

Scorned Ever More, A Lady Forsaken Book Three
Excerpt

Prologue

London, England
1788

The rules had always been the same:

1. The girl must be of noble birth,
2. The taking must be in clear sight of all men competing, and, finally,
3. Further attachments resulted in the loss of all points garnered.

A one-point penalty would be assessed if the female were married, and beyond that, if her husband or father were present during the tryst then extra points would be awarded.

Andrew Penton, the newly proclaimed Marquis of Drake, was hedging on a monstrous thirteen points being added to his running total, even with the penalty due to Mrs. St. Augustin's married status. The only way he could muster more points was if the girl were an innocent, and although his reputation as a rakehell of the first order was true, he did not relish taking the virtue of a young girl, no matter how willing she appeared.

"Surely, I cannot." The woman before him feigned innocence at his plight. "I must return before the performance begins."

"Come now, Pearl," Andrew coaxed. "It is only a few moments within my box. You truly must see the view. I guarantee it is far superior to the baron's seats below."

With little more effort expended, the baroness followed him willingly into his box, the door shutting soundlessly behind them.

"My lord," she gasped, "you were correct." Pearl moved from his reach toward the edge of the box, overlooking the general crowd below.

"Come here, my pet." Andrew hadn't followed her to the edge. "Come sit with me."

He took a seat just out of the shadow's reach, enabling Chastain, his dear friend and competitor, a clear view. He glanced at Chastain across the theater and winked as Pearl returned to sit next to him. Andrew nibbled the woman's neck, her moans barely covered by the dramatics of the production.

Chastain, always the most brazen of the pair, had already relieved his female guest of the top portion of her gown. If one could peek into the darkened corner of Chastain's theater box, one would behold a succulent breast exposed for the world to see. The young girl, most likely pushed into Chastain's arms by her own marriage-hungry parents, clawed at Andrew's friend's shirt as if her very life depended on what he could give her. Fortunately for the girl—and unfortunately for her money-seeking family—Chastain would offer nothing beyond this one night.

Their games of seduction had not only progressed in their scandalous nature over the last couple of years, but had also lost their ability to thrill Andrew. Only two years out of university, and already high society had lost its luster. Therefore, their games were always evolving. No more could the tryst take place in a private setting, nor would either man take the word of the other that the deed was, in fact, done.

His seduction and taking of the Honorable Mrs. Pearl St. Augustin would be made far less problematic if he could coax her from her seat, push her up against the back wall of his box, and lift her dress. He would

take her swiftly, be done with it, and be at his gentleman's club before the night's performance ended... He may even return her to her husband's box. He wasn't a complete scoundrel devoid of the manners suiting a marquis, despite his years out of university.

But he knew he would forfeit points if their tryst happened anywhere but in plain view of Chastain. To top that off, Andrew had fallen severely behind in points as of late. With the renovations currently underway at his country estate and his withdrawal from town for an extended period of time, he'd been unable to make the acquaintance of London's newest crop of debutantes. This gave Benjamin—Lord Chastain—a clear advantage, since he'd spent the holiday season traveling from one house party to another, gaining introductions to the *crème de la crème* of the season's freshest faces.

That simply meant Andrew would have to appease himself, and his needs, more often...since every time he bedded a widow or married matron he earned fewer points.

Curse Chastain and his ever-increasing lead.

"Oh, Andrew," Pearl simpered as he took her earlobe between his teeth and gently alternated between nipping and sucking it. "Can we go somewhere? Anywhere?"

The desperation in her voice dampened his lust further.

He released her lobe long enough to answer. "I am afraid not, my pet. I have a very busy evening and only have a few moments to spare. Though, I would deeply relish a complete night in your company," Andrew encouraged. He needed this—not only for the points, but also for his own release. He'd denied himself too long, focusing on the responsibilities to his lineage and not his own body.

It was time he concentrated on what truly mattered—besting his friend at his own game.

Chapter One

London, England

February 1799

The Marquis of Drake, Andrew Penton, leaned casually against the wall bordering the gardens. Anyone who stumbled upon him might think his pose nonchalant and tranquil. Yet inside, his discontent festered just below the surface.

There were numerous places he'd rather be, many obligations to which his time would be better devoted. Instead, he flitted around yet another *ton* gathering, acting the self-indulged lord with nothing better to do than discuss the weather with simpering young debutantes, and argue the merits of the war to be waged against their French counterparts.

