

From Chapter Three

Henry didn't think anyone could loathe him more than he despised himself in that moment. It was not yet noon, and the gray skies matched his mood. He stood outside his town house—correction: the Marquess of Shrewsbury's town house—and watched as his footmen—correction: the Marquess of Shrewsbury's footmen—loaded his coach—that at least still belonged to Henry—with the last of his personal belongings.

He'd sent a trunk ahead with a note to his mother informing her that he'd be joining her for a visit. He didn't want to tell her the whole truth in a letter. Henry couldn't bear to see it written in black and white. He had lost everything. His fortune, his land, his reputation. The only thing he still had was his title, though what good was that when he had no land, no wealth to support it?

Somehow, even worse than losing his town house was the knowledge that he had let his friend down. King had needed him. He'd asked Henry for money to hire a lawyer. Henry had some idea what that must have cost a man with as much pride as the Marquess of Kingston. Why, the poor man was reduced to living in a tavern in Seven Dials. A few days ago, Henry had pitied him.

Now Henry envied King for at least having a roof over his head.

But he'd think about how to help King later.

Surely, Henry could fix this. He just needed one good night at the tables and—

No!

Henry clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. He could not gamble his way out of this. He would go to Surrey, confess what he'd done to his mother, and find a way out of this. A way that did not involve cards.

One of his former footmen opened the door to the coach, and Henry climbed inside.

“Goodbye, Your Grace,” the footman said.

Henry tried to reply, but the words caught in his throat. He raised a hand and stared forward as the coach glided away from Berkeley Square.

He still had his coachman and outriders, so at least he was leaving Town in style. As to how long he could afford them, well, that was another question entirely. Henry had a lot of questions these past few days. Chief among them was how the Marquess of Shrewsbury had managed to beat him at vingt-et-un. Henry was certain Fortuna had been on his side. Why had she deserted him?

The other question that plagued him was the woman in the fire. What was he to think of her? Was it a hallucination? Was it actually the witch from his childhood? Was she the reason he'd lost—either because she'd cursed him or he'd been distracted by her?

He'd turned these questions over in his mind so often that if he hadn't been mad before, he was making himself so now.

Henry peered out the window of the coach and spotted several well-dressed men lurching along the road. They'd most likely been out all night drinking and whoring. But there was a gaming hell nearby. Perhaps they'd been playing. Henry narrowed his eyes at them. They looked happy enough. Had they won? Henry still had some blunt in his pocket. What if he wagered it and won? He couldn't go to White's. Everyone there knew what had happened to him, but might he go to an anonymous gaming room and try to recover some of his losses? He'd said no more cards, but what about dice?

He reached up to tap on the roof of the carriage with his walking stick then lowered his hand and had to sit on it.

No more gambling, Henry.

He had a problem. He *must* have a problem. Most men didn't struggle this much to walk away from the tables. Why did he? Why couldn't he stop?

He sat on his hands most of the journey to Carlisle Hall. In the past, the trip had always seemed to take an eternity, but now Henry hardly had time to settle in before he recognized the familiar landmarks near his family estate—correction: the estate of the Marquess of Shrewsbury.

Thank God his father had had the foresight to make sure the dower house was given to his duchess upon his death. If not, neither his mother nor he would have anywhere to live. Of course, he might still have nowhere to live. He'd written to ask his mother if he could stay with her while he "got back on his feet."

She hadn't answered.

He'd come anyway because, quite frankly, he had nowhere else to go. He wasn't about to crowd in with King in a tavern in Seven Dials. Rory was somewhere on the Continent, mourning his dead wife. Henry hadn't heard from him in months. He had other friends, but they were friends of convenience, not true friends like King and Rory, whom he'd known since their school days. He supposed if his mother refused him, he could ask one of his sisters to take him in. His brother was on a ship in the Navy, but he had a cousin who was a clergyman. Clergymen had to take in poor relations. But Henry didn't intend to be poor for long. He could win everything back if he just found the right game...

