

“Stop!” hissed a woman’s voice.

“Darling, just one kiss. Come here, you silly goose.”

“Not now, Reginald. Behave yourself, *please*.” Sprawled on a worn stone bench deep in the gardens of Lord and Lady Pool’s London town house, Alexander Scarston, the Earl of Selbourne, heaved a sigh. He’d retreated to the extensive gardens hoping to escape the hordes in attendance at one of the premier balls of the Season, and he was in no mood for young lovers.

“Reginald, I said stop.” The woman’s voice was more insistent now. Closer as well. Looking for an escape, Alex peered into the shadows cast by the overgrown rhododendron bushes and wild roses. If he could avoid the garishly lit town house, he could be in his carriage and on his way to his club in a quarter hour at most.

He saw no reason to revisit the ball. Judging from his brief foray into the madness earlier, there was little likelihood that he would gain the information Pitt wanted, and every likelihood he would be accosted by some annoying matron who simply *had* to introduce him to her niece or daughter or second cousin twice removed, whom she knew an eligible earl such as himself would absolutely adore.

“Darling, don’t fight me.” An undertone of annoyance belied the man’s sickly sweet tone.

Selbourne decided to cut his losses, and he rose and melted into the shadows of the massive oaks towering behind him. But he’d waited a moment too long and found himself forgetting to breathe when he saw the woman glide through an opening in the hedge. Alex stared. How had he missed this exquisite creature inside?

In the cloud-filtered moonlight, the thick gold hair piled high on her head glittered. Her features had been molded by a true artist: high cheekbones; small, straight nose; full mouth; elegantly curved jaw line. Her neck was long and slender, her skin like fine ivory. A band of brilliant amethysts sparkled at her neck, and below the gems, he noted the swell of rounded breasts sheathed in shimmering white silk. The breeze played with her skirts and hinted at a willowy figure—small waist, shapely hips, and long, supple legs.

She was stunning, more so in her anger.

“If you don’t cease this instant, Reginald, I’ll—”

Her partner chuckled. “You’ll what?” He pushed through the hedge and grasped her elbow for support. With clumsy movements, his mouth fell on hers. She shoved him away but was prevented from escape when her gown caught on the protruding branches of the hedge.

“Stop teasing me.” The man’s words were slurred, and he almost knocked her over as he backed her toward the bench Alex had just vacated. All trace of charm was gone from his tone. In the shadows, Alex tensed.

The woman twisted, fighting to escape the drunken man’s hold. “Reginald, I said st—”

His lips savaged her neck, cutting her off. Alex took two steps forward but paused when the woman cried, “Get off me this instant!” She pushed Reginald back, and he flailed for an instant before grasping the back of her neck. His other hand snaked out and groped her breast. Alex heard her hand crack against the man’s cheek.

Reginald’s head jerked. “Lucia, stop acting so prudish,” he slurred. “No one can see us.”

Alex had grasped two handfuls of the bushes concealing him, prepared to intercede, when an alarm rang in his head.

*Lucia.*

Where had he heard that name before? It wasn't a common name among ladies of the *ton*, and the Italian pronunciation the man had given it tickled Alex's memory. "Bloody hell," he said under his breath. "Not her." Just his luck to run into Lucia when he was trying to save the bloody country.

"This isn't proper, my lord," Lucia was saying. "And if you weren't so drunk, you'd realize that. Now let me go before I scream."

Reginald chuckled. "You won't scream." He dragged his hand roughly through her hair, loosening it so it fell in heavy, silver-streaked waves to her waist. Lucia flinched.

"You don't want to upset your father. He likes me."

"Well, I don't." Alex's voice was low and menacing as he strode from the murky dark of the foliage into full view of the bastard still gripping Lucia.

"Unless you want your teeth knocked to the back of your throat, release the lady and walk away."

Lucia jumped and whipped her head in Alex's direction. He fixed his glare on her partner.

"I don't know who you are"—Reginald pointed a chubby finger at him—"but I'll have you know this lady is my fiancée. Go find your own." He gave Lucia a sloppy smile, and she took advantage of the moment to scoot out of his reach.

