

TO ROMANCE A CHARMING ROGUE

EXCERPT - CHAPTER ONE

Never appear to be too captivated by a gentleman, particularly if it is true. Revealing your weakness for him will give him the upper hand, and a woman needs all the power she can muster if she is to triumph.

- An Anonymous Lady, *Advice to Young Ladies on Capturing a Husband*

London, September 1817

"Eleanor, my dear, the worst has happened! Wrexham is *here*."

Her heart leaping at her aunt's disconcerting news, Lady Eleanor Pierce froze on the sidelines of the crowded hall. "Here? Tonight? At Carlton House?"

"Indeed. His arrival was just announced." Eleanor's proper aunt and chaperone, Lady Beldon, made a sour face. "The nerve of him! He should have the decency to respect your sensibilities."

Eleanor agreed that Damon Stafford, Viscount Wrexham, had a great deal of nerve. In truth, Damon was the boldest man of her acquaintance. But she had braced her sensibilities against the impact of seeing him again – or so she'd believed until just this moment.

Eleanor smiled in an effort to pretend composure and to slow her all too rapid heartbeat. "I daresay Lord Wrexham has a right to attend Prinny's fete, Aunt Beatrix. No doubt he was invited, just as we were."

George, Prince of Wales and currently England's Regent, regularly entertained at Carlton House, his garishly grand London residence. And Lady Beldon was sometimes included on the guest list, since her late husband had been an intimate of the pleasure-loving Regent's set.

Tonight the overheated mansion was filled with a crush of elegant gentry and aristocrats. Yet a surreptitious glance around the thronged hall told Eleanor that the charming rake who had once won her heart and then trampled on it was nowhere in sight.

"You make too much of the matter," Eleanor murmured, hiding her relief. "Wrexham is perfectly at liberty to move about society as he pleases."

Her Aunt Beatrix gave her a piercing stare. "Surely you do not mean to defend him? After he treated you so abominably?"

"No, certainly not. But I am resigned to meeting him again. It must happen eventually. He has been in London for a sennight, and we move in similar circles."

Lady Beldon shook her head in disgust, then studied her niece more closely. "Perhaps we *should* take our leave, Eleanor. I will tender our excuses to Prinny—"

"I have no intention of running from Lord Wrexham, dearest Aunt."

"Then you must prepare yourself. He may appear at any moment."

Nodding distractedly, Eleanor drew a deep breath. She was as prepared as she would ever be to encounter the wickedly charming nobleman who had been her betrothed.

She'd had several days' warning that Damon had returned to London after a two-year absence, since Lady Beldon's friends were eager to keep her abreast of society gossip. Eleanor had carefully planned what she would say to him, and how she would act. She would be gracious and cool and completely indifferent, showing him common politeness but no more.

"I am capable of facing him with equanimity," she avowed, her calm assertion belying the butterflies rioting in her stomach.

Aunt Beatrix, however, was neither convinced nor willing to excuse his lordship's past sins. "You should not be compelled to face that scoundrel. Were he a true gentleman, he would have the good manners to stay away."

"He has stayed away," Eleanor said with a dry edge to her tone. "For practically two years."

"Even so, his absence was not long enough! Indeed, I think he should be banned from polite society entirely."

Regrettably, Damon's crime against her didn't quite justify so severe a punishment, Eleanor reflected. "I suspect banishment might be a bit too harsh, darling Auntie."

"Not in the least. And I will never forgive myself for introducing you to that wicked rogue."

"You are not to blame. You did not actually introduce us, if you will recall."

The elder woman waved an elegant hand in dismissal. "Wrexham met you at my annual house party, which amounts to the same thing as an introduction. Had I not welcomed him into our home, you would never have been exposed to heartbreak and ridicule. But he was a friend of Marcus's. How could we know he would turn out to be such a libertine?"

How indeed? Eleanor wondered silently.

Her beloved older brother Marcus had thought very highly of Damon until the eventful dissolution of her betrothal — as had *she*. With his stirring good looks and his reckless, devil-may-care charm, Damon was every young lady's illicit fantasy, and every matron's worry.

