

We are all to blame for this.

WAIT A MINUTE, GET BACK HERE! Yes, I realize you usually skip intros because you think all they're going to be is a whine for feedback, BUT THIS INTRO IS IMPORTANT. See, I said it in capital letters, so it must be so.

Now, where was I? Oh, yes.

The following is important to understand the format of the story: Voice-overs are italicized and are between the symbols “:: *” and “* ::”

I have stolen lines from other authors. I do attribute them at the end. For the movie-goers, let me also admit that the inciting idea of this story was shamelessly ripped off from the movie, “Stranger than Fiction,” Will Farrell, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson, Linda Hunt. Columbia/Sony Pictures. 2006.

You may wish to keep those actors in mind.

The events of this story take place before the release of that movie.

Finally, the characters' opinions are strictly their own.

There. Now you have only yourself to blame if you didn't read this intro.

Oh, and about that whine

Steele Stranger than Fiction

by Peg Daniels

*:: *Steele stretched lazily and turned in the soft, California king-sized bed with its scented jade green satin sheets to take into his arms his lovely wife of twenty years – * ::*

“Hello?” Steele sat up and looked around the room.

“Hello, Mr. Steele,” Laura said into her pillow.

“Not you.”

“What do you mean, not me?” She’d sounded half-asleep, but now her eyes snapped open and she pinned him with a fully awake – and lethal – stare. “One of your former partners-in-crime paying you a visit?”

“Laura, really. Do you think I’d just be calmly sitting here if that were the case?”

“No, you’d be stuffing her under the bed or him in the closet. Silly me. So, who were you talking to?”

“Didn’t you hear a voice?”

She reached a hand up to his forehead. “Temperature’s normal.”

“My temperature’s never normal around you, luv.” He looked under his pillow then under the bed sheets.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the tape recorder or CD player or whatever.” He jerked her pillow out from under her head.

“Ow!”

“Aha!” Steele pounced on the item now revealed. He waved the digital pen recorder in her face.

She snatched it away from him, a scowl on her face. “‘Aha,’ what?”

So, she thought she was going to bluff her way out of this, did she? “What’s it doing in the bed?”

“Must’ve fallen out of my purse.”

“A likely story.”

“What is wrong with you this morning?” She threw back the covers and headed for the bathroom.

He plucked the pen from where she’d placed it on the dresser. He pressed rewind, then play, then he remembered earphones were needed to hear the playback. He ran after Laura and hovered over her shoulder while she brushed her teeth. He was getting worried that this wasn’t some form of retaliation for the last little snafu at the agency, which she faulted him for and which she still hadn’t seemed to quite get over – but this was no time to dwell on that. “The voice.”

“You must’ve been dreaming,” she said through a mouthful of foam.

“I wasn’t.”

“What did the voice say?”

She was humoring him. “It said, ‘Steele stretched lazily and turned in the soft, California king-sized bed with its scented jade green satin sheets to take into his arms his lovely wife of twenty years.’ It was describing my actions as I performed them.”

She smirked. “Sounds like a seduction scene from a trashy romance novel.”

:: **He put toothpaste on his brush and joined her in their morning ritual.** ::

Steele stared at the toothbrush in his hand. He put it next to his ear, shook it.

Laura gave him a look. “It goes in your mouth.”

“I know.”

They stood there, motionless. Finally, Laura asked, “What are you waiting for?”

“Until you’re finished. So that it’ll no longer be true that I joined you in our morning ritual.” He scraped off the toothpaste for good measure.

“Our morning ritual.”

He nodded. “Granted, I wouldn’t have termed brushing our teeth together a ritual, but I suppose it is.”

“And it’s important you not join me in it?”

“It is this morning.”

“Okay,” she drawled. She took a mouthful of water from the faucet, swished it around, and spat. “I’m done.” Steele hurriedly brushed, spat, swished, spat, hoping to beat out any new occurrence of the voice. Laura watched him all the while with a raised eyebrow. She gave her head a few rapid shakes as if to clear it, and then dabbed at his mouth with a hand towel. “About this voice – ”

“You heard it? I think it might’ve come from my toothbrush.” He turned and dropped the suspect implement into the waste basket. He gave the basket a couple taps with his foot. He jumped as he felt a touch on the back of his shoulders. He whipped his head around but saw only Laura, her

hands on him. And with a look on her face that said she thought he was up to something. He wished he was.

Apparently deciding this was all supposed to be one big joke, if one she didn't quite get, she smiled. She turned him around to face her and laced her fingers behind his neck. "I was going to point out you didn't take into your arms your lovely wife of twenty years."

Aha! She was responsible for the pillow-voice after all, a way to spice things up. As for what had been on the recording, no surprise there – certain things about him were predictable, he had to admit. And the toothbrush-voice must've been motion-activated. He'd have to ask her how she'd done it. Later.

He put his hands on her waist. "I stretched lazily and turned in our soft, California king-sized bed with its scented jade green – " He broke off. "They're not jade green, they're emerald green. . . . Anyway, I turned in our bed with its satin sheets *to* take my lovely wife of twenty years in my arms. I didn't get that far." He swayed her hips from side to side, leading her in a music-less dance. A cacophony of voices – Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra, among others – filled the air. Steele went stock-still; at the same instant, the singing cut off. Hip-movement activation?