A sudden jolt sent him sprawling across the seat, and another caused him to tumble to the floor. "John Coachman!" Henry yelled, along with a stream of more colorful expressions. His voice was drowned out by a loud crack, whereupon the carriage halted, and Henry was forcefully

thrown in the opposite direction. A moment later, the coach's door opened, and one of the outriders poked his head in. "Your Grace, are you hurt?"

Henry pushed himself to his elbows. "Hard to say, Milton. What's happened?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe one of the wheels is damaged."

Henry climbed out of the now-listing coach and stood beside John Coachman, who was studying the disabled conveyance. One of the wheels had indeed come off. A puddle on the road had filled in a rather deep hole, and when the coach's rear wheel went over it, the wood had cracked and given way. Now the wheel lay in pieces on the side of the road. God's teeth! What else could go wrong?

"Can you repair the wheel?" Henry asked.

Milton climbed out from under the coach. "The axle is cracked."

"Of course it is," Henry said. He glanced down the road. "It's only another mile or so to the dower house. I'll walk and send one of the duchess's servants back for the horses and the luggage. One of you will stay with the coach until it's repaired."

The coach, which boasted every accoutrement suitable for a duke, was worth a great deal. Not to mention, it was practically all Henry had left in the world. He went back to the door, reached in and took his hat and walking stick, and, with a deep breath, began walking. The day was warm, with a slight breeze, which Henry appreciated. Spring in London was still quite chilly, but south of London, in Surrey, the weather was usually a bit milder. Normally, he appreciated the warmer temperatures. Not so at the moment. He wore his greatcoat over his coat, which made him look ever so dashing, but it was also rather heavy. He was beginning to perspire. He supposed he could remove it and carry it over his arm, but he wanted to walk into

his mother's house looking as hale and hearty as possible, and the many-caped greatcoat made an impression.

He'd gone about a half-mile and could no longer see the carriage when he heard hoofbeats and the creak of a cart. Henry squinted as a farmer's cart, led by a large cart horse, came around a bend in the road. The driver was a man only slightly smaller than the horse itself, and sitting beside him was a tiny woman—though perhaps she only looked tiny due to the driver's enormous size—with a port-wine stain mark on the left side of her face. She was dressed in shabby clothing, and her brown hair had fallen about her shoulders and was strewn with bits of straw. Some sort of cloth clung to the ends of her hair. Perhaps it had covered her head at some point.

Clearly, this was a farmer and his wife or daughter. Perhaps they were his tenants—
correction: the Marquess of Shrewsbury's tenants.

The driver called to the horse, and the enormous beast slowed. "Good afternoon, sir!" the driver called, lifting his hat respectfully.

"Not much good about it from where I stand."

"Do you need assistance, sir?" the woman asked. She had an upper-class accent, which contrasted with her shabby appearance.

"I do, madam. We've lost a wheel on my coach, and my man tells me the axle is cracked. If you could take me to the dower house, I will ask my mother—"

"Your mother?" the woman interrupted. She'd straightened now and didn't seem quite so small. "The Duchess of Carlisle is your mother?"

"She is." Henry told himself it was not strange that this woman who looked like a peasant but sounded like a lady should know of the duchess. His mother was certainly the highest-

ranking peer in this part of the country. This woman would know him as well...if he'd ever visited his estate at any time in the last six or seven years.

“Are you Lord Michael?” the woman asked.

Henry thought her rather impertinent, but he held his tongue. Michael was his brother, his junior by eighteen months. “No. I am His Grace, the Duke of Carlisle.” He emphasized *His Grace* so the woman would know she was to refer to him thus going forward.

“*You* are the duke?” she said.

Henry did not fail to note she did not preface her words with *Your Grace*. “I just said as much.”

The cart's driver removed his cap and squeezed it repeatedly in one of his massive fists, but the woman had risen to her feet and began to climb down from the cart. This action spurred the driver into action. He jumped down, came around, and all but picked her up and set her on the ground as though she weighed no more than a leaf. Henry moved forward, thinking to take her place on the box. He wouldn't leave her on the road—impudent as she was—but she could ride in the back of the cart with the, er—he glanced into the back—slats of dusty timber.

