ROUGH MAGIC

A NOVEL OF
THE
AVENGERS*

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ONE

“Ariel, this is Prospero; Ariel, this is Prospero. Do you read, over?” The air traffic controller adjusted his headset, twisted a few knobs on the console in front of him, and listened intently for several seconds before repeating the call. “I’m picking up a lot of static, sir,” he reported to the officer standing nearby.

“Switch on the speaker,” replied the officer, a Royal Air Force group captain, his eyes never leaving the radar screen.

“Sir.” The controller toggled a switch, and a crackling hum issued from the speaker.

“Blast . . .” muttered the group captain under his breath. “First the fire control systems, and now this.”

The static buzz emitted by the speaker was suddenly interrupted by a faintly audible voice transmission. “. . . malfunctioning . . . read, over?”

The controller manipulated a series of knobs and switches in rapid succession as the transmission came through. “Negative. Say again,” he spoke into his microphone.

“Tell him to abort,” growled the group captain, turning away from the console and pacing back and forth. “This damned project has been cursed from day one,” he said angrily. “I don’t want to take any more chances.”

“Very good, sir.” The controller twiddled some more knobs as he tried to make contact.

“I suppose this means the end of the project, and the end of Caliban,” said an elderly man dressed in civilian clothes, who had been monitoring the flight of XB-9, code-named Ariel, with great concentration.

“I expect you chaps are in the best position to know that,” replied the group captain.

“Well, we shall see. Perhaps I can convince the Minister and the Air Marshal to give it one more go—”

The older man’s quiet speculations were interrupted by the controller. “Sir!” he barked, watching the radar screen, “he’s losing altitude!”

Everyone’s eyes fixed on the small screen.

“Ariel, this is Prospero. Report your position!”

There was no response, only static on the speaker.

The controller continued his efforts to re-establish radio contact with the pilot. But for the uninterrupted flow of the controller’s communications and the buzz on the speaker, the tower was silent. The group captain rocked on his heels, jaws
tightening, as he watched the blip on the radar screen that was XB-9. The civilian puffed anxiously on his weather-beaten meerschaum, sending up vast clouds of pungent blue smoke, and from time to time he absently pushed his errant spectacles back in place, as he often did when he was anxious.

Once again the static waned, and the three men were able to pick out fragments of the pilot’s transmission. The controller seized on this tenuous link with the aeroplane, and gave the order to abort. “Do you read, Ariel? Abort, I say again, abort!”

“. . . bloody Fokker! . . .” came the faint but clear response.

“Say again?” exclaimed the astonished controller, coming out of his hunched position and sitting upright. The radar screen showed the XB-9 slowly regaining its former course and altitude.

“There’s a Fokker up here,” crackled the voice over the speaker.

“He must’ve blacked out,” said the group captain. “Pressure and oxygen loss. And now he’s hallucinating. Just what we need.” He snatched up a microphone that stood on the console next to the controller. “Ariel, this is Prospero. Report all systems. Do you read?”

“Fire control systems all down. Losing hydraulics. Radio transmission touch and go. I can hear you quite well, though.” They heard the pilot chuckle. “And there’s some joker in a Fokker popping in and out of view.”

“That’s impossible!” snapped the group captain. “At your speed and altitude? Check your oxygen,” he ordered, in a calmer voice.

“Oxygen dicey. Maintaining present altitude—” The voice was again cut off by static.

“Repeat status on hydraulics.” The group captain was worried. He estimated it would take about half an hour for the pilot to return to base from his current position over the North Sea, and that was assuming constant air speed and aircraft integrity. Quite an assumption, he thought darkly, under the circumstances.

“Showing hydraulics at 90% of optimal,” sputtered the speaker. A few moments of silence punctuated by renewed static followed, and then the pilot spoke again. “There’s that plane again . . . Foxtrot One Niner One Seven . . .”

“Abort, repeat, abort! Can you bring her in?”

Increasing static was making communications more and more difficult.

“. . . request permiss— . . . try . . .”

“Very well, but eject at the first sign of trouble. Do you read?”

“. . . roger . . “

Over the next several minutes the tower lost radio contact with the pilot, but could observe the aircraft’s course and bearing change on the radar screen. No one spoke save for the controller, who kept up a steady stream of chatter and fiddled with his gadgetry, trying everything he could to re-establish contact with his pilot, until the speaker abruptly went mute. For a moment the only audible sound in the tower was
the ticking of someone’s pocket watch. “I’m afraid we’ve lost him, sir,” said the controller, slowly removing his headset and turning toward the group captain. “Radar indicates he’s still maintaining course and speed.” He glanced up at one of several clocks on the far wall, each showing a different time zone, then looked back at the radar screen. “Sir,” he said, leaning forward and peering intently at the small screen, “he’s changed course again.”

The group captain moved into a better position to view the radar screen. “What’s he doing? Keep trying with the radio.”

“Yes, sir.” The controller adjusted his headset over his ears and picked up a microphone. “Ariel, this is Prospero. Do you read, over?”

Nothing. And then, just as abruptly as it had ceased, the crackle of static over the speaker resumed. “Ariel, this is Prospero, do you read?”

In between the jumble of hisses, pops, and occasional howls a faint “affirmative” was discernible. Now the group captain spoke into the microphone. “Report course and speed!”

“. . . adjusted . . . hydraulics . . . losing alt—”

The group captain’s jaw tightened even more. He glanced at the civilian, who was shaking his head. “Right. Ariel, this is Prospero. Eject, man, don’t be a bloody fool! Do you read? Eject!” As he spoke, he saw with dismay that they had lost radar contact with the plane.

“. . . don’t understand . . “ the pilot’s faint voice sputtered over the speaker.

“Eject!” shouted the group captain.

“. . . systems failure . . . pressure loss . . .” More static followed, rendering the last part of the pilot’s transmission completely unintelligible. The men in the tower strained to hear, as the controller’s hands flew over practically every knob and switch on the console. “. . . the key . . . prop— . . . tell ’em . . .”

The elderly man looked at the group captain with a puzzled frown. “Propulsion? How could that be the key to the systems failures?”

One final intelligible communication from the pilot was received before all radio contact was lost with the aircraft. “. . . Mayday . . . punching . . .”

“Raise Alecto on the net,” the group captain ordered.

“Sir.” The controller switched frequencies, adjusted a couple of dials, and spoke into the microphone. “Miranda, this is Prospero. Do you read, over?”

“Loud and clear, Prospero.”

The group captain took the microphone from the controller. “Prospero reports all contact with Ariel lost, repeat, all contact. Do you read?”

“That’s affirmative.” A brief pause ensued. “Received Ariel’s mayday. Do you copy?”

“Affirmative. Have you radar contact?”

The group captain twitched with impatience, even though he knew perfectly well there wasn’t much he could do except wait for HMS *Alecto*’s eyes and ears to report Ariel’s fate. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Ariel down, repeat, Ariel down,” came the tense report over the speaker. Someone in the background could be heard shouting something about search and rescue as the communications officer came on the speaker again. “Prospero, this is Miranda. Ariel down, do you copy?”

“Affirmative,” responded the group captain, setting down the microphone. He turned to the controller. “Ask them to let us know when they’ve found him.”

“Miranda, this is Prospero. Request report when pilot located. Over.”

“Roger. Out,” crackled the speaker, and the tower fell silent again.

Three quarters of an hour later, HMS *Alecto* reported that the aircraft had gone down into the sea, all evidence pointing to an explosion on impact. The pilot had managed to eject, but too late. It was speculated that he’d waited too long and bailed out at too low an altitude. In any event, the plane’s canopy had apparently malfunctioned, resulting in the chute failing to open properly. He was picked up by one of the helicopters, floating in the water, dead.

The group captain listened to the report in silence. At the conclusion of the transmission, the controller slowly took off his headset for the last time that day, and switched off his equipment before falling back in his seat and rubbing his face with his hands. The civilian stood off to one side, staring out of the tower windows, toying with his long-cold pipe, too exhausted for any emotion.

“Well, gentlemen,” said the group captain finally, “there’s nothing more to be done here.”

“Sir,” acknowledged the controller, rising from his chair.

“Go on home, Lieutenant. You’ve had a hellatious day.” The group captain turned to the civilian. “You, too, old chap—”

“I think we could all do with a large whisky.” The older man shuffled over to the two officers.

