

THE PRINCE OF PLEASURE

EXCERPT

London, March 1814

The cloying scents of orange peels and tallow from the footlights and torcheres seemed almost overpowering tonight, yet Julienne knew the normal stage accoutrements were not to blame for her feeling of faintness. An entirely different cause had set her senses spinning.

He was in the audience, watching her performance.

She found her knees shaking. Even the ogling bucks in the pit couldn't distract her from his relentless regard. He sat in one of the luxury boxes, his fair hair shimmering in the glow of the theater's massive chandelier.

Dare North. The legendary lover who had stolen her heart and left her reeling in the aftermath.

Under his intent scrutiny, Julienne had executed her leading role in the John Webster tragedy in a daze, barely able to remember her lines. Once she had even missed her cue, which had earned her a disapproving scowl from the theater's august manager, Samuel Arnold.

I will not think of him, Julienne vowed futilely for the hundredth time as she waited in the wings for her final entrance.

The Theater Royal at Drury Lane was one of two premier theaters in London, and tonight's house was completely full. Filled to overflowing, in fact, a distinction normally reserved for London's reigning thespian, the remarkable Edmund Kean. Yet Kean had reportedly "taken ill," a public fiction to conceal the truth that he was still recovering from a fierce bout of drunken brawling.

Julienne had been given top billing this evening -- a splendid coup for a hitherto unknown actress from the provinces. She could not afford to squander this opportunity, or have her wits battered by memories she'd fought so hard to vanquish.

It had taken years to cleanse the ache of Dare from her soul, to conquer her yearning for him. She'd risked coming to London, even knowing of his presence here, yet hoping to avoid him.

A foolish notion, she realized now. The Marquess of Wolverton -- his present illustrious title -- was one of the chief leaders of the Beau Monde, despite his scandalous reputation, or perhaps because of it. He moved in London's most elite circles, as well as the more disreputable ones. She could no more have avoided him than she could quell the painful memories that seeing him resurrected.

Another foolish notion, believing she could forget someone so unforgettable, or a passion so wondrous. She had loved Dare with a reckless hunger she'd never felt with any other man, before or since. But her love had proved her downfall.

Her eyes blurred as she remembered the last time she had seen Dare, when she'd had no choice but to betray him. In a fleeting moment his regard had transformed from shock to desolation, from disillusionment to chilled contempt.

Unable to explain her reasons, she had watched through a haze of scalding tears as he walked out of her life. Losing him had left her devastated. Alone. Facing disaster-

A low hiss from the manager made Julienne realize she had missed another cue. Steeling herself, she swept out onto the stage to enact the final gory scenes of *The White Devil*.

It was a coveted role for any actress, playing a scheming Venetian courtesan, and she managed to make it through the dark tale of murder and vengeance with no more serious lapses. But she was grateful when her character's demise came at the end and the company could finally take their bows to shouts and whistles and sincere applause.

That the majority of the accolades were showered upon her surprised Julienne, considering her wretched performance. Pasting an alluring smile on her lips, however, she gracefully accepted the acclaim, executing a deep curtsey for the cheering crowd in the galleries, then the wilder throng in the pit, and finally the nobles and gentry in the boxes.

She was just rising when she made the mistake of glancing at the particular nobleman she'd tried so desperately all evening to ignore. Dare had moved to the front of his box to stand at the railing.

Julienne froze, caught in the hypnotizing power of his gaze; even at this distance, she could feel the searing impact. Her lips parted in a sharp inhalation, while his curved in a faint smile, slow and lazy and provocatively rakish.

She saw his sensual mouth move then, but with the rush of blood in her head making her senses swim, it took her a moment to realize he had spoken to her.

Without volition, she raised a hand, absently signaling for quiet. Slowly a hush went over the crowd, while countless heads swiveled in the direction of her fixed gaze.

Dare called her name again, this time loudly enough to be heard throughout the theater.

"Mademoiselle Laurent," he drawled, conversing as if they were completely alone. "Allow me to commend you on a most excellent performance."

Uncertain of what he planned, Julienne felt an unmistakable ripple of tension course through her, drawing her nerves taut.

"Thank you, my lord," she replied, striving to keep her voice steady.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"Is what true?"

Casually he lifted a hip onto the railing and lounged there, surveying her indolently. "That you intend to make your choice of protectors at the end of the season?"

