

A Holt in The Heart

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/12994869) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/12994869>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Fandom:	Remington Steele (TV)
Relationship:	Laura Holt/Remington Steele
Characters:	Laura Holt , Remington Steele , Anna Simpson
Additional Tags:	Romance , Angst
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-12 Words: 19,507 Chapters: 5/5

A Holt in The Heart

by [RSteele82](#)

Summary

(An ITCHy Story) What if Remington and Laura had crossed the line the night Anna Simpson returned to his life? Takes place during and after Woman of Steele.

Chapter 1

When the buzzer sounds at my door, I know exactly who is on the other side without asking. Who else would it be at this hour, so shortly after my own arrival home? Memories of the utter humiliation I'd just experienced at his hands flashes through my mind. First, this morning, when he'd gone chasing after that blonde, abandoning me with Caroline Welles, our client, to make his excuses for him. I thought I'd made my opinion clear on such antics as we'd dined with Caroline and her husband, Herbert.

"And when Mr. Steele sees something that attracts his attention, he won't *hesitate* to track it down, will you sir?"

Criticism cloaked as a professional explanation, wrapped up in a saccharine coating. Caroline took it as such, thank God, and the quick look he'd given me said my point had been made, uncomfortably so. Or so I'd thought, until he'd done it the second time at Club 10 that evening, leaving Herbert Welles looking upon me with pity in his eyes as we watched from the dance floor while he chased that blonde again. It had been enough. More than enough!

I've never told him he couldn't have his flings. After all, he's a grown man with needs. Needs I've still not fulfilled. So, if he can't keep it in his pants while we try to figure out what exactly it is we want from our personal relationship, more power to him. I have no hold on him, no claim to him. The only request I have ever made, unspoken yet I believed understood, was that he use discretion. Not to flaunt his affairs in my face. It's one thing to climb into your empty bed at night suspecting his is not equally as lonely and quite another to know it's not... and to have a face to attach to those images of him doing to another woman what you want him to be doing with you.

I pull open the door. Surprise, surprise. Mr. Steele. Standing there in all his glory. Tie gone, the first couple of buttons of his shirt undone. Looking contrite, nervous, as though he's about to walk straight into the lion's den. Good. I've never refused him the opportunity to present the reasons for his actions, but as far as I'm concerned, this is indefensible. I tell him as much.

"What did you expect me to do, spend the evening looking at the back of your head? It happened in the museum. That was alright. Now it's happened again. Watching you with that blonde is not my idea of a rollicking night out."

The utterly defeated pose he takes is not at all what I expected. Sitting, bent forward, shoulders slumped head down. Nor is the story he tells me. A woman, an unimaginable loss, him suffering in the aftermath. Unsure if I'll believe him, or if he'll simply sound like he's gone mad. I may be angry, but I'm not heartless. *Especially* when it comes to him.

I mentally sigh. It's often a point of frustration with myself, this instinct of mine to protect him, body and heart, despite how many times he's tried to pull a fast one on me, has let me down. Maybe it's because I am dumbstruck by his resilience. In spite of being abandoned time and again as a child, his life on the shady side of the street as an adult, he still has one of

the kindest hearts I've ever known, a gentleness about him that lures me in like a moth to the flame. Then again, maybe it's simply that contrary to what my commonsense screams at me daily, I've somehow allowed myself to fall in love with him. His past, his secrets and his candid admissions he cannot promise to stay, be damned.

I force myself back to the here and now. He's talking again.

"Thank you." The words catch me unprepared and my eyes widen. Amazingly, I sound perfectly composed when I speak.

"For what?" I ask. He stands and walks slowly towards me. I can't take my eyes off him as he approaches, enraptured by the profound gratitude I see in his eyes, on his face, that I've not sent him off to suffer his sins, but have instead offered absolution. Sometimes, I even surprise myself.

"For understanding."

He reaches for me, cupping my face in his hands, and drawing my lips up to meet his as he bends his head downward. When he releases my face and he wraps one arm around my shoulder, another around my waist, I press against him willingly. The kiss is breathtaking in its tenderness. It's the type of kiss that leaves your heart pounding and turns your mind to mush. The type of kiss that when his lips part yours, you lean in, silently asking for more. I do just that, and he obliges, always grateful for those moments when I willingly offer some small part of myself to him. I press even closer to him and his embrace tightens. He dares to touch the tip of his tongue to my lips. This is where, nine times out of ten, I pull away, put distance between us. Instead, I hum softly as I open to him, then allow myself to savor his rich, spicy taste as his tongue traces my teeth, then does an elegant dance with my own. I feel the proof of his arousal against my stomach before he shifts his hips, always the gentleman.

Then again, maybe he's simply afraid such an evident sign will send me running for the hills. Actually, it thrills me to know I can do this to him. I'm not exactly his 'standard'. Maybe all those trashy novels I read are correct: when a rake is considering settling down, it is often at the hand of a woman who goes against his norm.

I stiffen, my own thoughts shaking me. Settle down? Where in the hell did that come from? He's been honest from the beginning: neither promises to stay nor of a future. It is the crux of our largest problem. But he's stayed. For more nearly two years, he's stayed, and I'm not under the impression he plans to take off tomorrow. That has to count for something. Doesn't it?

He must have noticed my sudden tension or that I was caught up in my own thoughts. Maybe both, for he ends the kiss, but not wishing to lose all contact, pulls me into his embrace. I lean back and look at his face, find the reluctant acceptance in his eyes that is always there when I back away. But the strain around his eyes, the way his eyes dart away from mine before he buries his face in the crook of my neck, speaks of his vulnerability.

And it is my undoing. I have developed zero intolerance for his vulnerability. It breaks down all my carefully constructed walls and goes straight to my heart.

I remember the night, sixth months earlier, after my house was bombed. I'd lost Bernice and Murphy in the months before, had no family nearby to offer me solace. I needed, desperately almost, to feel fully connected to someone. All the reasons for not crossing that line of the bedroom door were conveniently absent.

“Tonight, if you asked, I don’t think I could say no.”

It was one of those times I was reminded what a truly good man he is, underneath all his quips and the devil-may-care attitude. I'd offered up what he'd wanted for the last year, and he turned me down. Chivalry, I'd thought to myself that night as I lay alone on the couch. As much as he wanted me in his bed, he wouldn't take advantage of a moment of despondency. There was simply too great a risk for morning after regrets.

I have wanted him since he walked into the office at Ben Pierson. With his blue eyes and dark hair, the slim frame that made anything he wore from jeans to a tuxedo look fabulous. It had only been a matter of weeks before I wanted to know the man beneath all the masks, somewhere between the magnum of champagne and his championing a former heroin addict in the morgue. He was a mystery I wanted to unravel, both in and out of bed. The year and a half in between had only served to make me want him all the more.

I could do this for him, for us. I ache to take him in my arms, kiss him, caress him, until his eyes fill with the mischievousness and good humor that is normally there. The only thing that's stopping me is me.

For once, I decide to get out of my own way.

Chapter 2

I cradle his head in my hands and lift it from my shoulder, then press up on my tip-toes to kiss him in a way I haven't done since that evening in the wine cellar of St. Abbott's Monastery. A hand clutches my waist, while the other dives in my hair. The kiss is ravenous. He feeds hungrily on my mouth, as I do on his, the two of us devouring one another's flavor as a street urchin might food after being too long deprived. Suddenly, both his hands are on my waist, and he's lifting me away from him, our lips separating with a loud pop. He wipes a shaking hand over his mouth, discretely removing my lipstick from his lips while fighting to catch his breath.

"Laura, I think it would be best if we stop—"

I don't let him finish the sentence, stepping back to him.

"Don't think," I answer. "Isn't that what you're always telling me? Don't think," I urge again, "Just feel."

My skin's already on fire, my panties damp, at just the thought of feeling his hands on my bare skin, feeling his skin under mine. I make my intentions clear, trailing kisses along his neck as my fingers release one button after another on his shirt. His hands grab at mine, stilling them.

"I don't want to start something we won't finish, Lau-ra," he tries again, lengthening my name the way he does when perturbed with me or trying to get my attention. "Unless I use your bathroom, the nearest cold shower is several mi—"

"You won't need one," I interrupt to promise.

He doesn't believe me. Can I blame him? How many times now have our evenings ended with me rushing out the door when things heated up? So, I make my intentions clear by doing something I've *never* done with him before: I push back up on my toes, kissing him, as I reach between our bodies and caress his burgeoning erection through his pants. His body shudders at my touch, then, with a groan of half-need, half-relief, he wraps his arms around me and crushes me to him, taking control of the kiss, slowing it down until he's once more tantalizing me with those tender, breathtaking movements of his lips against mine. My hands are on the move again, tugging his shirt from beneath his belt and unbuttoning it the rest of the way. He gasps against my mouth when I drag my fingers from throat to belt.

"Not here. The bedroom," he mumbles gruffly against my lips, then his settle over mine again.

Somehow, we make it up the stairs with our lips barely parting and I've managed to ease his tuxedo jacket off his shoulders. With a careless shrug, it drops to the floor midway up the steps. The fastidious Mr. Steele is seemingly unconcerned with wrinkles at the moment. Who am I to judge? I couldn't care less. But there's some housekeeping to do first, and although

I'm kiss dazed this is not something I'm willing to ignore, no matter how uncomfortable it might be.

"Have you been checked out by a doctor recently?" I ask against his lips, as my fingers work on removing his cufflinks. He hums a yes against my lips, but must sense that isn't enough.

"Clean bill of health," he assures between kisses. "You?"

"There hasn't..." I stumble, my skin flushing. I had been prepared to ask the question but not answer it. I'm by no means a virgin. I've lived with a man, for God's sake. But since I arrived home one day and found out that man had left without warning, I'd sworn men, in general, off. Until him. Until now. "The same," I answer instead, refusing to divulge there had been one since Wilson.

I feel him nod, as I remove the last cufflink, tucking the pair into his pants' pocket. His shirt drops to the floor and I tear my mouth from his, wanting to taste him, trailing lips and tongue along his neck. He throws his head back to give me more access, and seconds later I feel my belt slacken then hear it hit the floor.

"Condoms?" I manage to ask.

"Wallet," he confirms.

I know I should be relieved. I went off the pill after Wilson left me as it seemed a pointless waste of money. His preparedness prevents us from having to stop and run to the drugstore for protection. But I can't help wondering if those condoms were tucked away with the hopes we'd cross this line one day soon or if they were for some nameless faceless woman... women... he may or may not have met yet. The thought makes my stomach clench so I shove it aside and return my mind to the business at hand.

