

CHAPTER ONE

of

MONSTER AMONG  
THE ROSES

*A Beauty and the Beast Story*

LINDA KAGE

Monster Among the Roses

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Publishing History

Linda Kage, July 2017

ISBN-13: 978-1546573678

ISBN-10: 1546573674

Credits

Cover Artist: Kage Covers

Editor: Stephanie Parent

Proofreader: Judy and Shelley

# chapter ONE



*I nervously twisted* my ball cap between my hands, the frayed bill skimming across my calloused knuckles with each pass. The room where I waited was bigger than my entire apartment, and the seat on which I gingerly perched myself probably cost more than everything I owned.

It smelled rich in here. Like money. Like the walls had been papered in fresh, crisp hundred-dollar bills straight from the bank. I glanced between my knees to my shoes, hoping I hadn't knocked any dirt onto the opaque marble floor, only to discover a small clump of dried mud did rest by my right sneaker. Shit. I quickly kicked it under the chair to hide the evidence just as the door beside me opened.

A gray-headed woman in a blue pantsuit—the same one I'd spoken to, announcing myself when I'd arrived twenty minutes earlier—peered out. "Mr. Nash is ready to meet with you."

Feeling caught in the act, I stopped messing with the dirt clod and jerked to my feet, my face flushing hotly. I started to slide my hat back on to hide what must be a

nasty case of hat hair, only to wonder if it would appear more respectful to keep a hat off when meeting a man such as Henry Nash. After hesitating a good five seconds, unsure of what to do, I pulled the hat on. This was who I was. Putting on airs felt deceitful.

Nodding to the secretary to let her know I was ready, I followed her inside the lion's den, only to slow to an intimidated stop just inside the doorway. If I'd been daunted by the opulence of the waiting room, the interior of Henry Nash's office blew me away. Huge mural-sized paintings would've given the museum effect if the slate-gray chairs in front of a colossal black granite and silver desk hadn't screamed corporate office. I was afraid to move and track more mud across the floor. Hell, *breathing* in this place felt taboo.

I didn't belong here. What had I been thinking to schedule a meeting with *the* Henry Nash? He was going to laugh me from his museum office before I could even start begging.

The massive chair behind the desk revolved to face me just as the man planted in it hung up the phone on which he'd been talking. Then he stood.

"Ah, Mr. Hollander." Rounding his desk, he strode toward me where I stood petrified in the doorway. "It's nice to finally meet you. Your mother's said only good things."

The mention of my mom caused the ball of dread in my throat to harden and cut off my air.

"How is she?" he asked as he held out a hand for me to shake. The question was pleasant and polite. The look in his eyes was kind and interested. The entire way he'd come to me, not made me approach him, was just—I wanted to shake my head, confused.

I'd built this man up in my mind as a rich, heartless beast who ate baby kittens for breakfast and flambéed the weak and needy for dinner. He stomped on dreams and mocked the poor, gaining power with each tear he forced

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to fall. The overdue notices that littered our mail with increasing regularity, demanding money, only seemed to enhance my impression of him.

But here he stood, a normal mortal with a slight paunch to the gut and thinning hair on top, and...and he *smiled* at me as if he were genuinely pleased to meet me.

Flustered, I didn't know what to say. What to do.

"She...uh...she's..." Quickly, I reached out to shake with him. His skin was warm, dry—human—and his grip was sincere. "She's not well," I blurted.

Damn, I'd hoped to work into that topic subtly.

"Oh?" Mr. Nash tipped his head to the side, concern marring his eyebrows.

"Yeah, she..." I ripped my hat off and began to fidget with it again.

"Here." Mr. Nash stretched out a hand, inviting me further into the office. "Let's sit and discuss it. Miss Givens..." He nodded to the secretary, and she left the room, shutting me inside the grandiose office alone...with the one man who could destroy my mother.

Palms sweating, I wiped them on my thighs and followed him to a chair placed in front of his desk. Instead of moving back around behind the table, he sat in the other seat next to mine. It didn't put me at ease, as I think was his intent; I only felt closer to the chopping block now.

"Tell me about Margaret."

At the mention of Mom's name, I blew out a long, steadying breath. I was here for her, here to beg and accept anything Henry Nash wanted of me. For my mother, I could do this.

"Well," I started slowly, swiping my tongue over dry lips. "As you know, she fell and broke her hip about three months ago."

"*Did* she?" Mr. Nash lifted his eyebrows, the soul of ignorance and surprise, maybe even worry.

His shock confused me. “Yeah...” I said slowly, trying to discern if he was lying and really knew or if he honestly hadn’t a clue. “Didn’t she mention it when she asked for the loan extension?”

