

Shunned No More, A Lady Forsaken Book One
Excerpt

PROLOGUE

Hyde Park
April 1806

Viola clutched the handle of her pink parasol tightly to her chest in anticipation of the spectacle to come. Her gaze fixed on the two figures shrouded in the early morning fog of Hyde Park. The men, really only boys, began to count as they paced away from each other. Shiny, pearl-handled pistols positioned in their right hands were at the ready.

She clamped her lips tight to suppress the giggle that threatened to escape.

Who would have thought that she, Lady Viola Oberbrook, would have two men seeking her hand in marriage—and in the first week of her very first season, no less? That they were the twin sons of Lord Haversham was an even greater *coup de grace* for her. She'd be the envy of every debutante. The talk of the town. As well she should be! Her father was the Duke of Liperton, after all.

If only she'd found a way to get all of London here to witness the duel. She'd done what she could by leaving word with Mrs. Tenchard. The old gossipmonger was sure to spread the news more quickly than Vi could spend her monthly allowance at the milliner's shop.

And Vi prided herself on her ability to spend her father's money.

"Miss Viola, beg'n yer pardon, but it be wise to don ye wool kid gloves," her lady's maid, Sarah, whispered beside her.

"Shhhh," Vi hissed in return, raising her hand for Sarah to hold her tongue. She didn't want to miss a single moment of what was to come. She would remember this for the rest of her existence. The day two men of the *haute ton* battled in her honor. She sighed.

The twins—Cody, with his hair cut longer than the current fashion permitted, and sporting a determined glint in his eye, and Winston, with his smartly trimmed blond hair falling respectfully above his collar—reached the required twenty-pace distance and turned.

Their pistols fired in unison. Vi's heart soared. Her first duel . . . and certainly not her last, if she had anything to say in the matter.

The swift morning breeze pushed the smoke from the scene as both men dropped to the ground, soggy with morning dew. Shouts of urgency rang out in the air. Men rushed in to assist the twins.

A cold chill inched up her spine; her breath caught in her lungs.

Neither man moved.

A sharp inhale of breath sounded next to her, but Vi was hesitant to remove her attention from the scene as the pungent smell of a spent firearm reached her.

"Call Doc Durpentire. Post haste!" bellowed Mr. Rodney Swiftenberg. As a distant relative of the Havershams, Swiftenberg stood as Cody's second during the duel. Others, vaguely familiar, knelt over both fallen men.

The gossip rags would have much to write about this day. Vi could hardly wait to see her name in print. Maybe her father would increase her dowry, seeing as she would be in high demand by the day's end.

"Miss," Sarah called. "I think it best we be head'n home. Ye Pa is going to be right mad when he finds you snuck out and now these poor men be lying dead at ye very feet."

"Surely you jest. They are simply play acting for dramatics—in my honor, I do suppose." Viola eyed the

two groups of men where they stood, their heads shaking in turn. One took his coat off and laid it gently over Cody's still body. Vi's glare snapped to Winston, where another man shook out a horse blanket. The thick, coarse material drifted on the morning breeze and settled on the second body.

She studied the scene in front of her. It had the potential to be ever so romantic. A story she would regale her grandchildren with. It was a shame neither twin was the first born and, therefore, unworthy of her hand. But she'd seen no reason to inform them of this minor issue and spoil her fun. They'd find out soon enough.

Slowly, the eyes of every person present settled on her. She took a step back at the harshness of their stares. Her chilled hand rose to cover her mouth. She wanted to tell them to avert their eyes; she was the daughter of a Duke. They need show the respect due her. None of these men held a title higher than Baron. How dare they look at her thus?

A tall, slender man carrying a large cloth bag rushed to Winston. She assumed this was Doc Durpentine. He would have both men patched up in no time. But with both Cody and Winston taking a bullet, their feud would not be resolved. Viola imagined what the pair would think up next to prove one deserved her hand over the other. Perhaps a curricule race through Mayfair District. She knew she would be able to convince Cody to let her ride along on the adventure. She could practically feel the wind against her face as the carriage took the corners at a high speed, shifting across the seat so that her soft body might come to rest against Cody's hard one.

Imagine what the silly, empty-brained young females would think. They'd envy her further. An unbidden smile played across her lips.

The doctor drew the heavy blanket aside and his hands moved over Winston's body. Then, they stilled. His head dropped forward. He spoke to the men around him, but Vi was too far to hear their conversation.