"Pity," Laura said.

"'Who's Sorry Now,'" Steele said, suddenly placing the voice that had been so discordant with the others.

Laura drew back. "I am, that we're having this conversation." She dropped her hands from his neck and turned away.

Surely she wouldn't have been so cruel as to subject him to Rocky Sullivan? Steele put a cotton swab in first one ear, then the other, to check for wax. He found some, but he wasn't sure if it could account for the aural disturbances. He hoped so. He'd make a doctor's appointment to get his ears flushed out.

He observed his wife attacking her hair with her hairbrush. He laid his hand over hers. She put up the expected token resistance but then allowed him to take the brush from her. He replaced her hands around his neck. "No, I'm the one who's sorry. What's a pity?" He sprinkled tiny kisses along her jawline and over her eyelids and spiraled in toward her mouth. At first there was no response from her. On successive passes, her lips only grazed his skin. Then her mouth sought out his. Then her kisses got deeper. When he was sure her attention was thus fully occupied, he patted her down from neck to hip with the skill, touch, and objectivity of a master pickpocket to see if she had any hidden equipment on her. He ran his fingers through her hair. Nothing. Since she was wearing only panties and his pajama top, this exhausted the exterior possibilities. Which left –

She leaned away from him. "You didn't get that far."

He gave a start and hastily called his fingers back from where they'd been heading. "Beg pardon?" Too late, he realized she'd been practically purring and he might've gotten away with his continued exploration.

Her hands dropped, and, given the narrowing of her eyes, Steele didn't think it would work this time to try to replace them.

:: * *she resumed jerking the brush through her hair in short, hard strokes.* * ::

Steele had all he could do to not grab the talking hairbrush from Laura's hand. He would at least persuade her to use it with long, gentle strokes. "Laura – "

Laura brought the hairbrush down onto the countertop with a smack, which pleased Steele to no end, but he kept this to himself, suspecting that Laura was not in the mood to get the same kind of thrill as he out of the pummeling of the hairbrush. His suspicions were confirmed when she turned to him and spoke. "Let me make it perfectly clear this time. It's a pity you didn't get as far as taking your lovely wife of twenty years in your arms when it actually might've led to something." Laura picked up the hairbrush and practically wrenched out half a head of hair.

At the sight of the resumption of the short, hard strokes, Steele, who'd opened his mouth to make some kind of reply, completely lost track of whatever he'd been about to say. He crept his hand up along his body. Laura evidently saw this in the mirror and shot him a dirty look, dissuading him from his sneak attack on the brush. He'd have to get it later. He picked up his razor and dared it to say something. When it didn't, he reached for his shaving cup. He stayed the motion and set the razor back down. Shaving now might still count as joining Laura in their morning ritual.

He gazed at Laura's reflection in the mirror, the brush taunting him with its short, hard strokes. He shook himself. It had to be the earwax. Or stress. He knew a great stress-reliever, and he was letting an opportunity slip by. Rather, it'd run away screaming and now he was going to have to track it down and bring it back alive. He stepped behind Laura. He caught her hand in mid-hair-pull and slithered his other arm around her and hugged her to him. Given the stiffness of her body, he feared not only was opportunity dead but rigor mortis had set in. He tried to guide the brush through her hair. This only made her strokes shorter and harder, so he gave up. But not entirely. He kept his hand on her brush hand and his arm around her waist. She didn't fight him on this, so he was hopeful of a resuscitation. He knew her that well.

After a minute or so, Laura met his gaze in the mirror. He pressed his lips to the top of her head in true apology. She averted her eyes. But after a while her body relaxed, and eventually she let him ease the brush through her hair for several strokes. He smiled into her locks, victorious over the hairbrush-voice. He coaxed the brush from her grip. Behind his back, he chucked it into the waste basket. Laura turned and tried to look around him, probably in order to see what that thunk had been, but he pulled her into a kiss before she was able to do so. He caressed her hair and swept it back to reveal an ear. He nibbled on it, then nuzzled her neck. "Let's go back to bed so I

can complete the movement and take my lovely wife of twenty years in my arms,” he murmured against her skin. “I have some other movements in mind as well.” He thrust his hips against her. Crooners be damned.

She gazed up at him with sultry eyes. She pulled his head down and gave him a soul kiss that left him barely able to stand. “Too late,” she whispered huskily against his mouth. “‘The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on’” She broke away from him and sallied forth toward the shower before he registered what she’d said.

And then he sallied right after her. “There were no fingers, writing – there were voices, talking.” And singers, singing, but he decided not to bring that up. “Besides, ‘And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press, End in the Nothing all Things end in – Yes – Then fancy while Thou art,’” he countered.

“Who said that, Daniel?” Unaccountably, there was a sneer in her voice.

“Good guess, but it was that same ‘moving finger’ fellow. Omar Sharif.”

“You mean ‘Omar Khayyám.’”