The older man opened his mouth, only to shut it. He seemed to deliberate something before speaking again. “I’m sorry, but your mother never asked me for a loan extension.”

I stared at him.

What? Of course, Mom had asked. She’d *told* me she’d been denied. She’d told me...what the hell had she told me? My brain sputtered, trying to remember her exact words.

I was sure she’d gone to Nash Corporation and asked for some leniency. She’d sworn that she’d tried everything. Wouldn’t everything logically include asking for a loan extension? That was why I was here. If Henry Nash wouldn’t listen to my poor, broken mother, maybe I could get him to listen to me, maybe I’d have more to bargain with than she’d had.

But if Mom hadn’t even talked to him—

I shook my head, denying the possibility. Of course, she’d asked for an extension. Anyone in her position would. “Maybe she asked one of your people and it just never got back to you,” I allowed.

Except the man before me squinted in doubt. “All requests for loan extensions are passed through me, Mr. Hollander. I make those final decisions.”

My shoulders collapsed. Well, this changed things. This...

I needed to regroup and figure out what to do.

Except no, honestly, it didn’t change much at all...maybe just the way I viewed the man before me.

Mr. Nash cleared his throat discreetly. “If I may, I know your mother’s been behind on her payments. Very behind. And I *am* aware the people who come to me for a loan usually do so after they’ve been declined help from

the bank. Lending your mother money to start her bakery was a risk. I was aware of this from the beginning and made my own allowances to prepare for any worst-case scenario. So, if Margaret has fallen on hard times and needs some leeway, I'm perfectly willing to—"

"You don't understand," I blurted harshly, causing Mr. Nash to pull back and blink at me. Running my hands over my face, I clenched my teeth and tried to quell the rising panic. After taking a moment to calm myself, I quietly confessed, "It's worse than that. We had to close the bakery." And we were about to be evicted from our apartment if we didn't pay our back rent, and the medical bills kept coming, and the utilities never stopped, and—

And it was enough to make me feel as if I couldn't breathe every time I thought about it.

"It's gone way past needing an extension." I hated to expose this. I felt like a failure every time I thought it. Saying it aloud, to Henry Nash, might possibly be the most humiliating moment of my life. "At the state we're in, I don't see how we could ever pay you back."

"Oh." Mr. Nash calmly clasped his hands together as he studied me. His intent gaze seemed to bore through my skull as if he were searching for all my innermost thoughts. Then he murmured, "You looked like a man on a mission when you came into my office, Mr. Hollander. It makes me think you have an idea about how you want to resolve this problem."

I gave a slight nod. "I do."

He nodded back to me. "Then I think I'd be very interested to hear it."

"A trade," I said, without thinking.

Mr. Nash lifted his eyebrows. "A trade? What kind of trade?"

"My mother's debt," I said, pausing before I added, "For me."

With a squint, the other man slowly began to shake his head. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

“I swear, I’ll be at your service, do whatever you want me to do, for the rest of my life, if...if you wipe away her debts.” I said it this way in the hopes he’d take care of *all* her debt, not just the one she owed him.

“At my service,” he repeated, cocking his head to the side as if trying to understand what I really meant. “In what way?”

I shrugged. “Any way you want. I’ll do anything.” When he simply blinked at me, I more emphatically added, “*Anything.*”

I wasn’t stupid. I knew men as powerful and rich as Henry Nash had to have gotten to this point by doing a little bit of dirty work. I was fully prepared to be one of his dirty men, deliver illegal supplies, break kneecaps, help him cover up his dark deeds, whatever he required of me. It made me feel sick and slimy every time my mind wandered in that direction, but to save Mom, I would cope.

He repeated, “Anything?” as if an idea had started to brew in his head.

I nodded and eagerly sat forward. “If you would help my mother, I’d give you my life.”

I could tell my passion impressed him. His raised eyebrows yet considering gaze said as much. But he kept the rest of his thoughts close. Drawing his clasped hands up to his chin, he measured me pensively.

“Tell me this, son. If I clear your mother’s debt in exchange for your servitude, how do you foresee her taking care of herself after that? I mean, with no bakery to bring money in, a broken hip to prevent her from seeking work elsewhere, and a son who will no longer be there to help—as he will then belong to me—what do you think will happen to her?”

I gulped, not quite able to ask the bold, daring thing I really wanted to ask.

But Mr. Nash must’ve read the plea on my face. “Oh, I see. You don’t want me to just help her out of her debt



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to me. You're actually asking for more financial assistance. I'm assuming you want me to set her up for the rest of her life, then?"