As far as motherly natures went, Beatrix Attree, Viscountess Beldon, harbored very few nurturing instincts. Yet she'd taken in Eleanor after her parents' deaths when she was but ten years old, and had been her chaperone ever since. And Beatrix loved Eleanor as much as she was capable of loving anyone.

Her ladyship was an aristocrat to the core, and she had strict notions of what was proper for the nobility. In the beginning she'd made allowances for Lord Wrexham, despite his rather wild reputation, because he held an illustrious title that went back several hundred years and a fortune that was even larger than Eleanor's.

For her own part, Eleanor had cared little for Damon's title or wealth. It was the nobleman himself who inspired her ardor. The first moment they met, she'd felt a lightning bolt of attraction for him, as well as a connection she rarely experienced with any other man.

Falling in love with him had been ridiculously easy.

Of course, her foolishness in succumbing to his irresistible allure could possibly be excused by her relative youth at the time. She was only nineteen then, and in her girlish heart she had yearned for a wildly romantic love. A suitor who made her burn, who made her feel feverish and desired, just as Damon did.

She'd been spellbound for those few short weeks of their whirlwind courtship and engagement, believing they were ideally matched; that Damon was the man of her dreams. She had expected – *hoped* – to live with him happily ever after as his wife. Until that fateful morning two years ago when she spied him driving in Hyde Park with his beautiful mistress, not only not bothering to hide his affair but actually *flaunting* it.

Feeling grievously hurt and betrayed, Eleanor had immediately terminated their engagement and vowed to have nothing more to do with Damon. He had broken her heart as well as severely embarrassing her and savaging her pride. Even now, she couldn't quell her lingering resentment. Yet she refused to cower at the thought of facing him-

"Well," Lady Beldon announced, breaking into her niece's thoughts, "if you insist on staying tonight, you would do well to keep Prince Lazzara by your side in the event Wrexham has the gall to approach you."

"I shall, Aunt. His highness only stepped away to fetch some refreshments for us."

An Italian nobleman, Principe Antonio Lazzara di Terrasini had come to England in the company of his elder distant cousin, il Signor Umberto Vecchi, who was a diplomat to the British court. Reportedly the prince was in the market for a bride and was considering Lady Eleanor for the position.

Eleanor well knew that her chief attractions had little to do with her character or intellect. She was a notable heiress in her own right, due to the extensive fortune left to her by her mother. She was also the daughter of a baron, and now the sister of an earl, since her elder brother Marcus had recently inherited the Danvers earldom from his own distant relation.

However, she hadn't yet decided how seriously she wished to be considered as Prince Lazzara's future princess. Admittedly she was attracted to him. His sensual voice and melting dark eyes were the very essence of romance. He was also handsome, engaging, charming, and witty – and from all reports, as much of a rake as Damon had ever been.

And after her disastrous betrothal to Damon – followed by a second, even briefer betrothal to another nobleman shortly afterward – Eleanor was adamant that the next time she became engaged, it would be for good. More crucially, she would *only* marry a man whom she loved and who loved her in return.

Just then a hush fell over one end of the hall. Eleanor suspected that Prinny had entered with his entourage. But when her aunt stiffened and muttered "Speak of the devil" under her breath, Eleanor realized that it was not only His Royal Highness who had attracted attention.

Damon Stafford, Viscount Wrexham, stood beside the Regent, drawing all eyes, including hers.

The company began bowing and scraping fawningly to Prinny, while Lord Wrexham casually surveyed the elite gathering – and the gathering returned the favor.

In some vague corner of her mind, Eleanor was aware of the excited murmur of feminine voices remarking on the noble newcomer, yet in truth all she could register was Damon... his height, his muscular vitality, his charisma. He seemed to fill the hall with his presence.

His features, which boasted strong brow, cheekbones, and jawline, were rawly masculine and just as striking as she remembered, although his complexion was more sun-bronzed now by his travels in Europe. His hair was the rich color of sable, without the blue-black hue of her own ebony. His eyes, set off by heavy eyebrows and thickly fringed lashes, were still dark as midnight and just as bold—

Eleanor's wits abruptly scattered when those penetrating eyes found hers in the crowd.

