The Notorious Virtues

Alwyn Hamilton

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PART I

HONOUR

Prologue

THE CHARMED CITY

It was known as the Enchanted Hour.

The sliver of day *just* before the clubs and bars and dance halls turned out their revelers. But after the factory workers and shopgirls had risen for another day.

The maids, cooks, footmen, and butlers had already hurried through predawn streets to get to their posts. They waited, as the sky lightened, for their sleepless employers to stumble home, discarding shoes and bow ties that their staff would tidy up behind them.

The lumbering delivery trucks had made their rounds, with their clinking glass bottles of milk, tightly bound stacks of newspapers, and cooling loaves of bread. But the sleek taxis and grand town cars still idled sleepily.

Yesterday was forgotten, but it wasn't quite today. Before the upper half of the city slept and after the lower half rose.

But the undying things in the woods never slept. They watched. They watched as a sleepy maid hurried to the back entrance of a white marble home, stumbling a little as she tucked her hair under her white cap. They wondered if she might lose her footing and cross out of the borders of daylight. They wondered if the footman shaking a cigarette into his palm might lean against a tree and come within reach.

And they wondered at the sight of the dark-haired girl, appear-

ing and disappearing between the gaps in the grand houses. Walking alone through the streets in stockinged feet, her dress still dancing in the rising sunlight. Looking like the whole city belonged to her alone.

Because one day, it might.

Chapter 1

NORA

Honora Holtzfall was never late.

Everyone who arrived before the Holtzfall Heiress was unfashionably early. Everyone who arrived after her was embarrassingly tardy.

Except Nora was no longer the Holtzfall Heiress. Officially, she never had been, though every newspaper had called her that. She'd been the heiress to the Heiress. But now the Heiress was dead, and Nora was no longer guaranteed to succeed her as eventual head of the family. She was just another granddaughter of Mercy Holtzfall.

And there wasn't a person in Walstad wealthy enough that they could afford to keep Mercy Holtzfall waiting. Not even Nora.

Especially not Nora.

Especially not on the first day of the Veritaz Trials.

The clock above the bank on Bauer Street showed ten minutes to the hour.

Nora would just make it.

Obviously, in an ideal world, she would have arrived both on time *and* wearing shoes. But Nora couldn't have everything, no matter what the papers liked to say.

Today was the equinox. Allegedly the first day of spring, although Nora would have contended the chill in the air wasn't exactly vernal. But it meant that today, there would be exactly as much day as there

was night. And even now, in a city lit with magimek bulbs, days like the equinox still held power.

Twice a year the immortal Huldrekall would willingly emerge from the woods. If they didn't ask the Huldrekall for a Veritaz tonight, they would have to wait for the first day of autumn before they could start the trials.

Stay out of the woods, little one. The old folktale refrain whispered in Nora's mind. *There you will find dangers you do not yet know how to face*.

Of course, every newspaper in the city had an opinion about the trials being held so swiftly.

At Least Wait Until the Last Heiress Is Cold Before Picking a New One

Some couched it in feigned sympathy for Nora.

Let the Girl Grieve Before You Make Her Compete!

But like most things, Nora agreed with her grandmother rather than the press. The sooner they held the trials, the sooner she could regain her rightful place in the family.

So tonight, Mercy Holtzfall, head of their family for the past three decades, would ask the Huldrekall which of her granddaughters was worthiest of being her heir.

It was a rite that stretched back centuries.

Held over generations.

Bound up in blood, custom, and ancient oaths.

And *still* Nora wouldn't put it past her grandmother to disqualify her if she was even a few minutes late for breakfast.

Nora turned onto Konig Street just as the metal grating of a kiosk

clattered open noisily. Inside, the kiosk's owner began slicing open the thick bundles of morning papers, arranging them among packs of gum, cigarettes, and small charms, so that their headlines faced out.

The front page of *The Walstad Herald* caught Nora's eye. It was a picture of her sitting at one of the small tables at Rik's, taken just a few hours ago. Her head was thrown back in laughter, and a flute of champagne loosely dangled from one hand, while the other rested on Freddie Loetze's shoulder as if to say, 'Oh, Freddie dear, you're too much.' A diamond the size of a cherry glinted on her finger, and the thin strap of her effervescent dress slid off one shoulder, carelessly displaying her skin. Nora pulled up the same strap absently now. She looked carefree in the photograph only because she had taken a lot of care to appear that way. The headline was printed in fresh ink above it:

Cheers to Better Days Ahead for the Once (and Future?) Holtzfall Heiress

Nora waited for it: the intoxication that usually came with seeing herself on the front page. But she felt as sober as ever in the cool morning light.

Grief-Stricken Former Holtzfall Heiress Drowns Her Sorrows

Well – Nora plucked the *Gazette* out of the rack next to the *Herald* – *that* was definitely another take on things. There was a photo of her sipping from a frothy coupe with the blur of the brass band at Café Bliss behind her. She was still wearing her Lussier heels in that picture, kicked up brazenly amidst the chaos. She must have left them at the Ash Lounge, then. Or maybe the Ruby Rose Club.

Her fingers flicked through the rest of the broadsheets as the kiosk owner set them out. She was on the front page of most of them, obviously. News about the Holtzfalls always had papers flying off the stand before the ink was even done drying.

Especially since the murder.