I drag my fingers through his thick, lush chest hair, fulfilling one fantasy, but there's dozens more to go. I kick off my heels which only serves to emphasize our height difference. In short order, I feel his fingers tugging down the zipper of my dress. Strapless, it slithers down my body leaving me in only a black, also strapless, bra, matching black panties and a pair of stockings as it was too warm out for a full pair of hose. I kick the dress aside, and return my attention to exploring his well-toned, attractive torso with my hands and mouth. This time it's me who grabs his hands when I feel them move to the clasp of my bra. I shake my head while looking up at him, distracted for a second by how his eyes have darkened several shades and his irises have grown large from desire.

"You first," I insist.

He seems surprised, but doesn't argue and his gaze follows my every move as I kneel down to help relieve him of shoes then socks. His eyes travel over my body as I stand and I can't help noticing his hands clenched at his sides, as though it is taking great effort to keep from touching me as he wants. I'm no more capable of stopping the smile that spreads across my face than I am of keeping the next day from dawning. My self-confidence soars with that unconscious action alone and I let the old Laura out to play. My Mr. Steele isn't Wilson. This I instinctively know. There would be no 'not there', 'don't do that' or 'you're out of control,'

coming from him. To that end, I dip a couple of fingers under the waistband of his pants and tease, laughing huskily when I feel his stomach muscles tauten.

“Lau-ra.” He draws out my name in his impatience, well aware of what I am doing, not that I’m keeping it a secret.

Using his shoulders as leverage I seek his lips with mine. Subtly, he widens his stance to lessen our height difference and give our mouths more contact. One of his arms snakes around my waist, his fingers clenching it, while he wraps the other arm below my shoulders, freeing my hands. I make good use of them, unbuckling his belt then unlatching his pants and sliding the zipper down. When my hand slips inside to play with his glutes, he gives a guttural moan, his fingers digging into my waist and deepening the kiss. Growing impatient myself, I move my lips to below his ear, teasing a spot with lips and tongue that leaves him muttering God’s name. With another smile lifting my lips, I tug his pants over his hips and he kicks them aside when they pool at his feet.

He’s wearing briefs. I should have known, I think to myself. An impeccable dresser, he wouldn’t wear boxers and risk unsightly gathers beneath his tuxedo pants. His rigid erection is compressed by the tight, elasticized material, but the outline is easily made out and I cup him one last time before sinking to my knees, unplanned, and anxiously remove this last piece of clothing. He springs free and I am at once intimidated and fascinated.

I dare a peek up at him and find intense blue eyes staring down at me. I let my gaze travel slowly over him, from head to toe, then tip my head back to look him in the face again.

“You truly are a gorgeous man,” I compliment. And he is. If his legs weren’t a bit on the slim side, he’d be absurdly perfect. That one, single flaw, as minor as it is, makes him even more appealing to me. As does the stunned smile that’s plastered on his face. He didn’t expect such a compliment from me, it appears, and is supremely touched by the words.

I want to see the look on his face the first time I really touch him, so I keep my eyes on him as I reach out and take him in hand. He flinches, then sucks in a deep breath as his eyes grow dazed with relieved rapture. Only then do I turn my attention back to the task at hand. Granted, my own little black book only holds a few names, three to be precise, but none of those men had been as well-endowed as he... or uncircumcised. His erection is heavy, thick and long, hence the intimidation, but I am too caught up in exploring this piece of him for that feeling to take hold. I marvel at his shaft’s warmth, at how anything could be so hard yet soft at once. I experiment, my hand moving up his length to gently ease back the foreskin, revealing the engorged head. I circle my thumb over his cap.

“Christ, Laura,” he grates out from between clenched teeth.

His hands reach for me, grasping me by the arms, trying to urge me to my feet. I easily slip away and impulsively run my tongue along the underside of his erection then circle the tip with my tongue before taking him into my mouth. He sways on his feet and one of his hands tangle in my hair. I freeze. This is not something I’ve done much for a man. Wilson hated it, claiming I was degrading myself by the action. The only other man I’d done it for was my college professor, who’d ended up guiding my head with his hand while pumping into my

mouth. My throat was bruised for a week, an experience I don't care to repeat. Yet, I can't count how many nights I've fantasized about doing this for my Mr. Steele.

"You don't have to," he breathes.

I release his tip from my mouth and look up at him from under my lashes. His face is strained, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his free hand clenched at his side. I swear he's blushing and I get the distinct impression this is not part of his usual sexual repertoire. I nearly laugh aloud at the thought he might not be willing to risk this particular piece of his anatomy to a pair of the teeth belonging to someone he barely knew. I give his erection another stroke with my hand and watch him pant.

"I want to," I assure him. "Do you want me to?" I continue to stroke him, stopping here and there to caress his cap with my thumb, to give his sacs a gentle squeeze. Long seconds pass before he finally answers.

"You?" he gasps. "God, yes."

I smile up at him, then focus on fulfilling one of my fantasies with him... and apparently one of his own. His hand remains in my hair as I lick, nibble and suck, but he never attempts to guide me. I take my time, knowing it won't take much to push him over the edge. With my free hand, I explore his slim legs, his firm bum. After several minutes of this, I settle in and find a rhythm using both my mouth and hand, and soon he's calling my name over and over, as he explodes into my mouth. I swallow every drop and am thrilled I was able to do this for him. When I release him, he falls to his knees in front of my and pulls me into his embrace.

"That was..." He kisses me again, leaving the thought unfinished. "I've dreamt of you..." He wraps his arms tighter around me, nibbles on my lips. "I never expected..." Another thought left unfinished. I smile and weave my fingers through his hair. Embracing his head in my hands, I draw him to me and we kiss at length. He seems confused when I stand after our lips part. I yank the comforter and sheet to the bottom of my bed.

"Get in," I order softly. "I'll be right back."

His eyes follow me, as I go downstairs to secure the latch on my front door. I stop to take a long drink of my now cold tea, then turn off the lights downstairs. Housekeeping finished, I pick up his tuxedo jacket on my way back up the stairs, fishing through the pockets until I locate his wallet. Hanging his jacket over the railing, I drop the wallet on my nightstand, before joining him in bed, straddling his waist. A smile lights his face, his hands grasping my hips. I bend over and kiss him.

I take my time familiarizing myself with his body. I discover his inner thighs are ticklish, and if I press my fingers firmly between the fourth and fifth rib on his right side, he laughs and jerks away from my hand. I can make him moan by suckling his skin right below his left ear, and he clutches me to him when I do the same to any spot on his collar bone. The tip of my tongue drawn down his neck sends shivers over his skin, a nibble of his nipples leaves him bucking beneath me and grabbing at pillows and sheets. Love bites on his thighs wrench deep, guttural moans from his throat, and when done on his delicious bum, he's left mumbling my name and God's alternately. My fingers drawn through the hair of his head

leaves him unconsciously leaning into my hand as though he is starving for this display of affection, and when I run those same fingers through his chest hair, his eyes focus on my face as he absorbs the emotions, reactions found there. He hides nothing from me, but when I reach for his again rigid shaft, he captures my hands and shakes his head.

“Laura, please.” He draws out each word.

Apparently, he’s had enough and wants his turn with my body now. Who am I to deny him? He has, after all, been extremely patient as I’ve taken my fill of his, though it’s not been nearly enough. I nod from where I sit astride him. He sighs and his body shudders with relief beneath me. His hand glides up my back and fumbles with the clasp of my bra. I see irritation with himself flash in his eyes, his hands not nearly as steady as he wishes them to be. I feel the hooks give, and he wraps me in his arms, pulling me down against him before he rolls us, so that now I lay on my back. Sometime during the movement, my bra has disappeared, yet he doesn’t reach for my breasts immediately. Instead, he takes his time, much like I did with him, learning all facets of my body.

But first, he feels the need for a bit of equality it seems, kneeling by my feet and removing each stocking ever so slowly, his lips and tongue lathing every last inch of skin as it is bared. I can’t stop myself from writhing on the bed. He’s driving me crazy and he’s come nowhere near either of the most pertinent parts of my body. A crooked grin settles over his face when he brushes a hand over the dampened crotch of my panties. Not only am I already hot and wet, but his touch makes me lift my hips so my mound presses against his hand. I think he might have a bit of pity on me. I was wrong. He slowly works my panties down my legs, his lips trailing after them, purposefully avoiding the place I most want his mouth. I grunt in dissatisfaction, and he laughs deeply at my wordless complaint.

Stripped bare before him now, he stretches out on his side next to me, tracing the tip of a finger over the freckles spattering my shoulders and sternum. He seems fascinated by them, devoting a good deal of time to their exploration, then, much as I had, his eyes traveled slowly over my body.

“My god, you’re beautiful,” he breaths.

The way he says the words combined with the look in his eyes makes me believe I am exactly that to him. I flush from the heady pleasure of it all. Observant as he is, he doesn’t, of course, miss the sudden pinkening of my skin and he’s touched by it, if the kiss he gives me is any indication. Our lips don’t part until he stretches his long, lithe frame over mine, settling between my legs when I spread them for him. I suck in a hard, fast breath when his heavy erection lays against my center. I don’t have time to think about this, however, because he unleashes a storm of sensation across my body. I’m amazed by how active he keeps us, starting out with me on my back, then my stomach, then side and finally ending with me straddling his lap as he sits on the edge of the bed. Every position gives him the access to my body he is wanting, and he does with me as he pleases, with my blessing. By the time he’s done, he’s learned every one of my body’s secrets, and exploits them at will to bring me the most pleasure. I wrap my arms around his neck and tuck my head into his shoulder, having been rendered a quivering mass of flesh, already brought to climax twice, once by his mouth,

then this last time by his hands. I burrow my fingers in his hair and pull his head down for a long, lingering kiss and he, in turn, rolls us over, until I lie stretched out on top of him.

It's time for us to finish what we've begun as neither of our bodies are up to prolonging it any further. I straddle his hips, as he intends me to do, then lean over and grab his wallet off the nightstand, handing it to him. He fishes out two condoms, handing me one. I'm nervous, thinking about the mechanics of it all, and absent mindedly rip open the foil packet I suddenly find in my possession. It takes me several seconds to realize he's stretched an arm across the bed to return the second condom and wallet to the nightstand. I find his eyes watching me and I shake my head. Tossing the foil wrapping aside, I hold out the condom to him.

"Maybe you should..." I explain, refusing to volunteer my hands are simply not steady enough to do the job. Not to mention, I'm long out of practice. My mind circles back around to the source of my sudden nerves. I don't think I'm capable of taking control of this, our first time together. There's balancing, not leaning too heavily on him, setting the rhythm... not to mention it's been a long time for me and given his considerable package, I suspect there will be some discomfort for me at first.