Despite all her self-warnings, she simply froze as Damon locked gazes with her. It was peculiar, how one could experience heated flashes and cold chills at the very same time. How the air could be drawn from one's lungs so swiftly, making it difficult to breathe.

The impact of seeing him again was like being struck by a lightning bolt; that same sizzling jolt she had experienced when she first laid eyes on Damon just over two years ago.

Her hand stole to her breastbone in a futile effort to calm her heart, which was somersaulting painfully in her chest. Her heart was not the sole victim, either. Her palms had grown damp and her knees felt absurdly weak.

But of course, she was foolish to expect any other response. No man had ever fired her blood or touched her deepest emotions the way Damon had....

Suddenly scolding herself, Eleanor straightened her spine. *I will not make a scene*, she vowed silently. Not with so many denizens of the ton watching.

The hall was currently abuzz with speculation as the crowd's gazes shifted to her. All society knew that she had jilted Viscount Wrexham because of his rakish ways, and clearly the guests present were eagerly waiting to see how she would deal with him now.

"I have brought you champagne, Donna Eleanora, as you see."

When the deep, velvety, Italian-accented voice broke into her chaotic thoughts, Eleanor had never been more glad for a distraction in her life.

Tearing her gaze from Damon's, she turned her back on him and flashed Prince Lazzara a brilliant smile. She refused to let her former betrothed's arrival spoil the evening for her.

For tonight, at least, she was fiercely determined to ignore the bittersweet memories of her hapless romance and the wicked rake who had caused them.

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Glad to have a moment's respite from the warmth and the genteel din of Carlton House, Eleanor left her aunt in the charming company of the distinguished Signor Vecchi and took the younger Italian's royal arm to stroll along the gravel paths.

Prinny's taste in decor was considered questionable at best by most of the haut ton, but Chinese lanterns hanging at intervals lent the gardens a fairy-tale aura. The flickering golden light reflected in various fountains and pools, bringing to Eleanor's mind a memory of another glittering evening – and another shimmering fountain that had played a unique role in her brief engagement to Damon the first time he'd kissed her.

It was only when the prince called her attention to her distraction that Eleanor recalled her companion. "Why do you keep staring at that fountain, *mia signorina*?"

Why indeed? Eleanor wondered, scolding herself silently even as her cheeks flushed. She had no business remembering Damon's stolen kiss or its aftermath, when she'd pushed him into the nearby fountain for his bold impertinence.

"The sight is lovely, don't you agree?" she equivocated.

Prince Lazzara nodded. "My palace at home boasts many beautiful fountains. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to see them one day."

His teasing smile hinted at the reason she might have for visiting – as his bride – but Eleanor could not put too much stock in his suggestive remark, since the prince was known for his skillful ability to flatter and entice the fair sex.

"Will you tell me about your home, highness? I have never been to Italy, but I hear there are many spectacular sights."

To her relief, Don Antonio launched into a warm recitation about the southern half of his country – which recently had been designated the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies by Europe's ruling powers – and the principality he ruled over near the Mediterranean.

Eleanor listened politely, although with only half an ear. Much to her dismay, she couldn't stop herself from dwelling on her past memories of Damon.

Barely a few days after meeting him at her aunt's annual house party, he'd taken more liberties than she could even have dreamed of from a gentleman, stealing a kiss and earning himself a thorough drenching. Inexplicably, her unconventional response to his seduction had only intrigued him more.

A fortnight later they were engaged to be married.

Eleanor had lost her heart to him, not because he was wealthy, titled, and sinfully handsome. Nor was it even due to Damon's charm, his wit, or his effortless ability to make her believe she was the most desirable woman in the world. It was because he challenged her and made her feel alive. Because he eased her loneliness, the sense of aloneness she had felt since childhood.

Her attraction went beyond the physical, with an almost instant meeting of minds. She could talk to him about her yearnings, her dreams. Could tell him her innermost thoughts and secrets.

Damon, however, was far more reticent about sharing his feelings. It was as if he kept part of himself hidden from the world – and specifically from her.

