

Andrea Rains Waggener excerpt from Romance Novel

“The Oakes sisters together?” Armstrong said from behind me.

I didn’t turn because, annoyingly, I could feel myself blushing.

“That could be an unstoppable force,” he said.

I kept my back to him. It didn’t seem to bother him. He said to Lilly, “Mind if I take her away?”

Lilly smiled bigger and cried harder. Cooper tightened his grip on her shoulders.

I let Armstrong take my hand and pull me into the pulsing crowd of dancers. Just then, the music slowed.

“Dance?” he asked.

“As long as my feet stay on the ground,” I said.

He grinned and put his other hand on my waist. I rested my hands on his shoulders. We shuffled together awkwardly for a few seconds. Then we both relaxed, and he pulled me to his chest. I put my face against his shoulder and my arms around his back and breathed in that great Armstrong smell that beat the heck out of all other smells in the world.

We moved with the music, our bodies heating up. I could tell by, uh, certain indicators, that he was enjoying being close to me as much as I was enjoying being close to him.

Then I thought about what a jerk he’d been, and I wondered why he thought he had the right to kiss me the way he had in the reception hall. I leaned back and looked up at him. “Why the hell did you kiss me?”

“Why the hell did you jump off a ledge to save me?”

I wasn’t ready to answer that question honestly. So I said, “You have a cute ass.”

“So do you.”

“Well that explains it then.”

I put my head back on his shoulder, and we shuffled some more.

“Still hate men?” he asked.

“In general,” I said into the soft flannel of his brown shirt.

“How about in private?”

I pulled away again and looked at him. “You still suck at puns.”

“I’m good at other things.”

“I have a vague memory of some of them.”

“Vague is better than none.”

His hand, which had been at my waist, slid down closer to my butt.

“Do you know why I hate men?” I asked.

“Because of Brock.” His voice, which had been relaxed and mellow, roughened.

“Because of what he did to you.”

I shook my head. “No. Not that. Well, yes, partly that. But mostly because of me. Because I managed to somehow simultaneously push Brock into being something he wasn’t and turn myself into something I wasn’t and in the process, I abandoned myself completely for the relationship, as screwed up as it was, and because I feel like I also somehow either made him or let him do that to me. Does that make sense?”

“Probably would to a woman.”

I punched his arm.

He grinned. “I get it.”

I sighed. “The shorter, clearer version of what I just said is I don't trust myself around men now. I'm afraid I'll lose myself again.”

Armstrong stopped dancing. I stopped moving too. He put his hands on my shoulders.

Around us, couples continued to sway and shuffle. Several people bumped into us. I didn't care a whole lot.

Armstrong put his knuckles under my chin and raised it. Then his fingers trailed along my jaw line and down my neck. “Iris, I've loved you for twenty years.”

My heart stopped beating.

“You have no idea how amazing you are, do you?” he asked me.

Or at least, I thought that was what he asked. I was kind of stuck on “I've loved you.”

And before I could answer his incredible question, he went on. “You're beautiful. You're smart. You're funny. You're strong. You're loyal. You're kind.”

I snorted. Kind? Really? I'd been a first class bitch for months.

“Yes, you're kind.” He chuckled and impressed me with his mind-reading abilities: “You've just been a little off your game the last few months. For good reason.” He reached up and caressed my chin with an index finger. It felt like an explosion of carbonated bubbles fizzed over my skin.

“I've never known anyone as perfect with Harry as you are,” he said. “And Fleur doesn't like anyone except me and Harry. Not even Lilly. But she loves you.”

“Fleur de lis,” I whispered.

God, I was dense! At the hospital, he'd told me fleur de lis was an iris-shaped pattern, and I hadn't given it a thought. He'd named his cat for me! And I hadn't noticed. How could I have missed what was right under my nose?

Armstrong bent his head and laid his rough cheek against mine. When he spoke, his breath warmed my skin. “I never had the guts to tell you how I felt about you, and ... well, go after you,” he said.

He leaned back and peered into my eyes. He was looking for some reaction to his words, but I was frozen; so I’m sure he didn’t see what he was looking for.

“Are you listening?” he asked.

I managed to nod.

“Good. Because I thought I was going to die a couple hours ago. And while I hung on that branch, this voice kept saying, ‘Armstrong, you cowardly ass. You wasted your life. Why didn’t you go after her?’ So,” he took a deep breath, “I’m coming after you.”

I stared at him and said nothing.

“But don’t worry,” he said.

Why would I do that? Because the last time I’d let myself love someone, I’d gotten used, torn apart, and tossed aside like a smelly t-shirt?

Was I strong enough to give in to what I felt for Armstrong?

Was I finally ready to be totally honest with myself?

Because I loved him too. It was possible I’d loved him for as long as he’d loved me. I was just too busy judging him for what he didn’t have to allow myself to appreciate what he did have.

“You don’t need to worry because I’m good at ropes,” Armstrong said. “So I’ll tie a line to you to make sure you don’t lose yourself.”

I couldn’t help it. I smiled. Then I let him pull me close again. Then I willed my mind to go blank while I lost myself in how good it felt to be pressed against him.