I'm distracted again, as I watch him adeptly roll the condom onto his shaft with practiced hands. I'm shocked to discover I feel disconsolate at the action. I am by no means immune to jealousy. Prone to it, actually, where my Mr. Steele is concerned. I don't want to think about how many women he's been with since he entered my life, or how long it's been since he took his last lover. I may pretend I'm okay with him addressing his physical needs elsewhere, but given the clenching of my heart now, I have to admit that I'm not. Somewhere along the way, I'm not sure when, I'd claimed him as my own and I discover I desperately want him to tell me that he is.

Thankfully, he reaches up and tugs my head down for a kiss, interrupting my morose thoughts. As soon as our lips make contact a jolt of pure need makes my body tremor. I slide my arms around his neck, and urge him to roll over until he is on top of me again. When our lips part, I see he's been caught off guard but pleased. It's unlike me to willingly concede control of anything, especially when it's important and this, our first time, is monumental. I trail my lips over his chest as he reaches between us to position himself at my entrance. He pauses, and waits until I drop my head to the bed then brushes my hair off my face with his fingertips. My hands caress his back, his shoulder and our eyes meet, hold.

"I feel as though I've waited a lifetime for you," he whispers.

"I feel the same," I confess. I, however, don't mean for us to finally consummate this relationship of ours, as he likely does. I mean for him to appear in my life. As crazy as he might make me at times, he completes my life somehow. It's been a long time since I've been able to envision him leaving without sadness consuming me.

He kisses me, then presses forward, mumbling my name against my lips. My fingers dig into his back, my back arches, and I hiss in a breath as I bite my lower lip. He stills, then leans down and rests his forehead against mine.

"Laura," he whispers my name, but can't hide his concern.

“I’m alright,” I assure him, stroking his back to prove it. “Just give me a second.” His head nods against mine.

I take a minute to pant. He waits for me, peppering my face with touches of his lips. I will my muscles to relax and when they finally do I wriggle against him, a hint that he should move. He retreats then thrusts a bit deeper this time. I feel my body stretch to accommodate him. It’s not as uncomfortable this time, but, like the gentleman he always is, he stills again. When I’m ready, I tilt my hips and press upwards, taking him in to the hilt this time. A shiver courses over me as he fills me in that way only a man can.

“My God,” he murmurs, bowing his head and resting it against my shoulder to do some panting of his own this time. “I can’t quite believe this is happening,” he murmurs, sounding as dazed as he claims to me.

“Me either, but it is,” I whisper against his lips, the thread my fingers through his hair and press his head downwards to kiss him again.

He begins to move, experimenting until he finds that place where I am most sensitive, and focusing on it, establishes a rhythm meant to bring me bliss or drive me out of my mind, I’m not sure which. I wrap my legs around his thighs, my hips moving in conjunction with his. I’m close, so close, already. He seems to know it, and arches his back so his mouth can lathe and suckle my breast. I shatter around him, my muscles clenching his shaft so hard, that I vaguely hope it’s not hurting him I guess not, when he moves faster, and lips trail down my neck, leaving heat in their wake. I bite my lip, trying to be silent, but I first moan, then whisper some deity based oaths. I haven’t even recovered from my first orgasm, when he wraps his arms around me and rolls us over, until I’m on top again. This time, there is no hesitation, and I rise and fall against him, circling my hips now and again, as my fingers tangle in his chest hair and I rake my nails softly over his nipples while his hands caress my breast, abdomen, squeeze my bottom. In only a few minutes, I am hovering on the edge of bliss again and am guessing his staying power is waning based on how his hands are grasping my hips, while he pumps his beneath me. I feel the familiar tightening and can’t stop myself from crying out this time.

“Oh my God, Remington!”

It’s the first and only time I’ve ever used that name for him aloud, although that is who he is to me in my dreams, and for a second my hips falter, wondering how he’ll feel that I’ve attached the name to him without permission. I should have thought to ask what name he’d prefer before—

The thought ends when he presses up onto his elbow and uses his free hand to pull my head down to his, kissing me with such tender thoroughness that I am left with not a single doubt the use of that particular name had meant the world to him. Three more thrusts of our hips and I am soaring and only one more beyond that has him shouting my name while he presses as deep within me as he can. The feel of his shaft twitching within me, of his body shuddering with utter bliss beneath my hands, prolongs my orgasm. When it ends, I collapse on top of him, trying to catch my breath.

“Good God, Laura,” he pants, then busses me atop my head. His hands are on the move, caressing my back, my sides, running through my hair, trying to soothe my body.

When I finally stop quaking, I leave his embrace so he can dispose of the condom in the garbage can next to the bed and use a couple of tissues to clean himself off. When he stretches back out on his side next to me, he reaches for me, pulling me into his embrace and weaving our legs together. My head rests on his shoulder where he has easy access to my lips, which he uses frequently. We stare at one another, both sated, for now, and still processing what’s just happened between us. He can’t stop touching me, brushing feather like strokes across my face with his fingertips, over my neck, bussing my forehead, cheek. I am no less hungry to maintain contact, the intimate air that surrounds us, fingering his jaw, caressing his chest, his neck. My eyes grow heavy and sleep threatens to drag me away.

“Laura, I need to tell you...” My eyes fly open. He stumbles then tries again. “I want you tell you that I—“ I press my finger against his lips, cutting off the words while shaking my head.

“Don’t,” I request quietly. “If you’re about to tell me you can make no promises beyond today—“ He opens his mouth to lodge a protest I think, given the scowl knitting his brows together, but I shake my head again and he stops, allowing me to continue. I start again. “If you’re about to tell me you can make no promises beyond today, you don’t need to. I didn’t sleep with you to pry a commitment out of you. If that’s not what you’re going to say, but are planning to make some grand announcement about your feelings for me, whatever those may be, I’d rather you didn’t because I’ll only wonder if those feelings were nothing more than an aberration brought on by mind blowing sex.” When he looks prepared to argue, I lay my fingertips against his jaw and add, “Please.”

Seconds tick by as he stares at me, mulling my request, then finally he gives me a reluctant nod before bending his head down to kiss me again.

“You’re everything I ever imagined and so much more,” he says instead. I touch my lips to his again and smile.

“It was good, wasn’t it?” I smile at his affronted look.

“Good?” he repeats, pretending offense. I tuck my face against his neck, inhaling his warm, woodsy smell. “That’s akin to saying Royal Lavulite is just a pretty rock, the Hope Diamond is merely another trinket, the Mona Lisa a fairly decent piece of art or ...”

I’m lulled to sleep by the sound of his rich voice, the hand gently cradling the back of my head, and the fingers stroking my neck.

It’s a little after one when I wake, and I hold my breath as I open my eyes, afraid it might have been yet another of the hundreds of dreams I’ve had before. But it’s not. He’s here, holding me the same way he was when we fell asleep. I nuzzle closer to him, absorbing his heat and press my lips against his neck. He stirs, the fingers resting against my neck moving underneath my chin, nudging it upwards, so he can kiss me. I shiver at the touch of his mouth to mine and the memories of our earlier lovemaking sets my body on fire. He deepens the kiss and we make love again in this position, where we can touch and kiss to our hearts content. I barely manage to keep my eyes open while he disposes of the second condom.

When he stretches out on his side again, and urges me to turn so he can spoon his body around mine, I willingly mold myself into his lean frame. The last thing I remember before sleep steals me away again is his hand reaching for mine, weaving our fingers together, as he presses a kiss to my shoulder.

I have no idea what time it is when he nuzzles his face against my neck, his beard pleasantly scraping against my skin. I roll to my back, and he lifts my hair off my shoulder, before caressing my cheek with the back of his fingers.

“I didn’t want you to wake and find me gone,” he tells me quietly. My brows knit together as my sleep soaked brain tries to comprehend what he’s telling me.

“Where are you going?” I manage to ask, my words slurring together as I’m not quite awake.

“Home. We’ve a meeting with Stevenson at eight, if you recall, and I can’t very well show up in my tux.” It takes several seconds for me to digest this. “The woman who runs the joint will be quite cross with me should I show up late in order to catch a few more winks with the lovely woman beside me.”

“You can’t change at the office?” He gives me a sheepish look.

“I’m afraid I’ve been a bit remiss about bringing a spare suit with me to the office, since I used the last during our most recent encounter with Descoin.” I can’t help feeling disappointed, as I wanted nothing more than to return to sleep in his embrace. Still, he’s correct. Stevenson’s confidence in the Agency might be shaken if the alleged owner and boss showed up for the meeting in a tux.

“Alright,” I concede. He leans over and kisses me, then turns over and gets out of bed. I roll to my side, watching him dress, fighting the urge to surrender to sleep again, although the sight of him in all his glory is a potent stimulant.

“Do you know where my cufflinks are?” he inquires. I snort a little laugh. Even at, I glance at the clock, three o’clock in the morning, my fastidious Mr. Steele has to be properly dressed to drive the ten minutes it will take for him to get to the Rossmore.

“In your pants’ pocket,” I provide. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves them, then once his cuffs are secure, pulls on his jacket and hangs the bowtie around his neck. He rakes his hands through his hair, and it annoyingly falls back into place except for one lock that insistently hangs down over his forehead. Shoving his wallet into the pocket of his jacket, he sits down on the edge of bed and cups my cheek with a hand. For the longest of time, he simply stares at me.

“My God, I don’t want to leave you,” he tells me, sounding awed by the fact. The words warm my heart and I can’t help but smile. He leans down and kisses me then stands, surprised when I tug the sheet off the bed and wrap it around me.

“I have to lock the door behind you,” I remind him.

At the door, he gathers me to him and kisses me again, then trails his fingertips over my cheek, reluctant to leave.

“Have you any idea what tonight means to me?” The quiet intensity of his words, the sentiment making his blue eyes burn bright as he looks at me, are so sincere my hand laying against his shoulder contracts. I’m afraid of reading too much into what he’s said, given the afterglow of a night of great sex still surrounds us.

“I wouldn’t dare hazard a guess,” I answer pertly, softening the words with a smile and by drawing a hand through his hair. The corner of his mouth quirks upwards then returns to its normal state so quickly you’d have missed it in the span of a blink. He recognizes an evasive maneuver on my part when he sees it, and that particular response indicates he’s amused he’s made me nervous.

“Laura, you *will* see me in a few hours,” he promises. Another sign he knows me far too well, that reassurance. With his departure, the old fears have begun to creep back in. I wonder if I’d feel more secure if I’d woken to him in the morning, rather than seeing him to the door in the middle of the night.

“Alright,” I answer, drawing the word out. “Then I’ll see you at the office.” He brushes his lips against my cheek, and nods somberly.

“With bells on...”

With those words, he unlatches the door then steps through it, turning to give me one last look before he goes. I close and bolt the door, then return to my bedroom, bereft that I wouldn’t be waking in the morning next to him. I climb back into bed and curl myself around the pillow his head had been resting on, letting his scent sooth me back to sleep.