But instead of moving aside to allow him to pass, the woman stepped directly into Henry's path. He tried to sidestep her, but she moved into his path again. Henry looked down at her. Not as far down as he would have supposed when she was beside the cart's driver. She was not that short. She came to his chin, which made her about five and half feet tall. She looked up at him, and he noticed her brown eyes were quite large and more than pretty. They were fringed with thick, dark lashes. They were so thick, in fact, it appeared as though she'd lined her eyes with kohl, as he'd seen actresses and other performers do. But this woman didn't need kohl to accentuate her eyes. They were striking with no added cosmetics.

She was saying something, and his gaze dropped to her lips. She had full lips, shaped in a perfect bow. Her mouth was pink except for a section of her lower lip on the left side that intersected with what must be a birthmark. The mark made that section of lip a shade of ruby that made Henry think about kissing it.

“—how dare you show your face here?” the woman demanded.

Henry blinked. It was not like him to be distracted by a pretty woman. “I beg your pardon. What was that?”

She scowled at him. Somehow, the expression of anger made her eyes darker and even more lovely. “I said”—she put her hands on her hips—“after the way you have behaved, how dare you show your face here?”

Henry couldn't help but notice she still hadn't addressed him using *Your Grace*. He also couldn't help but notice the way she spoke to him. He was not used to being spoken to in this manner. Well, he'd sat through enough lectures in his life. He could give a few.

“After the way *I* have behaved? You jump down from a cart and accost me in the middle of the lane—*my* lane, I might add—and think to lecture *me* on conduct? We haven't even been introduced.”

“First of all, this is not your lane. You want an introduction? This is *my* lane, *Your Grace*.”

Henry stared at her for a moment, trying to work out what she meant. She claimed his lane was her lane, but that couldn't be, unless...

He was not usually slow, but it took a moment for everything to click into place. His mouth dropped open. He closed it immediately, but he saw the smug look that crossed her face. “Lady Katherine,” he said, and bowed belatedly. Shrewsbury had mentioned his daughter was

living at Carlisle Hall. Henry supposed in all the frenzy of losing everything he owned, he'd forgotten that piece of information.

Additionally, he had never before spoken to the marquess's daughter. He'd seen her once or twice, but she was known for always wearing a veil to obscure her features. The betting books at White's were full of wagers as to why she wore the veil. Some said she was ugly or had an enormous wart or a bushy mustache. Henry didn't care for those sorts of wagers. He liked his cards and dice. Not that he was too high in the instep for the betting book. His name was there as often as any other man's. But he had some boundaries—few and far between as they might be—and he didn't go in for wagers based on gossip or idle speculation, especially if a child or woman was at the center of it.

One thing the gentlemen at White's had gotten wrong: Lady Katherine was not ugly. He supposed she'd worn the veil to hide the birthmark on her face. But she wore no veil now.

“Now that we know each other's names,” she was saying, “I want a word with you. More than a few words.” Her hands rested on her hips, and her eyes flashed at him.

“On what topic?” Henry asked, honestly puzzled. What could the daughter of the Marquess of Shrewsbury have to chide him for? He'd done her no wrong. If anything, she should thank him for his poor luck at the tables. After all, her father was now in possession of Henry's ancestral home and his family's town house.

“On the topic of your tenants. Excuse me, your *former* tenants.”

Henry frowned at her. He glanced at the cart driver to see if the man might have an inkling of what the lady was going on about, but the man seemed inordinately interested in the bottom of his boot.

Henry was growing impatient now. As much as he liked chatting with a pretty woman, he was hungry and tired and too warm in the greatcoat. “You want to speak to me about the tenant farmers? What of them?”

“What of them? *What of them?*”

Clearly, that phrase further angered her for some reason. Her right cheek had gone pink, and her brown eyes burned with anger. Henry was rather fascinated. He wasn’t the sort of person to make anyone particularly angry or particularly elated. He was an amiable, genial sort of fellow who generally got along well with everyone.