She'd been so confident that she could eventually break through the walls he erected. And since they seemed to be so ideally matched in spirit, wit, and passion, she was certain Damon would eventually

come to love her, despite his reputation as a heartbreaker.

Then she discovered that he hadn't given up his long-term mistress as he'd led her to believe. He had broken her trust irrevocably. Trampled her pride, crushed her vulnerable young heart.

The pain had subsided over time. Now Eleanor felt only a bittersweet ache — or at least she had until tonight when she realized she would have to meet Damon face-to-face.

It should be a matter of sublime indifference to her whether or not he'd returned to London. She still harbored a measure of resentment and anger toward him, true, but little thought of revenge or violence or serious ill will. In fact, she had braced herself to meet him with equanimity.

All the same, as she strolled the garden paths with Prince Lazzara, Eleanor kept an eye out for the particular English nobleman who had thrown her composure into such chaos with his unwanted appearance this evening.

Perhaps that was why she gave a start when a figure emerged from the shadows along another path.

It was only one of Carlton House's liveried footmen, Eleanor saw with relief. The servant had been sent to search for Prince Lazzara, since his countryman, Signor Vecchi, wished to introduce him to some important personages.

When Don Antonio offered Eleanor his arm to escort her back to the great hall, she declined with a smile. She had no desire to return to the house where she might encounter Damon. "I think perhaps I will remain here in the gardens for a moment longer, your highness. I see several of my friends just over there. I will join them."

She would not be alone, since there were small groups of strollers enjoying the lovely evening, including several ladies whom she recognized. And her aunt knew where she was after all, Eleanor reasoned.

Thankfully the prince did not try to press her or take her to task for remaining unchaperoned in the gardens, but merely bowed gallantly and promised to return shortly. Eleanor watched him disappear down the path, then turned in the opposite direction, toward her friends.

Her heart gave a leap, however, when another tall figure stepped out from the shadows. She recognized those broad shoulders in an instant; that sense of power, of vitality, of danger about him.

She knew those bold dark eyes and the low voice that stroked her nerve-endings like velvet when he spoke, as he did now.

"Elle," Damon said simply.

An arrow of pain pierced Eleanor at his casual form of address. The French word for "she" had been his pet name for her.

She tried to catch her breath but couldn't manage it just then. Nor could she speak. Her throat had gone dry and she felt a trifle faint. Damon had rendered her paralyzed and tongue-tied — she who was never at a loss for words. *Devil take him!*

Deploring her weakness for him, Eleanor squared her shoulders and found her voice. "My Lord

Wrexham," she murmured with a regal nod.

In response, Damon cocked his head, studying her. "So you mean to treat me with distant formality? I confess relief."

"Relief? What did you expect from me, my lord? That I would box your ears?"

His mouth curved with a hint of humor. "You did so the last time we met, as I recall."

Eleanor flushed. That last time she had been a woman scorned, and she'd taken her fury out on Damon's handsome face when she ended their betrothal.

"I admit," he said, lightly rubbing his left cheek as if in remembrance, "I deserved your scorn then."

"You did indeed," Eleanor agreed, only slightly mollified. "But you may rest assured I will do nothing so unseemly tonight. Now, if you will please excuse me...."

She made to pass him, but Damon reached out and touched her arm. "Pray, stay a moment. I went to some trouble to get you alone so we could speak in private before we must meet in public."

Her eyes widened in comprehension as she stared up at him. "You contrived to get me alone here in the gardens? *You* had Prince Lazzara called away by that footman?" Realizing her voice had risen unbecomingly, Eleanor lowered it to a tart whisper. "What Machiavellian gall!"

Damon's faint smile was a bit rueful. "I am guilty of manipulation, true, but I thought we should attempt to clear the air between us, and I didn't trust what you might do if I approached you in a crowd. Hopefully you will not shove me into a fountain or worse just now."

Eleanor arched a skeptical eyebrow. "No? There are several fountains nearby."

She thought she saw humor spark in his dark eyes at her veiled threat. "At least suppress your urge for retribution until you hear me out."