Chapter 3

I arrive at the office much earlier than necessary, not that I don't arrive early most days. Generally, however, 'early' equates to fifteen, twenty minutes. Today I am here forty-five minutes before our meeting with Mr. Stevenson. In an effort to kill some time, I make a pot of coffee, then settle in at my desk with the morning newspaper.

I feel a bit like a schoolgirl with her first crush and am irritated with myself for it. I rooted through my closet this morning for the perfect outfit. Something he'd appreciate, but not so obvious that he'd know I dressed with him in mind. I finally settled on a red blouse with matching red sweater vest and a black pencil skirt. He's never said, but I'm fairly certain he likes me in red, as his eyes tend to follow me more than they normally do – which is quite a lot - when I wear it. Now, here I am, checking my watch every few minutes and fidgeting. Get ahold of yourself, Holt, I order myself.

I pick up the paper and thumb through it idly, looking for anything that captures my attention. Ahmed Sekou Toure, the first President of Guinea, has died. I skim the article and move on. Another article on the McMartin Preschool case. I can only shake my head as I read. What sane person would believe almost four hundred children had been abused and subjected to Satanic rituals for years without anyone discovering it before now? Something's wrong here, very wrong. My attention wanders.

My treacherous mind keeps replaying our night together, over and over again, forcing me to concentrate on not squirming where I sit. I've never been one to romanticize sex. It can neither salvage a damaged relationship nor make someone fall in love with you when the inclination is absent to begin with. Yet, I've never been able embrace the concept of 'free love', either, although I've often wondered if I would be happier if I could. The girls of Four East and Bernice, as well, thought nothing of tumbling into bed with a different guy each week, even veritable strangers. Throughout my college years, the girls would lecture me: Sex can be simply fun, it doesn't have to be personal. I tried to embrace that philosophy for a while, I really did, for I certainly didn't enjoy being dumped by guy after guy because I refused to put out like 'everyone else does.' Enter my college professor. With the exception of that one instance of oral sex gone badly, the sex was good. But unlike the girls in my group, I didn't feel empowered, taking and giving freely. I felt... nothing... in the aftermath and often suspected I could be any college co-ed who was willing to spread her legs and it wouldn't have mattered to him. Hence, I ended it, for if our affair taught me anything it was that, for me, sex *is personal*. How can it not be? Is there anything more intimate than allowing another person literally inside your body?

My musings are interrupted by Mildred's arrival. I call out a morning greeting to her, decline her offer of coffee as I am already nursing a mug of it, and ask her to have Mr. Steele come see me the minute he arrives. I grimace after the words leave my mouth, wondering if it will seem a bit... desperate, then shrug off the thought. We are meeting with Stevenson shortly and do need to discuss our approach. My mind returns to the matter at hand.

Flesh. Just flesh. Maybe that's what it came down to in the end for me. I have waged a war my entire life against not being seen as 'just flesh.' Yes, I can dance topless on a bar in Mexico, with a good deal of tequila in me, or do a striptease with the best of them, when the occasion demands. I do have a wild side, in and out of bed, that I work very hard to keep in check. But there is a huge difference between allowing someone to see your flesh and permitting them to view you as nothing more. And isn't that the crux of random encounters? If it hadn't been you, it could have been any Jane, Joanie or Joanne willing to drop trow and hop into bed. For better or worse, hopelessly provincial or not, sex means something to me. I don't judge those who are far more free than I. In fact, I envy them.

Sex certainly can complicate matters when your heart is already involved, which is why I've kept Mr. Steele out of my bed all this time. Like it or not, want it or not, my heart's been involved for a long, long time and my track record in this area is positively dismal. The two men I've loved most, loved best, turning and walking away without a look back. I'm honest enough with myself to know if I took him into my bed, and he dismissed me with a wink and a smile as nothing more than yet another conquest, something inside of me would be irrevocably broken. My heart, I suspect. Three times the charm? No, three strikes and you're out is far more accurate. If a third man I've loved and given all of myself to turned and walked away, that would be it for me. I wouldn't be able to find the strength to risk love and loss a fourth time.

Yet, last night I threw caution to the wind. Sex with the professor had been good, with Wilson... okay, given how uptight he could be about anything other than sex in the standard missionary position, all staid and controlled. But last night? Oh. My. God. Phenomenal might be an understatement. From beginning to end, it had been extraordinary, and I am trying very, very hard not to attach more meaning to it than I ought. I'd made love to the man, not simply had sex with him. I have no idea what it might have meant to him, if anything at all, although there were many indications I wasn't just another 'shag' to him. I've been kicking myself on and off all morning for not allowing him to say whatever it was he'd tried to convey. Good or bad, I'd be so much better off knowing where I stood this morning.

My eyes widen and my attention is finally captured by today's news. *Fully* captured. For there, on the front page of the society page, is a photo of the specter from Mr. Steele's past. 'Lydia Vanowen Announces Engagement to Walter Patton,' the headline blasts. Born in Australia, parents distantly related to British nobility. Attended boarding school then finishing school in Europe. Met Patton on a ski holiday in St. Moritz. He asked her to dance, and she fell for the man before they left the dance floor. Patton a wealthy industrialist, listed among the top fifty on Forbes. Both Patron of the Arts. Patton's collection currently on display at the LA Gallery.

I lift my cup of coffee to take another long drink, while mulling his reaction to this news. Certainly, it dispels any notion of ghosts returning to the living. I barely have time to consider this thought when Mr. Steele steps through my doorway looking dapper, if I do say so myself, in his grey pinstriped suit. Lowering the cup, I smile at him.

"Good morning. You wanted to see me?"

I don't know what I was expecting. Certainly, not a grand gesture or a proclamation of undying love. A kiss, maybe. At the very least a smile. I don't even get that. I can't help but think the news I'm about to bestow upon him will change that.

"I think there's something in this morning's paper you might find interesting. It seems our mystery woman isn't such a mystery after all." I reach across my desk, and hand him the paper, already folded open to the article. "Her name's Lydia Van Owen, and she's going to marry Walter Patton. Not a bad marrying, if you like fortunes-"

I stop speaking mid-sentence. Instead of finding comfort in the blurb, as I thought he might, he glowers at the paper. Suddenly, those little hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Something's wrong. Very wrong. He's not merely distracted, but so cold, I wouldn't be surprised if I looked up and saw icicles hanging from the ceiling.

"What is it?" I ask. Growing alarmed, I stand up and lean against my hands pressed to the desk. "I don't understand. Did something happen? Did something change from last night?"

He doesn't answer me, barely even acknowledges me with the quickest of glances before throwing the newspaper on my desk and storming out. I follow. Setting aside what happened between us last night, we're partners, and, in my mind, that entitles me to at least the courtesy of an answer.

"Where are you going?"

"Out." The single word is biting, icy. The answer is no more acceptable than the lack of one. Stevenson is due to arrive in less than ten minutes. I stop in the doorway of my office and call after him.

"Mr. Steele, if you recall we do have *business to conduct*." I emphasize my statement with a point of my finger when he whirls around and glares at me.

"I'm sure you can manage without me for a while." With those parting words, he turns to leave.

"I suspect I'll have to," I tell his retreating back, throwing up my hands, unable to do anything but watch him walk through the doors and disappear down the hall. I don't even have two seconds to try and digest what has just happened here, when Mildred rounds her desk to confront me.

"What happened?"

"You tell me. What would you assume when a man kisses you in the evening then turns into a total stranger the next morning?" Mildred's eyes widen.

"You mean, you and Mr. Steele?"

"Hard to believe from *that*." I can't help but frown.

"Oh, there must be some explanation," Mildred insists, always the 'Boss's' champion. An idea strikes and I cross the reception area to yank the telephone book off Mildred's desk, thumbing through the listings until I find what I'm searching for.

"Yes. And I think I know where to find it." I make a mental note of the address, then drop the book back down on her desk. I retrieve my purse from my office, then tell Mildred in passing, "Tell Mr. Stevenson that Mr. Steele and I were called away on urgent Agency business. Relay Mr. Steele asked that you convey his personal apologies, then reschedule the meeting."

I don't wait for an answer and soon I'm speeding down 405 North on my way to Bel Air, where I suspect I'll find Mr. Steele. I pull the Rabbit off an at exit and stop it in the parking lot of a convenience store. I need coffee to fuel myself... and time to gather my thoughts. Sitting the cup of steamy brew aside after taking several sips, I lean back in my seat and press my hands to my face.

I'm beyond confused. How does a man go from not wishing to leave you at three a.m. to treating you as an unwanted interloper in his life not even five hours later? Practiced libertine though he might be, I don't believe he makes loves with other women as he did with me, for too many times something said or done had revealed unguarded, honest emotion. His reluctance to leave me? I would swear that was genuine as well.

At some point between the time he left the loft and arrived at work this morning, he'd discovered Lydia Vanowen and Anna were one and the same... but not through the Society page. He hadn't been surprised when I'd revealed Vanowen's identity, but had been furious to discover she was engaged, easily ruling out the paper. Then how? Did she call him? Was she there, waiting for him at the Rossmore when he arrived home? Even more important, at least where he and I were concerned, had he been in love with her before she'd 'died'? Was he still in love with her? Is that why he'd be enraged by news of her engagement? Why he'd been so cold towards me? I have not a single answer to any of those questions.

Another damnable piece of his past, come back to haunt us. I close my eyes, and take a deep breath, letting it out slowly. My reaction is unfair, I recognize. Both of us have a sexual past, although his is comprised of a much lengthier list and is considerably more varied. At any given moment, someone from that past could pop up, although far less likely in my case as the only ex-lover I could imagine trying to track me down already had. Yet, when Wilson had arrived on my doorstep out of the blue last year, Mr. Steele had been respectful towards him *and me*, from the beginning until the end. When I'd needed space, he'd conceded it to me without hesitation and when I needed him to step near, he'd willingly done that as well. Do I owe him any less now? I shake my head in answer to my own question.

He, however, *owes me* more. Common decency, to begin with, coupled with a dash of courtesy. And he damn well owes me an explanation for why he'd been so hostile towards me. I deserve at least that much. Not because we'd slept together last night, but because of the nearly two years of friendship, partnering one another, and trying to figure out how to have a personal relationship despite everything in our way.

Mind made up, I put the car gear into and pull out of the parking lot. Fifteen minutes later, I pull into the drive of Walter Patton's home, not in the least surprised to find the Auburn parked in the driveway. It is why I've come here, after all. My instincts had insisted he'd come here seeking answers of his own. The Rabbit hasn't even come to a stop when he emerges from the gardens out back. By the way he looks back towards the garden, before turning to face the car, it appears he's not in the least bit happy to see me here.