“Not for me,” replied the group captain. “Not just yet. I’ve something to attend to first, I’m afraid . . .”

“Won’t it keep? You look like you need one most of all,” protested the civilian, as the three of them left the tower.

“Later.”

The sun was setting on what had begun as a splendidly clear, crisp day. Perfect flying weather, each man thought ironically.

“Won’t you change your mind, George? Surely there will be time enough—” began the elderly man, when they stepped out of the tower onto the tarmac.

“There’s never a good time for it,” said the group captain, half to himself, his face ashen. “You carry on without me.”

“What could be so pressing now? The report’ll keep—"
The group captain looked away, in the direction of the setting sun. “I must tell his wife, you see,” he uttered very quietly. “I’m going to have to tell her that this time, her husband won’t be coming back.” The group captain turned and slowly walked back to his office.
TWO

A man wearing the uniform of a U.S. Air Force major sat on a straight-backed wooden chair, hunched forward, his elbows on a small griny table. Overhead, a solitary naked lightbulb dangled from some invisible wire, casting a stark pool of light over the table and chair. The rest of the room receded into darkness, and its dimensions were impossible to guess. It smelled of tobacco and stale sweat.

On the table in front of the man were an ashtray, a battered packet of cigarettes, and a tape recorder whose faint hiss was the only sound in the room at the moment. The man was in need of a shave; his necktie, which had been loosened some time ago, hung untidily askew; both his shirt collar and tunic were unbuttoned. Hanging out of the corner of his mouth was a cigarette, which he now pinched between the thumb and middle finger of his left hand, and took a slow, deep, deliberate drag on it before pulling it from his lips. He examined the lit end of the cigarette with the same slow deliberation, then flicked the ash in the general direction of the ashtray.

"For the last time, Boone, or whatever your name is, who do you work for?" boomed a deep voice from the darkness. Wing Commander Devereaux, ordinarily a man of considerable patience, was beginning to find this whole affair quite tiresome.

Boone took a desultory drag on the remains of his cigarette, then crushed it out violently in the ashtray in front of him. "And for the last time, I’m telling you, nobody. And also for the last time, I don’t have to talk to you guys.” He pulled another cigarette from the nearly-empty packet of Marlboros lying next to the ashtray and lighted it, inhaling deeply.

"You do, and you will," said Devereaux softly. “Eventually.”

"Oh, was that a threat?” Boone pretended to be intimidated. “You’ve got nothing on me--you know it, and I know it. So let’s cut the bullshit.”

"Let’s do.” Devereaux leaned across the table, his face inches from Boone’s. “Let me put it this way: who backs you? whose money funds your arms thefts? who do you work for?”

“What thefts? That’s ancient history, pal. My memory’s faded. Anyway, back then, things were . . . arranged. I already told you, in my business it didn’t pay to ask too many questions.” Boone examined his cigarette carefully. And, he thought, it never pays to give too many answers.

“In your business, perhaps. But our business is asking questions,” snapped Devereaux. “Whom d’you think you’re fooling? Now, then,” he breathed, “why don’t you be a nice chap and answer my questions?”

“OK. I work for the CIA. Happy now?” Boone puffed on his cigarette.

“Don’t be coy with me, you bloody little man,” spat the Commander, smacking the palm of his hand with the swagger stick that until now had remained out of view.
behind his back. Devereaux flung a manila folder he’d been holding under his arm down on the table in front of Boone. Several documents spilled out. “Recognise these?”

“Yeah. So what?”
“All of them were on your person. None of them is genuine.”
The major looked away with a sarcastic laugh. “How the hell would you clowns know?”

Devereaux resisted the impulse to smack Boone across the face with his stick. “We know what you American clowns tell us,” he said, mocking Boone’s tone. “For one, you are not known by the American authorities to be stationed in Britain with any American armed force; in fact, you are no longer a bona fide member of any branch of the American armed services. How’s that for starters?”

“Bullshit.”
“And what about all these documents, old boy? Where did you get them?”

Once more Devereaux leaned toward Boone, a mean gleam in his eye.
“The Spring Valley swap meet,” sneered Boone, sucking on his cigarette.
“What were you doing at RAF Fenmarsh?”
“Looking for the ‘O’ Club.”
“What were you doing lurking about TMF/X?”
“The what?” The American blew a smoke ring.
“Oh, is that what you guys call it?”
“And where the hell did you get the Level One security pass?”
“Sent in ten boxtops from my Wheaties.”

Devereaux smacked the table with his stick, barely missing Boone’s hands. “I’ve had just about enough of you.”

A vague form suddenly sprang out of the shadows and lunged at Boone. Immediately, two more shadowy figures, this time military policemen, leapt forward and quickly dragged the first figure off Boone, then vanished into the darkness.

“That’s quite enough!” barked Commander Devereaux. “This is going nowhere,” he added, after a seemingly interminable silence, his composure regained. “And neither are you, until you tell us what we want to know.”

“Well, then, I guess we’ll all be here ’til hell freezes over,” said Boone with an ugly chuckle, and took another drag on his cigarette. “Right, Sarge?” He glanced at one of the barely discernible figures in the darkness.

A tall, well-muscled man in a sergeant’s uniform stepped into the pool of light.
“Shall I have a go at him, sir?”
“As you were, Sergeant.”
“Sir.” The man stiffened, and retreated from view.

“Since you insist on being so obstinate, Boone, perhaps we’d better conclude
our little interview,” said Devereaux, “as I have no intention of going on until, as you put it, hell freezes over.”

“Well, that’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all evening,” replied Boone drily.

Devereaux barely glanced at Boone. He checked his watch for the time and said, “Interrogation terminated at 2243 hours on seven December 196-.” He then switched off the tape recorder, and turned toward the shadows from which the MP’s had earlier sprung. “Time you chaps had a go at him. Steed?”

John Steed emerged from somewhere in the back of the room and took his place a foot or so away from Boone. Fatigue and boredom were etched in his features. This was strictly the RAF’s problem; some Yank lurking about an airbase is picked up on some vague suspicion of theft, and they all go immediately to action stations. Steed stifled a yawn.

“Steed!” Devereaux’s gruff baritone roused the former from his private grumbling. “A quiet word, if you don’t mind.” The commander took Steed aside. “This Boone, or whoever he is, was caught trying to access some extremely sensitive archives at the experimental testing and maintenance facility,” he whispered. “Up ’til now, he’s only been mixed up in arms thefts. At least, that’s all we’ve been able to turn up on him so far.”

“What’s so sensitive about the archives?”
“M’m afraid I can’t tell you that.”

Steed closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Typical. How the devil did they expect him to help, if he didn’t even know what the problem was? “What are we supposed to do, then?”

“Your people are being briefed. A very serious security breach is involved here, which means you lot will have to conduct an independent inquiry. I think it will be more useful if we turn Boone over to you right now. Maybe you can get to the bottom of this business.”

“I can’t very well get to the bottom of anything until I know what I’m looking for,” said Steed icily.

“That’s not for you to worry about at the moment. Mother will give you further instructions later.” Devereaux nodded at the American. “Just get him out of here.” He motioned to the two MP’s.

“Right.” Steed turned toward Boone. He’d have a chat with Mother later, all right. But this wasn’t the time to be thinking about personal matters. “Come along, then, Major,” he said, his well-rehearsed civility leavened with just a dash of sarcasm.
THREE

The cold night was refreshing after the suffocating interrogation room. The MP’s had Boone by the arms and now steered him toward some cars parked in a gravelled clearing nearby. Steed strolled behind them, idly fingering the coins in his pocket, trying to identify the constellations visible above the treetops. His stargazing was interrupted by the appearance of Tara King, who had been sitting impatiently in her car for the duration of Boone’s questioning. “There you are, at last.” She yawned, stretched, and flexed her stiff muscles. “Can I go home now?”

“School’s not out yet,” answered Steed. She seemed to always be skiving off these days; there was a time when she positively champed at the bit for a place in the hunt. As far as he was concerned, her presence this evening was superfluous, and he would have preferred letting her go, but orders were orders.