Bewildered, Julienne thought back frantically to the declaration she'd made last week, half in jest. She had been in the green room after a performance, surrounded by eager swains, all vying for her attention and urging her to accept their unwanted invitations. When one persistent coxcomb crudely pronounced his determination to have her in keeping, she hid her

dismay and feigned a laugh, protesting that she couldn't possibly decide from among such delightful gentlemen just yet.

Her indecision was purely a defensive strategy. She had no intention of accepting any man's protection, but neither could she risk spurning her devotees or alienating any of these wealthy theater patrons. She would have to tread a careful line, holding her courtiers enthralled while putting them off, maintaining their admiration without committing herself.

When pressed, she pledged to make her choice at the end of her acting engagement. Her unattainability had an added benefit, she shortly discovered. Being fought over by rich, titled admirers actually increased her value to the theater because it brought in more business.

That Lord Wolverton had learned of the episode, however, was a testament to the efficiency of London gossips, Julienne surmised.

Trying to regain her splintered composure, she uttered a polite response. "I fail to see how my intentions would concern you, my lord."

"I should like to declare myself as a candidate in the competition."

An audible ripple of surprise and interest emanated from the crowd.

To her shock, Dare hoisted himself up to stand on the balcony railing. Julienne wasn't certain if the gasps she heard came from the audience or from her own throat. Both, she suspected. In all her days in the theater, she had never been more at a loss; her mind went blank, and she felt the particular panic that came from forgetting a crucial line.

Except that this time there were no scripted lines to learn. This was no play at all.

The crowd, however, was behaving as though the scene was merely a continuation of the earlier performance, maintaining an expectant hush. Julienne held her own silence, unable to guess what machinations Dare had planned.

Looking totally at ease in his precarious position, he leaned a shoulder against the column supporting one side of the box.

"I have made a wager regarding your choice, mademoiselle," he announced, enunciating clearly. "I've wagered that you will choose me."

The rowdy throng in the pit reacted with a chorus of titters and guffaws, while the rest waited with bated breath for her response.

"Have you indeed?" Julienne managed, stalling for time. "You have a very high opinion of yourself, it seems."

"An opinion that is warranted." His gaze slewed over the crowd. "Does anyone here doubt I can win the heart of this lovely Jewel?"

There were whoops and shouts from the riffraff in the pit and a spurt of clapping from the upper tiers. Dare sketched a debonair bow, acknowledging their approbation.

It was a dangerous maneuver, Julienne thought with alarm. If he were to fall from that height, he could severely injure himself. But then he had always been the most reckless man of her acquaintance. Reckless, daring, outrageous. He appeared totally unconcerned that he was making a spectacle of them both in front a multitude of gawking spectators.

And the audience obviously relished his bold tactics, responding with titillation and delight.

Gritting her teeth, Julienne moved along the stage, closer to his box, while trying to recruit her wits. Dare had cleverly trapped her with his public declaration. She had no intention of taking a lover, most certainly not the notorious rake who so forcefully reminded her of the tormenting past, one who still had the power to bring her pain. But she didn't dare refuse him outright, not without jeopardizing all she had worked for. Her livelihood depended on pleasing her audience.

Fortunately, she had performed for years, and she had a great deal of practice dealing with rogues and obstinate pursuers.

Making a belated recovery, Julienne placed her hands on her hips and eyed Dare up and down, looking him over critically as she might a horse at Tattersalls.

"Perhaps your inflated opinion is warranted after all," she agreed thoughtfully. "Your reputation certainly precedes you. The notorious Lord Wolverton -- a thoroughly wicked rake, famed for his charm and address and his fondness for debauchery. The Prince of Pleasure, is that not the name I heard? Also known as the scourge of feminine hearts."

"Yet you have fast become the scourge of male hearts, ma belle."

"That was not my intention," she said, offering an alluring smile that contradicted her words. "But since you remark on it... I might venture to make a wager of my own." She faced her audience, playing to the crowd. "I stand accused of willfully breaking gentlemen's hearts. Well, in this instance, I shall endeavor to live up to the accusation. I wager that I can bring the Prince of Pleasure to his knees."

The roar of approval was almost deafening, punctuated by the thunder of stomping feet and howls of glee. It was several minutes before the theater quieted enough to allow the spectacle to continue.

Dare's own smile was devilish. "So you think you can break my heart?"

"I am certain of it."

"You are welcome to try." He gave another bow, holding her gaze riveted. "I look forward to the first engagement, my beautiful Jewel."

Excerpt from The Prince of Pleasure by Nicole Jordan
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