He'd fled the overcrowded ballroom only moments before when his latest dance partner, pushed upon him by their hostess, had stepped on his booted foot one too many times. That was not the only injustice he'd been dealt during his brief time this evening. Another chit had held him so securely during their promenade about the dance floor that her hands had left sweaty stains on his linen shirt.

He wondered if young women today were properly trained in the art of the quadrille, or if they were sent into the wilds of society wholly unprepared.

And all the time, Andrew's dear friend Benjamin chuckled at his unease.

It had been far simpler when he hadn't tried to be a respectable lord; when he hadn't given a feathering about what others thought of him or his antics about town. The days when he'd only cared about spending his coin and who would warm his bed that night seemed so long ago.

Now, he hid from potential bedmates and begrudgingly paid the new income tax levied against him to help offset the cost of financing British troops fighting in the Napoleonic War. Two shillings per pound was a trifling amount compared to what he'd spent to set up his last mistress in her own London townhouse.

It was past time he returned to the ballroom. The evening would end shortly, and he could return home or to his club for a drink.

Andrew pushed away from the wall, his position hidden from view of the main drive, and started back to the side entrance he'd exited a few moments before. It had been fortuitous that the lord who owned this home had a door leading from his study and onto the drive.

"...we have gone over this several times."

The words floated on the light breeze, meeting Andrew as he stepped inside the study door and the warmth of the house. Pausing, he strained to hear the rest of the conversation, if only to delay his return to the ballroom.

Andrew pushed the doors closed, leaving it open only a crack as footsteps approached on the outside walk. It would not do to be caught eavesdropping.

A trio stopped outside the door, their features obscured by the darkness, though Andrew saw enough to know the group consisted of two females and a well-dressed gentleman.

"See that you follow the instructions given to you." The man took the arm of one of the women and walked on, leaving their third companion behind.

Without the pair blocking his view, Andrew took in the sight of the woman before him. She was gowned in the darkest of blue to match the color of the night sky, her hair piled atop her head, leaving her neck exposed...almost vulnerable.

As he watched, she brought her hands to cover her face, and her shoulders shook ever so slightly as if she sobbed; yet no sound broke the silence of the night.

The urge to step back outside, comfort her when she was clearly upset, was strong—but that was a

familiarity he was not comfortable with. If someone happened upon him alone with a young female in the shadows of the front drive, there would be many questions. Questions he was not suited to answer.

Instead, he kept her in view.

The least Andrew could do was ensure that she caught up with her party and entered the ball safely.

After a few moments, her hands fell away from her face and rested at her sides. She squared her shoulders and called, “Do wait for me, *Pere*.” And with quick feet, she hurried to catch up with the pair who’d left her behind.

As speedily as she’d moved toward the front entrance, Andrew closed the study door and made his way back to the ballroom and his place beside Benji on the fringes of the dance floor.

“Where did you run off to?” his friend asked.

“I was hoping our great host had something a bit stronger than sherry stashed in his study.”

“Ah, very clever of you.” Benji patted him on the back in sport. “And tell me you found an exquisite bourbon or scotch.”

Andrew wouldn’t share what he’d actually come across or his true reason for escaping the merriment around him. “Alas, it seems our hostess has hidden the good stuff.” As he spoke, he kept his gaze trained on the entrance to the ballroom, waiting to see the woman dressed as night descend into the crowd.

“Do not look so despondent,” Benji said. “Your side of the wager is nearly fulfilled and you can depart.”

“I do not look despondent.” Though, if he had to dance with one more simple-minded girl, Andrew was prepared to put himself out of his misery. “Besides, I have already satisfied our wager.”

“The devil you have!”

Andrew looked about as members of the *ton* turned their looks upon them. “Do keep your obscenities down.”

“Our wager stipulated the first to six dance partners without being approached by their sires after wins ten pounds. You most certainly have not met the number to conclude our wager and take the purse.”

Andrew thought back. “There was the cross-eyed chit, the homely creature solidly on the shelf...” He held up his hand, counting the fingers as he went. “...the young girl with the horridly orange dress, oh, and do not forget the sisters who each demanded their turn.”

“Ah-ha!” Benji said in triumph. “Only five. It so happens I myself am at five, as well.”

It was then that *she* entered the room—and all thoughts of wagers, coin, and his dear friend fled his mind.

“Enough,” Andrew commanded his partner to silence. If only every person in the room would do the same so he could behold her in peace.