Suppressing that urge would be harder than she'd thought. Yet Eleanor held her tongue as Damon continued more slowly. "I doubt you will readily forgive me for what happened two years ago—"

"Whatever gave you *that* impression?" she interrupted sweetly. "Merely because you turned me into a laughingstock and a figure of pity in front of the entire ton, you think my magnanimity would be in short supply?"

"No one would ever think you a figure of pity, Elle."

She stiffened this time at his soubriquet. "I prefer you not call me that silly name. The proper form of address now is 'Lady Eleanor.'"

"Ah, yes. I had heard Marcus petitioned the Crown to raise your precedence from a baron's sister to an earl's. Very well, then, my Lady Eleanor... will you grant me a brief audience?"

Damon's cordiality was beginning to wear on her nerves. "What do you wish to say to me, Lord Wrexham? You needn't apologize for your despicable behavior so long ago. It is over and done with and I scarcely ever think of it anymore."

At her lie, his expression remained enigmatic, even as his gaze searched her face. "I regret hurting you, Eleanor, but I did not seek you out tonight in order to apologize."

"Then why did you employ such machinations?"

"I hoped we could declare a truce. For your sake more than mine."

"My sake? How so?"

"I don't want your reputation to suffer for my past sins, so I hoped we could avoid any awkwardness when we are seen in public together for the first time. Even if you were merely to cut me, it would provide more fodder for the tongue-waggers."

"I agree. We can behave civilly toward one another when we officially meet."

"I thought we could go one step further tonight. Perhaps I could request your hand for a set. A simple country dance, nothing more," Damon added when her eyes narrowed.

"Why on earth would I wish to dance with you?"

"To put any gossip to rest."

"On the contrary, my dancing with you would only inflame the gossip by making it appear as if we were on familiar terms again. No, there is no need for such intimacy, Damon. But I will not cut you dead whenever I see you. Now, if that is all...?"

"Don't go just yet."

His low remark was neither a command nor an entreaty, yet it made Eleanor pause. The temptation to stay with Damon was overwhelming, even if she didn't like being in such close proximity to him, particularly all alone at night. "I don't wish to be seen alone with you," she began.

"We can remedy that."

Startling her, Damon took her elbow and drew her a few yards off the gravel path, behind a topiary yew and deeper into the shadows.

Eleanor didn't protest, even though she knew she should. Perhaps it *was* better to get their first meeting over in private, so there would be no awkward moments when they met in public. But understandably, she was not in a generous mood.

"I cannot fathom what you hope to accomplish," she said rather peevishly. "We can have little to say to each other."

"We can catch up on the past two years."

But she didn't wish to catch up, Eleanor thought. She didn't want to dwell on what Damon had been doing all the time he was away — what women he had been with — or to recall how lonely and abandoned she had felt when he left. Even so, she managed a polite response.

"I understand you have been traveling on the Continent?"

"For much of my absence, yes. Chiefly in Italy."

"And you have returned to England to stay?"

"For a time, at least. I enjoyed my travels but found myself longing for home."

Eleanor felt a twinge of envy since she had always wanted to travel. A single young lady, however, jaunting all over the globe was considered highly improper, particularly by her aunt. Moreover, Europe had been extremely unsafe until the defeat of Napoleon's armies three years ago. But someday she hoped to fulfill her dream to see more of the world than her own country.

Then Damon surprised her again by reaching up to touch a curling tendril on her forehead. For a moment she thought he meant to straighten the narrow silk bandeau she wore, which was adorned with blue ostrich plumes to match her empire-waisted gown of pale blue lustring and overskirt of silver net.

"Your glorious hair.... Why the devil did you cut it off?"

The question took Eleanor aback. She wore her raven hair in short curls now. The style was quite fashionable, but in truth she'd cut it severely two years ago in an act of defiance, since Damon had professed to cherish her long hair.

"What does it matter to you, my lord?" she retorted archly. "You haven't the right to care how I wear my hair."

"True."

Giving a casual shrug of his broad shoulders, he unexpectedly changed the subject again. "How is Marcus faring?"

Eleanor breathed more easily. She could relax a measure if Damon would only speak of such mundane matters as her brother. "He is faring very well, as it happens."

"I understand he married this past summer."