“Do you even have the smallest inkling how they have suffered? How they *are* suffering?”

“Are we still speaking of the tenants?”

“Yes!”

He started at her forceful exhalation.

“Your willful neglect has ensured they live in squalor, with barely enough food to survive. You are not fit to be called *Your Grace*. You should be called *Your Disgrace!*” And with that, she turned on her heel and marched back to the cart. She offered the large man her hand, and he handed her back to the coach’s seat in an easy motion. Then he walked around the horse and took his position again.

“Good day, *Your Disgrace*,” she said.

“That’s not very original,” he said, churlishly. Every duke who caused a spot of trouble was labeled a *disgrace* by the papers and the public.

Henry looked at the driver. Surely, this man would take his side. “Sir, do you mean to leave me here on the road?”

The driver opened his mouth, but Lady Katherine interrupted. “That is exactly what we intend. It might do you some good to walk and think about what you have done—or rather, *not* done.” She tossed her hair and nodded to the driver. “Good day.”

“Not really,” Henry mumbled to himself as the cart drove on, leaving dust in its wake and making him cough. Well, he thought, Lady Katherine certainly lived up to the *shrew* part of her father’s title. He could only hope his mother gave him a warmer welcome.

Henry reflected, as he walked and sweated and brushed dust from his lovely greatcoat, that this was not the first time he’d been called a *disgrace*. Any number of headmasters had referred to him and his friends King and Rory using that term. More frequently, the three of them together were called Misfortune’s Favorites, because it was said anyone who met the boys suffered misfortune. Henry thought the events of the last month would prove that assumption incorrect. He’d suffered enough misfortune to make up for any he might have caused anyone else.

Not that Lady Katherine would agree. She seemed to think he was some sort of ogre who mistreated his tenants. She probably thought he beat women and feasted on babies. For some reason, the few times he’d seen her, his impression had been of a shy, meek person. She wasn’t that at all. She was brash and outspoken and...beautiful.

Henry couldn’t deny he was intrigued by her. For the most part, that interest stemmed from the novelty of the way she’d spoken to him. He’d very rarely, if ever, been talked to in that manner. Certainly, no woman who was not his close relation had ever addressed him in that way. Henry didn’t think even his sisters would have dared. And all of this anger because of the estate’s tenants? Henry had an estate manager. The man’s name was Gillett. He had experience and had come highly recommended. He sent monthly updates. Gillett had never mentioned anything

about squalor or neglect. Henry wondered what had become of Gillett when the estate had gone to Shrewsbury. Had the marquess kept him on or let him go?

The gate to the dower house came into view, and Henry smiled at the sight of it. The wrought iron was adorned with flowering vines in pinks, whites, and reds. They certainly gave the place a welcoming appearance.

Henry unlatched the gate and passed through, forcing himself to march to the door and keep his head high. He paused at the arched doorway and looked up at more flowering vines. These flowers were orange and purple. The flower boxes in the windows were stuffed with a profusion of flowers as well. Henry hadn't known his mother was such a proficient gardener. But then again, what else did she have to do out in the country all year long? She never came to London now that his sisters were married.

Henry wondered if he should knock or go in. Considering he hadn't been to the dower house more than a handful of times since his father's death, more than a decade earlier, he decided to knock. He knocked once, waited, then knocked again. The third time was more akin to pounding. Finally, the door creaked open, and an ancient manservant blinked at Henry from behind enormous spectacles.

Henry blinked back. *Impossible*. "Ellsworth?"

No, it couldn't be Ellsworth. The man had been a relic when Henry was born. He must be past ninety now. He could not still be serving as the duchess's butler.

"Your Grace," Ellsworth said, bowing slightly. Henry swore he heard the man's bones creak. "What a pleasant surprise."

"I do hope so, Ellsworth." Henry braced himself to catch the butler if he fell over as he rose from his bow.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace.” The butler cupped his ear, indicating he hadn’t heard Henry.

