

By the gods, it *is* Old Nick." Nicholas Hollingsworth, now *Sir* Nicholas Hollingsworth, late of His Majesty's Army and with a knighthood for valor on the battlefield, raised his dark gaze from the cards in his hand. He squinted through the haze of cigar smoke and brandy fumes until he met a pair of cold blue eyes he had never thought to see again this side of hell.

"Peter Everdean." His voice was steady, low, despite the turmoil in his brain, in his soul. "Is it you? Alive?"

"Sorry are you, Nick?" The golden-haired man smiled sweetly, Mephisto disguised as Gabriel.

Around them, the tumult of the gaming hell went on, men laughing and shouting, bottles shattering, smoke billowing, fortunes won and lost, lives changing on the turn of a card. But to Nicholas, as he folded the cards carefully in his long fingers and laid them on the table, none of the London decadence existed any longer.

He was back on a scorching Spanish battlefield, and the smoke was now cannon fire, the smell acrid in his nostrils, the dirt under his worn boots slippery with blood. He felt again the sharp pain in his leg, the wet, sticky warmth of his own blood, the numb sensation of falling, falling....

A pair of blue eyes above him, a voice telling him they would soon reach the field hospital, not letting him fall any further. Not letting him die.

Nicholas shook his head fiercely. He rose to his feet, perfectly steady despite the quantity of brandy he had consumed that night, his knuckles white on the silver head of his walking stick. He moved carefully toward the elegant figure who waited in the smoke, not entirely sure he wasn't more drunk than he had thought. Or dreaming.

"I thought you were dead," he breathed.

"Certainly not." Peter's voice was as cool, as controlled as ever. "I am far too wicked to die. As, I see, are you, Old Nick." He gestured toward Nicholas with his quizzing glass, taking in the long scar on his tanned cheek, the walking stick that was more than a mere fashionable accessory.

"Quite. Just a bit the worse for wear." Nicholas ran his hand through his thick black curls, uncharacteristically bemused. Here he was, standing in a noisy London hell, conversing calmly with the "late" Peter Everdean, as if four long years had been nothing. Peter was still the golden Apollo to Nick's Hephaestus; slender, charming, graceful, still able to gain every girl's eye, be she duchess or Spanish peasant.

And still as cold as a witch's...

Hmm.

Nicholas had seen the truth of Peter long ago, when they had lodged together in Spain. Peter was a man with some secret torment, some demon that rode him. He was charming, yes, an excellent companion, but unpredictable.

Entirely the wrong companion for wild Old Nick Hollingsworth, bastard son of the Earl of Ainsley, whose father had bought him a commission in the hopes he would stick his spoon in the wall in Spain and cause the Ainsleys no more trouble with his escapades. Together, Nick and Peter had been the terrors of the army.

And Peter had saved his life, practically carried him miles to a field hospital. Then disappeared. A physician had told Nicholas, when he awoke from his delirium, that his rescuer had died later that day.

Now here he was, alive, whole, the same Peter. With the same flashing, secret

torment in his eyes. And Nick owed him so very much. Owed him his very life.

Now Peter smiled at him coolly, swinging the quizzing glass by its long ribbon.

"You know, my friend," he said. "You may be just the man who can help me."

A short carriage ride later, Peter sat down behind his massive library desk and waved Nick to a nearby armchair. "I have been living rather quietly in the country since the war, gotten involved with local politics, that sort of thing." He held out a box of expensive cigars, waiting for Nicholas to take one before he chose for himself. "But I am not altogether isolated in Derbyshire. I've heard of *you*."

"Indeed?" Nicholas grinned.

"Indeed . . . Old Nick. I read the scandal sheets."

"Doesn't seem your sort of reading material, Everdean. Or should I say, Clifton."

Nicholas leaned back in his chair, enjoying the cigar, the familiarity of Peter's cynical company.

"My . . . someone at Clifton Manor enjoys them greatly. I merely read them when they happen to be lying about, of course."

"Of course," Nicholas replied, all innocence.

"Yes. Your name is always there. Duels, brawls, hearts broken, horse races won. They say you refused to marry the Woodley chit when you danced with her three times at Almack's."