Alex smiled. He'd been in a foul mood all evening and would relish plowing his fist into the man's soft, pudgy middle. A good fight was just what he needed right now.

"Your fiancée?" He shot Lucia an incredulous look. "Unfortunately, the lady and I have a more intimate connection. I'm her brother-in-law." Or close enough, he amended.

Lucia's eyes grew into dark moons as she studied him, and when Reginald glanced at her for confirmation, she gave a distracted nod.

"Lord S-S-Selbourne. At last we meet." Reginald staggered back. "Perhaps not on the best of terms, but nevertheless, I'm pl-pl-pleased to make your acquaintance." He stumbled over a graceless bow, eyes wide with alarm.

Alex's gaze returned to Lucia's and held. Her eyes were still wide and unreadable.

"Your name, sir?" Alex's attention never left Lucia. "Ah—"

"Viscount Dandridge," Lucia supplied, as her fiancé seemed to have forgotten. Alex nodded, effectively dismissing the man from his thoughts. He wouldn't waste his time with the whey-faced coward. But Lucia . . .

She was nothing like the girl he remembered from his brother's wedding five years before. She'd been—what? Fourteen? Fifteen? Her eyes were the same. Azure blue, if memory served. But when had she acquired that creamy skin, those lush lips, those curves?

And her hair—glorious curls cascading down her back. Hair a man could wrap thickly around his hands. Hair that could brush against skin, teasing it and—

"Selbourne," she said, "I can't begin to express how I feel at seeing you again."

Shutting out the tempting image, Alex tried to focus on her words.

"Unfortunately, Lord Dandridge had a little too much to drink tonight." With complete composure, she pushed an errant curl from her cheek. "I thought the air might help."

"I see." He continued to pierce her with his gaze. She broke eye contact first, and he saw a flicker of something—anger? resentment?—in her eyes before she shot Reginald an exasperated look. Though Alex doubted the coward had enough backbone to argue with him, he spoke first.

"Dandridge," he said before the man was foolish enough to try and intervene. "You may go. I'll take my"—he glanced at Lucia—"sister home."

Lucia huffed loudly. "I'm not your sister."

"Your sister is married to my brother. That's close enough. Let's go."

"There's no need for this, Selbourne. Reginald is quite capable of taking me home. There's no reason to start gossip, which, you well know, will be the inevitable result if he and I leave separately."

Alex raised one eyebrow. He understood her concern for appearances. There *would* be gossip if Dandridge did not escort her home. It was just that he didn't care. Alex wanted Dandridge to disappear, and he generally got what he wanted.

"Tell Lady Pool that Miss Dashing has a headache." He directed his words to Reginald, but his gaze never left Lucia's. "Say I offered to escort her home, and you agreed." He winked at Lucia. "Be sure to convey her regrets."

Lucia's eyebrows shot together, and she glanced from Alex to Reginald and back again. "Lord Selbourne—" The edge in her voice might have cut glass. "While we're exceedingly grateful for your . . . *kind* gesture"—sarcasm oozed from her voice—"I assure you it is entirely unnecessary. If you will excuse me." She placed her hand on Reginald's arm and turned toward the house.

"One more step and you'll be taking your leave from over my shoulder."

She jerked as though his tone were a rapier slashing through her.

"Good Lord!" Reginald gasped. Alex expected a similar response from Lucia. Instead she whirled to face him, her eyes suddenly more indigo than azure, and hurling silent but deadly daggers at him. The tumultuous skies before a rainstorm on the Yorkshire moors were less threatening.

"Lord Selbourne—" Her hands fisted at her hips.

Alex blinked. Was the chit actually about to challenge him *again*? Inconceivable. He watched in disbelief as she parted her lips to argue further.

"I don't need—"

He grasped her arm firmly above her elbow and yanked her to him. "Don't test me."

Her skin was impossibly soft, and he glanced down to verify that he was actually touching her bare arm and not the silk of her gown or gloves. Intrigued, he pulled her closer. When her face was mere inches from his, he said, "I'll have my wish one way—or another."

Lucia's eyes slitted and her lips thinned. He imagined he could hear her teeth grinding. For a moment, in her anger, she resembled the child he vaguely remembered. Then her features relaxed, and she turned to Reginald and smiled.