The glow from the candles lining the walls and hanging from the ceiling showed her beauty for what it truly was: stunning. Exquisitely refined. And utterly dissimilar to any and all women he’d met recently, far surpassing them not only in beauty but poise.

She appeared nothing like he’d expected from her silent sobs and hunched shoulders cloaked in the darkness.

Now she stood tall—exuding a firm confidence that he at once admired and envied. The gems hanging from her neck and ears further enhanced the glow her presence cast on the room. Never would he think her capable of such a vulnerable persona as what he’d seen only moments before from his hidden vantage point in the study doorway.

A quick glance around the room told him that he wasn’t the only one enthralled by her sudden appearance, as a few others took in the sight of her.

She spoke to the pair beside her, all serious as they descended the few steps and blended into the crowd. The older couple were likely her guardians, judging from their similar features and complexion—though their outward display of self-assurance aligned, as well.

Would she be as captivating when she spoke as she was by sight alone? He could not help but wonder. On so many occasions, a pretty turn of the lips or a coy glance caught his attention only to be followed by a disappointing one-sided conversation, or worse yet, blank stares without a word uttered.

Andrew kept his eyes firmly on her, urging her to look his way—or better yet, walk in his direction.

His previous need to protect her fled.

The woman radiated poise and composure as she took in the room, as if not a thing in the world could dampen her night, her eyes traveling across the crowd, never lingering too long on any one person or group.

It was then that Andrew realized he wanted her. In his arms—and in his life.

And he would stop at nothing to have her.

#

Lady Lorelei de La Valette took in the scene around her. Elegantly gowned women danced with smartly dressed gentlemen, young debutantes hid amongst the palms on the fringes of the dance floor, and servants hurried to and fro with trays overflowing with food and drinks.

She loathed their superior attitudes, yet simultaneously envied them their excessive lifestyle.

After many years of travel, it seemed to her that she should feel no sense of unease when entering a room wherein she knew not a soul, but even to this day, she longed for a familiar face.

“You know how important this night is,” her father, the Comte of Epernon, hissed in her ear once again. “These people will compliment your beauty, all while despising your French heritage.”

“We have been over and over this, *Pere*.” She used the French term and waited for the scolding she knew would follow.

Yet, it came from her mother, which was unexpected. “Lorelei, what have we told you?”

“I am to appear as nothing less than a lady born and raised amongst London’s upper crust. I am to blend in with other debutantes and not give reason for anyone to remember me.” She only hoped her moment of weakness before entering the ball did not show on her face. The tears had receded before they’d fully started, and she’d hurried to catch up, the night covering her seconds of doubt.

“Very good, my daughter,” her father said. Though many would see his words as harmless, Lorelei knew them for what they truly were—a threat. The consequences if she failed would not only impact her, but also her parents.

She was tired of running. If she complied with what was asked of her then it was possible her sires, as well as herself, would come into favor and a new fortune. They were here for a specific task, which could be accomplished in little time, and then they would spirit her off back to France. Her mother’s hope was that none would remember her presence.

“Smile, *ma petite*,” her mother whispered as she stepped back and the trio moved farther into the grand ballroom.

Lorelei wanted to ask why they trusted De Pez and Bonaparte—and wanted particularly to know how being in his favor would benefit any of them. Instead, she lifted her chin in defiance and pasted a smile on her face, hoping no one could tell it didn’t reach her eyes.

Her entrance into the room had also been carefully staged to maximize her exposure. They’d arrived late—after the receiving line had disappeared—but before the gentlemen had retired to the card room off the main ballroom. Her hair was swept and gathered high upon her head to reveal her slender neck and highlight her dark, exotic coloring. Her eyes, the color of moss, were outlined by a thin line of coal. Her lips held a hint of color, though not enough to start gossip. And her dress, conservative and outdated by French standards, favored a high neckline in the front but plunged in the back to show off her gracefully arched back. The

midnight-blue satin clung to her tall frame, smoothly gliding to the floor and pooling about her slippered feet.

A delicate strand of cultured pearls hung around her neck, and teardrops dangled from each ear. They were the preferred stone of the English, and that suited Lorelei.

Taking the final slow step into the crowded ballroom, her parents blended into the background and Lorelei took a champagne flute from a passing servant to steady her shaking hand. Peeking over her shoulder, Lorelei confirmed that the comte and comtesse had indeed given her a bit of space, yet they still kept pace with her. It would not help her to have them shadowing her all eve.

