



The Manhattan Encounter (House of Steele)

By Addison Fox



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He'd faced down madmen with guns, hunted thieves and jumped off buildings for fun. So why is Liam Steele at his wit's end when Dr. Isabella Magnini needs his protection? The brilliant and beautiful scientist's work is revolutionary, and someone wants to keep her insights secret—no matter what it costs.

When the House of Steele comes together to protect Isabella, Liam realizes just how isolated he's truly become. And as he and Isabella dodge bullets, fires and even an invasion, he knows he's in more danger than ever. Because how will he ever let her go?

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The Manhattan Encounter (House of Steele) By Addison Fox Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #657605 in eBooks
- Published on: 2014-07-01
- Released on: 2014-07-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Addison Fox can't remember a time when words weren't a part of her life. In addition to being an avid reader, she loves writing novels about strong-willed and exciting heroes and heroines – individuals who are meant for each other and who deserve their happy ever after. After she makes them work for it, of course!

Addison lives in Dallas. You can find her at her home on the web at www.addisonfox.com or on Facebook (facebook.com/addisonfoxauthor) and Twitter (@addisonfox).

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London

"You can't be a damn playboy all your life."

Liam Steele stared down his grandfather and ignored the fact the man's rheumy blue eyes held more mischief than censure. "Fascinating advice coming from a man who narrowly avoided an arranged marriage to a princess because the urge to sow wild oats remained too strong."

"I was waiting for the right woman. She wasn't it."

"Maybe I am, too."

Alexander Steele's snort was loud and about as subtle as the whistle of an oncoming freight train. "Could have fooled me."

A light sigh floated over the top of Liam's head before a gentle hand cupped his shoulder. "Alex. For the love of God and all that's holy, would you please leave the man alone? Even I'm sick of listening to you."

Liam stood and took his grandmother's hand, helping her into the chair. "Nice save, Grandmother."

"A necessary one." She settled her hands in her lap, her gaze focused on her husband. "He's been going on and on and I'm done listening to him. You'll settle down when you're damn well ready to and not a moment sooner. Just because your father married at twenty doesn't mean that's the right path for you."

"Now, Penelope." His grandfather started in with the tone Liam and his sister Kensington had dubbed the "Parliament Address."

"Marriage is good enough for Campbell, Rowan and Kenzi."

"Because they found the right partners. Liam's still looking for the woman who makes his heart sing."

Liam shook his now-empty glass, the whiskey-tinged ice cubes making a satisfying sound to echo the end of Round 1. "I'm actually standing right here, you know."

"Yes, dear." His grandmother patted the hand he'd left on her shoulder. "But sadly, the argument rages on whether you're here or not. Your grandfather has wedding fever."

Which, to his grandmother's earlier point, his siblings had done an admirable job of feeding. Three relationships in less than a year—good, solid relationships that were destined to stand the tests of time—had only increased his grandfather's focus.

His grandfather's *maniacal* focus.

"In the event it's escaped anyone's notice, I date plenty."

"Plenty being the operative word," Alexander Steele grumbled. "You date a series of vapid models who are convinced a piece of chewing gum will make them fat. Real women eat."

Liam had learned long ago to let the opinions of others—even those he loved as dearly as he did his family—roll off his back. He lived his life as he chose and couldn't muster up much concern about what anyone else thought.

So why was the urge to simply leave so overwhelming?

"I'm only in London overnight. Any chance we can discuss something a bit more interesting?"

"What's more interesting than the rest of your life?"

"Living it." He set the leaded glass down with a thud on his grandmother's antique end table. Whatever either of his grandparents had been about to say faded on their lips as they both stared at him, silence descending on the room like a thick roll of fog.

Isabella Magnini dug the piece of paper out of her pocket once more to double-check she'd come to the right address. Rain beat down on her umbrella, sluicing off in a curtain of water that made the front door hard to see, and she squinted to make out the gold numbers partially hidden by wet ivy. At least she'd found the place.

The bottom of her slacks was a soupy wash of wool against her ankles, striking evidence that the Tube ride that had begun her evening was a monumentally bad idea.

Like coming here.

She fought the thought and marched the rest of the way toward the door. No backing out now. No turning around. No wishing her actions away. She needed help and if the increasing threats finding their way to her office, her home and her car were any indication, she needed it now.

The London townhome rose several impressive stories above her as she lifted the heavy knocker. A small porch cover shielded her from the rain and she turned to shake off her umbrella as she waited for the door to open. A heavy clap of thunder startled her—just like everything else these days—and she jumped, water flying off her umbrella like a wet dog shaking out its fur.

"Hey!"

A dark voice behind her added to the surprise and she whirled around, the motion flinging more heavy drops of water toward the doorway.