"What are you doing here?" I was right. He's agitated by my appearance and makes no attempt to disguise his irritation. I steel myself and tamp down the urge to answer with a biting retort. I'm here for answers, and given the tension between us right now, should my own temper ignite, this meeting could be catastrophic instead of cathartic. I cross my arms in front of myself, and approach him slowly

"Trying to understand what's happening... between us." His only response to me is to sigh and avert his face. Clearly, he doesn't want to have this conversation, but I'm determined it will happen. "Look, I'm not a child." I hold my arms out to either side, as if to prove it. "If there's a woman in your past, I can accept that. But I want you to be honest with me. You knew Lydia and Anna were one and the same when you walked into the office—" He hold up his hands towards me, and interrupts.

"Ah, Laura, please let me understand the facts of my own life then I'll give them to you. Okay?" He claps his hands together as he turns away from me, as if dismissing me. I give pursuit, and I'm beginning to lose the fragile grip I have on my temper.

"If," I emphasize the word, while raising my brows at him, "You give them to me." My chin tilts upwards and I plant my hands on my hips, failing to disguise my own irritation now. "What we have here is a *game*, Mr. Steele. You dole out pieces of your past and I'm supposed to be *grateful* for your trust. I may have given you your name, even decided your line of work but your past, *your damned past*, I always knew you had that over me. I was hoping your present would come to mean as much to you." I have nothing left to say, and turn to leave.

"Wait, Lau--" He gives chase, grabbing my arm and steps in front of me before releasing it. "Do you honestly believe that all the time we've spent together means so little to me, eh?" he pleads his case, holding out his hands, then bringing them together when he's done. I don't know what he expects me to say, in light of how he's shut me out, has treated me as though I've committed some unknown transgression for which I've already been tried and found fully at fault for. For that matter, how can I possibly weigh what his life now means to him, when I have no idea the weight his past holds. I tell him as much and am surprisingly calm when I speak.

"How can I answer that when I have *no idea* what came before? Or what you're feeling now? You're the one who knows what *I'm* up against. You have to decide, not me." He rubs his fingers against his brow, clearly confused. Despite how he's acted towards me this morning, I can't stop myself from reaching out and touching his arm reassuringly before I walk away. My first instinct may be to protect the man, but now I have to put myself first.

Chapter 4

I'm weary from it all, already, and more than a little injured. Try as I might to be dismissive, casual about what happened between us last night, I simply can't be. I told him, not so long ago, that I didn't want to be left with a scrapbook of memories should we cross the line, yet here we are. Would I only have the bittersweet memories of the one night of loving him to carry with me for the years to come?

I sigh, and prop my elbow against the door frame, resting my head in my hand and kneading my brow with a pair of fingers. I wish I could lay all the blame at his doorstep, but in truth it had taken only a sad story, his vulnerability and four words – 'Thank you... For understanding.' – for my resolve to wait until I knew we had something real, lasting, to go by the wayside. I had, in fact, been the seducer, not the seduced. He'd no more manipulated me into bed, than he had forced me to give him all of myself, body and heart, which I had. My own doing, all of it, damn it, for he'd been fully prepared to bid me goodnight after a few, tantalizing kisses.

Yet, my responsibility or not, I can't help feeling like I've been betrayed, somehow cast into the role of Alice Reed, the femme fatale, when I am actually Mrs. Wanley, the faithful partner (*The Woman in the Window*, Edward G Robinson, Joan Bennett, Raymond Massey, RKO, 1944). I didn't fake my own death leaving him behind to mourn my loss. I didn't lie to him and deny who I was when first confronted. I didn't hide my engagement from him. So why am I being subjected to the brunt of his anger?

He blames me. The idea is so ridiculous, I laugh, then my brows knit together. On second thought, maybe it's not so farfetched, after all. It's the one thing I can't wrap my head around: his coldness which borders on disdain, the way he's shut me out so completely. Since the day he arrived in my life he's turned *to me* in times of upheaval, not away. So why is this time so different? Does he feel he's cheated on Anna in some way by going to bed with me on the same night of her return into his life?

This hypothesis is exactly what I need, for I go from desolate to infuriated in less time than it takes to flip a coin. I hadn't done anything wrong. His anger towards me wasn't justified, no matter his reason. I made love with him, nothing more, nothing less. If anyone is the injured party here, it's me, for it seems not even twenty-four hours after we consummated this relationship of ours, he's already turned away from me and towards another woman.

By the time I return to the Agency, my mood has turned so black, that I turn my temper on a hapless Mildred.

"Oh, Mr. Steele's not back yet," she tells me, as I push through the glass doors to the Agency and enter the reception area, intent on making a beeline for my office.

"Did I ask for him?" I snap at her, and am instantly contrite. "I'm sorry Mildred, I'm sorry." I drop my purse on her desk, and lean against it with my arms, trying to gather myself.

"Sounds like someone's giving you a rough time, honey," she empathizes. "Oh, Miss. Holt, I don't know much about yours or Mr. Steele's private life--"

"Join the party-" I interject.

"But this morning you told me-"

"That was this morning," I answer dismissively. "One day I decide our relationship is strictly professional. Laura, I say, you work with the man. So alright, *you're attracted to him. Forget about it.* Maybe in the future..." Mildred stands up and rounds the desk to stand in front of me.

"Maybe that future isn't so far away," she suggests with eager optimism. I know she means well, but the fact is last night we were so close to that future, all we had to do was accept it had arrived. Today? That future seems light years away.

"I know there's something between us," I concede, wishing with all that I am, right now, that it wasn't the case. "And I know he feels it too. It's as if we're groping towards each other but every time our fingers touch, something happens. One of us pulls away," I end, making no attempt to disguise my frustration.

"Oh Miss. Holt, I'll be straight with you. I've seen you and Mr. Steele. And I'll admit that sometimes the dance you do around each other makes my head spin. Maybe if one of you would just stand still long enough..."

"I have no hold on him," I protest, for events in the last few hours have certainly proven that, "And if his past can just blow in and wipe out the present, maybe I should forget him." My assessment draws a laugh from Mildred.

"From what I've just heard, that sounds the last thing you want to do."

"Mildred," I begin to correct her, as I walk towards to the couch and sit down, "Mr. Steele and I have gone out. We've had our fun. But we've never done anything more." This is a blatant lie, of course, but the idea of Mildred watching me for days, weeks, to come, with pity in her eye is more than I can bear. Still I can't help a sarcastic "Hah!" before I continue with my argument. "So why should I care if he wants to see someone else, why should I feel like I want to *kill him?!?*" I demand to know as I make a strangling motion with my hands while Mildred sits down catty corner to me.

"Because you're not being rational, even though you want to be."

"Of course I want to be rational!" I exclaim. But wanting to be, and being able to, are two very different things.

"Oh, honey-"

I focus on a thought that has just traipsed through my mind, and give myself a mental kick for not clueing in soon. I'm a detective, for God's sake, and there's the mystery of Anna Simpson to be solved.

"You know, Mildred, the more I think about it, the more it seems that Mr. Steele and I are being forced apart. I let myself get sidetracked today." And I'm irritated with myself for it.

"When you went to Miss. Vanowen's?"

"A woman who suddenly reappears in his life? Twice in one day? A woman who's supposed to be dead? *This time* I'm not going to get sidetracked."

I spring to my feet, grab my purse off the desk, and stride quickly out the door without saying goodbye. I have been so obsessed with figuring out Mr. Steele's behavior, that I've failed to focus on what's of true importance. Why had Anna faked her own death? What made her suddenly decide to resurrect herself to him, by arranging 'accidental' meetings twice in one day? She'd had *years* to make her status of 'living' known to him if that was what she'd wanted. Why had she waited until now? What was her angle? I was convinced there had to be one.

It was time to find out how she knew where Mr. Steele would be and what, exactly, it was that she wanted from him.

I hadn't slept much last night, which marked the second night straight with little sleep, although the first night was spent far more pleasantly than the second. After meeting with Caroline Welles at the museum yesterday, I had managed to confirm Anna's appearance at the museum, then later Club 10, were not coincidental by any means. It was Anna who'd recommended Caroline seek out the Agency's security services, and it was Caroline who'd inadvertently disclosed when Mr. Steele would be at the museum and his dining plans for that same evening. I hadn't gotten much further than that when I finally called it a day and went home, but I'd gathered enough information to confirm Anna was the puppeteer in whatever game this was we were all playing.

I hadn't heard from him all evening, not that I'd expected to given my sudden new-found status in his life. Still, it was at odds with what the majority of what the past two years had been when, if not in one another's company, we'd speak at least once each evening. I turned to my barre to relieve some of my tension caused dually by my activities with Mr. Steele the night before and all that has happened today. It helped. It didn't solve the problems at hand, but at least I no longer felt as taut as a violin string.

I'd stripped my bed down to the mattress pad, and spent several hours plodding up and down the stairs to the basement where the washer and dryer were located. Mattress pad, sheets, pillowcase, comforter – all of it washed clean of his scent and the memories of what had happened on them before being returned to my bed. Even then, his scent lingered on the pillow on which he'd slept. Instead of bringing comfort as it had less than twenty-four hours

before, his smell was accompanied by a wrenching pain in my gut which sent the pillow sailing across my room to land on the floor next to the closet.

By the time morning arrived, I'd dozed for a few minutes here, catnapped for a couple of minutes there, but no real sleep had come and when I gazed in the bathroom mirror, it showed. My skin is paler than normal, making my freckles stand out, and there's a strain around my eyes I hadn't seen there in years. I dress without my usual care, putting on the first two things I find in my closet, then tossed my hair up in a bun. My appearance is the last thing on my mind. Finding out why Anna Simpson aka Lydia Vanowen had invaded our lives, the first.

I'm caught off guard when the Agency doors are not only unlocked when I arrive, but I find Mr. Steele at Mildred's desk rustling through files laying on it. I stutter step, then approach him.

"You're here bright and early." He laughs a little.

"You've corrupted me," he answers lightheartedly.

I know I should find comfort in his sudden lack of animosity towards me, but instead it sets me off balance. It takes a good deal of effort on my part to respond in kind.

"Should I be encouraged?" I ask, standing across from him at the desk as he continues to shift through the files.

"Ah," he continues in the same good humor, "I've become a slave to my work."

"Security for the museum?" And just like that, he turns somber. I appreciate the gesture, the attempt to infuse the conversation with some of our old camaraderie, but that he feels the need to put on an act for me speaks loudly of the place I have in his life now.

"Hmm. Another matter." He takes a piece of paper from the file, and folding it, shoves it into a jacket pocket.

"A professional matter?" I press. His hesitation tells me I've journeyed where I'm not welcome and he gives me a look which tells me he's unsure how I'll react if he tells me the truth. To his credit, he does, even if done somewhat grudgingly.