“Do I? Don’t recognize the name. What movies was he in?” She rolled her eyes at him, but he took only half-notice, the other half of his notice – and then more – on the body she was revealing to him, a body that caused the fire of lust to burn as brightly in him as it ever had. More so, since love was gasoline poured on that fire. He yanked his pajama bottoms down, tripped on them, and nearly ended up on the floor in his haste. He managed to slip into the shower just before she closed its door on him.

He sprang back out. “Laura! A warm shower, please!”

She looked down at him. “You need a cold one.”

“Laura,” he moaned as piteously as he could.

Her look was as frigid as the bath water. Then she sighed and adjusted the water temperature. She reached through the shower door and yanked him in by the arm. “Come in here, handsome husband of twenty years.” To Steele’s delight, she didn’t even give the tiresome excuse that they had to get to the office – no doubt only because there were no urgent cases pending and it was a Sunday – but rather, she let him lather her up. She returned the favor. Soon they were giggling, and then their gasps were for other reasons.

:: **“Michael. . . Lisa. . . Naughty, naughty! Mind if I join in?”** ::

Steele shrieked, the sound a full-out, little-girl shrill. He forced his hand between Laura’s leg and

his hip in order to unlock her legs from around him. He all but pushed her out of the way of the showerhead so he could get the last vestiges of soap out of his eyes. He shoved the shower door aside and stepped out determinedly. He now knew who the trickster was. “Felicia . . .”

No one was there.

Water dripping from his hair and body, Steele stalked through the apartment. He looked under the bed, in closets, under the sofa, under the sofa cushions, and behind the sofa pillows. He looked in cabinets, in the dishwasher, in the oven, and out on the window ledges. He ended up on the patio. He stood there a moment, at a complete loss. He went to the edge of the patio and surveyed the street.

“Mr. Steele,” Laura said from behind him.

He turned toward her. “Hmm?”

“You’re naked. In full view of the neighborhood.”

All he could do was stare back at her, limp in more than one way.

Steele stared at the diplomas on the wall. He heard the door open, and he turned to see Laura come into the room to join in on the consultation. She sat down next to him. He nudged her and nodded toward the psychiatrist sitting across from them. “‘The Year of Living Dangerously.’ MGM. 1982,” he whispered. The crinkle that had appeared in Laura’s brow when he’d told her about the hairbrush-voice and the showerhead-voice and the songsters and the chanteuse, and which had deepened with each successive confession to having had another aural visitant, smoothed for a moment and she smiled at him, just a little.

The Linda Hunt lookalike looked up from reading Steele’s chart. “Was this a dangerous year for you, Mr. Steele?”

He shrugged. “No more than usual. Got shot at. Broke my leg. Was hit on the head numerous times.”

“Brain injury. That certainly is associated with a greater risk for it.”

Steele was still trying to process “brain injury” when Laura sat forward and asked, “Risk for what, Doctor?” She used her “professional” tone, but her fingers gripped Steele’s leg. Steele made a mental note to tell her it was time for a nail trim.

Dr. Giovanni acknowledged Laura’s presence for the first time. “Mr. Steele says he hears voices

in his head – ”

“They’re not in my head, they’re out there,” Steele said, gesturing around him.

The psychiatrist’s face remained free of expression. “But no one else hears them.”

Steele looked at Laura, but she gave him a slight shake of the head. Steele sank into his seat. “That’s what I love about you, Laura. So truthful. So painfully truthful.”

Dr. Giovanni tapped Steele’s charts against her desk, and Steele snapped back to attention. The psychiatrist, however, again addressed Laura. “Mr. Steele has had a thorough medical exam, including, per the request of you both, being checked for implants.” Her tone suggested not only that patients requested this all the time but that the incidence of finding such was nil. “As a result,” Dr. Giovanni continued, “we have ruled out physical causes for his symptoms. We thus turn to the psychological. Mr. Steele says that often the voice is participating in a running commentary on his life – ”

“Some are trying to,” he allowed. “But others speak about things that already happened – or – ”

*:: *Remington stroked and caressed her; at least she didn’t spurn him, didn’t turn away from his touch. He kissed her forehead, kissed her fingers, kissed her hard, and one by one peeled those fingers back from her eyes. She stared up at him, her dark eyes wide and startled. “Will you at least,” he whispered, “give me a chance to audition?”* ::*

Steele gave his head a violent shake, tried to recall what he’d just been saying to the psychiatrist, failed. He looked to Laura for help, hated seeing the concern in her eyes. In a quiet voice, she told him, “You said, ‘Some are trying to, but others speak about things that already happened – or,’ and then you broke off.”

“Yes, right. I was going to say other voices speak about certain events as if they had happened, but I don’t recall them, and I assure you, I would.” Why were the voices conjuring up all these “first time” scenarios with Laura? Why would he be fantasizing in reverse? After all, he had the reality of her, a reality that far exceeded any fantasy.

He cleared his throat. “Voices have even spoken about a future that can never be. Supposedly, I have a daughter, ‘Katharine-with-an-“a”,’ who will be graduating from Stanford in 2008 – ”

“Yes, yes, you told me all this,” Dr. Giovanni said. “My point was, if such a hallucination is present for a significant portion of time during a one-month period, Mr. Steele will meet one of diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia.”