"I only danced with her once, and of course I would never marry her. She has less conversation than my horse, and is not nearly as pretty."

"Ha! And what was the latest? That opera dancer? Celine Lacroix?"

Nicholas laughed out loud, more at Peter's coolly raised brow than at the memory of the

fiery mademoiselle. "She stood in front of my house screaming and throwing rocks at the windows. Woke the whole neighborhood, not to mention that she broke five windows."

"You *had* given the...lady her conge. Quite understandable that she would be upset." Peter clicked his tongue in mock sympathy. "But really, Nick, you cannot devote your life to tormenting your father's family forever, you know."

Nicholas sighed. "I know, I know. But since the war, there is not much need for the meager skills I possess."

Peter studied him for a long moment. "What have you been doing, besides drinking and whoring?"

Nicholas looked down at the smoldering tip of his cigar. "Forgetting, of course. As I am sure you are. And having a very good time in the process."

"Old Nick, eh?"

"Quite."

"If you ever happen to become bored with that, I have a task that might amuse you."

Nicholas sat up straight, his interest caught by something in Peter's voice, a distant longing perhaps, a hint of steel. "Do tell."

"Perhaps you will recall, two years ago my household was involved in some...unpleasantness, which I do not like to recall."

Nicholas frowned. "Yes, of course, Clifton. I did not connect it to you. I was in Paris at the time."

Yet the tale had reached even to Paris. The Earl of Clifton's sister, fleeing her home the night of her betrothal, leaving behind a very elderly, very dead fiancé. Clifton had put it

about that the deceased duke had died of a heart attack, hinted that it had come about because of his exertions in the bed of a housemaid, and that his sister had retreated in heartbreak to distant relatives.

Not that anyone actually believed that. But the Earl of Clifton was rumored to be as ruthless as he was reclusive, and the heirs to the dead duke had been hardly prostrate with grief, but rather elated to inherit the title and estates. The scandal had soon died down, and there had been no inquiry.

Peter's eyes flashed a blue fire, quickly hidden by golden lashes. "I need someone, someone I can trust, to find my sister and bring her back to England."

Nicholas almost fell out of his chair. Him, as the finder of lost brides, the seeker of runaway debutantes? Ludicrous. Absurd. "I understood the young lady to be in Cornwall. Or was it Devon?"

Peter's pale hands tightened. "Neither. I've recently received word she may be in Italy."

"And you want me to find her?" Nicholas rose to his feet, convinced completely that his old friend had truly gone mad at last. "Italy is a very large place, Everdean, and there are many locations where a runaway heiress could hide."

"There is no place where she could hide from Nicholas Hollingsworth, surely. It is very important that Elizabeth be brought back here to me. Soon. And there is no one I trust to do it, as I trust you. Remember Spain? We are old friends. Are we not?"

Nicholas looked into those ice blue eyes, and saw there all he owed Peter Everdean. His life might be worthless, wasted in drink and women, but he liked living it all the same. If it had not been for Peter, he would be lying even now in a mass grave in Spain.

Perhaps a sojourn in Italy would do him some good.

He slowly sat back down. "I don't even know what your sister looks like."

A small smile never reached Peter's eyes. "That is easily rectified. And Elizabeth is actually my stepsister. Her mother married my father."

Peter pushed a small inlaid box across the desk. Nicholas lifted the lid, and there was the most lovely woman he had ever seen in his thirty-four years. And he had seen some.

No, he amended, as he studied the miniature portrait closer. She was *not* beautiful. Her sweet, heart-shaped face and narrow shoulders above a purple satin bodice almost gave her the appearance of a child. Her slender neck seemed to bend with the weight of black hair, swept up and entwined with pearls and amethysts. Yet her wide, blue-gray eyes seemed to speak to him in some way. The curve of her shell-pink lips indicated some wonderful, precious secret that she would divulge only to him.

She was a woodland fairy, dark and enticing and elusive as the mist.

Nicholas looked up to find Peter watching him. He closed the box with a loud snap. A beautiful sprite Elizabeth Everdean might be, but Nick owed Peter a great debt. And, rogue though he was, Nicholas always paid his debts. "Where is she now?"