"Anna's in trouble. She needs my help."

"What kind of help?" I can't help pushing the matter. He may not believe he's in trouble, that he's a pawn in some game, but I'm convinced of it. Simply put: I'm afraid of what the woman might manipulate him into doing for her.

"A man's threatening her. I promised to remove that threat." A frisson of fear slithers down my spine. How? How does she want you to remove that threat? Those are the words I want to ask, but he is so shut off from me, so... foreign... from the man I've come to know, that I'm afraid of the answer he might give me.

"And then?" I inquire, instead. He sighs, disconsolately.

"She's free to marry Walter Patton," he says. I can only nod my head slowly, once, at that answer. That he's wearing the same suit he arrived at the office in yesterday hasn't escaped me, but I've been carefully avoiding thinking about what that means. Where has he been all night, what has he been doing... and with who. The knife in my gut twists a little more.

"Is that what you want?" I can't help asking. He seems confused by the question.

"Hmm, I don't know. I suppose I haven't thought that far ahead." The amount of candor with which he answers each of my questions is remarkable, yet I have no idea if this bodes well for the survival of at least our friendship or partnership or not. And even before I speak, I know I'm about to risk severing, altogether, the tentative strings that bind us.

"I feel little like the messenger bearing bad news. I may get my head lopped off. But I haven't been using it much lately anyway." I pause, as I consider what I've just said, unplanned, so candid of an admission. For years, I'd decided the course of our relationship logically, assessing carefully what I was and wasn't willing to risk. Two nights ago, I'd allowed my heart to make the decisions, and look where it had gotten me: exactly where I always feared I'd end up. And I wasn't sure whether it was with which heart or mind I was acting when I spoke next. "Anna Simpson's reappearance into your life was not accidental."

"What do you mean?" He's surprisingly calm when he asks the question, his eyes never leaving my face.

"She persuaded Caroline Wells to hire the Remington Steele Agency. She knew you were going to be at the museum. And she knew where you're going to have dinner that night," I relay as factually as I would information from any case. Maybe that's where I went wrong. I don't know. But his anger is both instant and directed fully at me.

"I told you," he shot back, voice like ice once again, and rising with each word spoken, "There is a man threatening her. He watches her constantly. That's why she had to make our meetings appear to be accidental so he wouldn't become suspicious." By the time he's finished, he won't even look at me. His fury with me is like alcohol on an open wound, and I can feel myself pale under their venom.

"I hope you're right." It's all I can think of to say, and I turn on my heel to retreat to the sanctuary of my office before the tears that are threatening can fall.

"Laura, listen," he yells at my retreating back, grabbing my arm before I can get very far and pulling me back near. He releases my arm, and I stay, but I can't look at him. I refuse to allow him to see how much he is hurting me, as my pride has taken too many blows these last days. "Just... please... please..." his voice softens and I can hear the apology in it. I face him after all, and my heart takes another blow as I see the toll this is taking on him. "I have to take this one step at a time. And the first step is to remove that leech." He looks like he wants to say more, but with a shake of his head, he drops the hand he'd been holding up and leaves me alone as the office when he departs suddenly.

"I hope you're right," I say aloud again to the empty office.

My trip to Club 10 proves invaluable, confirming what I've come to suspect: Anna hadn't merely arranged the meetings, but has been manipulating Mr. Steele from the start. She'd tipped the orchestra leader handsomely to play the song that had haunted Mr. Steele from its first note, assuring its start would coincide with her arrival. She knows her target well, I have to give her due credit for that, for he is a sentimental man at heart and whatever the meaning of that song was to them, it had been significant... and had guaranteed he'd approach her.

What troubles me is I still have no idea what her end game is and how far she is willing to go to get there. My encounter with her at the Los Angeles Gallery leaves me with the impression that ice water runs in the woman's veins, which doesn't bode well for whatever she has in mind. Mr. Steele said Anna needed him to remove a man from her life who had been threatening her. What exactly does that mean? Drive him out of town through threat, intimidation or blackmail... some combination of one or more?

By late that afternoon I finally put it all together and realize Anna has murder on her mind. It's the perfect double con, in a way. Convince Mr. Steele she's being threatened, make him believe there's a chance to recapture what they'd lost when she'd died. Pick up unwitting cowboy in a country western bar, go with him to a hotel presumably to get it on, then taunt and ridicule the man's prowess until he hits her. When Mr. Steele sees the injury, deny it was Merleau in a way to convince Mr. Steele that it was, then reluctantly tell him where Merleau could be found. In the meantime, she convinces Merleau that Mr. Steele is a threat to Merleau's investment in the woman. One seeking to protect the source of his money, the other seeking to protect someone he cares about. One is dead, the other is in prison... and the only two people in Los Angeles who can reveal her true identity have been eliminated as potential threats to her carefully planned future, and she lives out the rest of her life in veritable luxury as Mrs. Walter Patton.

I am chilled to the bone at the thought of what might happen. I have no idea where Mr. Steele is, as he hasn't been in the least inclined to keep me informed of his whereabouts these last two days. The Auburn isn't at the office, not that I'd expected it to be. His parking place in the garage at the Rossmore is empty, but I still go up to his apartment, letting myself in when he doesn't answer the door. There's only one other place I can think he'll be, and soon I have the Rabbit on 405 North, driving towards Bel Air.

I'm too late. When I arrive at Patton's house, the Auburn shoots past me on its way out the gates. I give chase. I lose him on Wilshire, but given our location I'm fairly certain where he's going. Sure enough, I find the Auburn behind Club 10. I pick the lock on the service door and approach the dining room from the kitchen. I barely have a chance to peek over the saloon style doors into the other room, when Mr. Steele screams at me with alarm.

"Laura, get back!"

I swear I feel the bullet Marleau fires at me whistle past my ear.

"Laura are you alright?" Mr. Steele calls out to me. I'd dove to the floor to avoid being hit with the bullet intended for me, and now I tuck my back against the wall, turning my head towards the dining room so I can be heard, but not fired upon again.

You've been set up!" I yell back. "Both of you. I know you don't want to believe that but it's true! This is *exactly* what Anna wants!"

"Just get down and stay quiet," he urges me. I know he doesn't want me to continue to draw Merleau's attention, but I have to find a way to end this without Anna's scheme being carried through to fruition.

"She wants you to kill Raymond," I call out again. "That was her plan from the very beginning. She told you Raymond beat her didn't she?"

"I never touched the woman," Merleau decries.

"*Of course*, you didn't," I answer the man. "But she needed something that would drive *you* over the edge," I direct this to Mr. Steele. "Something that would make you put Raymond out of the picture completely. So, she set up an unsuspecting *cowboy* in a western *bar* this afternoon and ridiculed him into *hitting her*!"

My explanations have little sway with Merleau who has his own reasons for wanting Mr. Steele and I out of the way. He, does, after all, have his own game afoot and we present a risk to his future as a kept man. Does he actually believe he can control Anna? That if he should survive tonight, she won't find another unsuspecting soul to finish the job if he walks out of here alive? He's a fool. Thankfully, Mr. Steele seems to have regained his wits. Because of what I've said? Because my life is now at risk, and those protective instincts of his have risen to the surface? Or had he realized, before I even arrived, that he simply didn't have it in his character to kill someone in cold blood? I'd like to believe it is the last.

Merleau had been too quiet, and I've spoken enough for him to know where I'm at. I sense he's on the move, but realize how close he's gotten to me until a hair too late. Thankfully, Mr. Steele shoves the drums off the bandstand, drawing the man's fire, providing me the opportunity to shove the chair and bus cart in front of me into the man. A struggle ensues between he and Mr. Steele, one shot after another ringing out until our would-be-murderer runs out of bullets. In the scuffle, Merleau manages to get the better of Mr. Steele and makes his escape. But at least we stand on our own two feet, unharmed, and whatever spell Anna wove around my partner appears to have been broken. Since that is what really matters, I can live with Merleau on the lam.

Suddenly a shot rings out, leaving Mr. Steele and I looking at one another, unsure of what to expect. With a great deal of trepidation, we watch to see who comes through the door. Merleau stumbles into the room, shot, then collapses to the floor. Mr. Steele urges me to hide, then waits with dread, his suspicions confirmed when Anna enters the room holding a gun. From where I am hiding, I can see she is both shocked and disappointed to find him still alive.

"Darling... you're alive." She feigns happiness. Mr. Steele, however, is having none of it, having finally figured out exactly who and what she is.

"You just had to see who came through that door, didn't you, hmm?"

"Darling, I was afraid he'd kill you. I thought he had," the woman protests, unconvincingly.

"And you can claim self-defense. I mean after he shot me he came after you," he assesses accurately, his voicing echoing his stunned betrayal. It's not at all easy to watch, his disillusionment, the implosion of his beliefs about this woman, who she was to him, what he believed he was to her.

"Well what difference does it make?" she defends. "He's out of our lives."

"No, Anna, no," he tells her, drawing out the words. "He'll always be with us."

"What are you saying?"

"You murdered him. And unhappily for both of us I can prove it."

"You wouldn't send me away, not now, not after we've found each other again." Her final attempt to manipulate him fails, dismally, and he doesn't even deign to reply. Without emotion, she raises the gun and points it at his heart. "We could have so much together..." she begins, sighing.

He just stands there. Why are you just standing there? I want to scream the words. In a heartbeat, I realize he'll let her pull that trigger before doing anything that may reveal I'm there, placing me at risk. If he thinks I'm going to crouch there in my hiding place and watch as he's killed before me, he has another thing coming. I take action instead, leaping at Anna and grabbing the gun, forcing it into the air. It fires, the bullet impaling the ceiling before I wrest the gun away from my nemesis. Her final words for him, as I lead her away with the gun leveled on her are nothing more than a –

"Goodbye, Remington Steele."

Chapter 5

It hadn't been an easy night by anyone's standards, I reflect, as I stand at my barre. I'd called the LAPD from the hostess stand of Club 10, and had stood at Mr. Steele's side as we watched Anna led away in handcuffs, charged with murder and conspiracy to commit murder, and we gave the detective our statements. To anyone else, Mr. Steele would have appeared composed, formulating carefully thought out answers to each of the questions directed to him. I, of course, knew otherwise. The toothpick had emerged from his pocket, and he gnawed at it frequently; his hand alternately scrubbing at his lower face or his neck: all of them telltale signs that he was living on the razor's edge of his emotions. At times like these he needed soft words, some quiet logic, a gentle touch, to help him gain his equilibrium.

I simply didn't have it in me to give him any of those things as I had baggage of my own that I was carrying.

We'd seen little of each other today. He'd arrived promptly at the office and was his usual charming, persuasive self with Stevenson, securing the contract for us by the time the man left the offices. After the meeting ended, he'd approached me, hoping to speak, but I cut him off before he began.