Tara pouted. “Oh, well. It’s just that I had plans for later—”

The petulance in her voice rankled Steed. He wasn’t exactly delighted with the prospect of spending the next couple of hours on this dull assignment, either. But then Tara had been prone to peevishness these past several months, ever since that young German chap, von Something-or-Other, had turned up again. Steed recalled how taken with Tara the German had been when she was introduced to him. Tara hadn’t been at all interested then, and the fellow eventually gave up on her and disappeared. But when he resurfaced a few months ago and once again started paying a great deal of attention to Tara, she didn’t seem to mind at all. And she didn’t seem to mind what he, Steed, might have to say about it. It wouldn’t matter as much, he reflected, if they didn’t have to work together anymore. But this was no time to allow personal concerns to interfere with the job. He took a deep breath of the chill night air. “Tara—”

“Rudy and I have made plans—”

“What a surprise,” muttered Steed under his breath. “This shouldn’t take long,” he said aloud. “All I have to do is deliver that phoney Major to our people; all you have to do is keep me out of trouble. And then you can go home.” He glanced at his watch.

“What do you want me to do?”

“The military police will turn Yankee Doodle over to me as soon as we’re ready. I am to take our charge to Site Delta, where I’m to deliver him to the interrogation unit. You are to follow me at a discreet distance until I’m safely within Delta’s perimeter. And that’ll be the end of our menial chores in this little episode. By the way, I’ll be driving that characterless grey Rover over there.” He glanced at a lone vehicle squatting under an old oak some several yards distant.

“Right.” She got back in her car.

Might as well get this over with and go home to a good night’s sleep, he thought, and strode in the direction of the MP’s.
“Do you have to cuff my hands behind my back?” whined Boone. “It’s not like I can go anywhere, you know.”

“Regulations,” replied one of the MP’s.

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit. Anyway, I thought this guy was taking over from you clowns.” He jerked his head at Steed, who was now only a few steps away. “Look, I just want to be able to smoke, OK? What do you say, there, Beau Brummel?”

Steed impassively assessed his prisoner. Just another loudmouth Yank. All bark, no bite. Probably no teeth, for that matter.

“You. I’m talking to you.” Boone eyed Steed with obvious contempt.

This cartoon of an American was getting on Steed’s nerves. Being relegated to the role of Mother’s errand boy, particularly at such a late hour and without any kind of briefing, was insulting enough without the added indignity of playing chauffeur to a knave who’d been drummed out of his regiment.

Ignoring Boone for the moment, Steed stepped over to the more senior of the two military policemen. After a brief exchange of words, the MP unfastened Boone’s handcuffs, then handed both cuffs and key to Steed. Boone was shaking out his hands and rubbing his wrists when he found Steed standing in front of him.

“The name’s Steed, John Steed,” murmured Steed politely, a dangerous glint in his narrowed eyes. He fingered a lapel on Boone’s tunic critically. “Don’t we look untidy,” he continued in the same quietly polite tones. “As for your tailor, me buck—” Steed shook his head in mock distress. “And your cravat is a disaster.”

Boone stared incredulously at Steed before turning to one of the MP’s. “Who the hell is this candy ass?”

A swift glance from Steed silenced any reply the MP might have been entertaining. Turning his attention once again to his prisoner, Steed said, “Now, what do you suppose Grandma would say if you arrived in such a sorry state?”

“Grandma?” Boone snorted. “Where the hell are we going—Tobacco Road?” He clenched his fists and glanced round him warily, gauging the distance between himself and the MP’s.

Steed’s hands suddenly flew to the American’s necktie, and pulled it so tight that Boone gasped. “There, that’s better,” murmured Steed, letting go the tie. There was the merest hint of a smile on his lips.

Boone coughed, tugging at his collar with one hand. “You son of a bitch—” he sputtered, but before he could finish, Steed’s right fist had hit him squarely and hard in the solar plexus. As Boone doubled over, breathless, Steed deftly handcuffed him, hands in front.

“Such language,” chided Steed. “If you’re going to masquerade as an officer and a gentleman, you should at least polish your manners.” Steed’s civility vanished, and he shoved Boone forward roughly. “Come along, boyo. Another word out of you and you’ll learn exactly what sort of son of a bitch I really am.” He walked briskly to
the Rover, with Boone stumbling alongside and cursing. The dull routine of the past several months had bored Steed, and he was not entirely surprised to discover how much he’d enjoyed burying his fist in the soft flesh of this boor. I’m losing my edge, he was thinking; I could do with some proper skullduggery, instead of all this tame nonsense Mother plagues me with these days. That, or pack it in altogether and take up stamp collecting. After shoving Boone into the front passenger seat, he climbed behind the wheel and drove off.

Steed drove at a steady but unhurried speed, letting his mind wander. These country roads had virtually no traffic during the daytime, never mind in the middle of the night. He never overtook any vehicles, nor did any approach from the opposite direction. Boone slouched sullenly in his seat and chain-smoked. Steed’s thoughts led him, as they so often did of late, to his partnership with Emma Peel, when he would wake up every day to the exhilarating feeling of all his senses being fine-tuned to such a pitch that his nerves fairly sang with every breath. Of course, that had mostly to do with Emma herself. He tried to quash any further thoughts along those lines and forced his mind back to the dull job at hand.

* * *

Thick hedges lined both sides of the road they travelled, and there were practically no intersecting roads or lanes. That was one of the reasons Steed chose this particular route. He again checked his mirror for Tara’s lights as he reached the top of a small hill, and he could just glimpse her, a good quarter-mile behind, dutifully tootling along when she’d rather be in bed. A fetching girl, but now grown so distant from him. Evidently that von Whatsits had made a more vivid impression on Tara than he’d originally estimated. Steed tried to picture the man, and recalled only that he was very young, very handsome, very charming, and very wealthy.

Tara yawned and checked her speedometer again. She was keeping to a fairly steady thirty-five miles per hour, more or less maintaining the agreed-upon distance of a quarter-mile between herself and Steed. It had been a long evening, and cold, and excruciatingly dull. She tried to imagine how a long hot bath would feel when she finally did get home. By the clock on the instrument panel, she could see it had just gone midnight. With any luck, she should be home by half past one. That wasn’t so bad; she should be thoroughly refreshed by the time Rudy collected her in the morning for their outing.

Her pleasant meditations were aborted by an old farm lorry lumbering across the road dead ahead. Tara’s heart beat in her throat, and consequently the squeal she emitted was somewhat muffled as she wrenched the steering wheel to avoid a collision. There were gaps in the hedges to her right and left, normally closed off by the large wooden gates which now stood open to permit the lorry to cross the road.

The lorry was just long enough to span the width of the road. It managed to
creep far enough across Tara’s path to block her way completely before it stalled. She couldn’t see the driver, but heard him repeatedly crank the engine in an effort to start it up again. Tara stared at the ancient vehicle, which had to be twice her age, and wondered what it was doing out at this time of night. “You’ll never get it started if you keep flooding the engine!” she shouted in exasperation, pummelling the wheel. She reached for her transmitter. “Dionysus, this is Clio. Come in.” Tara waited, but received no reply. “Dionysus, this is Clio,” she repeated, “come in.” Still no reply. She pressed some buttons and tried again. Silence. Tara reset a small dial and spoke tried once more. “Olympus, this is Clio. Do you read me?” Still there was no reply. She flung the instrument aside in frustration, then hit the dashboard with her fist. “Can’t you get that bloody bucket of bolts out of the way?” she screamed at the lorry, leaning on the horn.

* * *

Steed was once more deep into his thoughts when he was interrupted by the sudden materialisation of an approaching car. The road had straightened out a couple of hundred yards earlier, stretching into the darkness without so much as a kink in it. His back stiffened as he gripped the wheel more tightly. Where in blazes had the car come from? There had been no sign of any traffic for miles. He had not seen any headlamps since they left. He certainly hadn’t seen any cars when the road stretched out ahead of him. As far as he knew, there were no intersections for at least two miles. Indeed, the hedges on either side of the road seemed even thicker and more impenetrable that before.

“What’s the matter?” Boone asked nervously, smelling Steed’s tension.

Steed ignored him.

“Hey, that car’s coming straight at us!”

“I can see that,” replied Steed through clenched jaws.

“They’re trying to kill me,” said Boone, as if he could hardly believe it.

“And who might ‘they’ be?”

“Goddamnit, you asshole, if they wanna kill me, they won’t worry about you being in the way! They’re damn near on top of us now!”

“Do tell.” Steed watched the car come closer and closer, and it looked like it was aiming directly for him.

“Goddamnit, let me get these goddamned bracelets off me!” yelled Boone, struggling with the handcuffs.

