

The soft knock at the door was annoying. Isaac raised bloodshot eyes as it opened to reveal Mrs. Russell. Then he froze, every nerve drawn taut with sickening abruptness, when she informed him that Miss Eleanor Hampton was asking to see him.

He rose, suddenly restless, and told his housekeeper to show her in. When she appeared he blinked, and two thoughts collided inside him. The first was that he hadn't fantasized her beauty; it was as striking as it had been the day before. And the second, that she was wearing the same gown, an improbable lack of vanity for a woman. It seemed a deliberate, conscious decision, as if to imply his good opinion was not something she particularly wanted to win.

Mrs. Russell was obviously burning with curiosity, but after the requisite courtesies between them, the young lady said bluntly, "I would like to speak with you briefly in private, Captain McCallister."

Isaac hid both his turmoil and his own curiosity.

"Of course, Miss Hampton. Would you like anything, tea or coffee?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Well, please come in and sit down." He nodded for his housekeeper to withdraw, adding with scrupulous propriety, "Just leave the door open, Mrs. Russell."

As that good lady retired Isaac motioned his guest to an armchair, surprised when she didn't take it. Instead she stood in the middle of the room, stock-still, her eyes on the door. Then, pardoning herself, she retraced her steps and purposefully shut it.

Isaac studied the closed door, then turned a searching look on his visitor, deciding for the time being to make no comment on her odd behavior.

"Well, as I say, please sit down, Miss Hampton."

“If you don’t mind, I would prefer to stand.”

He lifted one brow, countering, “I’m not comfortable sitting while a lady stands.”

“At the moment, I’m not a lady. I’m a supplicant. That being the case, I would prefer to stand.”

Her steely eyes were fired with what he could only describe as grit. His curiosity swelled, but he possessed himself in patience, conceding to her wishes. He sat down behind his desk again while she stood before him, stiff and unyielding. The silence was unnerving.

“Are you certain you wouldn’t like something? There’s some excellent lemon tea.”

Crisply, she replied, “Nothing, thank you.”

Rebuffed once more, he dove into the chilly water.

“Well then. What can I do for you?”

She smiled, but it never reached her amber eyes.

“Of course, you know how happy we all are that you are home and safe.”

Meeting her icy gaze, he replied dryly, “Yes, I can see that.”

If she felt his sarcasm she ignored it, continuing, “However, your miraculous return from the grave has placed my family in a difficult position, as I’m sure you know.”

He conceded, “Yes, Miss Hampton, I suppose that’s true.”

Pausing, she went on with a seeming incongruity.

“The party you interrupted was for me.”

“Indeed. Was it your birthday?”

She gave him a searing look that implied only a feeble-minded idiot or a child of six would bother with a party for such an inane reason.

“We were celebrating the fact that I have been given an important commission.”

His vibrant voice was rich with insinuation.

“And may I ask what it is, Miss Hampton, you have been commissioned to do?”

Her eyes flashed, and he reflected that the depth of her pride was matched by the thinness of her skin.

“I am an artist, Captain McCallister. I’ve been commissioned by the builders of the Finley Bank of Massachusetts to adorn their new bank building with a patriotic mural.”

“My congratulations, then.”

She nodded a curt, half-hearted acknowledgment.

“Needless to say, they did not want to entrust such a large project to a woman. I was given it at last on the basis of my own work, and my father’s reputation. However, Mr. Finley knew the straightened condition of my family, and I believe, to some degree, he offered it from pity. That is immaterial to me, as I will do the job for him, and I will do it well.” Gathering her considerable pragmatism, she added dispassionately, “Besides, an unknown artist doesn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“A sensible attitude, Miss Hampton. But I fail to see what any of this has to do with me.”

“It has a great deal to do with you. When I say I’ve been given a commission, that may sound very grand, but unfortunately, the wage is not. By the time I’ve purchased my materials and hired the day laborers I’ll need, there will be little left in hand.”

“I see.”

She had no reason to say more. They both knew her family was poor, and they knew the reason why. It was strange, for though they hardly knew each other, they knew one another’s family skeletons perfectly well.