I couldn't speak. My voice box had frozen over with fear, anxiety, and hope. So I merely nodded humbly before I bowed my head, bracing to be forcibly removed from his office for my brazen request.

He drew in a deep breath, and for the longest time that was the only sound he made. He waited until I looked up before he exhaled. "You must think very highly of your ability to serve, Mr. Hollander."

"I..." I flushed. Honestly, I didn't think I was worth the lavish chair I sat on. But my pride was the first thing to go when it was my mother's future on the line.

"I'll do anything," I whispered.

Mr. Nash ran his gaze over me, from head to toe. It was such a personal scrutiny I almost felt violated. A new thought struck. Oh hell, what if his idea of service meant something more...carnal? I gulped, wondering if maybe there were a few things I wouldn't do after all.

Then the old man made it worse by asking, "How old are you...Shaw's your given name, isn't it?"

My skin crawled and my stomach churned. "What?"

He made an amused sound. "I inquired about your age."

"I...I'm twenty-eight," I confessed, hoping maybe I was too old for his taste.

But then I thought about all twenty-eight of those years—all that time I'd had to make something of myself—and a swell of shame consumed me. So many people I'd attended school with had gone on to become successful and accomplished. I felt as if I was still drowning under bills and trying to keep my mother from losing everything.

"Do you not have employment elsewhere?"

More humiliation coated me. Ducking my head, I cleared my throat and admitted, "The, uh, the factory

where I worked went out of business about six months ago.”

I’d been approached by other factory owners almost immediately; word had gotten around I was an honest, dependable, and hard worker. But Mom had already been having trouble at her shop. She’d been forced to let go of all her employees and the bank had just foreclosed on her house, so I’d moved her into my one-bedroom apartment, sold my truck to pay off one of her loans, and tried to salvage her business.

“I started helping my mother at the bakery, but...”  
I shook my head.

By the time I’d become involved, there was no saving it. Mom never should’ve been allowed to run her own business. Always the bleeding heart and more concerned with helping others than making a profit, she’d only accumulated more debt instead of paying any off. She’d never charged what she should to customers, oftentimes giving away her food for free to people in need. Then she’d trusted the wrong people, er, person, her own daughter to be exact.

“You have other siblings, though, isn’t that correct? Five if I remember. Could they not—”

“No,” I damn-near snapped before flushing hard from embarrassment. But mentioning my older brothers and sisters lately was a prickly point for me. None of them were willing to help. Justin had flat-out refused, coolly stating Mom shouldn’t have gotten herself into such a mess in the first place. Alice never answered her phone, avoiding us at all costs. Mom and I had both lost contact with Bryce and Becky. No idea where they even were. And Victoria was a big reason why we were in this mess in the first place. She’d actually helped Mom start her shop, only to turn around and empty the bakery’s bank account before taking off to parts unknown.

Clearing my throat, I glanced away before more quietly admitting, “They’re not... *available* to help.”

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"I see," Mr. Nash murmured. I was beginning to hate it when he said that. Just what the hell did he really *see*?

Certain that whatever he saw in me couldn't be good, I blew out a silent breath of defeat. Coming here had been a fool's mission. No way would he help me. If I were him, *I* wouldn't help me.

Mr. Nash lowered his hands to the arm of the chair. "Well, I think we can work out a deal," he announced, sounding way too jovial. "How soon can you start?"

My mouth fell open, unable to quite believe what I'd just heard.

I wanted to ask, *start what?* What exactly did he have in mind for me? But I was afraid to hear the answer. So I said, "Anytime. Now. Whenever you want."

He chuckled and rose to his feet. "I like the enthusiasm, but I think tomorrow will be soon enough." Snagging a pen and notepad from his desk, he jotted something down. "Can you make it to this address in the morning by nine?"

A disorienting sense of surreal doom struck me. Was this really happening? Fortunate things never happened to me. There had to be a catch.

"I... Yeah, sure." To save my mother, I'd be wherever he needed me to be, whenever he asked.

He nodded in satisfaction. "Good. I'll draw up a contract tonight, agreeing that I'll help your mother through her financial situation in exchange for your services, and we can go over it when you arrive. Then you can get started."

He tore the top piece of paper from the pad and handed it to me to reveal he'd only listed a street address. A bead of sweat coursed down the center of my back. It was cold and made me shiver.

With no doubt in my mind I'd just sold my soul to the devil, I said, "Okay. I'll be there." And then I thanked him from the bottom of my ill-fated heart.

THANK YOU

for reading a sample of

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