“Be quiet and stay down. I haven’t time for you at the moment.”

“I’m telling you, they’re gonna kill me!”

Steady your course and don’t lose your nerve, Steed told himself, his jaws tightening along with his grip on the wheel. He ignored Boone and concentrated on his driving. A moment or two more— He was about to swerve to the right side of
the road and out of the path of the oncoming car when Boone turned toward him and grabbed the wheel, wrenching it violently anti-clockwise and putting them directly into the path of the other car. Shutting his eyes, Steed slammed on the brakes and braced himself for the agonising impact. The only things he felt, however, were his Rover fishtailing and smacking sideways into something on the verge. Steed opened his eyes in time to see the other car flash past them without slowing down or deviating even an inch from its course.

Steed’s left fist smashed backhanded into Boone’s face. With his right hand still on the wheel, he managed to turn the car back into the road. “You stupid shit!”

Boone grunted, rubbing his face. A thin trickle of blood ran from his nose. “You dumb shit! I coulda been killed!”

“I should kill you myself—I don’t give a monkey’s about you. As long as I stay alive.” Steed remembered seeing a narrow track a couple of hundred yards back leading from the road to a stand of oak trees. Without another word he turned the car around, drove down to the lane and turned into it, switching off the lights, and stopped the car. He’d just about had it with Boone, who was proving to be dangerous as well as tiresome. It was time to handcuff the Yank behind his back again. But not before Steed paid him back for that last escapade.

“Hey, what the hell’s this? What are you doing? We gotta get outta here—they’ll be back—”

Before Boone knew what was happening, Steed opened the door and pulled him outside. He shoved Boone up against the car. “You nearly got me killed back there,” he breathed in a dangerous whisper. “I’m going to enjoy this.” With those words, he released his captive and was about to bury his knuckles in Boone’s face when Boone reacted. He drove his knee up into Steed’s groin, and as Steed doubled over, Boone, with his handcuffed hands clasped firmly together, gave him an uppercut to the jaw. Steed folded, like a broken marionette, and fell to the ground unconscious.

A quick search of Steed’s pockets yielded the key to the handcuffs. Boone freed himself in no time, climbed into the car, and moments later was back at the road.

The night was still and bitterly cold. Boone could see no cars in the distance, in either direction. Wondering what had happened to Steed’s partner, he thought he’d wait just a bit longer before inching out onto the road and switching on his lights. Pity Steed didn’t have a gun; that would’ve been handy.

The night was deathly still. Boone decided that it was time to make a run for it and get the hell away from there.

* * *

The lorry driver finally succeeded in restarting his engine, and with a terrible grinding of gears shuddered out of Tara’s way and disappeared into the night. Tara
glanced at the clock on the dashboard; she’d lost five minutes, thanks to that blasted lorry. Well, it shouldn’t be too hard to catch up with Steed, she assured herself. She wondered if he’d noticed she wasn’t following him, and had slowed down for her. Doubtless he was as anxious to get this over with as she was. She changed up and accelerated. He’d drawn some really dull assignments recently; which might account in part for his impatience, even recklessness, of late.

* * *

Boone figured he’d wasted enough time. The coast looked clear enough. He threw the car into gear and floored the accelerator, losing a few moments before he finally got enough traction to fly out into the road.

He deliberately left his running-lights off, and turned in the direction he and Steed had originally started from. He remembered spotting a break in the hedges not far from here, an opening for a farm track of some sort, it looked like. He could take that, and beat feet before these damn fool Brits got the wind up and sent the whole goddamn cavalry out after him.

As he shot down the road, Boone thought he heard the sound of a sharp crack coming from somewhere off to his right. A few moments later, as he careened round a curve, he heard another crack, accompanied by an audible thud, followed by what sounded like breaking glass. It sounded very close. He felt a queer burning sensation in his chest, and the night suddenly seemed to grow darker. He couldn’t see very well where he was going. Boone blinked, straining his eyes, and fumbled for the headlamp switch. Something hot was spreading over his chest, and there seemed to be all kinds of stars in the night sky, even down among the trees.

* * *

Tara thought she glimpsed an oncoming car with no lights when a loud report followed by the sound of shattering glass pierced the still night air. She watched as a car swerved violently out of control on the curve, and heard the sound of crumpling metal as it smashed headlong into a tree. As she neared the scene of the crash, Tara realised with a sickening jolt that the smoking wreck was the grey Rover. Screeching to a stop, she leapt out of her car and ran over to the driver’s side of the Rover. The door had been sheared off, and a human form sprawled out, head downward. Tara recognised the American; but where was Steed? A swift look around confirmed that Boone was alone. She knelt beside Boone, who bled profusely from the chest. Looking up at the shattered windscreen, she could make out two bullet holes on the driver’s side. Boone uttered a feeble groan, and Tara bent down closer to his face. “Can you hear me?” she asked, pulling him out of the wreck. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

Tara was about to rise when Boone summoned his remaining strength and
clutched at her arm. “No time,” he gurgled, blood trickling from a corner of his mouth.

“Who shot you?”
“Bastards,” he croaked.
“Who? Who was it?”
“Tell Steed . . . “
“Tell him what? Where is he?”
Boone’s eyes fixed on a distant point in a glassy stare. His grip on Tara relaxed and his hand fell to his side. Tara leaned as close to him as she could, to catch his words. “Tell him . . . They killed Peel . . .”

“Peel?” Tara went cold. “The Knight Industries—?”
Boone managed to turn his head from side to side, in a feeble negative. “Pete,” he whispered.

“Peter Peel? But surely he died in a plane crash—” None of this was making any sense to her.
Boone mustered the last of his strength and tugged at her sleeve. “Murdered,” he rasped vehemently.

Tara bent nearer to his face. She could barely hear him. “Peggy . . . killed,” she managed to make out. Boone then uttered something about a camera before closing his eyes.

Tara struggled to revive him, but it was too late. Boone’s head fell back, and the thready pulse she’d felt earlier at his carotid ceased throbbing.

Now to find Steed, she thought anxiously, letting Boone drop to the ground. She ran back to her car and was about to climb behind the wheel when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Any chance of a lift?” asked a tired but familiar voice.
Tara spun round. “Thank goodness, you’re all right!”

“Not very, and not for long.” Steed ruefully confessed that Boone had managed to best him, and how. “You know Mother’ll have what’s left of my manhood for this,” he said, mentally berating himself for having been so unforgivably sloppy. “What about you?”

Tara told him about the antique lorry, and about Boone, as Steed listened in grim silence.

“Can you identify the car that shot past here, heading back toward the base?”
“What car?” Tara frowned.
Steed described his encounter with the vehicle. “It happened no more than, oh, ten-fifteen minutes ago. Are you sure you saw nothing?”

“Positive. I didn’t see anything, or anyone,” insisted Tara. “Between the spot where my lorry turned up, and where Boone left you, there are no lanes or anything. It couldn’t have turned off the road. So I should have seen it. If it were there.”

“Are you saying I imagined it?”
“You did suffer a rather nasty blow,” she delicately replied.  
“Not before I saw the car. It was there, I tell you. Or something was. We were at the point of collision when it seemed to just . . . pass through us.”  
“That’s impossible.”  
“I’m only telling you what I saw. I can’t make you believe me,” snapped Steed. His head ached.  
“Well, if it wasn’t a car, what was it?” Tara gently put her hand on his arm.  
“I don’t know.” He stared down at the ground. “I don’t know. Perhaps there’s more to this business than I thought,” he said, gingerly massaging his sore jaw. “But if Mother won’t tell us ahead of time, well—” He left the rest of the sentence hanging in the air. “I suggest we contact Delta, and then I’ll run you home.”  
“Boone said something very weird, just before he died.”  
“And what was that?”  
“He said Peter Peel was murdered.”  
“What?” Steed forgot all about his aches. “Repeat exactly what he said.” His jaw tightened as she repeated Boone’s words, but they meant no more to him than they had to Tara. What the devil was Mother playing at, anyway? And what could Peter Peel possibly have to do with the dead Yank? Peel deliberately killed? This was certainly news to him.  
“Was he murdered?”  
Steed opened the car door. “As far as I know—as far as anybody else knows, for that matter—Peter Peel was killed in a plane crash. You remember the facts—fairly straightforward, I thought. But if we are to believe Boone, it would appear that whoever killed him had something to do with Peel’s death. What, or how, I cannot begin to surmise.” He paused, trying to concentrate on the problem and not allow other thoughts to distract him. “The question is, who knew Boone’s whereabouts tonight? And who knew where to find him to kill him?”  
“I’d say there was a leak,” replied Tara.  
“And I’d say you’re right. But who? Why?”  
“Find that out, and maybe you’ll find out if Boone was telling the truth about Peel.”  
Steed’s face bore a grim expression. “Call in to HQ. I think we ought to assume for now that Boone was telling the truth, and see where that takes us.”  
“My radio’s not working.”  
Steed slammed his fist against the door. “Damnation! Is nothing going right tonight? I’ll see if mine still does.” He limped back to the wreck and returned with a battered but functional portable radio. “At least this seems to be in order. Olympus, this is Dionysus. Do you read?”  
“I read you, Dionysus. Report.”  
Steed succinctly described what had happened, leaving out only the fact that Boone was dead, and requested an ambulance. “Code Red Delta, repeat, Red Delta.”
As soon as his transmission was acknowledged he switched off the radio and tossed it back in the car.