Old Asa McCallister had had three children; James, the first-born, Margaret, and Isaac, younger by several years. His birth had carried their mother to an early grave, from childbed fever. Lonely and overwhelmed by the burden of three children, Asa married a young widow, Elizabeth Devereaux Hampton, whose dashing husband had gambled away his portion before being killed in a tavern brawl. The lovely Elizabeth brought nothing to the marriage save the clothes on her back and her young son, Devereaux, called Dev. It wasn't long before she put horns on Asa, cuckolding him with a handsome young customs officer. When he could blind himself to it no longer, Asa had thrown both Elizabeth and her son out of the family home, giving the old dower house of Boxwood Cottage over to them, a grudging concession to whatever obligations he'd had to either of them.

Though Asa had adopted Dev in that first flush of happiness, the old man clearly viewed him as the bad baggage of an unholy union, and had nothing to do with him ever afterwards.

Dev had remained at Boxwood Cottage even after his faithless mother's death, feeling it his due, though he had not kept his rightful name of McCallister. He'd used his father's name instead, calling himself Dev Hampton, in an attempt to irritate the old man. It had succeeded. The two rarely spoke, and when Asa died the snub was complete, for he'd not even referred to his second wife, or to Eleanor's father, in his will.

It followed that Boxwood Cottage did not legally belong to them. Mired in endless bitterness, Eleanor's mother believed herself cheated of a large fortune by Asa's stinginess and wounded pride. After her husband's death, Fanny had even brought suit against the McCallisters, a tactic doomed to fail, tailor-made to lay waste the already tense relationship between the two families.

And through it all, Fanny's level-headed daughter had been left to hold the tattered remnants of the Hampton family together.

Isaac wondered if pity for her situation had passed over his face, for her next words sounded almost defiant.

"I am not afraid of work, Captain. I've been a nursemaid and a seamstress, I've taken in washing, I've even worked the harvest, anything to earn money for my family. Having a place to live has made things easier, though of course we were always there at your father's sufferance. Now your father is gone, as is mine, and we have no right to the place we have called our home. I know this full well. You are under no obligation to us, though I think some small concession would not be too much to ask. Now, I've enough saved to pay our keep while I work, but little more. My commission will surely not cover it."

Before he had the chance to speak her tone changed, softening, as if pleading for reason from an unlikely source for it.

"Try to understand. I've spent many years striving to be entrusted with an important work. Something besides locket portraits of babies, or frigates on chamber pots!" Isaac fought a grin, sobering as she continued, "This is the opportunity I've waited for all my life, it seems. If we lose our home now, I will have no choice but to give up my commission and find employment in at least one position, if not two."

"What is it exactly that you're asking of me, Miss Hampton?"

Isaac's mouth was so dry he'd had to force out the thoughtless, mechanical words he regretted at once. Dear God, why was he being such a cold-blooded bastard? He hadn't given Boxwood Cottage any thought at all. In the catalog of his property, it was less to him than his barn. But at the moment it was a vital asset, because it was the thin piece of line that tied her to him. Of course, he would never have tossed three helpless women into the street. But this was something she clearly didn't know, and so he still had her tied to that thin line, while she tugged at it like a mainsail in a high wind, fighting to be free.

His gut twisted as he wondered if the things he'd seen and suffered had hardened him to the point at which he could use her predicament in such a fashion. Yet, he didn't want to hurt her. There was simply something in him that wanted the advantage over her. It was the arrogance beneath her beauty, he supposed. He wanted her to beg the favor of him, as petty as it made him feel.

His question still hung in the air, while he watched her swallow her considerable pride.

"I am asking that, under the circumstances, you allow us to go on living in Boxwood Cottage. At least until my commission is done."

"And how long would that be?"

She calculated, "For a work of this size, the ceiling and four panels in the entrance, I would say at least six months. Perhaps longer. The construction has just broken ground, and I can't begin until they're nearly finished. Mr. Finley has not even approved my final sketches."

He mused aloud, "Six months," leaning back in his chair. In a moment he would say yes and she would be gone. She was no beribboned, flighty creature to be tempted with chocolates or an invitation to tea. Behind his stony expression his mind worked frantically to find a way to keep her with him, just a little longer.

"Well, I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement."

He hadn't intended to offend her, though obviously something had done so. She stiffened, observing coldly, "I thought you might say that."

"I beg your pardon?"

Her eyes were hard as flint.

"You're looking at me again. The way you looked at me yesterday."

Isaac was taken aback, but did his best not to show it.