Steele looked down at himself. “I’m Sybil? Sally Field, Joanne Woodward, Lorimar Productions, 1976.”

“Schizophrenia is not synonymous with multiple personality disorder, Mr. Steele, despite popular culture often confusing the two,” the shrink said with a sniff. “Although some people diagnosed with schizophrenia may hear voices and may experience the voices as distinct personalities, schizophrenia does not involve a person changing among distinct multiple personalities.”

“Thank God,” Steele sighed. “One of us who’s suffered from that malady is quite enough.”

The nut doctor raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, Mr. Steele?”

Steele met his wife’s glower. “Laura, you must admit, the first four years I knew you – ”

“Let’s stick to the current mental case,” Laura said, and Steele reflected that this evening he was going to have a devil of a time massaging those knots out of her jaw. Assuming she let him touch her.

Laura turned back to the headpeeper. “Mr. Steele has told me all about the voices, Doctor. What other criteria would he have to meet?”

“Social or occupational dysfunction, meaning that for a significant portion of the time since the onset of the disturbance, one or more major areas of functioning such as work, interpersonal relations, or self-care, are markedly below the level achieved prior to the onset. Have you noticed any changes in these areas, Ms. Holt-Steele?”

Laura didn’t spare Steele a glance. “His interpersonal relations are as varied and colorful as they’ve ever been, care for self I can’t see as ever being a problem for him, and I don’t think it’s possible for even him to function below the level he’s achieved at work.”

“Thank you, darling,” Steele said. He hoped she’d just worked out her anger at him over the snafu at the office.

The headshrinker didn’t seem to know what to make of Laura’s reply, so in the time-honored way of psychiatrists, she glanced at her watch and moved on. Steele found himself unable to pay attention to the discussion until he heard Laura ask, “What’s the treatment?” She took Steele’s hand in hers, and he roused himself from the funk he’d fallen in to give hers a squeeze.

“Drugs and extensive therapy,” the deficiency expert said, and Steele fell back into his funk.

*:: *Steele didn’t remember leaving Dr. Donna Giovanni’s office nor the drive back to the agency. This, he felt, was a further sign he was losing his mind.* ::*

Steele looked up and around. “I’m not loony!” All conversation in the elevator ceased, and his fellow travelers, except for Laura, inched away from him and stared straight ahead. After six more stops that felt like sixty, the door opened on their floor, and he and Laura exited alone. Steele had

recognized among the passengers others who had offices on this level, but they'd either gotten off earlier or stayed in the elevator.

He slumped against the wall. "Oh, dear God."

Laura rubbed his arms, but he took little comfort from it. "Did it happen again?" she asked.

He nodded and repeated the words the voice had said. "And it was right, at the time," he added as they walked down the hall. "But not any more, not about the last part." Steele stopped. "I'm not going crazy, Laura. That line needs a rewrite." He continued down the hall. Laura didn't accompany him, and he knew it was because if she did, she'd be compelled to be honest, and in this one matter if no other, she couldn't bear contradicting him. Part of him took wry amusement over him finally having found something she disagreed with but wouldn't argue about. But only a small part.

He stopped again, closed his eyes. Maybe he'd give Laura some excuse and go home. Better, to a movie. Stay in the theater all day. All week. The rest of his life. Alone, in the company of his voices.

He heard Laura's footsteps come toward him. "In my youth . . ." He paused, and the footsteps ceased. He took a breath and picked up his thought. "I'd go to films to escape from my life, if just for a little while. I'd be the leading man. I'd overcome all obstacles, save the day. And I'd always get the girl. Well, not always. When I was Rick Blaine, I lost Ilsa." He smiled to himself. "I confess, Academy Award or not, that didn't sit well with me. I worked out several scenarios where I could still have Ilsa." He glanced over his shoulder at Laura then turned back to face the empty hallway in front of him. "Since I met you, I've had a life I've never wanted to escape. Wanted the occasional vacation from, maybe." He heard a faint chuckle behind him and knew she was in agreement. His own sardonic smile evaporated. "We've overcome many obstacles, you and I. Saved the day a time or two. Most importantly, I got the girl." He found himself gnawing on his thumbnail, forced himself to stop. "You know what frightens me the most, Laura?"

"What?" she asked quietly.

"Getting confused about how things really were, how they are. I'm sure you'd be the first to say our life together hasn't been perfect, but as for me, when it comes right down to it, there's not one thing I'd change about it. It's what makes it my life."

Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. "I'll help you keep things straight."

He shook his head. "Not good enough. I want to find these voices and stop them."

"The drugs – "

“Will have no effect. At least, not the intended ones. The voices aren’t in my head.”

“Mr. Steele – ”

He wheeled about. “The sheets on our bed are emerald green. I know my emeralds from my jades, Laura, and I would’ve never had the thought that the sheets are jade green. There must be another explanation for the voices. One that fits the facts but starts with the premise the voices are real.”