“He’s dead, Steed, there’s nothing they can do.”

“You and I know he’s dead. And so will a few others. But let’s keep that information under our hats for a while, until further inquiries are made. For the time being, Boone is merely injured, not dead. If there’s a leak, the fewer people who know what really happened the smaller the field of suspects.”

Tara nodded. “So now we wait?”

Steed peered at his watch. “With any luck, they’ll be here within the half-hour.”

Nausea overcame him. “I think I’m going to be sick,” he muttered, turning away.

The ambulance eventually arrived and Boone’s body was removed. As soon as the ambulance was out of sight Steed went back to the car, where Tara was waiting. “Let’s get out of here,” he growled, sliding behind the wheel. Tara winced as he ground the gears and manoeuvred back out into the road. “I think I’ll have a little chat with Mother myself—about the late Wing Commander Peel. As soon as he’s through giving me a ballocking for tonight’s fiasco.” He pulled hard on the gear shift lever, accelerated, and with squealing tyres shot off down the road.

“I suppose this means a new investigation will be ordered,” said Tara after a while. “Poor Mrs. Peel,” she added, unwittingly echoing the very thought that had stifled Steed into stony silence. Neither uttered another word for the duration of the drive back to London.

FOUR

The river lapped gently at the hull of HMS Minerva, riding out the high tide in
the Pool of London. Steed strode briskly up the brow, saluting the officer of the watch as he flashed his security pass, and, receiving permission to come aboard, crossed the quarterdeck and headed for the pilot house. He wasn’t looking forward to this meeting with Mother. It had been a long, unpleasant night, and, what with the inevitable inquiries that followed Boone’s “accident”, an exhausting one. Steed was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his mind from wandering; he hadn’t had a good night’s rest in days, and the past twenty-four hours had been unremittingly tense and for the most part sleepless.

A few discreet enquiries in various quarters had turned up nothing of significance regarding Mrs. Peel’s husband. As far as anyone knew—or was saying, at any rate—Wing Commander Peter Peel perished in an aircraft mishap barely six months after his return to England. During a routine test flight, something had gone wrong with his plane, and he was forced to eject. Apparently, the canopy had jammed and Peel wasn’t actually able to eject until the aircraft had lost too much altitude. He was eventually picked up, indisputably dead this time, by a patrolling Navy frigate. There had of course been an official investigation, as there routinely was in such instances. Not that there was much to investigate—Peel’s plane had disintegrated on impact with the sea, and whatever might have been left of it had sunk irretrievably. The whole incident was chalked up to the inherent perils of modern aviation and officially deemed an accident.

Nevertheless, Steed was not entirely satisfied. That Boone fellow knew something, and wasted his last few breaths on exposing a possible murder. Had Peel been mixed up in arms thefts? And was Boone killed to prevent him from implicating Peel? If so, by whom? No, it was too ridiculous. Impossible. When it came to integrity, one couldn’t have had a more sterling professional reputation than Commander Peel. Then again, Steed’s years of experience had taught him to take nothing for granted. Further investigation was in order; but first he’d hear what Mother had to say. The old tyrant had to know something more about the matter than he’d previously let on.

Steed had scarcely stepped through the door to the bridge when Mother spun his wheelchair about and hurtled toward him. “A fine mess you’ve made of this business!” he roared, irascibly waving off Rhonda, his assistant. “You nearly got Tara killed, then you nearly got yourself killed. Finally, you succeeded and got Boone killed!” Mother rolled furiously toward the binnacle. “Now all of military intelligence are apoplectic!”

“I’m frightfully sorry,” Steed said in his most disarming voice, only to be silenced by the sharp thwack of Mother’s swagger stick—an accessory he had recently affected—against the binnacle.

“So am I! Interdepartmental relations are delicate enough as it is, as you well know. But now you’ve gone and made a dog’s breakfast of this whole tiresome little affair—” He glowered at Steed, smacking the palm of his hand rhythmically with the
swagger stick. “What’s the matter with you? You’ve been very sloppy lately. You’re losing your edge.”

Steed couldn’t help a slight smile. Et tu, Mater. “You’re right, Mother—” he started to say, but was again cut off.

“Of course I’m right, I don’t need you to tell me that.” Mother smacked his palm a few times in rapid succession with the stick. “I should put you on involuntary leave immediately,” he grunted, emphasising this pronouncement with a resounding whack of stick against binnacle. “As it happens, however, that is not possible, for I have been informed we are understaffed at the moment. God knows why; the other side have been good little boys for weeks,” he muttered in an aside. Mother gave the binnacle one final reverberating smack. “I’m afraid I have no choice but to keep you on for the moment. Find out who killed this Boone person. Find the leak. Now get on with it!”

Steed inclined his head slightly, still smiling, and turned to leave. “Yes, Mother.” He was about to step through the bridge door when he turned to face Mother again. “What exactly did Boone mean?” Steed raised his eyebrows and looked enquiringly at his superior, a sharp edge to his voice. “Tell me. What he said about Peel—”

“—means no more to me than it does to you,” snapped Mother. “The Air Ministry may know something, but if they do they’re not telling us. They conducted a typically perfunctory investigation when it happened.” He played with his watch fob. “Oh, there were the usual vague rumours, of course, the sort of rubbish incidents of that sort spawn, totally unfounded.”

“What rumours?” Steed’s back stiffened. “None ever came to my attention.”

“Sabotage. Suicide. Utter drivel. The kind of mindless scuttlebutt junior ministry flunkies pass along with the tea and biscuits in the commissary every time there’s an accident of that sort.” Mother spun round in his chair. “The Air Ministry’s official conclusion is that it was an accident. We also looked into the matter, as it involved a top secret project, but the RAF refused to cooperate with our people in this business from the very beginning.” He wheeled up and down the length of the bridge moodily. “Just another example of inter-agency non-co-operation and the bloody-minded intransigence of all military organisations!” he fumed, more for his own benefit than Steed’s.

“We never just ‘look into’ matters where sabotage may be involved, particularly without my knowing about it.” He met Mother’s stare and held it. “What do you know about Peel’s death?”

“As I have already told you, I know no more than you, or anyone else for that matter,” said Mother impatiently. “Now why don’t you be a good boy and toddle on home? I have other problems to attend to.”

“Was Mrs. Peel ever informed about the rumours?”

“Certainly not.” Mother didn’t like these rare occasions when Steed got testy.
Never used to happen, when Emma was around to keep an eye on him.

“Why not?”

“For heaven’s sake, man, what was there to tell her?” shouted Mother. “There were no facts, no evidence—only idle gossip. Don’t be tiresome.” He fixed Steed with a raptorlike stare. “She had more than enough on her plate at the time, I should think. In any case, some sleeping dogs are best left to rest in peace, as it were.”

So he did suspect something after all, thought Steed furiously, struggling to maintain an impassive expression on his face; he just didn’t have the guts to tell me, or Emma, until his hand was forced. “I think she ought to be told now,” he said in a very low, cold voice.

“Concur.” Mother rolled up within a foot or so of Steed. Yes, Emma had had sense, a rare enough commodity in this day and age. And she wasn’t unattractive, either. He’d always liked her. More importantly, she was good for Steed. Kept him finely honed. Pity things turned out as they did; Steed wasn’t quite himself afterwards. And now this business, which promised to be unpleasant for everyone. Mother forced himself to end his mental digressions and return to the matter at hand.