"I have an appointment at 9:30 with the accountant," I'd informed him. "I'll see you later." With that, I'd grabbed my purse from my office and had departed.

I wasn't avoiding him, per se, but now that disaster had been averted, I needed time to sort out my own thoughts and feelings away from him. I'm not ready for apologies, explanations or excuses. I can't be his shoulder as he tries to come to terms with Anna's manipulations, deceptions and betrayal. If I keep near, I know I will be consumed with how to soothe him, sacrificing whatever it is I want and need in the process, even if I don't know what that is.

It was nearly five o'clock by the time I returned to the office. Mildred informed me 'the Boss' had taken off some thirty minutes before, allegedly to check in with Carolina Welles at the Los Angeles Gallery and perform a cursory check on the security system, while hopefully managing a little PR work with Caroline in light of recent events. It was for the best, I acknowledged. I actually *had* ended up tending to Agency business throughout the day and was still as confused as I was two days ago.

The only conclusion I'd managed to come to was that I'm not ready to give up on him. On us.

And I'm not sure what that says about me.

Is it courageous of me to believe we can find a way to get past all that's happened these last days? To risk having my heart broken again, by the same man? To have faith that a man with so many surprises up his sleeve is worth the effort? To trust that whatever this... thing... between us is, it's worth giving it one more chance?

I'd like to think so, but I don't know. I feel betrayed, heartbroken, violated... abandoned. No apology, no explanation is going to change that. Only time will. But while I'm confident the first three will gradually lessen then disappear, I wonder if I will ever be able to get past the last. To forget how it felt when he'd not only turned completely away, but had seemed to revile me. Would there be a day that passed when I didn't worry something, someone, else from his past might appear and the same thing happen again?

I don't know.

Because this experience has taught me there is something far worse than someone you love walking out of your life without so much as a goodbye: They stay, will be part of your day-to-day existence but completely shut you out. He's done it once, so it begs the question: Could it happen again?

That's the scary part.

I'm drawn from my thoughts by the buzzer at my door. I give it a glance. I'm not expecting anyone, yet I know who it will be and I'm apathetic about answering. I haven't figured everything out in my own head yet, had needed more time to myself. In a split second, I make a decision. As I cross the living room, it occurs to me this could be his 'let's part friends' or 'It's time for me to move on' speech. If either case is true, there will be no reason to keep trying to work through in my mind how we get past this and I can fast forward into the middle of the self-loathing-for-sleeping-with-him-How-do-I-get-over-him phase... after all, I've already gotten off to a good start in both areas. But I vow to myself, I won't give an inch. There will be no warm welcome. No signs of what's on my mind until I know where his head is at. I have my pride.

I pull open the door and my suspicions are confirmed. There Mr. Steele stands, leaning against a shoulder in my doorway – a very anxious Mr. Steele. I merely stare at him, blank faced. He clears his throat nervously and holds up a bottle of champagne.

"A thank you gift, from Caroline," he explains, gesticulating towards the bottle and stumbling over the words nervously. My only response is a detached nod of my head. "I felt the urge to share it... immediately." The tip of his tongue swipes at his lips. He hasn't found his footing.

"How thoughtful," I offer, impassively while indicating with my hand he can step in. He continues to fidget as I close the door behind him.

"Ah," he draws out the word, "Actually, I felt the urge to see you." Tilting my chin back I nod again while I cross my arms as though to say I already knew the champagne was nothing more than a ruse. He works up the courage to continue. "To explain some things."

Explanations, excuses, hopeful absolution it's to be, then. All that I wasn't prepared to hear yet.

"There's no need," I answer coolly. He's flummoxed by the answer and stalls for a second.

"It might help put some things in perspective," he tries again, and holds a hand out in my

direction, "For us." I'm not in the mood and he's determined. Our history works against me on this one, as I've never denied him a chance to make amends, and I'm not going to start now. Reluctantly, I take the bottle from his hand and he talks as he follows me towards the kitchen.

"Ah, when I went to Anna's, ah, it was for two reasons," he begins, stopping at the bar and resting his hands against it while I remove wine flutes from the dish drainer. "First, was to say that I'd sent Raymond packing and the second, the more painful, was to say that I, I felt that we, ah..." he's avoided looking at me as he spoke, but he looks me in the eye for the next, "...didn't have a future together. She'll always be a part of my past but I, ah, realized that...that's where that relationship belonged." He looks down at counter, a bit shy after that much honesty – if that's what it is, and I have my doubts, the sting of his rejection still far too recent. Uncomfortable, he picks up my vegetable brush and toys with it.

"What made you realize that?" I can't stop myself from asking the question, even as I make myself continue to appear as indifferent as I've been since he arrived. He taps the brush in the air, in my general direction and it takes him a long second to look up from where his eyes have been glued to the counter.

"You..." he tells me, finally lifting his head to look at me. He's shy, almost painfully shy, certainly vulnerable. I have to steel myself. The last time I let his vulnerability go straight to my heart, look where it got me. He continues, "I'm not the same man I was when I walked into your life, Laura. I've changed... you changed me."

I can't help the smile that lifts my lips and wonder if he notices it never reaches my eyes. I'd like to believe him, I want to believe him. I've watched him change over these last two years. I try to give him credit for it, but often fail. *All change is temporary*, the old saying meanders through my mind. I have to give some weight to the thought. If his past can come in and turn him into a veritable stranger, make him so easily forget that I matter in all this, what does that mean?

"I only changed your name," I answer, refusing to acknowledge the rest. What he's shared with me has clarified nothing, has only made me all the more confused.

"Yes, well, merely the most obvious alteration," he answers, the smile he tries to give me faltering. He can't deny, any more than I, the tension that's between us. It's doing neither of any good, so I mentally take a deep breath and let it out as I pry the cork from the champagne bottle.

"Well," I comment as I pour, then offer the only treaty I can, "What shall we drink to?" Grateful, he gives me the first real smile since he's arrived, although the strain still shows around his eyes.

"Ah, um the present, eh?" He looks hopeful that I'll understand the reference to our conversation in front of Patton's house.

"The present?" I feign ignorance. While I'm willing to call a semi-truce right now, all is not forgotten.

"Ah, yes," he's caught off guard but quickly recovers, "and the future."

"Isn't that getting a little brazen for us, Mr. Steele?" I challenge, lightly, making him nervous again, as though he's said too much.

We freeze when strains of the song that held him mesmerized at Club 10 begin to waft across the room from the radio. His eyes dart guiltily to my face, and my smile fades. He quickly reaches over to snap off the radio.

"Let's be brazen, eh?" he asks, giving me a wide smile, trying to ease the awkwardness of the moment. I can't help it, I'm charmed, and return the smile.

Tapping our glasses together, we entwine our arms, and sample the champagne. When he leans in for a kiss, my reaction is automatic: I move towards him and our lips meet. The kiss sends a jolt to my core, and my body reacts viscerally to it. *Traitor*, I scold it. I feel his lips lift in a smile against mine and I abruptly end it. Setting down my champagne flute, I leave the kitchen and walk into the living room. Crossing my arms and rubbing my hands over them, I look anywhere but at him. I hear the clink of his glass as he sets it on the counter as well.

"You've every right to be angry with me, Laura," he says from behind me. I turn to look at him.

"I don't want to be angry. I want to understand," I tell him. I shiver when I realize the words are nearly identical to what I'd said to him after he'd all but ignored me in favor of his obsession with Anna when we dined at Club 10. He takes several steps into the living room and perches on the arm of the couch. Dropping his head, he rubs at the back of his neck, while shaking his head.

"I don't know. I don't know," he answers so quietly that if I weren't just a few feet from him I wouldn't have heard. He stands to pace. "I cared for Anna once, a great deal. I'd even imagined, a time or two, that, perhaps, one day we might have a future together." He rubs a hand across his chin. "Then she died." He sighs, loudly. "Ah, Laura, there I was waiting for her to arrive so we could go away on holiday together, and instead, I read her obituary in the newspaper. Then five years later, here she is, quite alive, driving me bloody well insane pretending it wasn't she." He turns to look at me, to make sure I'm listening. I nod my head.

"Go on."

"My past and present had collided in a way I never quite could've imagined. The woman I'd once cared for, believed dead, had come back and was in danger. She needed my help." He looks at me beseechingly. "I didn't think you'd understand." Sitting back down on the arm of the couch, he runs a hand wearily through his hair.

"So instead, you tried and convicted me of failing to support you. And that's not the worst of it: You were *furious* with me, for the conclusion *you* reached, without ever having *given me a*

chance!” I accuse. “Tell me, Remington Steele, when have I *ever not* stood by you when you’ve *come to me!*?” I demand to know, my voice betraying a deep, abiding hurt I hadn’t wanted him to see. He scrubs his face with both hands, then holds them palm up towards me.

“How could I expect you to understand how conflicted I was? That I needed to help an old lover? *Especially* in light of what happened between us that evening,” he challenges.

“A mistake!” I retort, throwing out my arms and leaning forward. “*That’s* what happened!” It was another slip on my part. I hadn’t planned to throw it out there, especially like that. In fact, I haven’t even decided, emphatically at least, that it was. But there it is, in living color between us.

“The hell it was,” he bellows, taking to his feet again. His utter outrage is there in the tremble of his hand as he shoves it through his hair, the clenching of his jaw, the muscle twitching in his cheek. “Have you any idea, whatsoever, what the other night meant... means,” he corrects, “to me?”

“Ha!” I bite out. Not the most eloquent response, but it makes the point.

“Just what is that supposed to mean?” he booms.

“What do you think it means?” I ask, throwing out my arms again. “*Actions*, Mr. Steele. Your actions spoke volumes about how you felt about the other night! For that matter, they’ve made it perfectly clear, time and again, that I cannot possibly *hope* to compete with your *damned* past. Every time it shows up, *you shut me out! Five hours* between when you left my bed and arrived at the office, and in that short span of time you made the decision to freeze me out... when you weren’t directing your anger at me! What does that say about the importance of us finally crossing that line, of my place in your life?”

“Damn it, Laura. I was confused,” he protests, angrily. “If I recall correctly, you found it no less difficult when Wilson Jeffries popped up from your own past and he wasn’t a bloody ghost come back to life!”

“You’re right, I didn’t,” I admit. “But I turned *to you*, whereas you... you turned *away from me!*” In saying this, I turn away from him now. The room has taken on a chill, and stride towards my bedroom, stomping up the stairs. Still, my tongue seems to have taken on a mind of its own, and while I’m finished, it’s not. “And I sure as hell didn’t screw you on Tuesday night, then him on Wednesday! Important. *Ha!*” Without plan, I laugh shortly, sarcastically, to emphasize the point.