It was known that Benjamin Davis, Lord Chastain, held a fondness for women, and Lorelei had no reservations about preying on that weakness.

Lorelei moved through a part in the crowd quickly, hoping her parents lost sight of her. The group of ladies stepped close, effectively covering her movements, and Lorelei switched directions, traveling parallel to the comte, successfully assuring she had a few moments to herself.

She knew not a soul in the room—nor all of London.

And that terrified her.

For a brief moment, she contemplated whether she'd be able to follow through on the task given to her. The stark reality was, she hadn't a choice.

She tilted her glass to her mouth in hopes it would cover what she was actually doing—searching the crowd.

The British stood on pomp and ceremony, which meant no man would approach her without a proper introduction. The comte had insisted she leave the introductions to him, as he was convinced many lords would flock to his side to discuss the ever-changing governmental systems and the key players in their home country. The political situation in France was strained, particularly in their interactions with England, for the War of the Second Coalition still raged on.

Though who these men and women thought the comte loyal to, she cared naught.

She would not pass on the opportunity to sample life in London society; it was a place she could belong. Amongst the finery, she could find the home she had been lacking, even if only for a short time, though she also understood the dangers of falling in with the wrong people. A group of established wallflowers adorned in every shade of pastel imaginable lined one wall. Lorelei knew to steer clear of the group, or she'd likely end up amongst the palms with them. Nor should she attract the attention of the wealthy, elderly gentlemen currently escorting the most well-to-do debutantes and elite courtesans about the dance floor.

No, she sought the notice of only one man.

She'd studied his portrait thoroughly on their journey to England.

His every feature was imprinted on her mind: the roundness of his cheeks, his fashionable sandy brown hair, and his penetrating stare. She wondered if, when they eventually met, she would feel any tenderness for him, or if he would take a genuine liking to her.

Her research told her he was an avid horseman who craved excitement, but also lavished himself with the finer things in life.

She searched the crowd once more.

Lord Chastain—Benji, as he was commonly referred to by his consorts—stood with another man just outside the room that would hold the evening's card game. He gave off the exact impression she'd expected: an entitled rakehell who stood on the fringe of society by choice. Both he and his friend stood tall and wore tailored suits that would rival the fashions in Paris. He was as handsome as his miniatures portrayed, but she found her gaze drawn to the man beside Chastain, who appeared equally at ease at the center of the crowd. She noted how other partygoers gave the men a wide berth.

Benji had the reputation of a womanizer and gambler, though there was nothing particularly extraordinary

about his appearance to suggest either designation. Lorelei had expected a jovial man, but he laughed only at his companion's remarks and barely acknowledged anyone else who walked past.

However was she to attract his attention if he never took his eyes from his friend, she wondered? Truly, he looked nothing like a man she would ever call 'Benji,' which had always struck her as a child's name.

Her sires thought to accomplish—with all due haste—exactly what they'd journeyed to London for: unlimited access to Benjamin Davis, Lord Chastain, keeper of the plans to the fortified city of Carcassonne, located on a hilltop between the Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea. It had been long held that when Lord Chastain's father had fled France, he'd taken the only set of plans to Carcassonne—which also happened to be a detailed map outlining the best possible way to lay siege to the great trading city.

Lorelei, her glass in hand, moved along the side of the dance floor as the men conversed. While the room was filled with marriage-minded matrons and fortune-seeking fathers, she noted that no one approached the pair, and neither man put their name upon any girl's dance card.

How would her father obtain an introduction if both men kept so much to themselves?

Lorelei had decided even before their carriage arrived that it would be necessary for her to break free of her mother and father and seek her own introduction. Even then, she sensed her father had again spotted her and was currently staring daggers at her across the crowd as she maneuvered herself farther from him and closer to Chastain.

Though he would be angry with her, she'd gladly accept his wrath later, for he would never cause a scene in public.

Chastain's associate took in the milling crowd. His eyes landed on her briefly, then returned to her for a longer inspection. It felt as if his earnest gaze penetrated to her very soul, uncovered all her secrets, and found her wanting.

She sensed she should turn back and approach Lord Chastain when this man wasn't close, but something drew her attention back to him.

Lorelei smiled.

To her amazement, he smiled back, turned to Chastain and said a few words... then started in her direction. The crowd moved out of his path as he walked toward her, his eyes never releasing hers.