“Therefore I suggest you tell her forthwith, and don’t tarry about it.”

Steed felt his pulse race. “Me? But I know nothing about—Surely it would be better if you—” He spread his hands in an imploring gesture.

“No, you tell her. That’s all, John.” Mother turned his back on Steed and gestured cryptically to Rhonda, who had suddenly appeared from nowhere. “Find out who killed Boone, and you’ll find out who—if anyone—killed Peel.” Rhonda silently took her post behind Mother’s wheelchair. “If you want to know anything about Peel, you should have a chat with his Groupie, George Miles. Well, come along, then, Rhonda,” he growled, waving impatiently in the direction of the charthouse.

“Mother—”

“That’s all!”

Steed watched Rhonda propel Mother into the charthouse. She leaned over and touched a bulkhead, and from somewhere below came the sound of machinery. The charthouse deck gave a shudder, and then both Rhonda and Mother slowly began to descend from view to the decks below.

FIVE

Group Captain George Miles, DFC, had just finished reading a formidably
thick report and was about to heave it aside when the intercom on his desk sputtered, and squawked, “A Major Steed to see you, sir.”

“Very well, Sergeant. Send him in.” Miles got up from his chair and looked out the rain-streaked window at the runway apron below. The door to his office clicked open. “Come in, Steed,” he said, without turning around.

Steed shut the door behind him and walked over to the desk. “Filthy flying weather,” he remarked, laying his bowler and umbrella on the desktop.

“Indeed. I’ve had to cancel today’s training, and the chaps have been restless enough as it is.” Miles finally turned around and faced Steed. “What can I do for you?”

“You know why I’m here,” replied Steed smoothly.

“Yes. Yes, of course. Sorry, old man, I’ve been rather preoccupied lately. Do sit down.” Miles indicated one of the armchairs in front of his desk, and waited for Steed to take it before he resumed his seat. “Well, then—”

Steed came straight to the point. “What’s the connection between this Boone fellow and Wing Commander Peel?”

“We’ve no idea.” Miles leaned back in his chair. “You know as much as anyone, at this point.”

“Seems no one knows any more than the next fellow,” said Steed with impatience. “All right, what theories have we got about Peel’s death?”

“You tell me. Officially, of course, the investigation will be reopened. In fact, that’s being done as we speak. Unofficially, however, I will tell you that I doubt very much any hard new evidence will turn up. Remember, Peel’s plane disintegrated upon impact, so even if it was sabotaged, there’s no way of ever finding out.”

“What do you think, George? Do you think Peel was murdered?”

Miles stared out the window. “Anything is possible. But likely? I don’t think so . . .”

“Why would Boone waste his breath telling us that, if it weren’t true?” Slapping his thighs and rising from his chair Steed began pacing the room. “Let’s assume Boone, or someone he knew, did in fact sabotage Peel’s plane for some reason.”

“Surely, if the plane was sabotaged, then Peel’s death was the unfortunate consequence of the plane’s destruction.”

“Maybe there was something in Peel’s background—”

“You yourself have said you cannot believe Peel was mixed up with Boone in the arms thefts. In any case, most of those thefts occurred while Peel was missing.”

“Boone’s words imply that Peel was got rid of. Deliberately. Perhaps he found something out.” Steed gazed steadily at Miles.

Miles produced an old briar pipe and filled it from a canister on his desk. He took his time lighting up and puffed slowly before speaking. “If Peel knew anything about espionage and sabotage, he certainly never said a word about it to me. Or
anyone else, for that matter.” He watched Steed pace. “Peel was assigned to my unit after his return. I hardly knew him before then; just saw him here and there at various official functions, that sort of thing.”

“Could something have happened while Peel was being held—”

“I thought about that, and even reviewed the transcript of his debrief. I participated in the debrief myself, incidentally, and my recollection of it hasn’t dimmed. I can’t say I saw anything in the transcript or can recall anything that I would characterise as suspicious, out of the ordinary. At least, nothing in terms of providing clues to a murder.”

“Was he engaged in some undercover operation when he went missing? That is to say, did his plane really crash somewhere in South America, or was it made to seem like that’s what happened, so that Peel could be dropped in secretly—”

“There’s no ‘supposedly’ about it. I can assure you, Steed, that he was not, and that his plane did indeed crash-land. Peel was legitimately presumed dead. No one had any idea he’d survived, much less been found alive and imprisoned by some revolutionary group or other, until practically the eve of his release. And then only a handful of people were in on it. Not even Mrs. Peel knew until the day he was flown back to this country.” Miles glanced away. “Remember, Peel was still suffering from the effects of his captivity when we got him back. He was under medical care for a good six weeks in the U.S. before he was certified for discharge, and was under constant observation the entire time. No one ever tried to contact him, nor did Peel act in any way out of the ordinary, under the circumstances.”

“All right, let’s assume, then, that whatever it was Peel knew he found out after his return. Whom did he associate with? What did he do?”

Miles put down his pipe. “There you may want to chat with Emma,” he said, “if you haven’t already done so.”

Steed had sat down again, and was staring at the blurry window behind Miles. “I’m supposed to break the news to her that her husband was murdered. I should have answers to her questions, not vice-versa.” His voice betrayed his edginess.

“Yes. Quite.” Miles fingered his pipe. “As I said, I didn’t really get to know Peel until he joined my unit. He had an excellent reputation, though, which preceded him: hard worker, good pilot, good officer, good all-rounder. He certainly lived up to that reputation. Exceeded it, actually. He really threw himself into the job, you know. Loved to fly, and the riskier the assignment the better, it seemed. He was especially pleased to be in on the XB-9 project.”

“The XB-9—that was the experimental plane that was scuttled a couple of years ago?”

“Yes. Actually, not long after Peel’s death. It had a history of mechanical bugs and demons, and there had already been one fatality during a test flight of an earlier prototype. In any case, due in part to Peel’s death, and in part to certain compromises in the technology, the brass decided to scrap the XB-9 and rethink the entire project.”
“Do you think it’s possible the plane was sabotaged in order to force the government to abandon the project?”

“Unlikely. The plane was pretty much doomed by the time Peel went up in it that last time; we were already looking at a newer, more sophisticated aircraft. We just wanted a few more test flights of the XB-9, to finalise some data pertinent to a new weapons system.”

Steed gazed out the bleary window for a time before speaking. “A new weapons system? Tell me about it.”

“Well, Steed, it was—and still is—all very hush-hush—”

“When is everybody going to stop playing silly buggers with me?” said Steed. He reached for his inside breast pocket. “If it’s my credentials you want—”

Miles waved him off. “No, no, that’s not necessary. I’ve already been briefed, but—” He found his ream and prodded at the ash in his pipe.

“But the less you cooperate with us, the happier your bosses will be, is that it?”

Steed exclaimed with some exasperation. “Too much bother trying to get at the truth of Peel’s death. Easier to let sleeping dogs lie, as none other than Mother let slip. Well?” he barked. “That’s it, isn’t it? Is that what I’m to tell Mrs. Peel?”

“Project Tempest,” said Miles quietly. He paused, glancing at Steed as if in expectation of a question. But Steed said nothing, slouching in his chair with his arms folded. “That’s what the XB-9 platform was ultimately designed for,” resumed Miles, emptying ashes into a paper cup and laying down his pipe. “Peel was ‘Ariel’; ground control was, naturally, ‘Prospero.’ And the weapon itself was ‘Caliban.’”

“And just what did ‘Caliban’ do?”

“It was a prototype laser-holography image generator. Only one of its kind. After Caliban went down with the plane, Tempest was shelved pending further studies and of course the requisite funding. The funding never came through, so the whole project has been lying buried in the top secret archives ever since.” He paused. “That’s why we got the wind up when that American was caught here the other day. He was found in the area where part of the archives is kept.”

Steed sat up. “Indeed? Were the original designs for this contraption in these archives by any chance?”

“I don’t think so. They would normally be stored in Pro and Con’s archives.”