Peter smiled again, a rare genuine smile of...what? Relief? Gratitude? Expectation? Whatever, it was gone in an instant. He reached into a drawer and withdrew a slim letter. "A friend who was traveling in Venice says she saw a girl answering to her description in the San Giacometto."

"Venice?" The old soldier in Nick had taken over, pushing aside the indolent roué. His muscles tensed, his mind raced, hungry for the chase again. He sat forward in his chair.

"This friend is reliable?"

"Quite. And Elizabeth is very distinctive. She may be dark, like the Italians, but there cannot be two ladies like her in all of Europe." Peter took up the inlaid box and opened it, smiling down at the painted image. "There cannot. And Italy is just where she would have fled. Elizabeth fancies herself an artist, and indeed she is quite good."

Nicholas felt a frisson of unease ripple down his spine as he watched his old friend trace a pale, long finger over the painted dark hair. Shaking his head, he pushed the unease away. "Venice is not so large a place. It should not take very long."

Peter glanced up sharply. "Then you will do it? You will find Elizabeth?"

"I will. For you."

Peter nodded and looked back down at the painted girl. "Then your debt will be paid."

Venice

"There *he* is again!" Elizabeth hissed urgently at Georgina from behind her fan, barely audible over the raucous music and the laughter of the dancers. The Contessa de Torre's famous masked ball, held every year to begin Camivale, was famously wild, and this year was no exception. Napoleon was gone, Italy was free (perhaps a bit *too* free), and the Venetians were in the mood for merrymaking.

And Elizabeth had been having an absolutely splendid time, imbibing the excellent champagne and dancing with her quite attractive, if rather somber, sometime-suitor, the sculptor Sir Stephen Hampton. She had laughed and flirted and cavorted, and had been

enjoying lingering at supper with a crowd of fellow artists.

Until she had seen *him*.

He had been in the Piazza San Marco that morning, she was certain of it. Watching her as she sketched. Then, when she had made up her mind to confront him, he had been gone.

Like mist.

She had been suspicious, yes. After all, it had been rather too quiet on the Peter front for over two years, and she had not expected him to simply let her go as easily as he had. But, more than suspecting the man's motives for watching her, she had wanted to paint him. So much so that she had ached with a need to put his features down on canvas.

In her travels with Georgina, Elizabeth had seen many men. Wealthy men, handsome men, well-dressed and witty men, some of whom had shown a more-than-polite interest in her. A few of the models she had seen in artists' studios had been almost godlike in their physical beauty. Her own stepbrother, as annoying as he was, was a veritable Apollo.

But she had never, ever seen a man like this one. When he had vanished before she could so much as trace a rough outline of him, she had almost thrown a tantrum right in the middle of the crowded piazza.

Well, he was not going anywhere now. Elizabeth left off trying to gain Georgina's attention, and forgetting the revels of the night, forgetting even basic good manners, she propped her elbow on the table, rested her chin in her palm, and stared.

He was tall, taller than almost any man there, and much taller than her own diminutive five feet. Despite the fact that it was supposed to be *un ballo in maschera*, he

wore modern evening dress, stark black and white, impeccably tailored over his wide shoulders. The only flash of color was a small ruby in his simply tied cravat. His hair was unfashionably long, as black as her own but curling where hers was stick straight.

Not even a white, jagged, wicked-looking scar slicing across his cheek could detract from his powerful, primitive masculine beauty.

How she *would* love to paint him. As the god Hades in his underworld. In a little toga. Or maybe even nothing.

He was just altogether perfect. As beautifully made as the marble statues she had seen in Rome and Florence. Except that those were cold, white marble, and this man was obviously warm, golden flesh. Yet, despite her appreciation for his wide shoulders, it was his eyes that really caught her, that made her completely unable to look away from him. They were the deepest, darkest brown she had ever seen, almost black, and it was like falling into soft velvet to look into them. Warm velvet, that invited confidences, coaxed secrets from a woman's heart, but gave up none in return.

She, who had learned to be adept at reading people through their faces, their expressions, their eyes, could tell absolutely nothing about this man. He revealed nothing at all.