I throw my hands up in the air, disgusted with him and furious with myself. I hate that he has the ability to do this to me, has from the start: setting me off balance, revealing too much of myself to him, letting him know I care for him far more than I want to, maybe ought to. I yank open my closet door a little more violently than necessary and pull out a sweater, flinging it on and then tying the sash tight around myself. When I turn around, I involuntarily take a step backwards, because the man standing below is more furious than I’ve ever seen him. Automatically, my chin juts out and my lips tighten. I may not have wanted or planned to say what I did, but I’ll be damned if I’ll apologize. He takes note of my response and if the hand fisting at his side is any indication, his temper has just edged from boiling to nuclear.

He waits until I come back downstairs before he speaks, prolonging this standoff between us. I nudge my chin upwards another millimeter, refusing to be the one that bends, despite the ice-cold look of fury he's peppering me with.

"Would you care to spell out what, precisely, it is you seem to be accusing me of?" His voice is frosty as nitrogen and he speaks between clenched teeth.

In our nearly two years together, I have never pushed him this far and, now that I have, I'm not sure how to handle the man standing before me, or if I even want to. Yet, I instinctively know it would be unwise to accuse him outright, because there is every chance he may walk out that door and be done with this life once and for all. That's reason enough to frighten me into backing down. No matter how angry I am or how shattered the heart he stole from me is, the idea of a life without Remington Steele in it in *some manner* is unthinkable. My chin drops and I hold up my hands in a conciliatory gesture.

"I'm sorry, that was out of line," I offer. "It's none of my business who—"

"The hell it isn't," he explodes. He storms in my direction, only to retreat, tugging a hand through his hair as he mumbles to himself. He turns to face me again. "I swear, woman, I need a bloody road map to make sense of how you arrive at the conclusions you do." The words are no less heated, but at least the walls are no longer shaking. Still, the comment ignites my own precarious temper. *He* needs a map? Oh, ho. Talk about pot-kettle and I say as much.

"You're one to speak. Rand-McNally and I have become bosom buddies since you entered my life!" I snap. That muscle in his jaw twitches again and I watch as he fights for control of his emotions.

"Then let me draw you a personalized map," he grinds out. "I neither slept with Anna nor did I screw you, shag you, lay you, or any other offensive term that suits you in your temper." His voice continues to rise as he speaks, until he is thundering again. "I *made love with you*, Lau-ra, and I believed it was the same for you. Am I mistaken?" The implications of what he's said are terrifying and his question at the conclusion is enough to make me want to bury myself in a carton of Haagen-Dazs until I can forget it was ever asked. Instead, I wrap my arms around myself as a tremor races through my body and avert my face, staring at the door to the loft as though it holds the answer. Then I realize it does. Dropping my arms, I stride towards it with intent.

"It's been a long day and I think it would be wise for us to take some time to cool off, to think about—"

"Lau-ra," he draws out my name, clearly vexed with my avoidance. "Answer the question." I let out a short harsh breath, pulling open the door before I face him.

"After what's happened, does it even matter?" I evade.

There are times I forget small, pertinent details about my Mr. Steele. Such as he has a temper that may ignite slower than my own, but when pricked gives my own a run for its money... that a gentleman he might be by nature, but he once lived on the streets where he was

anything but... and how fast he can move when inspired. In a blink of an eye, I'm reminded of all three.

"Not this time, you don't! You're not running away from this!" he roars. Before I know what's happened, he's slammed the door shut, and I'm trapped between him and it. In the second time in as many minutes, I'm not sure who the man is in front of me or what to do with him. "Answer the question, Laura!" I cross my arms and avert my face. Trapped, and not at all happy about it, I have no choice but to answer him.

"You're not mistaken," I answer, with no little resentment for the admission being pried from me by his hand.

From the corner of my eye, I watch his body shudder with relief, and a shaking hand swipe at his mouth. It hadn't occurred to me saying what I had might hurt him, but clearly it had. Deeply. *Good*. A little dose of what he's put me through these past days. Then he reminds me again that his long lean muscles are not meant for strength but quickness. He grasps my face in his hands, and before I am fully aware of what's happening, his lips are covering mine and I'm pressed between a hard door on my backside, and an equally hard body on my front. My senses are overwhelmed from the moment our lips meet. His heady scent, the taste of the champagne lingering in his mouth, the way he's kissing me as though it's both the last time and the first. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess to cram my hands between our bodies and shove him away.

"Don't!" I command. His hand swipes at his face, one registering disbelief.

"Why not?!" he counters briskly, unable to hide his utter frustration.

"Because it *doesn't matter* what happened three days ago," I answer. My heart clenches in my chest remembering how I felt those two days, and those memories are reflected in my tone.

"It does," he insists adamantly, crossing the room and embracing me again, pressing his cheek to the side of my head. "It does matter. It means everything." I wriggle away, shaking my head.

"No, *it doesn't*," I insist. To my utter mortification, I can feel tears threatening and I need him to leave before they start flowing. "The only thing that matters is when it comes to your past *I can't win. I'll never win*. I'll always be left on the outside looking in, wondering how long before someone, *something* that I have no clue about comes back and lures you away."

"That's not going to happen," he tries to assure me. His blue eyes are earnest and I almost believe him. Almost. But I know better.

"Yes, *it will*. It happened with Felicia and then Daniel. Now with Anna," I remind him. "It's only a matter of time before it happens again." With a forlorn shake of my head, I tip my head towards the ceiling and hold a palm to my forehead, gathering my strength to say what needs to be said. Swallowing hard, I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before looking at him again. "You've been honest from the start: You can't make promises about tomorrow. I've been honest as well: I need more than a roll in the hay, and you can't give that to me. You're a good friend and a great partner. I think—"

"I love you, Laura," he interrupts, speaking so quietly I almost miss the words. My blood roars in my ears, my heart pounds against my ribs and I'm convinced I imagined them. I give my head a small shake as though I can erase them so easily. He steps to me, and presses his palm against my cheek. "I'm not going anywhere, Laura. I want to go to work with you each day, come home to you at night. I want to fall asleep with you in my arms and wake with you there. I want to cook you dinner in the evenings, make you breakfast in bed on the weekends. I want to dance with you before the fire at my flat at nights, spend lazy afternoons with you curled up in front of the television watching movies while feeding you endless amounts of chocolate." I can't help it, a laugh escaping my lips at this. "I want to make love with you until we ache, then make love to you one more time after. My future is here, if only you'll allow me to have it."

By the time he's finished, the tears that had been threatening are spilling over. I stare at him, unable to find the words, my heart's racing and, despite myself, I feel my hope take wings and soar to the skies. But since Wilson and my father, I no longer believe in promises. It's not a part of myself I'm particularly proud of, but I need something more, especially in light of what he's just put me through. I need him to give me something he's never given anyone else before. An irretractable commitment. Proof.

"What's your real name?" My words are barely audible, and I hold my breath waiting for his anger, perhaps his disbelief. Neither comes, instead hurt and longing war within his eyes.

"I don't know," he answers softly, but he's tortured by this fact and can't hide it. He drops a kiss on my forehead as if to soften the blow for me. "I can't recall ever knowing it, my name changing with each new family as it were. The name you gave me is the only one I have, the only one I've ever wished to claim as my own." My face scrunches up as the tears continue to drip from my eyes. I don't know if I'll understand the harm people can visit upon each another, especially children. "*Forgive me, Laura. Keep me.*" The plea, the need is undeniable.

"For how long?" I ask as he thumbs away my tears.

"For good," he answers, then leans down and touches his lips to mine. "I love you, Laura," he murmurs against my lips, before kissing me hard, the palm on the back of my head keeping our lips firmly joined. Our lips part, and he continues to ask, to hope. "Tell me you want me." My fingers clutch at his shoulders when he kisses me this time. "Tell me you'll keep me."

He's growing more desperate, as his uncertainty in what I'll do builds. The kiss grows more tender, weaving its spell around me. There's always been so many obstacles between us, preventing us from moving forward. Many of those problems still exist: his past, my past, his impulsivity, my hesitancy, his spendthrift ways, my natural frugality, his need to bend the rules, my need to play by them. But when I feel his fingers cupping the back of my head flinch and the arm around me tighten as though he's afraid I'll push him away again and this time send him away, my decision's made. Good or bad, right or wrong, I feel... complete... happy when I'm with him. For the first time in our association, I believe what he's said on faith alone. I lean back, parting our lips and I see fear and hope warring in his eyes.

"I do. I will," I whisper. He doesn't say a word, doesn't smile, but blows out a long, shuddering breath and beneath my fingers I feel his body tremble before he leans down and kisses me again.

Hours later, I lay with my head on his shoulder, an arm and leg splayed over him, lazily trailing my fingers across his chest as he strokes my back and periodically presses his lips against the top of my head.

“Laura?”

“Hmmm?” I answer, never lifting my head. I’m content to stay just where I am.

“I was thinking...” He allows the thought to trail off.

“About?” I nudge.

“When we go to the flat tomorrow, it might be wise for us you bring along a few changes of clothes for yourself... to keep them there.” He’s nervous about making the suggestion and I find that endearing.

“I was just thinking it would be wise for you to do the same, here,” I tell him. I feel him nod his head and he hugs my shoulder in answer.

I mull all that’s happened the last few days and can’t help but be amazed by where we have ended up. In bed together is the least of it. So much has been said, yet there’s still one thing left unspoken.

“Remington?” His chest rises and falls slowly when he takes a deep breath. Apparently, I’m not the only one adjusting because each time I’ve used the name it’s been followed by a heartfelt kiss or indrawn breath as he savors it coming from my lips.

“Hmmm?” I press up on my elbow and lay my palm against his cheek, then wait until his blue eyes meet mine.

“I love you,” I whisper, then watch as he closes his eyes, swallows hard and nods his head rapidly. It takes him long seconds to collect himself, and when he does, he wraps his arms around me and rolls us over, settling himself between my legs which part to welcome him.

“That certainly wasn’t the thing to say if you’d planned to get any sleep, love,” he forewarns as he fingers my hair back off my face. Goosebumps pepper my skin at the endearment. The evidence of what he eludes to lies heavily against the apex of my legs. I give him a jaunty smile and raise my brows.

“I don’t recall saying I was tired,” I retort, drawing my fingertips down his back, then caressing his firm bottom.

“Absurdly passionate, indeed,” he mumbles as he leans down, letting his lips hover close to mine. “I’m truly a fortunate man.” With that, he settles his lips over mine as I laugh.

I suspect there will never come a time when we don’t spend at least a part of each day sniping and snarking, fussing and fighting. We are, after all, two very headstrong people. But, as Remington’s lips tease and taste mine while his hand cradles my neck, I finally own all our bickering for what always has been and always will be: foreplay.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!