Rodney, hands shoved deep in his pockets, moved in her direction.

"Whatever is the matter with them?" she asked when he was close enough to hear.

"I think you should go, Lady Viola. This is not a scene any innocent maiden should witness," Rodney replied. His blond hair was so much like Cody and Winston's, but his attitude had always struck her as arrogant for a man with no title or wealth to speak of.

"Who are you to order me about?" Viola closed her parasol with a swift click and handed it to Sarah, her hands coming to rest on her rounded hips.

"It is not the time for this. My cousins . . . they are both dead." Rodney paused. "I must alert my uncle to his misfortune."

"You are mistaken."

"I assure you, no mistakes have been made this day." He abruptly turned, stalking back to the crowd gathering between the fallen men.

He must be jesting, Viola thought. She looked between the fallen pair again, their motionless bodies so at odds with the twins she'd come to know in recent days. The heat of exhilaration drained from her as a hand settled at her elbow. Viola felt the calloused fingertips through her thin morning cloak.

"We should be going, Miss."

Vi shook Sarah's imploring touch from her arm and tried to focus her gaze on something—anything—other than the lifeless boys on the ground.

"Well," Viola stated. "This was..." Dread clawed at her insides, and her spirit shattered as she stared at the two men lying prone and unmoving before her. "...unexpected." Her entire life had been leading up to this moment—a life of societal demands and the rigors one had to follow to be accepted. A life that had just stopped, as quickly as those of the two men who now lay dead. *Dead*. She had murdered these men—the realization came at her all at once, even as her mind rebelled. Cody and Winston, the silly twins who had entertained her so, were no more. Yet, she continued to breathe. With each breath, standing in the chill of early

morning in Hyde Park, she felt the obligations of her station, its standards and protocols, too powerful for a seventeen-year-old girl to overcome.

She glanced around her for help, for someone to tell her what to do, but all focus was on the boys on the ground. Years of being taught how to behave hadn't prepared her for anything like this.

"Miss, what should we do?"

"I suppose we should . . ." She cleared her throat. "I suppose it is time to start over." She sensed, somehow, that starting over might be impossible.

"Start over, Miss?" Her maid's dark brow pulled low over her eyes.

Viola straightened her already impeccably postured back and forced her prized smile before continuing. "To find another suitor, you silly girl! This time, I intend to set my sights a bit higher." She spun on her heels, determined not to stumble, to not falter before so many. She started back towards her carriage, moving through the men without meeting anyone's eye, feeling the weight of their stares as she passed. It didn't matter. She had the evening's entertainments to prepare for and an image to uphold—no matter the cost to her soul.

CHAPTER ONE

Winchester, Hampshire

July, 1815

Lady Viola Oberbrook tallied the list of figures on the page for the fifth time. “Impossible,” she muttered. For the last eight years, she’d run Foldger’s Foals at a tidy profit. But the tides had been changing over the last six months.

Setting her pencil aside, she surveyed the room, adorned in lavish blues and golds, paired with dark cherry wood. The surroundings were her home. Decorated soon after she’d fled London, the room exuded the expensive tastes of her youth. The dark wood of her desk passed smoothly under her fingertips. It would fetch a handsome price. She would have to sell more furnishings, since the foals weren’t fetching a higher return.

How she’d changed that she now valued simplicity over extravagance. A part of her would be glad to see it all vanish.

A soft tap at the door drew her from memories better left in the past. “Come in.” Vi closed the ledger and stood, smoothing her gown with charcoal-smudged fingers.

The office door opened on rusted hinges to reveal Connor Cale, her assistant and stable master. As a middle-aged man of the *ton*, he’d been a savior when she had needed a friend all those years ago. Now, his salt-and-pepper hair, honest face, and connections in London society enabled her to complete her life’s work while remaining in the background.

He strolled hesitantly into her office, stopping in front of her desk. “A new client has arrived to assess our available stock.”

“We are not expecting anyone today.” Vi opened her desk drawer and placed the ledger inside.

“I understand, but he has traveled all the way from Kent and wishes to meet with the owner.” Connor’s gaze flitted around the room, not focusing on any one thing.

“Then, by all means, show the man around.” She always worried when allowing someone onto the property. One overly inquisitive client could disrupt her life—and the lives of all who depended on her—immensely. “Are you familiar with his family?”

“I do not *personally* know him. He is newly arrived in society.”