Oh, not even dear Stephen, who had escorted her dutifully about Venice, could come close to this man! Elizabeth flashed an apologetic glance at the redheaded sculptor who sat beside her, then looked back to the dark stranger.

Only to find him staring right back at her.

Elizabeth gasped, and dropped her gaze back to her lap in bewilderment. Then she peeked up.

Her eyes dropped again. He was *laughing* at her! "Fool, fool!" she whispered, pounding her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Gaping like the veriest lackwit."

"Did you say something, Lizzie?" Georgina turned to Elizabeth at last, her cheeks still pomegranate red from the lively debate she had been leading on the merits of oils over tempera.

"Not a thing." Elizabeth snapped open her fan, waving it so vigorously that tendrils of black hair escaped from the gilded netting that held the heavy mass in place.

"Oh. I thought you were just agreeing with me about what a *fool* Ottavio is!"

This released a flood of Italian invective from the slighted Ottavio. Georgina laughed merrily, tossed her gorgeous auburn head, and looked back to Elizabeth.

Her eyes traced to where Elizabeth was peeking, and widened.

"Ahhh," she breathed. "I see."

"See what?" Elizabeth dared another look. The object of her admiration was deep in conversation with their hostess. The contessa, every buxom inch of her almost exposed in her silver satin Cleopatra costume, was pressed against his arm, laughing up into his eyes.

One of the sticks of Elizabeth's abused fan snapped in her fingers.

Georgina smiled. "I see, Lizzie, that that is just the sort of man you need."

"What!" Elizabeth gasped. She had traveled with Georgina for two years, had heard every imaginable risqué remark issue from her friend's crimson lips, but she was still moved to blush at times. "Whatever do you mean?"

"That man there. The one you are ogling as if he were a particularly delectable cream puff in Seganti's bakery window." Georgina pointed with the jeweled dagger of her lady-pirate costume, waving the sharp tip around erratically until Elizabeth grasped her

wrist and forced her to cease. "He is just what you need."

Elizabeth blinked in confusion. Had Georgina, always a bit eccentric, slipped into complete madness and begun to procure men to satisfy Elizabeth's "lusts"? "Need for what, Georgie?"

"For your secretary, of course! Your man-of-affairs, your *aide-de-camp*. Don't you remember our conversation yesterday? What did you think I meant?" Georgina's brows rose. "Oh. Oh! Never say you, our little nun, were thinking of other affairs besides accounts payable when you saw this dark mystery man!"

Their small circle guffawed loudly, drunkenly, banter flying as Elizabeth felt herself slowly turning crimson.

"How the mighty have fallen!" Georgina said. "The nun is in lust!"

Elizabeth groaned, and buried her face in her hands.

"Really, Georgina!" Sir Stephen sniffed. "Must you always be so crude?"

"Really, Stevie!" Georgina mimicked. "Must you be such a prig? We're only teasing Elizabeth a little. A very little."

"Stop it!" Elizabeth cut off her friends' familiar squabbling with a wave of her hand, and managed to lift her champagne glass for a comforting swallow. She only wished it were something a bit stronger.

Georgina slid her gold brocade-clad arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. "I am sorry I embarrassed you, Lizzie, but do admit it. You did feel something, er, less than pure when you looked at that handsome bit of manhood."

Elizabeth blushed anew. "I...really, I thought no such thing. I merely thought I should, well, paint him."

Liar, her conscience screamed. *Paint him in honey, mayhap, and lick him from chin to toe....*

No! Elizabeth fanned herself with the mangled fan again, trying desperately to appear unaffected and unconcerned.

"Oh, Lizzie, dear, of course you want him! And who could blame you," Georgina whispered. "So handsome. And that wicked scar. Very piratical."

Elizabeth gave in to Georgina's gentle teasing with a giggle. "Shall he make me swab the deck, do you think?"

"Only if you are very fortunate. Or walk the plank?"

Elizabeth laughed outright at that, leaning helplessly against Georgina's shoulder. "That does sound intriguing!"

"What exactly is the plank, Lizzie?"

"Why, whatever I want it to be, of course!" Elizabeth blithely reached for a nearby champagne bottle and poured the last of it into her empty glass.