"I'm sorry if the way I look at you disturbs you. I shall endeavor to find another expression, though this is the face I was born with. Of course, that's my cross to bear."

She didn't smile. Rather she stood as if braced for battle, her face reflecting myriad emotions.

"Billy said . . . , " she began, then stumbled to a halt.

"Yes?"

"He said you admired me. That you questioned him about me. About me specifically." He denied her a shame-faced response, and she goaded, "Well, did he speak the truth?"

Calmly, Isaac confessed, "He told you the truth."

Her voice grew sharper, as if his lack of any proper embarrassment diminished the import of her words.

"He said you watched me for an hour more, from the loft in your carriage house."

"Again, he is telling nothing but the truth."

His voice was flat, utterly devoid of emotion. It was an effective device. He watched, amused, as it transformed her annoyance into open hostility. Her face reddened with it, but as she opened her mouth to speak he raised his hand, cutting her off.

"Miss Hampton, I don't know what you've heard of me, but it's true that for five years I was a slave in Algiers. I have lived among savages and barbarians, which you've no doubt been told. However, I've not forgotten everything of the rules of conduct in a decent society. Surely you're not suggesting I have compromised you in any way, merely by looking at you?"

Sullenly, she snapped, "Of course not."

He sighed, "Then perhaps it would be best if you came to the point."

It was an ill-considered command. Cool as an April breeze, she laid him flat.

"I have no money, nor anything else of value to offer you." Looking him up and down with a touch of contempt for the merchant prince, she added, "I doubt you would be interested in anything artistic I could offer. Mr. Finley tells me you employ Chinese and Venetian artists by the score, and you've brought home entire ship holds packed with their work. However, despite what you own, I sense in you a lack of something else. You've been a prisoner for some time, and I assume you have been deprived of female companionship. I am willing to offer you that companionship, for the length of time my family continues to live in your house."

Isaac was too stunned to speak. When he felt the laughter rising inside him, literally felt it contracting his diaphragm, he did his best to quell it. This situation was far too pregnant with possibilities to risk laughing her out of his study.

Clearing his throat, lips trembling, he said only, "Companionship, Miss Hampton?"

"Yes. Companionship."

He leaned his elbows on his desk, balling his hands together and resting his chin on them. Then he stared up at her, while she boldly stared back, completely poised.

"By companionship, I take it you mean sexual congress."

"I prefer the word companionship. But yes, that is what I mean."

"You may prefer the word, but I promise you, your friends and neighbors will not."

He waited for her to flinch, searching for any wisp of cowardice or regret. He found neither. It irritated him, a fact reflected in his question.

"And what of the possible consequences? What if I should get you with child?"

To his astonishment she'd clearly thought this through, for she replied without hesitation, "I would take every precaution possible to see it does not occur. You certainly know more of such things than do I. However,

since we are both healthy, and I presume we are both capable, there's no doubt it's a risk. I would, of course, go away somewhere for my confinement, at your expense. We would thoroughly discuss what the child's future would be, and agree upon it, before exercising the terms of our contract."

Caustically, he noted, "You sound more like a lawyer than an artist, Miss Hampton."

As if to goad him further, she smiled.

"Thank you, Captain McCallister."

Now completely exasperated, Isaac demanded, "Miss Hampton, do you realize what people will say about you? Do you know what you will be called?"

Distantly, she replied, "In your world, Captain. Not in mine."

"We do not live in the same world?"

"We do not."

Incensed, he nearly pleaded, "That's as may be, but the fact remains I don't believe you have any real notion what you're proposing to me. Or what you're risking."

Again, she never flinched.

"I am not without experience."

He pondered this, his eyes raking her, purposely giving her the look he used with foreign merchants to examine chests of tea or bolts of cloth.

"Not without experience? Salem has changed quite a bit while I've been away."

"I'm not a lightskirt, Captain. I am simply telling you I have had a lover. I'm a grown woman, well aware of what the arrangement would require of me."

“And this lover. Isn’t he likely to put a pistol ball into my brain when he finds out what you’ve been up to?”

“No.”

“So, you’re saying he is not here in Salem?”

“He is not.”

“And he is not likely to return here?”

“God forbid.”

“You’re telling me you have no feelings for this man?”

She sighed, obviously tired of being questioned.