It was then that she felt her first hint of trepidation. The man was stunningly handsome—not to mention, a friend of Chastain's—and he was coming straight for her, a smile still upon his face.

"I can do this," she mumbled to herself as panic set in. The lady next to her turned a pointed look at her before taking a step away, putting distance between herself and the young lady talking to no one. Lorelei would have done the same had she been in the woman's position.

Before long, the man stood before her. His eyes, while intense, were the softest hazel she'd ever seen.

"Good evening." His voice was a rich, deep baritone. "May I have this dance?"

She hadn't heard music playing, nor the voices of the great number of people surrounding her.

She had only eyes for him.

Shaking her head gently, she snapped from her daze. "Ah, well, it is by chance I have a free space later in the evening."

He smiled. "That is a shame, for I find myself without a proper dance companion at this very moment. Pity."

He made to walk away, but she touched his sleeve ever so lightly, pulling her hand back before anyone saw. "I believe a spot may have opened only just now."

She needed more than a brief moment with this man, though he wasn't the one she'd originally sought.

"Then allow me to ask once more—but only once more," he said. "For I do not find myself in the habit of begging for dance partners. May I have this dance?"

“You may.” She smirked. “If it so pleases you, your lordship.”

She wanted to giggle at the pompous tone in her own voice. The English were not known for their candor, and a sense of intrigue settled on her at his forthright nature.

He reached toward her, and Lorelei started to retreat before she realized he only sought her dance card, tied loosely at her wrist. He held the card in his large hands and wrote his name upon the first line.

The Marquis of Drake.

The letters were written in a thick, bold script that seemed an embodiment of his masculinity and borderline arrogance.

“Shall we?” he asked, holding his arm out for her to take.

“I would enjoy nothing more, your lordship.” Lorelei worked hard to suppress her accent. An import, as many were likely to call her, she did not wish to attract attention for her French blood, as many took offense knowing their countries battled and lives were lost every day. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He spun her on to the dance floor, settling one arm around her lower back. “The pleasure is all mine, I assure you.”

As they moved to the light strains of music floating through the room, Lorelei caught sight of her father, only a few feet from Chastain. He should be pleased with her progress, aligning herself with someone close to Chastain, opening up the possibility for an introduction.

“May I inquire as to the name of my beautiful dance partner?” the marquis asked.

She returned her attention to him and her breath caught at the sight. Forcing herself to exhale, she answered, “Lady Lorelei de La Valette.”

“Ah. While your accent is subtle, your skin tone gives away your French heritage, no?”

“*Oui*.” With her father out of hearing distance, Lorelei let herself fall into her native tongue, fearing naught from the marquis. He did not show himself to be a man entangled in the war between their nations.

“*Charmante*.” His skillful pronunciation had her smiling. He continued to look upon her. “I have not seen you about town. Are you newly arrived?”

“Correct, your lordship.”

“Please, call me Drake or Andrew, as my *amis* do.”

“That is not proper, your lordship.”

He chuckled. “But what do you see as *propre*?” He paused, as if scouring his brain for any other French words hidden there. “A *femme* is most *captivant* when they are themselves, *non*?”

She took her gaze from his, knowing she blushed a deep crimson. No man had called her captivating that she could recall. “You are *juste*, your lordship.” She hoped the couples swirling close by did not notice her embarrassment.

“*Je suis toujours juste, mademoiselle*.” He once again paused. “I fear that is the extent of my knowledge of your language.”

“Well, you did very well, indeed.”

“You have a much more solid grasp of English than I French.”

“It is only *juste*, as I have spent many years learning about your country.”

Something about him turned her back into the shy schoolgirl she’d been before her parents had changed her whole world. While she was well-traveled and highly educated, Drake gave the impression he’d seen and experienced more than was possible, given his youthful appearance.

“What brings you to my fair city?” he said, lapsing back into English.

“Oh, to escape the dreaded heat of India.” It was an effort to keep a straight face, particularly when the marquis willingly continued with the farce.

“Is the land as wild as I have been told?” he asked, appearing equally serious.

It had been a while since she'd enjoyed such an enjoyable exchange. "There are parts still untraveled!" When he only stared, she continued, "—and I will not go on about the inconveniences of outsmarting the monkeys who seek at every turn to rob you of your food."

"From France to India and now England? I dare say, you must be appallingly exhausted after such feats of bravery!"

As they continued round the dance floor, she allowed herself to laugh. "I assure you that it takes more bravery to enter a crowded ballroom than to face down a lion determined to steal my boots and gnaw on the leather."