She regarded him a long moment, and he knew she didn’t buy into his reasoning. He was about to walk away, to where he didn’t know, when her expression cleared and she gave his shoulder a squeeze. “All right, let’s say the voices are real.” She turned and paced the hall, her palms pressed together under her chin. “From what you’ve told me, the voices either give a fairly accurate account of past or present events – ” She broke off, then said her next words with particular emphasis. “From your point of view.” From her expression he assumed she had some dispute with his objectivity. She resumed her pacing. “Or they, shall we say, fantasize about your life, as if from your point of view.”

“Let’s focus on the ones who try to rewrite the past.”

She nodded and kept pacing. “They’re doing what you did with Rick Blaine – they’re dissatisfied with something that ‘actually’ happened, so they’re trying to put a different spin on it,” she theorized. She stopped and gave him a subdued smile. “You know, this reminds me of something. In college, I took a literature class. We had to read ‘Wuthering Heights,’ and I told the professor I hated how it ended. He gave us the assignment to get into one of the character’s heads and rewrite the story”

Her gaze turned inward, and at the sight of her mulling things over in her mind, Steele felt his hope a newly fledged bird, eager to fly yet terrified it would discover it couldn’t. “Laura? Where is your literary trip down memory lane taking you?”

She looked up from her cogitations. “You said it first. ‘That line needs a rewrite.’ And in our class, we rewrote ‘Wuthering Heights.’”

“I’m not following.”

“The moving finger, having writ, rewrites.”

“Sharif say that too? I like his ‘A jug of wine, a loaf of bread – and thou,’ better. Especially the ‘thou’ part. ”

“C’mon, Mr. Steele.” She grabbed his hand and led him back toward the elevators at a run, which seemed pointless, given the wait they would have for it to make it to their floor – it wasn’t like he was going to take the stairs next to the elevators, after all. But, he appreciated her avidity.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to explore another possible explanation for what you’re experiencing.”

Steele examined a bookcase full of mysteries, thrillers, and, hidden behind them, romances, writer’s guides, and myriad “how to get published” tomes. “Let me get this straight, Laura. We’re talking with your old English professor because you think I might be a character in a work of fiction?”

Laura slapped his hand as he absently twiddled with the lock on a safe hidden inside one of the professor’s books. She took the book from him and replaced it on the shelf. “Not just one work, Mr. Steele. Many.”

Steele collapsed into a very uninviting wooden chair. “Why couldn’t it have been the movies?” At that moment, the professor walked in. Steele did a double take and leapt to his feet. “Dustin Hoffman!”

“Laura Holt!” Hoffman walked right past Steele as if he didn’t exist.

“Professor Rakewell.” Laura held out her hand in a business-like manner. The phony Hoffman cradled her hand in both of his. He looked her over from bow to stern and stern to bow, his gaze lingering at parts amidships, and Laura blushed and giggled like Steele hadn’t seen her do in years.

“It’s Laura Holt-Steele.” Steele took both Laura and the professor by the wrist, relieved to find he could do so and thus was apparently still corporeal. He broke a handhold that seemed super-glued. “Would you excuse us a moment, please?” he said to the professor with a polite smile. He hooked Laura by the elbow and hauled her aside. “I thought it was just your calculus professor.” Laura flipped her hair and gave him a femme fatale smile.

“So,” Rakewell said, causing Steele to turn toward him, “I understand Laura thinks people are writing about you, Mr. Steele.” The professor took his seat behind his desk. “Fiction or non-fiction?”

“Both,” Steele said. He and Laura also sat down, Steele giving the professor and Laura one last cat-eyed look before relaxing.

“What persons?”

“Well, if I knew what persons – ”

“No, no, I meant, what persons are you being written in? First person, ‘I did this and I did that,’

second person, 'You did this and you did that,' or third person, 'He did this and he did that.'"

"Third person is all I've heard."

"Omniscient or limited?"

Steele blinked.

"Do the voices ever seem to know more about what's going on than you do?" Rakewell asked, Steele assumed as an attempt at clarification.

Steele spent a few moments in recollection. "Once I heard, 'Remington tried not to show it, but the anticipation was getting to him, as well.' And I thought, 'As well as what?'"

The professor sat forward. "Are you saying, nothing else besides anticipation was getting to you in that story?"

"Not that I could see."

"Who was in the story with you at that moment?"

"Laura."

"Aha! Anticipation was getting to Laura too, only you wouldn't know that, and the author was pointing it out." Rakewell slapped his desk. "That's omniscient." They all beamed at each other.

Steele's smile faded. "Why is that important?"

Rakewell shrugged. "It's not. But it's interesting."

Steele looked at Laura and said under his breath, "Academicians." Laura winced in reply.

She turned to the professor. "Why is it only recently he's been hearing these voices?"

"I can't answer that, literaturably speaking. Maybe he really is . . ." Rakewell twirled his forefinger around his ear.

"I'm not." Steele stood. "This is a waste of time, Laura." He strode toward the door.

Laura beat him to it and planted herself in his path. "Mr. Steele, I don't believe you're going crazy –"

"Words of comfort, coming from a woman who thinks I'm a piece of fiction." He swept his arm

out as if presenting himself on stage. “The role of the fictional Remington Steele is being played by the fictional me.”

She caught up his hand between hers. “Remington Steele has never been more real. You’re right, you don’t fit those other criteria for schizophrenia. Except for hearing voices, you haven’t changed in any other respect – you’re still the same exasperating, impulsive man I fell in love with.”