A man filled the portal, his thick dark—almost black—hair brushed back except for a few errant curls that formed artful waves over his forehead. Broad shoulders filled the breadth of a white button-down shirt that tapered into a narrow waist clad in black slacks. The water she'd inadvertently slung at him stained the white in heavy drops and he wiped water from his eyes before turning a narrow gaze on her.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry." She reached forward in a vague attempt to wipe the water off his shirt but stopped with her arm outstretched as the man took a decided step back.

Oh no. She'd written the address down wrong, that had to be it. Another mindless mistake, one of the many she made in her daily life as her head filled with the abstract thoughts of her work. Thoughts that took up so much room she edged out all the smaller details others had no problem recalling with ease.

She shook her head and dropped her outstretched arm, the heavy pour of rain at her back misting against her nape. She had the wrong house. Alexander Steele was eighty-five if he was a day and the man who answered the door most definitely did not have the look of hired help. This part of London was known for its highend homes, an increasing number filled by eligible bachelors who worked the stock market or billed exorbitant rates at the city's most well-heeled law firms. She'd clearly found her way to the front door of one of them.

"I'm so sorry. I must have the wrong house."

The smallest spark of warmth filled his shockingly blue eyes before he reached out a hand and gestured her closer. "Where are you headed?"

She glanced at the crumpled paper, now nearly transparent with rain, but didn't move from her spot. "Three twenty-five."

"You've found it."

"But I'm looking for Mr. Steele."

"I'm his grandson, Liam." Cultured tones lit up his voice—not quite British under the American but obviously influenced—before he reached out and snatched the umbrella, then took her firmly in hand. "You must be this evening's entertainment."

Entertainment? "I'm just here to see your grandfather, Mr. Steele. I won't take up much of his time."

A small smile lit up his face and the transformation was so shocking she simply stopped in the center of the large foyer to stare for a moment. A large glass chandelier hung from the ceiling, lighting the entryway in a soft glow and the warm light bounced off the rich locks of his hair.

The smile changed his face—warmed it considerably—and in some small, nonsensical portion of her brain she had the distinct thought the man smiled rarely, if ever. The stoic figure who stood in the doorway had looked like a formidable opponent. But the smiling man before her was a devastating one.

Sleek as a shark and likely as lethal, with a smile that begged you to come closer.

"Who are you?"

The words were as effective as the rain at dousing her fancies and she pulled herself from her drifting

thoughts. "Isabella Magnini."

"Dr. Magnini?"

"Yes."

"The Dr. Magnini who presented at Davos last year?"

"One and the same."

Liam shook his head once more, his muttered words nearly undetectable as another clap of thunder echoed off the marble entryway. "Wily old bastard."

"Excuse me?"

"Please, let me take your coat. My grandparents are in their sitting room enjoying a cocktail."

"I'm so sorry to intrude on your family's personal time."

The smile fell, that stoic facade concealing all expression on his face. The slightest lines bracketed his eyes and mouth—faint, yet evident enough to add character—and whatever sarcasm she'd sensed vanished when he finally spoke. "No intrusion at all as I've no doubt you were invited this evening."

"Your grandfather suggested I come. He's been—" She broke off, not sure how to explain the conversations she'd had to date with Alexander Steele about the strange happenings in her life.

How did one explain the subtle sense of being watched? Or the odd feeling that someone had rifled through your things, even when your clothing and papers and bookshelves remained in perfect order?

Or the very real sense someone had been inside your home?

She fought the shiver that threatened to roll down her spine and focused on the man before her, willing her nerves to calm. "Your grandfather believes he has the resources to help me with a...small matter."

If he had any question about her hesitation he gave no indication. "May I take your coat?"

Isabella glanced down at the rain-soaked front of her jacket—how had she forgotten it?—and slipped from the garment. The endless days of spring rain had greeted her the moment she'd arrived in London the previous week from New York and she had moments where she'd wondered if she'd ever get dry.

His fingers brushed hers when she passed over her coat and she forced herself to maintain simple, even breaths despite the flare of heat that skittered up her arm. Humans touched. Their bodies came into contact all the time. It was normal. Common, even.

And certainly nothing to dwell on.

She was dimly aware of his gaze before he turned to settle her coat on a hallway stand. That same rush of heat that had run up her arm kept up its assault, crossing her chest before settling in her stomach. With a precision born of long years of practice, she counted off the periodic elements in her head and willed her

pulse to calm.

Hydrogen. Helium. Lithium. Bery—

"Let's go introduce you to my grandparents, then."

With a soft sigh she followed behind him, the elements fading away like smoke, replaced with decidedly more *well-formed* thoughts. Like how strong and safe and solid and *reassuring* those broad shoulders looked under his rain-flecked shirt. And how enticing it would be to simply reach out and touch him.

Stick with the elements, girl.

Men who looked like Liam Steele didn't look twice at women with wild hair and curvy figures and, in the rare instances where they did, her profession typically ran them off before they could take a third glance.

Or any action at all.

Wily old bastard.