“None I can express without sinking to the vernacular.”

At last he allowed himself to laugh, releasing some of the tension he’d been holding inside. When it faded, his attention remained fixed on her. He was bewitched, still finding her face and form endlessly captivating.

“So, you are telling me you would like a new lover, and I seemed the most suitable candidate. As well as the most advantageous one.”

“No. I am saying I’ve had a lover and know what would be required of me. I do not want one. I had resolved never to have another, but circumstances intervened.”

He hardened his voice, again attempting to bring her to heel.

“And since when did you decide the act of love was something you could debase into currency?”

Without pause she fired back, “Since I experienced it and discovered how little there was in it of any true consequence.”

He continued to study her, absolutely fascinated. He should have been appalled by her words. He should have been, but he wasn't. Perhaps there was something in what she said, about the world she lived in being different. There was something alien about her, as if he dared not judge her by the same measure he would use on any other woman.

Tactically, Isaac tried, once again, to get underneath her skin.

"Perhaps you would like to hear in your turn what Billy told me about you. I wondered what he meant at the time, although now I understand completely."

Cautiously, she asked, "What did he say?"

Isaac drew out his answer, wearing a dry smile.

"Well, he said you were right pretty, and considerable forehanded, but I shouldn't be taken in. He said the red in that hair is no lie. You're bold as brass and come on fierce when you're crossed. A termagant with a mannish temper."

Shrugging with apparent indifference, she replied, "The world is full of people who mistake determination for obstinacy, if not belligerence."

"He also said you're a stiff-necked spinster, and you're every bit as eccentric as your father before you."

Finally he'd ruffled those feathers, her pique flashing in her eyes.

"My father was a great artist."

"That's as may be. I have never seen any of his work, at least, not since I was a boy, so I can make no sensible judgment in the matter."

It pained her to talk about her father. As distracted as he was by her offer, even so, he could see that. He surmised this the cause of the severity in her voice.

“Captain, whatever you may think, of me or my father, you have once again strayed from the point. Do you want me, or don’t you?”

For the first time since she appeared, he dropped the hard mask of restraint and allowed the raw emotion he felt to show in his eyes.

“Yes, Miss Hampton. I want you.”

Meeting her eyes across the desk, she actually seemed momentarily taken aback. Then she raised her shoulders with a nearly imperceptible gesture of tenacity, her expression closed to him once more. But Isaac had caught that flicker of weakness, improbable as it seemed. He nearly smiled when he recalled thinking he would never leave three helpless women homeless, as well. Eleanor Hampton was anything but helpless.

Nevertheless, he felt a painful stab of guilt. He knew full well he was toying with her, manipulating her to his own ends. He also knew that her image of his character, the humbug that he was a pitiless villain who would banish them from their home, had been spoon-fed her by her mother. Had he been a gentleman, he would have disabused her of it at once.

He wondered what else had been said of him, and with what assumptions and prejudices she’d arrived at his door. His step-brother’s widow was an hysterical as well as a fool, and how she had managed to produce such a woman was a mystery far beyond his comprehension. Yet here he sat, allowing the fear she’d planted in her daughter’s mind to serve his own ends. He supposed later it was his conscience, combined with her dignified beauty, that brought the improbable words to the surface, without passing through any process of examination.

“Actually, there is another solution to our difficulty you have not mentioned.”

“And that is?”

“We could marry.”

It pleased him unutterably to have cracked that icy façade. There was a heavy pause, into which she injected the shaky words, “Are you having a jest at my expense, sir?”

“On the contrary. I am thirty-three years old and a widower. I have been married, and I know it’s the sort of life I’m suited for. I want both a wife and children. As for you, if we marry, you would be asking no favor of me. The house would be yours as well as mine, to do with as you wish. We are cousins in a way, or at least, cousins by marriage. We already know one another’s family and circumstance. In many respects, it’s an ideal match.”

She looked at him as if he’d slipped the mooring of sanity and fallen into the abyss of madness. Doubtless she’d heard what all Salem had, that Captain McCallister had lost his mind in the desert. Consequently he kept his eyes fixed to hers, sane and reasonable, but resolute.

“God in heaven, you’re serious, aren’t you? This isn’t a joke, is it?”

Wryly, he said, “Most of my friends will tell you I have absolutely no sense of humor.”