“Thanks. I think.”

She gave him a small smile. “What I’m trying to say is, the psychiatrist was unable to see past her training and offer another explanation. Maybe we’ll find one here.”

“And if we don’t?”

“We keep looking.” She reached for his tie and shook it. “And notice I said ‘we.’”

Gratitude for her love took his tongue away, and he could only trust that the intimacy they shared would enable her to read his feelings in his kiss. Her tender response told him his trust was well placed, but later he would make absolutely sure she understood. The clearing of a throat behind him reminded him they were not alone, and with reluctance, he straightened. “Some things never change, eh?”

“No, they never do. Thank God,” Laura said, and he knew she wasn’t referring to the interruptions of their kisses.

“We’ll pick up there later,” Steele said with a wink.

“You can count on it, Mr. Steele.”

*:: *She took him by the arm, and he allowed himself to be led back to the professor. Laura took her seat, but Steele remained standing at some distance, skeptical that the ivory tower dweller would have better answers to questions he’d asked the shrink.* ::*

“Shut up!”

Steele winced, it striking him how his yell must’ve sounded to his present company. He turned from addressing the room in general to the professor, only to see the man grab for something on his desk under a stack of looseleaf papers. The pile tumbled, some of the papers fluttering off the desk to the floor. The papers, apparently student essays all entitled “The Anatomy of the Love Scene,” were covered with strikeouts and comments in purple ink, and many of them had a large letter F written on them. The professor paid no heed to the litter but rather scribbled away on the yellow legal pad he’d retrieved. “Er, I wasn’t shouting at you, Professor,” Steele said.

The man held up a hand and didn't look up from his writing. "No problem, you've just given me an idea for a story and I have to write it down before I forget."

"Oh, not another one," Steele moaned, no longer tempted to stand closer to the man in order to defy the voice. "Assuming Laura's theory is correct, why is it you writers find my life so interesting?"

"Because we have no life of our own. Don't worry, you won't hear my voice. I'll change all the names and details. Not even you will recognize it's about you. I've got a bestseller here. A movie blockbuster."

It was only on account of Laura that Steele didn't walk out. He waited until the man had ripped the sheet from the pad and stuffed it into a drawer full of similar slips of paper. "Professor Rakewell – "

"Tom."

Steele nodded but did not use the informal address. "Literaturely speaking, the voices I hear narrating events as they occur – why do I hear them only sporadically?"

The professor grimaced. "Given my own experience, I would say the authors are suffering from intermittent periods of writer's block. You hear them only when they're actually writing."

Steele stepped closer. "And when I hear the same idea, over and over, perhaps slightly differently worded, what the psychiatrist called an obsessive thought?"

"Revisions."

"And when I took the mental status exam and told the psychiatrist the current president was Clinton?"

"You were in a flashback."

"And when I don't seem quite me?"

"You're being written out of character."

Steele smiled at Laura. "I like this guy."

Laura's answering smile was muted. "Unfortunately, none of that helps us figure out who these authors are so we can verify this theory."

Tom settled back in his chair and steeped his fingers. "You say some of the stories are non-

fictional, Mr. Steele.”

“Remington.” Steele sat down. “Fairly so. A little creative larceny has been taken here and there.”

“Creative license,” the professor said.

Steele weighed that. “No, ‘creative larceny’ better describes it.”

Tom studied him, then waved the point aside. “What I was getting at, Remington, is those authors are doing research on you.”

Laura got up and took a few paces. “I see where you’re going with that, Professor Rakewell.” She leaned her arms on the desk and looked at the learned scholar. “We are brought to the question, where are those writers getting their information from?”

Steele did his own leaning to catch Laura’s eye. “Or who?”

“Whom,” said the professor.

By what the professor had explained to Steele as the story-writer’s version of the cinematic jump cut, Steele next found himself entering the office suite of Holt and Steele Investigations. “I’ll kill her,” he declared to Laura, who had materialized at his side.

She put a hand on his arm and pulled him to a halt. “We don’t know for sure it’s her.”

“Who else knows us better, who else is always prying for intimate details, who else belongs to an online writers group?”

She patted his arm. “Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

They pussyfooted toward Mildred’s office. Through her opened door, Steele could see her hunched over her computer, fanning herself with a hand. Laura still giving him looks meant to dissuade him from rash acts, Steele called out, “Ms. Krebs.” Mildred nearly shot into the air, or as much of a shot as a seventy-plus-year-old body could make. She stabbed the on-off button of the monitor, then grabbed a book on her desk and buried her nose in it. “That looked innocent, eh?” Steele said out of the side of his mouth to Laura.

Laura patted his arm again. “You just startled her.”

“That’s right, boss,” Mildred piped up. She swivelled her chair around to face them. “I didn’t hear you come in – I’m afraid I’m going to need a hearing aid soon.”

“Glasses, too, it would appear.” At Mildred’s bewildered look, Steele said, “Your book.”

Mildred tittered and turned the book – some kind of tax guide – right side up. “Afraid my age is catching up to me.”