“I said, I do hope so.”

“You need a rope to tow, Your Grace?”

“No, Ellsworth, I said—” Henry shook his head. “Is my mother at home?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Your mother is alone. Your father died, I’m afraid.”

Henry shifted his weight. “I know that, Ellsworth. I am the new duke.”

“I wouldn’t call it a fluke, Your Grace. Would you like to come in?”

In lieu of speaking, Henry nodded. Ellsworth opened the door further, and Henry stepped inside. The vestibule boasted paper painted with roses, as well as a cushioned settee and a vase with fresh roses on a mahogany table. The entrance was bright and clean, and, Henry had to admit, rather welcoming.

“Is the duchess at home?” he asked Ellsworth.

“You need a comb, Your Grace?” The butler’s rheumy eyes passed over Henry’s mop of brow hair. Henry resisted patting it down. He hadn’t had the funds to retain his valet, and no one but Backly had been able to manage his hair.

Henry took a breath, struggling for patience, and tried to communicate with Ellsworth again. “I said, is my mother *at home*?”

“On loan, Your Grace?”

“At home!”

“I am right here, Henry,” his mother said, opening a door that looked as though it led to a small parlor papered in yellow roses. “There’s no need to yell.”

“But—” Henry stopped himself from pointing at Ellsworth. For some reason, he always felt about nine again whenever he saw his mother. “Mama, how good to see you,” he said, coming forward and bending to kiss both of her cheeks. She smelled of roses and wig powder, as she always had.

Ellsworth held out a hand for Henry’s hat and walking stick, and Henry handed them over. Then the man attempted to take his greatcoat. Henry unfastened it and handed it to the butler, who sagged visibly under its weight. He watched with concern as the manservant attempted to hang the coat on a hook.

“I wish I could say it is good to see you,” the duchess said. “I didn’t hear a carriage approach. Did you wager that away too?”

Henry turned from the butler, who had finally managed to hang the coat. “No. The coach lost a wheel on the road about a mile away. The axle cracked too, I’m afraid. The coachman and outriders are waiting for assistance.”

His mother sighed. “And so it begins.” She looked at her butler. “Ellsworth, send the coachman and two grooms to retrieve the duke’s coach.”

The butler nodded. “Very good, Your Grace.” He turned slowly and shuffled away.

“Are you certain he heard you correctly?” Henry asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with his hearing, Henry. You needn’t yell at him. Come in and sit down. It’s still an hour before I usually take tea, but I’ll call for it now.”

Henry followed his mother into the yellow-papered room. The furnishings were in cream and yellow-and-white striped material. A window in the back of the room was open, and Henry had a view of a garden behind the dower house, as well as Carlisle Hall in the distance. He looked away. He didn’t want to see what he had lost.

His mother indicated one of the yellow-and-white striped chairs, and Henry took it while she sat in a cream chair and rang for tea. He should feel cooler without the heavy greatcoat, but despite the breeze wafting through the window and the loss of the thick garment, he still felt warm. Perhaps that was because his mother was staring at him.

“This is a lovely room,” he said. “Did you have the paper replaced? I like this much better. It suits you.”

“You don’t give a fig about the paper in this room,” his mother said. “Tell me why you’re really here.”

No one could say Georgiana Lewis had grown dim-witted as she aged. She was still as sharp as she’d always been.

“I was hoping you might allow me to stay with you for a few days.”

“A few days, eh?”

“Perhaps a fortnight,” Henry said. “I haven’t visited in some time.”

“You’ve never visited,” the duchess said. “I doubt you would be here now if you had somewhere else to go. So out with it. What have you done?”

Henry felt his shoulders creeping up to his ears. There was the nine-year-old boy taking over his body again. He forced his shoulders down and back. “I wouldn’t exactly say I’ve done—”

“Out with it, Henry.”

“Fine.” He stood and paced across the room, trying to think of the best way to say it. But there was no good way to tell his mother he’d lost everything, so he just said the first thing that came into his mind. “I lost the town house. I think a witch stole it from me.”