At that she retreated, back behind her wall of self-possession, but he could smell the panic underneath. “I would need time to make a decision of such consequence.” Leaning back again he countered playfully, “Miss Hampton, you are twenty-five and unwed. Time is your enemy, not your friend.”

With a withering glance she observed, “Your friends are quite right about you, Captain McCallister. You haven’t much of a wit.”

He burst out laughing, when she’d clearly expected to raise his temper.

“I suppose, Miss Hampton, you’ll have your work, to see if something serviceable can be made of me.”

With that he sobered, then went on, “You find yourself here at an opportune moment. I’ve been going over my

papers. I'm not the richest man in the city, but you'll never want. I will care for your family, as well. In fact, several of my ventures have done rather well without my attention, which I find irritating. At any rate, as you have no father, you're welcome to take these to a lawyer. I freely offer you half of everything, without any entailment."

Bitterly, she asked, "Are you trying to buy me, Captain?"

Stung, he shook his dark head in consternation.

"I confess, I do not understand you at all, Miss Hampton. You come into my home and offer to prostitute yourself to me, yet you are offended by a respectable offer of marriage."

After what seemed a tactical silence, she inquired politely, "May I speak frankly?"

"Please do. I suspect you would in any case."

In reply she put out that stubborn chin and hamstrung him with her bluntness.

"The offer I made you, whether it brought me pain and degradation or not, was an offer with an end. Whatever happened, sooner or later I would be free of you. I'm very patient, and I can endure what I must to accomplish my ends. However, the offer you make has no discernable end. I would belong to you, for the rest of my life. And that is another matter entirely."

He glared across the desk, his eyes alight with affront he didn't bother to hide.

"And marriage to me would constitute pain and degradation without a discernable end."

Faltering under his stare, she countered weakly, "I never said that."

"No, I suppose you didn't. Not precisely. But it was the lingering assumption in the air."

"I seem to have managed to offend you, and that was never my intention."

"You seem to be a young woman easily capable of offense without intention. You are no diplomat. But that doesn't bother me overmuch. What does concern me is that you seem to lack a woman's heart."

At last he'd cut her, a little, anyway.

"How dare you say that to me?"

"You said it about yourself, dear lady. You have no lover, nor do you want one. To become mine, or apparently anyone else's, would cause you pain and degradation. You speak of the precious gift of a child as if it were one more minor encumbrance to be dealt with. And as for my offer of marriage, you seem incapable of any intuition, which is a product of the heart."

"Intuition? You believe a decision of such import should be left to mere intuition?"

He shrugged, replying, "Whether it should or not, the fact remains it's usually the case, so long as the marriage has not been an arrangement of convenience. Therefore, I'm asking you to look me in the eyes and give me your decision. Yes or no. It's that simple."

She did look him in the eyes, as a heavy silence fell over the room. It had been ten years since he'd felt as tinglingly alive as he had in the last ten minutes of sparring with her. His heart was hammering, as if he'd run a great distance. It sent the blood rushing to every extremity, singeing his nerves and leaving a pleasant ache of longing. Until that moment, it had been a game. He told himself it still was. And if he hoped to believe it, then the tension with which he waited for her answer would not, he knew, bear close examination.

For the first time she was tentative, her voice halting and unsure.

"If I should agree, there are two things that would have to be understood between us."

He raised a brow, apparently relaxed, asking, "And they are?"

"First, I will not give up my work. Not under any circumstances."

“Very well. I see no reason you should.”

His answer seemed to surprise her, as though she’d made this stipulation before and been refused. In fact, it surprised her so much he had to press for the rest of her terms.

“And the second condition, Miss Hampton?”

Here she hesitated, briefly lowering her eyes. “I could not guarantee my sentiments, and will make no promise on that score. I will not deny you . . .,” she began, and then demurred, suddenly faint of heart. Drawing her brows together, she went on clinically, “I will not deny you access to my body. But my feelings are my own affair.”

Isaac propped an elbow on the chair arm, his chin on his thumb, his long index finger settling over his lips.

“I believe, Miss Hampton, you’ve overplayed your hand.”

Cautiously, she returned, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean you have overestimated the value of my desire for you. It’s true, I want you. You have used that fact quite ruthlessly. But I have no desire for a lovely body without a soul. If you have no affection for me at all, then I promise you, the access you offer will bring nothing but misery for us both.”