"Yes... Marcus wed Miss Arabella Loring of Chiswick. They are in France at the moment, visiting Arabella's mother in Brittany, along with her two younger sisters, who also recently wed. I believe you know her sisters' husbands, the Duke of Arden and the Marquess of Claybourne?"

"I know them well." Damon paused. "It surprises me they all three succumbed to matrimony so suddenly. I thought them confirmed bachelors."

"Matrimony is not catching, if that worries you."

Her wry quip elicited a quick smile from Damon. "I am cured of any desire to wed, believe me."

Eleanor bit her lip at his implication that *she* was the one who had cured him of his momentary madness.

A long pause followed as Damon grimaced, appearing to regret his careless remark. And his tone was

more serious when he said, "I heard that you were betrothed shortly after I left England, but that it did not last long."

Eleanor raised her chin, once more feeling defensive. "No, it did not." She had quickly broken her second engagement, a betrothal she had made out of defiance and pain and had regretted almost instantly. "I decided I was not willing to settle for a marriage of convenience after all. I was not in love with him, nor he with me."

I still loved you, Damon, she thought with a wistful ache.

Damon's voice lowered another register. "It is just as well that you broke off our betrothal. I could not have given you my heart."

"You could not, or would not?"

His expression was unreadable. "I see little difference. And you deserved better for your husband."

"Yes, I did."

"And now you are being courted by Prince Lazzara," Damon observed, his tone prodding.

Eleanor hesitated. "I would not say he is *courting* me, precisely. The prince came to England to see the sights."

"And to look for a bride?"

"So rumor says."

"I am not surprised that he is showing a marked interest in a beautiful heiress."

Not inexplicably, Damon's observation stung. "You think my fortune is all he sees in me?"

"Certainly not." The corner of his mouth curved. "But you don't need me to flatter you by cataloguing your many appealing attributes. Nor, I suspect, does Lazzara. The man would have to be a fool not to be attracted to you as well as your fortune."

But you feel no such attraction any longer? Eleanor wondered, feeling the ache increase. Aloud, she said in an offhanded tone, "It can be of no import to you if he thinks to woo me."

"Even so, I am concerned. He would be fortunate to claim you for his wife, Eleanor, but you could do better for a husband. He is not good enough for you."

She frowned at Damon. "How can you possibly know that?"

"Because I know *you*. You deserve better."

Eleanor truly did not know what to think of his remark, so finally she shrugged. "It is exceedingly presumptuous of you to set yourself to judge my suitors, Lord Wrexham."

"But then you know how presumptuous I can be."

She did indeed, she thought as Damon unexpectedly stepped closer.

He halted barely a foot away and stood looking down at her for a long moment. When his dark gaze held her transfixed, Eleanor's heart suddenly began wildly somersaulting again. Dear heaven, did Damon intend to kiss her? She would never forget the thrill of his kisses, never forget the taste of that firm, sensual mouth, which was moving slowly toward hers....

Eleanor's breath faltered altogether when Damon reached up and traced a fingertip over her cheekbone. She felt overwhelmed by his nearness, his warmth, his scent. Then, as if he could not help himself, he slid one hand behind her nape and lowered his head, letting his warm lips cover hers.

The delicious shock of it held her completely immobile; any thought of struggle melted at the softness of his kiss. His lips drifted, lingered, melded with hers, making her shiver.

At her involuntary response, Damon angled his head and pressed deeper, as if refamiliarizing himself with her taste, relearning her texture, his tongue probing her inner recesses, exploring.

Suddenly she was tumbling headlong into his kiss, falling. Myriad sensations poured through Eleanor at the magic of his mouth, while a rush of feeling blossomed in the depths of her body. She had no thought of escape. Damon had captured her completely. And the sweetness, the tenderness, the heat, all combined to rouse a trembling ache inside her.

When a soft whimper lodged in her throat, Damon drew her even closer, bringing her breasts against his chest, her thighs against his sinewed ones. Her body reacted helplessly; her spine arched and her limbs weakened. Eleanor strained toward him with hungry yearning as his tongue continued stroking, tangling, mating with hers in a bewitching rhythm.