"Lions? Gnawing on your boots?" he said with bewilderment. "I do agree, I would rather face a whole den of tigers than one marriage-minded matron."

"What always helped me was my ability to scale an elephant and make off before any harm was done." She was enjoying her outlandish tale as much as it appeared he was.

"I must remember to request your counsel when I travel next."

"I would be more than happy to guide your expedition." She paused before continuing. "That is, if I am not indisposed at the time."

"I am sure you will find the time to help a friend. But might I inquire why you'd be indisposed?"

"Well, I may be exploring the colonies at that time."

"India? The colonies? By heavens, you put most English gentlemen to shame with your geographical exploits."

Lorelei forced herself to stop the banter, recalling the reason that she was here this eve. Their conversation, while amusing, did not suit her main objective. "I fear I am not as well traveled as I appear, though I did have the pleasure of visiting India in my youth, and do plan to sail for the colonies someday."

"As long as 'someday' is not today." He increased his hold on her, bringing her closer to him as they danced. "Back to my original question."

She'd completely forgotten how their conversation of exotic lands had started. "Which is?"

"Why are you in London, Lady Lorelei?"

While he asked one question, Lorelei expected the answer he sought was to another one altogether. "Not to find a husband, if that is what you wish to know."

"My suspicions about you were correct: you are the forthright kind." He looked at her appreciatively, and she relaxed once more. "And I must say, I am very disappointed to hear you are not on the market."

"And why is that?"

"Because I find myself with a lot to offer one such as yourself." When she continued to stare, a smirk on her face, he continued. "You see, I am titled, wealthy, handsome...and dare I say, charming?"

"Oh, you are very charming." Lorelei wanted to laugh but held back, not wanting to offend him. It was not that she feared hurting Drake's feelings, only how it would appear to others around them. "You will be happy to know, if I were not here on a political errand with my father, I would find you quite suitable."

She should rein in her flirtatiousness with the marquis and focus on an introduction to Chastain, but she was unable to stop herself. It was the first stimulating conversation she'd had since her departure from France. In her mother country, her parents' ever-changing residence was always open to educated men and woman who enjoyed discussing the evolving regime from King to Directory to the man who it appeared would be their next leader, Napoleon Bonaparte. Though the topics might bore another young lady, she found any subject with the potential for debate highly interesting. She'd usually been clever enough to persuade her father's associates to her way of thinking.

During one such conversation, she had even devised a method for solving the horrid stench from the crowded and polluted Paris streets—yet her father called her plans idealistic in nature, no more than the easily

dismissed musings of a woman.

No one here in their rented London household spoke to her, and the men who came to see her father avoided her, knowing she was committed to a higher cause and thus not open to their advances. As any woman would, she enjoyed the marquis' undivided attention.

Though they hadn't discussed any subject of great import, his intelligence was clear in his wit.

The music stopped, signaling the end of their dance. "Thank you for restoring my wounded pride. May I request another dance later in the evening?"

"I am sure that would cause gossip of the worst sort, your lordship," she said formally, dropping in a shallow curtsy. "But as I do not much care what society deems proper, I would entertain another turn about the floor with a dance partner as skilled as yourself."

"Until then." He brought her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her fingers. After several long seconds, he released it. "May I escort you to your chaperone?"

Looking up, she noticed several sets of eyes on them, some couples stopped in mid-promenade to take them in, though she expected the gawking had more to do with the marquis than herself.

"Oh, that will not be necessary." Lorelei's father was close, she could feel his stare. She needed an introduction to waylay his scolding over straying from their plan. "I find myself parched. Would you be so kind as to escort me to the refreshment table?"

She'd handed her last glass to a passing servant before taking to the dance floor with Drake. Their walk would force them to pass by Lord Chastain, not having moved an inch since she and Drake—Andrew, as she now thought of him after their brief conversation—had taken to the dance floor.

As they walked the perimeter of the room, Andrew peppered her with questions about her trip from France, how she liked his wonderful city, and if she had plans to travel to Bath after the season ended. Lorelei gave him as many noncommittal responses as she could muster in an attempt to give him no useful information about herself or her family, while still hoping to keep his interest. She was pleased to note that their continued conversation had caught Chastain's attention.

