her arms around his waist in a fierce hug. "I will m-miss you so t-terribly, Ash...."

"I will miss you too, love," he said, returning her embrace with the same ferocity.

When a sob escaped her, Ash glanced behind him. The two boys were both staring at them somberly, while Skye was struggling to fight back tears also.

Longing to ease their sadness, Ash bent down and flung Kate over his shoulder, then carried her down to the lake, where despite her pleas of protest, he tossed her in.

To his vast relief, she came up spitting water and grinning. "I know very well that you are trying to distract me!" she yelled, pushing wet tresses from her eyes. "But I am not ever giving up!"

"No," Ash yelled back with a dry chuckle. "I would expect nothing less of you."

It was then that he recognized the tall, lithe form of his Uncle Cornelius in the distance, approaching them on foot. Most likely when the servants hadn't been able to corral them home, the long-suffering gentleman had come himself to rescue the girls, even though they would not want rescuing.

When Lord Cornelius finally reached their picnic blankets, he looked exasperated and frustrated. It wasn't that his discipline was nonexistent; it was merely not very effective. At least Ash could control the youngsters *most* of the time.

Cornelius halted with his arms crossed, his foot tapping, and let his gaze slowly sweep over the lot of them before focusing sternly on Ash.

"I warned you about the intensity of the sun at this time of afternoon, Master Ashton." He then pointed to Skye's face, which was flushed pink.

Upon realizing his cousin's fair skin was burning, Ash instantly swallowed his rebuttal. "We are coming at once, Uncle," he said, sending Skye a rueful glance and nodding at the others.

At his pronouncement, they all began gathering their belongings and loading

down the horses.

Then as a group, they turned and reluctantly trudged home toward the manor. Kate cradled her collection of Greek myths in one arm and fell into step with Uncle Cornelius. Quinn and Jack followed, leading the horses, while Ash and Skye brought up the rear.

As they left the sparkling lake behind, Ash glanced around them, committing the special moment to memory. Not only was this the end of their golden summer afternoon, but soon they would be going their separate ways, and like his young sister, he badly wished to delay their inevitable parting.

He suspected Skye was feeling a similar poignancy, for she tucked her smaller hand in his.

"I don't want a new mama, Ash," she said in a low voice.

"No one can ever replace our mothers, love," he tried to reassure her not for the first time. Yet evidently he had misjudged her reasoning.

"No, I meant that you needn't find us a mama and marry for *our* sakes. You should only marry for love, Ash."

To his surprise, her chin no longer quivered with her effort to hold back tears. Instead, Skye looked up at him with a quiet, trusting smile.

At her obvious desire to comfort him, Ash smiled in return and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, sweetheart."

After another moment, he swallowed the ache in his throat and slid his arm around her delicate shoulders.

"Everything will be all right, Skye," he murmured... and for the first time in many, many months, he could actually believe his own empty promise.