“Newly arrived in society?” Vi relaxed into her seat, the cause for alarm passing. The threat of a prior acquaintance with the gentleman would be null and the added bonus of fresh coin to spend would be a boon.

“From his appearance, I am led to believe he has returned from the Battle of Waterloo. While he was away, his father passed on.” Connor’s gaze finally met Vi’s.

Odd, he was never one to shy from eye contact.

“I am confused as to why you are here. Show the man about, but impress upon him that our newest crop of foals will not be ready for another two weeks. That is non-negotiable.”

Connor cleared his throat. “There is a problem,” Connor paused. “He would like to speak with you.”

“Whatever for? Most men are content to handle their business transactions with you.” She looked about her desk to occupy herself. Beyond the obvious reason—her past—she truly couldn’t spare the time to show the man around.

“While I agree with you, the man is very insistent. I do not think we can afford to send him away unhappy.” Connor leaned against the desk, his hands placed firmly on the smooth surface.

“While I understand your concern, *we* also cannot afford him recognizing me.” Vi leaned forward, mirroring his posture. She didn’t care that her pose and tone appeared defensive, verging on hostile even.

“I agree and I will tell—”

A latch clicked and the door behind him swung inward. She'd have to install a bell—or better yet, a sturdy lock.

“I am sorry to interrupt, but I do not have the luxury of spending all day waiting. I have a long return trip to my estate,” the intruder said, entering her office.

She looked from Connor to the intruder and back again. Her stable master had been correct, the man before her had earned his way in the military. Until very recently, she suspected. His skin was tan, his eyes intense, and his hair dark brown cut short on the sides and left longer on top. She could fairly picture a warm summer breeze ruffling its tawny locks.

The room turned overly warm, even for late August, as her mind wandered.

“Can I preview your stock today, or should I return at a later date?” Impatience infused his voice.

She'd been staring, with the great possibility of her mouth hanging open. She snapped her gaze away from his exquisitely sculpted male form, his alluring hair and brown eyes, and trained them on Connor instead. Sensible, practical Mr. Connor Cale.

“Mr. Cale will be more than happy to show you around the stables.” She locked eyes with Connor, pleading for him to remove the man from her office. “We have excellent quality young, almost mature enough for purchase.”

“Indeed, please allow me to—” Connor turned to the man with his arm wide to guide him back to the stables.

But the intruder held his ground. “Are you responsible for this business?”

“I am.” Viola answered.

“But, you are a lady . . .”

“Thank you for noticing.” Vi stood and smoothed her skirts, ready to escort him out of her office herself. “If you'll please—”

“Oh, yes, it certainly is a hard thing *not* to notice.” He took in her body from head to toe and back again.

Vi stepped around the desk to confront him. It was times such as these she was glad she'd retired from society, and their notions of what a lady should and should not do with her time. While it was a forced retirement, she *had* retired all the same. “Mister—”

“Lord,” he corrected.

She should have guessed he'd be a lord, and not just a younger son. His arrogance was evidence of his silver-spoon upbringing. “Well, lord . . . might I inquire as to your name?”

Vi continued past the irritatingly smug man and out the door into the stable yard, giving him no option but to follow her—which she prayed he wouldn't—or be left behind. If he answered her question, she didn't hear him.

“I have run Foldger's Foals for the past eight years. And very successfully, I might add,” she called over her shoulder.

“Should I find that impressive?” He had indeed followed her out the door.

“Yes—”

“I have saved hundreds of men on the battlefield.”

Vi stopped mere feet from the entrance to the stable. “Is it now my turn to be impressed?”

When she turned in his direction, they almost collided. Outrunning him didn't seem to be a viable option.

“I only state—”

“Since you seem determined to compare the size of our egos, would you also like to beat your chest and howl at the moon?” she demanded, her gaze now heated.

His hands flew up in defense, but she saw a glimmer of humor in his eyes. “We have started off on the wrong foot. Let us start anew. Apparently, I am the overgrown ape with the manners of a wild dog, who lacks

all social grace.” He bowed at the waist.

She laughed, hiding her enormous grin with her hand. “And I seem to be the woman determined to emasculate every half-ape, half-dog in my vicinity,” Vi said, dropping in a curtsy.

“I am Lord Haversham. . .”