“Not that Boone would necessarily know that.” Steed drummed his fingers on his knees. “What was Boone doing here? Was it coincidence, or did he indeed know something about this Project Tempest?” He looked at Miles. “We know Boone was an arms smuggler—”

“Yes, but he was comparatively small beer, Steed. Automatic rifles, anti-tank weapons, that sort of stuff. Surely, you don’t think—”

“The man may have had ambition,” replied Steed drily. “This Caliban would have been a real coup, wouldn’t it?”

“Impossible! You’re implying a security leak of monstrous proportions!”
“In a manner of speaking,” murmured Steed with a faint smile. “You still haven’t told me how ‘Caliban’ worked.”

“I’m no scientific expert, so I can’t really explain how it worked. That’s something the Project Engineer could have explained rather better. But in summary, it was theoretically capable of strategic deception based on a capability to generate three-dimensional images of, oh, you name it, men, matériel—”

“In other words, deceive the enemy into seeing something that wasn’t there.”

“Precisely. Mind you, it was still in its rudimentary stages. We never did find out exactly how capable a system it was in practice.”

“And the only prototype went down with the plane Peel was flying on his last mission, you say?”

“Yes. And, unfortunately, it wasn’t working during that flight.” Picking up his pipe again, Miles settled back in his chair. “Nothing, it seems, was working that day. Poor bastard,” he sighed, staring down at his hands.

“Can you get me a transcript of the tower’s communications with Peel during that last flight?”

“I thought you might want to see that, so I’ve had my sergeant make a copy for you. You can collect it from him on your way out.”

“Thanks. By the way, do you still have the tapes of those transmissions?”

“I imagine they’d be in the archives, along with the rest of the stuff on Tempest. Do you think you’ll need them?”

“I might. For now, however, the transcript’ll do.” Steed stood up. “Who built ‘Caliban’?”

“That I’m afraid I can’t tell you. All I know is that it was a blind project—that is, the various components of the device were manufactured by different companies. For security reasons, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate. Makes it more difficult to duplicate the device.”

“Of course. A common precaution. Who knew of the project?”

“Aside from myself, the Project Engineer, Peel, and a few thoroughly-screened others, no one but the Air Marshal and the Minister himself. As I said, it was very, very hush-hush. Even the manufacturers of Caliban’s various components had no way of knowing or even guessing what it was they were supplying parts for.”

“Nevertheless, someone could have found out about Caliban, and could have got hold of the blueprints.”

“Impossible!” repeated Miles. “This wasn’t your garden-variety weapon, Steed. From its inception, the Project was shrouded in the most sophisticated security—”

“Or someone got hold of Caliban,” muttered Steed, hooking his thumbs in his waistcoat and pacing back and forth once again.

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“Oh, come now, you don’t really think—” began Miles, but broke off with an anxious glance at Steed.

“Just suppose for a moment that Caliban was to be removed from the plane.
And suppose Peel either knew, or suspected, that such a scheme was in the wind, and who might be involved. That would leave us with the other alternative as to why he died—and that is that someone did in fact want Peel out of the way. Permanently.”

Knitting his brow, Miles relighted his pipe and smoked thoughtfully. “I see what you mean.”

“Now, suppose Caliban was in fact removed from Peel’s plane. How apparent would that have been?”

“Well, it wouldn’t—not until the system was engaged.”

“And was it in fact engaged during that last flight?”

“No. Peel was having all sorts of problems with the aircraft. As I mentioned, Caliban was one of the systems that appeared to be malfunctioning at the time.”

“Well, now, if you had pinched Caliban, wouldn’t you want to remove all traces of your theft, so that no one would even suspect it was stolen in the first place?”

“What are you driving at?”

“Get rid of the plane, and get rid of Peel, and who will ever know that Caliban—the one and only prototype in existence—did not perish along with the aeroplane and its pilot?”

Miles took his pipe out of his mouth and stared off into the distance. “Yes, I see. Poor bastard.” He would never forget the bone-chilling cold of that winter evening, and the frozen expression on Emma’s face when he told her how her husband had perished. “But as I said, that’s utterly fantastic! Anyway, Boone was deported shortly thereafter.”

Steed wasn’t going to waste time arguing. “What else can you tell me about Peel?”

“Not much, I suppose. I rarely saw him after working hours—that is, after my working hours. Peel always seemed to be flying—either the XB-9 or one of those antiques his flying club was so fond of. As it happens, I was courting my wife-to-be at the time, so you wouldn’t have found me hanging about the hangars any longer than absolutely necessary.”

“Someone finally managed to clip your wings, eh?”

“I’m afraid I’m grounded for life,” Miles replied with a smile. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you. I believe you’ve met my wife—the former Lady Diana Forbes-Blakeney.

Steed grinned with approbation. “You old devil. Congratulations! Well done!”

“Thanks. The right person makes all the difference . . . .” He fell silent. After a while he said, “For a chap who’d just come back from two years of political imprisonment, with a wife as delectable as Emma waiting for him at home, Peel certainly seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time pursuing everything under the sun except her.”

Steed took great pains to adjust a cuff. “Indeed?”

“Oh, I know that his experience would necessarily have changed him; it was
not unlike what happened to POW’s in the last war. But generally, when they had supportive wives or family, they did quite well. That’s what I found disconcerting about Peel: he was always so detached, so remote.”

“Did he ever talk about himself?”

“Not to me. With him, it was always the job, or those old planes. I don’t seem to recall him being matey with any of the other officers. Polite to one and all, but distant nonetheless.”

Miles’s impressions of Peel didn’t at all resemble the husband Emma had once described, thought Steed. To be sure, Peel’s return to normal life from what must have been a psychological hell cannot have been an easy transition to make. But staying aloof from Emma was hardly the way he, Steed, would have gone about readjusting. He glanced at his watch. “It’s getting late. I suppose I’d better be pushing off.” He shook Miles’ hand. “You’ll keep me posted, won’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve already had a chat with Mother about all that.”

“Good.” Steed picked up his hat and umbrella. “George, what did you think of Peel?”

Miles took a few puffs on his pipe. “He seemed to volunteer for every dangerous assignment that came up. You’d think he’d had enough excitement of that kind. It’s as though he were trying to prove something to someone. Surely not to Emma. To himself, perhaps.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Miles shifted uncomfortably. “He was too tightly wound. And too . . . dispassionate.”

Steed blew a mote of dust off the brim of his bowler. “And what about Mrs. Peel? What was she like after her husband’s return?”

Miles coughed slightly. “More or less what one might expect of a woman whose husband had returned from the dead.”

“But.”

Miles’s eyes met Steed’s. “But. Beneath the façade of self-control there was always such tension. And then, after Peter died, all that tension was supplanted by a bitterness, a hardness that I’d never seen in her before.”

“Doubtless his death was extraordinarily hard on her; I mean, to be widowed twice, and by the same man?”

“Harder than she cared to admit, I think.” Miles’s pipe had gone out again, and he set it down. “She never talked about him afterwards. Just threw herself into her work and pretty much took over running the family firm.” The rain was really pelting down as Miles looked at the wind-blown streaks of water crazily criss-crossing the windowpanes. “As if she suddenly had something to prove to someone,” he added, as though the thought had only now occurred to him.

“Do you think her husband might have told her something that made her suspect he was in danger, or was killed?”
“No, I don’t think so. We had no reason to believe Peel’s death was anything but an accident when it happened. Emma certainly never questioned it.” Miles put his hands in his trouser pockets. “In the course of the investigation at that time, we naturally asked her a few routine questions, and I myself saw quite a bit of her in the weeks following Peter’s crash. I don’t recall her ever mentioning anything that suggested she had any suspicions about the cause of her husband’s death.” He stepped out from behind the desk as Steed started for the door. “So you’ve been tasked with telling her—”

Steed nodded curtly at Miles, and reached for the door handle. “I’d best be off. Let me know when you hear anything.”

“Right-ho.”

“Oh, just one more thing,” said Steed, pausing in the doorway. “Can you give me the name of Tempest’s Project Engineer?”

“Squadron Leader Hogwood. But it won’t do you much good, I’m afraid. He’s dead.”

“Is he, now?” Steed leaned against the door. “And when did he drop off the twig?”

“Oh, a couple of years ago, at least,” frowned Miles, pulling his ear. “As a matter of fact, he was killed shortly before Peel died.”

“Killed, you say?”

“Flying accident,” said Miles.

“My, what a coincidence. The Ministry should double your danger pay. Hogwood didn’t happen to be chummy with Peel, by any chance?”