"Reginald, dear." She tried to move toward her retreating fiancé, but Alex held her elbow fast, trying to ignore the temptation of her full breasts pressing against him.

Lucia shot him a glare, which only made him grin.

"Lord Selbourne and I haven't seen each other in so long. I hope you can forgive me if I allow him to chaperone me home," she bit out. "We have so much to catch up on, and he so

rarely has the chance to exercise his brotherly . . . *affections*." The look she sent Alex would have withered most men. He stifled a large yawn.

"Of course, darling," Reginald said, already backing away. "I will call on you tomorrow. Pray excuse me."

Dandridge bowed awkwardly then turned and dashed for the house. Alex almost snorted. Worthless milksop. When her fiancé was out of sight, Lucia rounded on Alex, shaking his hand from her elbow.

"How dare you!" Her eyes fired hot with fury. "How dare you saunter in after all these years and treat me as if I were your charge! You have no obligations toward me, *brother*." Her hand shot out, and she poked him with an accusing finger. "Surely you recall that I have a brother of my own—a real brother—as well as a father, and I certainly do not need you"—she poked him again—"to act as their surrogate."

Alex's lips twitched. Little Lucia. How she had grown up, and what a temper! Finger wagging, she stood lecturing him, at least half a foot shorter than he and acting every bit the disciplining governess. Except his thoughts toward his governess had never tended in this direction. He would have laughed aloud if he hadn't remembered the circumstances in which he'd found her.

"If you'd been able to handle your wayward fiancé, I wouldn't have intervened at all. But, judging from the scene I observed, you were about to be compromised."

"That is utterly ridiculous!" Lucia waved his words away with an impatient flick of her hand. "Reginald simply over-imbibed. I had everything under control."

Alex's gaze roved leisurely over her state of dishabille, raising an eyebrow when he'd finished.

"Well—" She fidgeted, trying to straighten the creased silk of her skirts. "I would have had things under control given a moment more."

"Undoubtedly."

She reached up to restore some order to her heavy curls, but after several futile minutes, threw down her hands in frustration. "Why are you here anyway? It's been years since I've seen you, and I can't remember the last time you called at Berkeley Square."

It was an obvious attempt to change the topic, and Alex allowed it, smiling at her understatement. "I've never called at Berkeley Square. And I'm content to keep it that way. Your parents are my brother's in-laws. Let Ethan deal with them."

Lucia frowned at him. "Have you no sense of etiquette?"

Alex settled back on the bench, stretching his long legs and watching her under lowered lids. A cloud, long and wispy, passed over the moon, casting the garden into semidarkness. The remaining silver halo of moonlight reflected off the white silk of her gown, leaving her looking more like an angel than the girl he remembered. The dark, heavy smell of the roses wafted over them, and he wondered vaguely if this was some kind of dream.

"Perhaps my manners leave something to be desired. I assure you"—he added an extra measure of sarcasm to his tone—"had I realized the beauty you'd grown to be, I would have called. And frequently." In the pale darkness, he thought he detected a blush on her vanilla complexion. "I'd heard of your charms, but I seldom agree with the *ton's* definition of beauty." His eyes swept over her. "I'm pleased to find myself in error."

At his appraisal, her cheeks crimsoned further, and for a moment she was speechless—a rare occurrence, he surmised—then she shook her head in disbelief.

“You are a rake. I’d heard as much but never believed it. Your brother always speaks so highly of you, but the rumors are true, aren’t they? No.” She held up a hand. “Don’t answer. Your behavior confirms everything. All the *on-dit* and allusions and half-whispered stories. Well, I won’t fall into one of your rakish schemes. I have nothing but contempt for girls who ruin their name and that of their family for a scoundrel like you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re far too innocent for my tastes. Anyway, I regard you as a sister. A sister who’s surprised me by growing up.”

He rose and took her hand. Turning her toward the drive and the waiting carriages, he said, “Let’s be friends. I promise no further unbrotherly perusals of your lovely form.”

Her fingers on his sleeve tensed.

“If you promise no further eruptions of that unsisterly temper.”

She looked away and harrumphed, which he supposed was an agreement of sorts. With a low chuckle, he led her out of the garden.