Haversham? The smile drained from her face and the laugh stuck in her throat, cutting off her air. Abruptly, she pushed past him once more and moved back toward the safety of her office. She hadn’t heard that name in years. Her legs trembled with each step, much like that day long ago. Could it truly be? She searched the man’s face in her mind’s eye for any resemblance. But no, she saw nothing. While Winston and Cody had been fair-skinned and light-haired men of average height, the man before her stood over six feet and looked of French descent.

“. . . and I did not mean to offend. I simply seek to understand the inner workings of a stable.” He’d followed her back into the office.

Clearly, he hadn’t recognized her either, but why ever would he? They’d never met. Brock Spencer, heir to the Earl of Haversham, had left years before in service to King George III. She needed to sit down before her knees buckled beneath her.

“Is something amiss, Lady—” Connor started.

“No, it is just warm and I have been working many hours,” she said, cutting Connor off before the ignorant man used her given name. She moved behind her desk and regained her seat. She felt her confidence return as she laid her palms on the cool surface. “Starting over would be advantageous for this situation. My name is Lady Posey Hale. I have been the proprietor of Foldger’s Foals for many years. How can I help you today?”

She kept her eyes trained on Brock. If she looked in Connor’s direction, she was sure to find the man staring at her, his face a mask of confusion. Had he not made the connection yet? It had been many years since she’d discussed her past—and her need to keep it hidden—with her stable master. He’d tried to soothe her anxiety, but she had spent many days in this very office, dreading the time when her identity would be revealed and her present life ruined.

It couldn’t happen; she wouldn’t allow it to. There were too many people who depended on her.

“I seek to build a stable at my country estate. I was told at Tattersalls that Foldger’s Foals raises top-quality horses.”

“You were informed correctly, my lord.” If he noticed her discomfort, he didn’t show it. “My man of business can show you the foals that have not been spoken for this season.” She wanted him out of her office, off her property, and safely on his way back to wherever his estate lay.

“Right this way, my lord,” Connor said, herding Lord Haversham toward the door.

He bowed in her direction. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Hale. I look forward to meeting your husband when I return.”

The nerve of the man! It may have been a natural presumption, but it made her want to scream nonetheless. Instead, she tamped down her anger and pasted a thin-lipped smile on her face. “You may call me Lady Posey or Lady Posey Hale, my lord.”

His brow rose in surprise as his gaze traveled the length of her body and back to her face. “My apologies again, Lady Posey. I hope we have cause to meet again soon.”

“Yes, I will look forward to that.” It would be a cold day in hell when they would meet again. She forced a smile to her lips, hoping it didn’t appear as a grimace to the two men. “Do let me know if I can aid you with anything else. Have a pleasant day.” Vi turned her attention to the papers littering her desk, effectively dismissing the pair.

The soft click of the door told her they’d departed. Only then did her body go limp in her chair. That had been a close call. This was the reason she had policies and procedures that she, Connor, and her other staff

followed to the letter. Their livelihood depended on her ability to hide her identity.

She leaned forward and rested her cheek against the cold surface of her desk, her eyes closing. No one would purchase foals from the girl responsible for the death of two young men of the *ton*. It hadn't mattered that her father was a duke or that she'd spent the last eight years redefining her purpose in life. She'd been shunned by polite society and it was something she'd live with for the rest of her life.

"Viola?"

Damn, she really must look into installing a bell on that door. How long had she been sulking?

Lifting her head, Connor stood in the doorway.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Lord Haversham has selected eight foals."

"Eight?" She hadn't acquired this large an account in six months. It should thrill her to be able to make her self-imposed donation on time, without having to liquidate furniture from her office. Instead, she was unnerved.

"Yes, he will return in a few weeks to collect them."

Exactly what she'd been afraid of—his return to Foldger's Foals.

"Can you not deliver them to him?" she asked.

"You can discuss that with him. He will be back in the morning to negotiate the price for each foal."

Vi eyed him from behind her desk. Was he smirking? "You know who he is, do you not?"

Connor moved the rest of the way into the office and closed the door behind him. "I realized only after you fairly fainted in front of him."

"You do realize this is bad, correct? *Very* bad."

"He is only buying a few foals." Connor took the seat across from Vi and stretched his legs. "He will come tomorrow to negotiate the price, and then you will have no reason to see him again."

Vi appreciated Connor's straight approach to problems; he'd soothed her anxiety more times than she could count. "That sounds reasonable. I will handle him in the morning and never have cause to see him again. We will keep this short."

"Of course."

"I will draw up the paperwork now and have it ready for tomorrow." She had a sinking feeling things wouldn't quite transpire as she planned.