The thought had run through his mind on a loop since Dr. Isabella Magnini arrived, soaked to the skin, a half hour ago. Liam hadn't touched the second whiskey his grandfather had poured for him while he'd gone to answer the door, preferring to keep his wits fully about him. The choice was a smart one as it hadn't taken Alexander Steele long to dive into the matter at hand.

"You need to protect the girl, Liam."

"Of course we will, Grandfather. That's what the House of Steele does." He and his siblings had formed the House of Steele about four years before, their diverse interests and skills a match for a surprising number of in-need individuals and companies. From basic protection to digital forensics to active investigation, he and his siblings had the tools and the talent to fix problems.

While Liam ran the firm with his siblings, there was no mistaking his grandfather's continued use of the word "you" had a distinctly singular ring to it.

Although it was clear the rain-soaked doctor needed their help, he'd yet to fully understand what her problem was, and his grandfather's pleading eyes and continued insistence on protection weren't getting him any closer to figuring it out.

"Why don't you explain the problem for me, Dr. Magnini?" He'd kept his attitude casual, unwilling to play into Alexander's hands, but Liam had to admit his gaze had strayed toward the woman a few more times than was comfortable. He had no idea why, but something in her demeanor had drawn his attention.

It certainly wasn't her clothes.

Her sweater—a rich cashmere that looked like it had been stretched and worried over at the waist until it lost all shape—didn't do much for her figure, and the wool pants that clung to the bottom of her legs like wet shackles were about as fashionable as a potato sack, but.

His thoughts tapered off as her gaze collided with his.

Those large green eyes blinked in surprise, before she nodded and looked away. "I've tried to explain it to your grandfather and not very successfully, I'm afraid. Something's wrong, even if I can't define exactly why."

"Wrong how?"

"Someone's rifled through my things at work. And I know my notes have been tampered with." She took a small sip of the water his grandmother had foisted on her earlier before delicately resettling the glass on a small end table. "And I believe someone broke into my home last week when I was at work late."

"Your home?" Anger coated his throat with raw fire and he suddenly wished for the whiskey he'd spent the last half hour avoiding. "What do you think this person's after?"

Her slender fingers bunched in the waist of her sweater and Liam saw why the piece of clothing had no shape. "My work. My research."

"Which revolves around what, exactly?"

"Genetics."

Liam knew science had its champions and its critics across all branches, but what could she have possibly gotten herself involved with? And when did run-of-the-mill scientists become the object of something dangerous enough to have them seeking help?

"Enough talk for the moment. Let's go into the dining room and eat. Poor Isabella looks famished."

Penelope Steele's words received no argument and he helped his grandmother to her feet. He was startled to see Isabella follow suit with his grandfather, making a show of giving over her arm when Liam knew good and well the motion really helped to steady the older man.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Penelope wasted no time on the observation, her comment uttered the moment the two of them were out of earshot.

He shot his grandmother a sideways eye. "You're in on this, too?"

"The woman needs help, Liam."

"No doubt, but the timing of her arrival and Grandfather's evening lecture were rather curious, don't you think?"

His grandmother made a show of dusting some nonexistent lint from her sweater. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you don't. You're the innocent here instead of a ready foil for Grandfather's machinations."

"She needs you."

Liam stared down from where he towered over his petite grandmother in height. There was an urgency underlying her words, but it was the bleak look that creased the tissue-thin skin of her face that pulled him up

short.

"We'll help her, Grandmother. I promise."

Penelope nodded, then disengaged their arms as Liam pulled out her chair. Her quick glance at the empty doorway had her continuing. "Isabella's a tough girl. A shockingly brilliant one, too. She spent her late teens with her grandfather after her father was tried as a British traitor about fifteen years ago."

"Tried for what?"

"He was convicted as a traitor of selling dirty bombs to third-world rebels."

"And her mother?"

Penelope's lips pursed tightly together and Liam knew that look didn't bode well. "She had a mental breakdown after the news of her husband's activities. She's spent years in a private facility."

Isabella and his grandfather came through the door and he ignored the small spear of sympathy attempting to burrow under his breastbone as his gaze took in the pair. He knew what it was like to lose a parent. To lose both parents.

And while death wasn't fair, there was a certain mercy in knowing the loss wasn't by choice.

"Thank you, dear." His grandmother patted his arm as she settled her napkin in her lap.

The small gesture was enough to pull him from his strange musings and he moved around the table to help Isabella. A subtle confusion filled her gaze when he pulled her chair back before she readily accepted with a small nod. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

Her light scent—a subtle mix of roses and the lingering scent of the rain—sent a quick shot of adrenaline through his system as he pushed in her chair. His stomach clenched on the sensation and he tightened his grip on the back rail to stop the slight trembling in his fingers.

If that madness wasn't enough, he almost reached for one of the dark, heavy curls that flowed down her back before he caught himself.

Users Review

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