When his hand rose to cup her breast, a fission of fiery sensation sparked within her – a stark reminder of how easily he could arouse her yearning.

An even starker reminder of the pain he could bring her.

Suddenly recollecting their circumstances, Eleanor fought the searing wash of desire that was flooding her. She'd let Damon beguile her with his sensual caresses once before, and he had broken her heart.

The realization gave her strength to renew her struggle for control. Striving for willpower, she brought her hands up between them and pressed, trying to break free of his seductive embrace.

When Damon didn't immediately release her, Eleanor shoved at his chest, thinking to push him into the yew hedge. Apparently he was prepared for just that response, for he braced himself against her force as he lightly grasped her upper arms.

When he continued to claim her lips, Eleanor drew back her slippered foot and kicked Damon hard in the shin, striking the white silk stocking below his formal satin knee breeches.

Thankfully her violence had the immediate result of prying loose his grasp – and even elicited a muffled sound of pain from him.

Stifling her own whimper of pain, Eleanor freed herself completely and backed away.

Breathing hard, her pulse leaping in fits and starts, she tried to regain her dazed senses as she stared up at Damon.

His features had turned enigmatic again. To her surprise, there was no triumph in his expression. Instead, she glimpsed regret in the shadows that darkened his eyes.

"Forgive me, I became carried away," he said, his voice a husky rasp.

So had she, much to her chagrin, Eleanor acknowledged unwillingly. She was furious at Damon for enchanting her so that she had actually returned his kisses, and yet she felt oddly bereft now that they had ended.

"Donna Eleanora?" a deep masculine voice called out softly.

She went rigid upon realizing Prince Lazzara had come in search of her.

Hoping her lips were not too wet and swollen, Eleanor scurried out from behind the hedge. "Yes, your highness?"

Don Antonio smiled charmingly when he spied her, although his smile faltered when Damon stepped out behind her.

Heat staining her cheeks, Eleanor hastened to explain. "I encountered an old acquaintance, you see. In fact, I was just telling Lord Wrexham about my brother's recent marriage."

"Lord Wrexham?" Prince Lazzara repeated slowly as his gaze sharpened on Damon.

Damon, however, made an easy reply. "Will you introduce us, Lady Eleanor?"

When she reluctantly complied, the prince raked Damon from head to toe, obviously not liking what he saw. Bowing stiffly then, he dismissed Damon and pointedly held out his arm to Eleanor. "Shall we resume our stroll in the garden, *cara mia*?"

She gratefully took the prince's arm and murmured a polite "Good evening, my lord" to Damon as she turned away.

Admittedly Eleanor felt a vast measure of relief as she let Prince Lazzara lead her away. The wild thud of her pulse had calmed somewhat, yet she was enraged at herself for yearning for Damon's kisses, particularly since she still harbored more than a little residual anger and hurt from his betrayal two years ago. It had felt good to kick his shin, despite the pain her toes had suffered.

At least she had survived their first encounter, even if she *had* acquitted herself poorly.

Just then her princely escort broke into her distracted thoughts. "Lord Wrexham is the gentleman who was once your betrothed, is he not?"

His tone held more than curiosity; a note of masculine jealousy tinged the question.

"For a very brief while." She offered the prince a bright smile. "My feelings for Wrexham cooled shortly, I assure you. He is nothing to me now, and I am quite over him. He is merely a friend of my brother's, no more."

And yet Eleanor couldn't help but note that the conviction in her declaration sounded weak to her own ears. She was *not* over Damon, if her reaction to him a moment ago was any indication.

Of course, any woman would have been affected by his sensual assault. Damon's kisses were magical, passionate, swoonworthy.... Worse, the sparks between them still flared in full force.

Damn and blast him.

I should have kicked him harder, Eleanor muttered silently to herself. The pain would make her remember just how dangerous Damon still was to her.

Now she could only hope she had no more intimate encounters with him. She didn't trust herself not to behave in that same wanton manner if he ever attempted to kiss her again.

And if he did? Well, she feared she was likely to succumb to Damon's wicked charm all over again, and she most certainly would not let that happen!

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