She nearly cringed under the word, so saturated with venomous resentment.

“I did not say I could have no affection for you. In fact, I find you more than agreeable under the circumstances.” Her tone grew confounded. “You are not precisely what I had expected. In truth, you seem a very reasonable sort of man. We may find we get on well with one another. However, I was not speaking of affection or regard, but of love. I cannot guarantee that I could ever love you.”

Affection. From any other woman, it wasn't much. From her, he knew he had wrung a major concession.

Isaac sighed, feeling a great temptation to take whatever she offered, no matter how little. Hearing it, she tilted her head and spoke with fixed intensity, as if she were driven to ask.

"Please, tell me the truth. Why were you watching me? I'm no great beauty. Is it because you haven't seen a woman of your own society for such a long time?"

He mumbled, "No great beauty?" as he shook his head, continuing in a voice that was level and low, but vibrant with heat. "You're quite wrong, Miss Hampton. You are a beauty. But you were more to me yesterday than merely a beautiful woman. You were an autumn breeze, clear and clean. You were an orchard in spring, drenched in blossoms, or the sea off Cape Ann before a storm, with the wind churning the waves, the air so sweet and heavy with rain it feels like a balm against your skin. You were all of America for me. Everything beautiful that I'd taken for granted and lost and thought never to see again. That's why I stared."

Isaac was baffled to find her eyes so spellbound, her lips parted, her face beginning to redden. It was as if no one had ever told her she was beautiful before, a perplexing thought. For the first time her defenses seemed to have fallen completely, and he took advantage of that fact.

"What do you want, Miss Hampton?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"From life. What do you want?"

For a moment she still seemed guarded, but then the remarkable eyes lit with candor, as if the man who'd offered her marriage had a right to some small portion of her thoughts.

"I want to be an artist. I want to live up to the memory of my father. I want my family to be always cared for and happy."

Just as he wondered if she would go on her voice grew richer, the golden eyes warmer.

"I want to travel. I want to see the Northern Lights, and the River Nile, and the white sands of the Sandwich Islands. I want to see the great works of art and learn from them, Botticelli and Vandyke and Rembrandt. I want to see Paris, and learn to speak French, to discuss painting with other artists in the most cultured city on earth, where even the court painter has been a woman. I want," and here she floundered, to his chagrin, her eyes falling to the floor.

"It's foolish to whine over an endless list of wants that are of interest only to me. Life will give me what it gives me. It will be my duty to make the most of what I am given."

Isaac suspected the truth was that she'd revealed too much of herself, and retreated before she exposed anything more. He wondered if some hard blows from life had made her so wary, or if it was simply her nature.

Gently, he addressed himself to the top of her bowed head.

"Miss Hampton, I assure you, your desires in life are of interest to me."

Eleanor raised her face skittishly, and met his level, serious expression. Recognizing a tender vein of vulnerability, he offered mercy.

"Take the night to consider what I've said. We'll discuss it again after you've had a chance to sleep on the matter. In the meantime," he added slyly, "I shouldn't mention any of our conversation to your mother."

For the first time a genuine smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"In that, Captain McCallister, we are definitely agreed."

The interview seemed to be done, and she put a period to the lapse that had fallen between them, nodding her farewells and turning to make good her escape. Isaac delivered her one more dilemma before she reached the door.

"Incidentally, if it's not too great an imposition, I should like to come tomorrow to see some of your work."

She turned back and tilted her head, startled, and somewhat undone.

"You want to see my studio?"

"Of course. Why do you sound so astonished?"

"Well, I assumed you would have no interest."

"Why would you assume that? You said yourself I've had more than my share of dealings with artists. I should think you'd be mildly curious to have my opinion."

She seemed disquieted at the prospect, while he added in the tone of a man used to command, "I will call at eleven in the morning, if that is convenient."

"It is convenient enough."

She stood by the door, immobile, until he added pleasantly, "Well, then. Good day, Miss Hampton. I shall see you in the morning."

With that she fled, closing the door behind her.

Once she'd gone Isaac rose and began pacing the room, his heartbeat sickeningly erratic. He realized that his headache had fled, along with his weariness. He wanted her back, and he wanted it now. It was going to be a very long night before he saw her again.

----