Shock in the City as Verity Holtzfall Found Dead!

For a week, everything else had dropped off the front page as the same picture graced every newspaper in the city under a series of revolving headlines.

Nora's mother's lifeless body.

Lit by police headlights.

And the flash of journalists' greedy cameras.

Just hours before that picture, her mother had absently reached out to kiss her cheek before she left for the evening, as if Nora were a small child again. Nora had resisted the impulse to wipe at her cheek, which would have made her feel even more like a child. Instead Nora had said something flippant about not wanting to wear her mother's lipstick as rouge. Or maybe she hadn't said it. Maybe she had just thought it as she'd swept out the door without glancing back.

She wasn't sure, because in the moment, it hadn't mattered.

It only mattered a few hours later. When it became the last time she would ever see her mother alive. When she would next see her as a body on a newspaper cover.

That was how she'd found out. Leaving the Silverlight Café near dawn to a newspaper boy brandishing a broadsheet, calling out *Extra! Extra! Holtzfall Heiress Tragedy!*

Theo was waiting for her.

It was a burden to be as smart as Nora was sometimes.

Because in that moment, before Theo could even speak, before she'd fully caught sight of the picture of her mother's body, she'd

put all the pieces into place. A Holtzfall knight sent for her, the cries of the newspaper boy, the carefully controlled grief in Theo's expression – her mother was dead.

And if she was dead, so was Alaric, Theo's brother – and her mother's sworn knight. There was no way to her mother except through Alaric.

Nora was an only child. But Theo and Alaric – they were like brothers to her. And in one night her mother and Alaric were both gone. The small circle of people she cared about had constricted around her so suddenly she could barely breathe.

That photograph of the crime scene was the last she saw of her mother's face.

And the papers showed it over and over and over under a carousel of headlines.

Verity Holtzfall Stabbed to Death in Mugging Gone Wrong!

New Suspect in Holtzfall Heiress's Brutal Murder!

Mugger Confesses When Jewels Found in His Possession!

Lukas Schuld Admits to Stabbing of Verity Holtzfall!

Papers with her mother's body on them flew off stands. Even after Lukas Schuld confessed, speculation ran wild. What had Verity Holtzfall been doing in the 13th circle after dark? What kind of

seedy business would draw the Holtzfall Heiress far from the safe upper circles of the city? How had her sworn knight failed to protect her? Had Alaric, whose body hadn't been found, been in cahoots with Lukas Schuld?

And when they ran out of things to print about the murder, they turned their lenses on Nora.

A New Heiress Must Be Chosen!
Who Is the Worthiest of Them All?

Grieving Former Heiress Not Seen
Since Mother's Funeral!

Driven Mad by Grief: Honora Holtzfall
Unfit to Compete in the Veritaz?

Those headlines had been like pebbles tossed against the walls of her solitude. Taunting her even as she sat a hundred floors up from where the photographers were camped on the street. They were waiting for the grieving daughter to make a scene.

Fine. If they wanted a scene, Nora would give them the whole show.

She had chosen a dress made of bright rippling streams of gold fabric sewn into waves that hugged her body outrageously. It was scandalously sheer with a tendency to slip dangerously around her shoulders, hinting at a mishap that would never happen, thanks to the charms sewn into the lining. The shoes were Charles Lussier, one of a kind, made from stained glass, charmed to be strong as steel. Her makeup exaggerated her Mirajin features, inherited from her desert-born father's side of the family. The brightest red lipstick in

her arsenal made her look like she couldn't possibly be *in* trouble, she *was* trouble personified.

She had stepped out to show them that she was not beaten.

But the reality was, only one thing would truly show them she was still the heiress they all remembered.

Winning the Veritaz.

Spoiled Honora Holtzfall Gloats as Heirship Comes Within Reach

That headline was the *Bullhorn*'s. Obviously.

They'd run a picture of Nora wrapped in a white stole, which she had also abandoned in the course of the night, smirking knowingly into a camera. It was printed next to that familiar photograph: her mother sprawled in an alley stained with blood.

Pictures were worth a thousand column inches when paired like that: Nora seemingly celebrating only days after her mother's body went into the ground. To the *Bullhorn*'s disreputable credit, at least they stuck to their Holtzfall-bashing agenda even in the face of her tragedy.

'Does this look like a library to you?' The kiosk owner was eyeing the steadily increasing stack of newspapers Nora was holding with the sort of suspicion that suggested he didn't recognise her from the front of those same papers. 'Choose one and move it along.'

Ah. That was going to be a problem. Nora was one of the richest people in this city, but she didn't have any money *on* her. *Obviously*. Carrying cash was something that waiters and shop assistants did, not Holtzfalls. She sighed, working the small ruby ring off her finger. The papers were all one zaub apiece; the ring had cost her just over 10,000. 'Here.' She set the ring in the change plate. 'This should cover it.'

She tucked the newspapers under her arm and continued down the wide avenue to her grandmother's house. She heard him call after her, 'If this thing turns out to be tin and glass, I'd better not see your face around here again!'

For the first time since her mother died, Nora felt a real laugh bubble up on her lips. She waved one of the papers over her shoulder, flashing her face on the front page at him. 'That would be a lot of papers you'd have to stop selling.'

She had the satisfaction of watching recognition dawn on him a moment before she spun back, dashing the rest of the way to the Holtzfall mansion.