Steele stepped into the office, prevented from moving farther by Laura having snagged his coattail. “Something is catching up to you, Mildred. And there’s no aid for it.”

“Mr. Steele,” Laura said in a low voice, tugging at him, while at the same time Mildred’s smile faltered and she said, “What’s wrong, chief?”

Steele swatted behind him at Laura’s hand and got another step forward before she seized him by the trousers. “What’s on the monitor, Mildred?”

“Just getting a head start on our tax returns, chief,” Mildred said with a brightness only one such as Steele would know to be false – he’d been the one to teach her how to better put on such acts, after all. He strode toward her, towing Laura behind him as she tried to hold him back. “I know how that kind of thing bores you, chief,” Mildred said, her attempt at casualness thwarted by the look of alarm that had come into her eyes at his approach. Steele heard a ripping sound and stopped, feeling a draft, but after making a mental note to have words with his tailor, he resumed advancing on his target. “Nothing you’d be interested in, chief,” Mildred sought to assure him. “Really, chief,” Mildred stammered as Steele towered over her. She started to rise from the chair but Steele gave her a little push back into it and whirled it around to face the desktop.

“You’re due an audit.” He jabbed the monitor back on and kept a hand pressed to Mildred’s shoulder so she couldn’t escape. Laura stood on the other side of Mildred, and Steele met her eyes over Mildred’s head. Laura gave him a remonstrative shake of her head, and then the two of them simultaneously turned to the computer screen.

:: **The heavens were Sundered by an outraged cry.** ::

Steele groaned with the effort of peeling Laura’s fingers from around Mildred’s neck, his ears still ringing from Laura’s screech. “Let’s not have a story that ends in our murdering a potential viewpoint character, Laura. It’s occurred to me there might be money in this. And from the stories I’ve heard, Mildred is much beloved by me – though why this is so escapes me at the moment.” He glared down at the mother of all tattlers of tales.

Mildred rubbed her throat. “I’m sorry, bosses,” she croaked from her position between the narrow confines of the two of them. “It seemed harmless to give them a tidbit here and there. You make the perfect romantic couple.”

“Really?” Steele adjusted his tie.

“Oh, yes, chief. You’re so handsome, you’ve won your lady love despite the odds”

Steele had just put his elbow on the monitor and leaned his chin into his hand when Laura broke in with, “Can it, Mildred.”

“No, Laura,” Steele protested. He gave Mildred an encouraging smile. “This is interest— ” Mildred turned her back on him and pulled Laura close.

“And you, Ms. Holt. You’ve had this man of mystery snake his way into your life – ”

“Snake my way – ”

“Turning your life upside down – ”

“Me turning *her* life upside down – ”

“And in the end you’ve managed to reconcile your attraction to this gorgeous hunk who is making your life more difficult.”

Laura, who up to this point had been vigorously nodding throughout her tête-à-tête with Mildred, now mused, “Well, I wouldn’t say I’ve entirely reconciled it.” Steele put his fists on his hips.

“And each of you is strengthened by the other’s love,” Mildred finished dreamily. She glided from in between them.

Steele looked down at his toes. “Well, at least she got that part right,” he grouched. He peeped out from under his bangs. “She did, didn’t she?”

Laura showed her dimples and looped her arms around his neck. “You know she did.” Steele puckered up but found himself kissing air when Laura spun away from him and toward the figure that was tippytoeing out the door. “That’s no excuse for what you did, Mildred.”

Steele still saw dollar signs. “Actually, it’s a pretty good one – ” He yipped as Laura’s heel came down on his instep. “No excuse, Mildred,” he said through clenched teeth.

Mildred waddled her way back to them. “I’m sorry bosses. Guess things got carried away.” She stuck out her lip and looked up at them through her lashes in an apologetic way that Steele knew would pander to readers’ tender susceptibilities and thus increase sales.

Steele lay next to Laura on the carpet, propped up on an elbow. “You know this is futile,” Laura said to him. She tossed a hard copy of a story about the two of them into the fireplace.

Steele followed with a toss of his own. "But satisfying. Shame, though, that we can't make anything from this. My first hope was to retire off the royalties, but no publisher would touch this stuff."

"And your second hope?"

"Retire off what we could collect by suing the writers group for invasion of privacy. Lawyers said it wasn't worth it."

"I think it was a bit too much to hope people who write these kinds of stories are raking in the bucks, even collectively." Laura made another toss. "And I wouldn't have wanted to sue Mildred. Or Fred."

"I never got Mildred to admit to being the writer 'Krebbie.' And Fred told me his journals were stolen."

"Guess we'll never know." Laura glanced down at the story in her hand. "I'm surprised this one doesn't spontaneously combust."

"Racy, eh?"

"Downright smutty." The fire roared up greedily when Laura added the story to it. It feasted, then settled down with a satisfied hiss.

Steele watched Laura watch the fire. "Quid for your thoughts."

She darted a smile at him. "This reminds me of a case."

"I know the one. 'Bedside Babes.' Did you read the follow-ups these people wrote to that? 'Steele Blushing,' indeed."

Laura chuckled, looking both amused and appalled. "I don't think some of those positions are achievable."