Georgina nodded approvingly. "It is time you showed such an interest, my cloistered friend." She speared a chunk of roast duckling with her dagger and popped it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. "I had begun to despair of you, Lizzie, especially when you turned that heavenly Marchese Luddovicco in Rome down flat." She pointed the dagger at an oblivious Sir Stephen. "I had thought Monsieur Sculptor over there would be as lusty as you were going to get!"

"Georgie! Stephen and I are merely friends, as you well know."

"And I know he would like to be more! He is all wrong for you, Lizzie."

Elizabeth felt it best to turn the topic. "You are one to talk, Georgie! I have not seen

you 'take such an interest' since that model in Milan. What was his name? Paolo?"

Georgina speared another piece of duckling. "Bah! Men. Who needs them?" She seemed totally unaware of the irony of this. "I had two worthless husbands in five years—worthless but for their money, that is—and Paolo was becoming far too bossy. For all his gorgeous dark eyes, I felt it was kinder to...remove myself from the situation. Why did you think we left Milan in such a hurry?"

Elizabeth giggled into her champagne.

"But you, Lizzie," Georgina continued. "You need to have some fun. You are so young, and you act like such an old matron sometimes. I would wager that handsome rogue over there is just what you require. For the present, anyway."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "There is no talking sense to you tonight, Georgina Beaumont! So I am going out onto the terrace for some fresh air."

"Shall I accompany you, Elizabeth?" Stephen rose to his feet, rather awkward in his Caesar costume. He kept attempting to pull the toga down to cover his knees, and his laurel wreath was askew over his brow.

Georgina reached over, grabbed a handful of that toga, and pulled him back down into his chair. "Of course she does not need you to accompany her, nod-cock!" She totally ignored his icy glare, and waved her fingers at Elizabeth's retreating figure. "She is going outside completely alone, I am sure. That is the best way to, ahem, take the air."

Elizabeth, feeling very childish, stuck out her tongue at her laughing friends. Then she turned, swept out onto the terrace...and immediately tripped over the boots of the dark stallion.

It *was* her.

When Nicholas had first seen the woman, garbed as Juliet in forest-green velvet and gold lace, laughing and talking, he had known. Just as he had known that morning, when he saw her sketching a group of giggling Italian children in the Piazza San Marco, a beribboned straw hat half-hiding her face.

He had found Lady Elizabeth Everdean. And she was not precisely what he had been expecting.

Oh, she *was* pretty, just as her portrait had promised, small and delicate, pale and midnight dark. He had been told she was interested in art, but he had never expected to find her actually making her fortune in the medium, much less surrounded by a racy crowd of champagne-flushed artists.

When her partner, a tall, patrician-looking man dressed as a Roman with wreath and toga, had put his hand on her arm with obvious familiarity, Nicholas's fingers had reached convulsively for the pistol hidden in his velvet jacket.

For one shattering instant he had forgotten the debt he owed Peter Everdean. He had forgotten everything, and only seen this Elizabeth as a woman.

A lovely woman he wanted for himself.

He wanted to feel her small, pale body naked against his, to breathe in her scent, to ease into her welcoming warmth, and hear her sigh and cry out his name...

He needed some air.

Nicholas evaded the clinging arms of his hostess, and retreated in haste to the darkness of the terrace, to breathe in the quiet, the solitude.

He was not to be solitary very long.

No sooner had he lit a thin cigar and leaned back to enjoy it, than a bundle of green velvet and lilies-of-the-valley scent tumbled through the doors and landed at his feet.

"H—hello," the bundle whispered.

Nicholas found himself gaping like the veriest green lad at the lady's stocking-clad calves and slim ankles above high-heeled green satin shoes. He blinked and quickly raised his eyes to her face. She was half in shadow, yet he could still see the flush across her high cheekbones, and the way she was, in turn, gaping up at him.

"Signorina," he murmured, automatically making a polite leg. "Or . . . is it signora?"

"It . . . it is signorina," she answered, still whispering.

Nicholas's smile was white and predatory in the darkness as he looked down at her.

At last—Signorina Everdean.