The duke, her original intended target, stepped into their path as they drew close. She'd seen the look on his face before from other suitors, and prided herself on her ability to distract men from their own base thoughts upon meeting her for the first time. This night, she'd only planned to gain an audience with him, possibly pique his interest, and hope for him to call upon her soon.

"Drake," Chastain greeted them and turned a slight bow in Lorelei's direction. "My lady."

Lorelei couldn't believe her good fortune. She'd been in the room less than thirty minutes and now stood face-to-face with Chastain. She could only imagine her father's reaction as his child, a mere female, had gained an introduction before him.

Her mind whirled with the possibilities of gaining more ground than they'd planned for this evening, perhaps even a private conversation.

"Lord Chastain, may I introduce Lady Lorelei." Drake's words sounded guarded and not at all happy. "Her family is new to London."

Chastain smiled, a smirk that could only be described as smug. The pair had appeared to be friends earlier, but something about the way they now assessed each other led her to believe otherwise. She hoped that played nicely into her plans, which as yet were limited.

She coyly eyed Chastain from lowered eyelids as she curtsied. "Lord Chastain, I am honored to make your acquaintance."

The marquis moved closer to her side.

Her words gained the response she sought. "The honor is my own, Lady Lorelei. Drake and I have been friends for more years than either of us can count."

The tension that had shadowed the trio moments before was alleviated, and both men smiled as they chatted about inconsequential topics.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Drake said as he again settled Lorelei’s hand in the crook of his arm. “We were just on our way for refreshments.”

“I find myself in need of another glass, as well.” Chastain turned toward the table several paces behind him, not to be dismissed. “I shall accompany you.”

“That would be delightful, my lord.” And exactly what Lorelei had hoped he would say. She needed to find a way to speak privately with him without insulting Drake. While she very much enjoyed the marquis’ company—and he was extremely pleasing to the eye—she had other matters on which to focus.

With sherry in hand, they moved toward the terrace doors. She knew the darkened gardens would be a perfect spot for a quiet conversation.

“Lady Lore—”

“Ah, there you are, my daughter.”

Her father’s voice sounded behind her, and she turned to greet him. His icy stare chilled her faster than the cold winds that moved across the English Channel.

“Father, may I introduce the Marquis of Drake and Lord Chastain, his dear friend.” If her father’s thought was to steal Chastain away before she had an opportunity to speak with him, he had underestimated how badly she wanted to impress him. “These fine London gentlemen were explaining to me the marvels of England’s unpredictable weather patterns. A lady must be prepared for showers every time she leaves her home. How tiresome!”

“Very true, Lorelei.” Her father turned to Chastain. “My daughter is very interested in London culture.”

Her father, the Comte of Epernon, had never been a man with tact. He was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted, at no cost of time or money to himself. But London was not France—and his foreign title meant little to the *ton*. Even if her father failed to realize this, Lorelei knew at least that much.

“Father, please!” Regretfully, she slipped her hand from Drake’s arm and moved to Chastain. “Now is not the time for dreaded government talks. I believe Lord Chastain was about to escort me to the terrace for a spot of fresh air.” She gave her father a pleading look, hoping he’d take the clue and keep Drake occupied.

“Very well, but please bring her back after she cools down a bit.” He finally acknowledged the marquis. “Your lordship, I believe they have finally opened the card tables. Would you care to join me?”

Drake gave her one last lingering look before bowing and wishing her a wonderful evening. He’d wanted to stay and dance again, she could sense it, though he was too much the gentlemen to deny Chastain.

She watched her father and the marquis walk side by side to the card room. Though his back faced her now, the memory of Drake’s stare lingered. Never had a simple look dug so deeply, making her question the consequences and lasting cost of her mission. There was nothing left to do but allow Chastain to guide her outside and into the cool night air.

Chastain, while every bit as well dressed as Drake, lacked something. From where her hand rested on his forearm, she did not feel the tight, corded muscle of a man who spent hours at his fencing club, and she suspected he did not possess the sculptured legs of a skilled horseman, as she’d been told. His tailor should be commended for the fine cut of his coat, which no doubt covered what he lacked beneath.

It was truly a shame that the marquis was not the man she sought, for after only a few short minutes in his presence, her interest had been significantly piqued.

But her word was her bond—and her allegiance lay not with her own needs and wants, but with what would garner her family approval from the man many said would take control of France. “Shall we, Lord Chastain?”

“Without further ado, my lady.”

They walked arm in arm toward the terrace door. All the while, Lorelei refused to glance over her shoulder.