"Should we find out?" Steele waggled his eyebrows.

She threw the rest of the papers into the fire, then playfully knocked his elbow out from under him. He fell onto his back. She crawled onto him and stretched out full length. "Is that all you think about, Mr. Steele? Sex?" She gave him a peck on the lips, her eyes as full of mischief as the dancing flames of the fire.

He cupped her face and drew it down for a much longer return kiss. The particulars of the "Bedside Babes bonfire" they'd held twenty-one years ago were coming back to him now. They'd

been in almost exactly the same positions as just moments ago, slinging copies of the porn magazine into the fireplace. In an astonishing move, Laura had flung herself on top of him after he'd made a teasing remark. Her body pressed to him, her mouth demanding his, he'd had to hold himself very still, had to remind himself to be very gentle, afraid that if he answered in kind, that if he let go with the passion he felt, she'd be off him and out of his apartment before you could say "Veenhoff."

There was no need for such restraint now. He let his hands roam, linger, caress, let his hips undulate, let his tongue have its way. Laura, the pulse of his heart, the breath of his breath, aided his every move, and he abetted each one of hers.

Steele finally broke off the kiss. "Apparently, me having sex with you is all *they* think about, so it's their fault."

"You're only their puppet." Her mouth descended on his in a kiss that had him squirming with pleasure.

"Mmm." Steele smacked his lips. "They can pull my strings anytime."

She supported herself on her arms and began to unbutton his shirt. "Seriously, though, what are you going to do if the voices come back?"

He reached over her hands to undo her blouse. He released the first button and caressed the newly exposed flesh. He placed a kiss there, then lifted his mouth to hers. As their lips touched, he breathed, "Ignore them."

:: **And he never mentioned the voices again, though the writers continued to write about Steele and Laura – or Remington and Laura, or Rem and Laura, or Harry and Laura, even a Remy and Laura.** ::

"Did you hear that, Mr. Steele?"

The End

Final comments: Though I would have liked to incorporate into the story something of each of the list's fanfic writers, I was too lazy to come up with a story that would do so. I had to content myself with a few references, mostly to recently posted stories since they were fresh in my mind, and with some oblique (or not-so) references to specific writers – basically I just went wherever my ideas led me. I hope no one is upset that they or their stories aren't given a nod. I hope no one

is upset that they or their stories *are* given a nod. (I will write you out if you are).

Attributions:

I needed Laura to stay in the bathroom for a while after the tooth brushing, which led me to hair brushing, which led to “. . . she resumed jerking the brush through her hair in short, hard strokes,” spirited away from Pat’s story, “Steele Something Missing.” Then I had to play on that. Sorry, Pat ;-)

I was sure Rocky Sullivan and a mention of her “Who’s Sorry Now” had appeared in some old fanfics. I googled and turned up Debra’s story, “Never Too Young to Steele.” The other crooners are mentioned because they were mentioned in recent fics.

“Michael. . . Lisa. . . Naughty, naughty! Mind if I join in?” stolen from “Steeling Home,” by Xenos.

When I needed a “first time” scenario, I decided that rather than take the easy way out and quote from another recent fic by an author I had already used, I would research old NC-17 stories to see if I could find something that would work. It was a dirty job, but somebody had to do it. As a consequence, I nabbed the lines between the “: *” and “* :” in the psychiatrist’s office that finish with, “Will you at least,” he whispered, “give me a chance to audition?” from Susannah 2K’s story, “Variation on a Steele: the Steele After.”

“Remington tried not to show it, but the anticipation was getting to him, as well,” swiped from “Steeling a Honeymoon,” by LoriL. ‘Katharine “with an ‘a’ like Hepburn” soon to be graduating from Stanford’ kidnaped from the story “Legacy of Steele,” by the same author.

“The writer ‘Krebbie’” may cause one to think of . . . shall I say who, Nancy? But that is purely coincidental, Mildred tells me. And we all believe Mildred, don’t we?

Fred’s journals mysteriously ended up in the hands of Anne.

“Downright smutty” refers to stories written by . . . Good Lord! I see the list of names is so long I will exceed the megabytes I have available on my web site if I try to include everyone. You know who you are. And so does Steele.

Acknowledgments:

Thanks to my test readers Debra Talley and Vicki Cotter and Jamie Marchant for their comments and for putting up with all my emails (“My latest change is . . .”). Ever-supportive Debra came

along willingly, but Vicki was shanghaied when I lured her with an email asking if she'd seen "Stranger than Fiction" and found out she hadn't – just the kind of victim, er, test reader, I was looking for. Jamie felt she had no choice but to read my story because I've been so helpful in critiquing her writings. You can thank Debra for the fact that Steele cleans his ears with a cotton swab and not his pinkies; I should point out, however, that she wanted me to correct some of my incomplete sentences but I ignored her, so she wants you to know she washes her hands of that. You can thank Vicki for the changes I made to the intro – she thought you should all pay more attention to it. Jamie doesn't want to be thanked for any of this – she thinks the story should be worked on for another year and expanded to novel-length (but I'll thank her anyway for not letting me get away with the first draft).

All kidding aside, the input of these three women and of Gary G. was invaluable.