Miles shook his head. “I doubt it. Peel kept pretty much to himself. In any case, his temperament was rather different than Hogwood’s. Frankly, I used to wonder how Piggy ever became a pilot—”

“‘Piggy’?”

“Hogwood’s old school nickname, don’t you know,” said Miles with a wry smile. “Not very original, I grant you—”

“Now there’s a coincidence,” said Steed thoughtfully, and turned to leave. “You’ve been most helpful, George. If you think of anything else, you know how to reach me.”

Miles started to grunt something, but Steed had already vanished from sight.
The sun was setting when Steed awoke, stiff and unrefreshed, on his antediluvian sofa. Painfully raising himself to a semi-upright position he shivered, yawning, and squinted at the clock on the mantel shelf. He’d fallen asleep shortly after reading the transcript of the radio transmissions of Peter Peel’s final flight, and had slept fitfully, dreaming about all sorts of things he preferred not to think about during waking hours. Mrs. Peel had figured prominently in those dreams. On the rare and all-too-brief occasions in the past when his dreams had included her, they were without exception utterly pleasurable. But not this time.

Steed struggled to his feet and hobbled across the room to the drinks cabinet. Emma (as he always thought of her) had never forgiven him for failing to make an appearance at her husband’s funeral. He splashed some brandy into a tumbler. He imagined she ascribed his aloofness at the time to either callousness or, worse still, superficiality. He never told her the real reason for it, and made all kinds of excuses to himself as well. He took a long pull on the brandy. In the final analysis, he could never be anything more to Emma than a close friend. He swallowed the rest of the brandy, realising that he was still making the same old feeble excuses. Face it, old boy, you lost your nerve. Nothing less. And now Mother had saddled him with the unpleasant task of telling her that her beloved husband had been killed. Steed poured himself another drink. The fellow had been Emma’s choice. Twice. Steed had another generous gulp of brandy. Mother’s insensitivity infuriated him. The old bastard was no fool and surely must have guessed at Steed’s feelings for Emma. And now, to force this confrontation upon him— “To hell with Mother and everyone else,” snarled Steed. Mother himself could bloody well tell her, and be damned for his trouble.

One hour and three brandies later, Steed was roused by an insistent knocking on his front door. Wondering who could be calling on him at such an inconvenient hour, he peered though the peephole and was surprised to see Tara. Someone was with her, standing behind and slightly to one side of her. He opened the door.

“Steed!” Tara breezed into the living room. “Mother is being perfectly beastly about this whole affair!”

Interesting choice of words, thought Steed. He assumed his most charming manner. “Tara, my dear, delighted to see you. As always.” Then, turning to the young man, he said, “You, of course, are the Baron von Kurt. Do come in.”

The young man smiled warmly and extended his hand to Steed. “Rudy. Please. The other is so stuffy. Delighted to meet you once again.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine.” Steed returned the man’s smile and shook his proffered hand. “Rudy.” Handsome devil; and with definite style. Élan, even. Impeccable public school accent, on top of it all. “As for me, everybody calls me Steed. Including my relatives.”
“Look, Steed,” said Tara, “we can’t stay, but—”

“I was just about to offer you a drink,” broke in Steed smoothly. “Baron, er, Rudy—what’s your tipple? Whisky? Brandy? Schnapps?” Turning back to Tara, he murmured, “I imagine you’ll have the usual.”

“Really, Steed, we can’t, we’re already late as it is. Cocktails and dinner at the Embassy,” explained Tara, “and we’re not even dressed.” His amused look was met with a frown of severe disapprobation from Tara, and a suppressed grin from von Kurt.

Tara hooked Rudy under the arm and propelled him toward the front door. Turning to Steed, she said, “Cheeky monkey. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Tara.” Steed put his hand on her shoulder. “It’s been a long day. What have you come to see me about?”

Von Kurt gently disengaged himself from Tara and moved toward the landing. “Ah, excuse me, but I think I’ll just pop down to the car and wait. You have business to discuss. Perhaps some other time for the drinks. Good bye, Mr. Steed!” With that, he started down the staircase.

“You like him, don’t you.” Steed put it more in the form of a statement of fact than a question.

“Yes. And he likes me,” replied Tara. “As for you, you’re just being difficult.”

“Tara—”

The faintly pleading note in Steed’s voice disarmed her. “I just wanted you to know I’ll do what I can to help. If you need me.”

“I wish you would. Mother wants me to tell Mrs. Peel about her husband—”

Tara’s huge eyes fixed him with a firm but affectionate stare. “And you are going to tell her.”

“No, I’m not! I don’t have to tell her anything.”

“Yes you are, and yes you do,” she retorted. “You owe her that much at least, Steed, and you know it.” Tara rummaged in her handbag. “Meanwhile, see what you can make of this,” she said, handing him a piece of paper. “It was in Boone’s wallet. We’re still going over the few things he had in his hotel room, but I’m afraid this is the only item one might call a clue.”

Steed examined the sheet. It was a receipt from a theatrical costumier’s.

“What’s this all about?”

“Don’t know. It was given to me not an hour ago, to deliver to you.”

“Very well, I’ll look into it. Tomorrow.” He folded the receipt and put it in his pocket. “Care to come along, or do you have other plans?”

“I thought you were going to talk to Mrs. Peel first.”

“I think not. There’s not much to tell her yet.”

“You’re just stalling.” Tara paused in the doorway. “What time tomorrow?”

“Shall we have lunch first?”

“Can’t. How about I meet you, say around two?”
“Right. Two-ish it is.” Steed put his arm around her. “How about dinner, then?"

“Steed—”

He let go of her.

“I think you’d better have that chat with Mrs. Peel soon. Perhaps you should ask her to dinner.” She bounced down the stairs and out into the street to the patiently waiting von Kurt.

Steed slowly shut the door behind him, and leaned back against it. He didn’t want to think about Emma just now. In fact, he didn’t want to think about a damned thing. He poured himself another large drink, flung himself down on the sofa, and began counting the books in the bookcases.
Shortly after half past two o’clock in the afternoon of the next day, Steed and Tara stood in front of the unprepossessing entrance to an even more unprepossessing warehouse in a seedy little alley somewhere in Covent Garden. Steed eyed the peeling paint of the weather-beaten shopfront sceptically, and tried to peer through the grime-streaked window. A large dilapidated sign, proclaiming “VENUS THEATRICAL COSTUMES, Ltd.—Purveyors to the Trade Since 1756” in black Victorian lettering, hung above the doorway. “Wonder if anybody’s home,” he muttered to Tara, who in the meantime had tried the door and found it open.

“Coming?” she called, stepping over the sill.

Cautiously following her, Steed waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the shadows. “The Old Curiosity Shop,” he said, looking all around him at the remarkable collection of costumes representing practically all known historical periods, as well as a few invented ones.

Inside the long, narrow, murky interior of Venus Theatrical Costumes, Ltd. hung countless garments on multi-tiered racks that lined the walls. Each rack had a mechanismed rail through which the clothes-hangers passed, so that, with a simple flick of a switch, one could effortlessly move any of the costumes on any of the racks within easy reach. In addition to the clothes, there were all kinds of accessories scattered higgledy-piggledy among the cabinets and shelves that formed aisles of sorts down the centre of the warehouse. Wigs and shoes, hats and jewellery, belts and handbags, rapiers and six-guns, to name but a few items, could be found to complete any of the costumes in the shop, as well as complement any get-up that anyone could conceivably dream up on one’s own. Steed stopped to look at a jumble of bejewelled dirks displayed in one of the cabinets.

“Steed!” Tara had already found what passed for a counter at the back of the warehouse, and waited impatiently as Steed dawdled along the aisle.

“What’s the hurry? If Venus Theatrical Costumes have been here since 1756, I doubt very much they’re going anywhere soon.”

“This place gives me the shivers,” she shuddered. “I’d just as soon not hang about, thank you. So what’s your plan?”

Steed leaned against the counter. “Plan? I’m not a method actor, my dear. I improvise.”

Tara rolled her eyes just as the faded velvet curtain behind the counter parted and an equally faded, froggy little man hopped out. “Forgive me, dear lady,” he said in a kind of raspy croak, “for keeping you waiting. I was brewing some tea and didn’t hear the bell.” He was round and bandy-legged, and stood, shoulders hunched, eagerly rubbing his scaly hands. “And good day to you, young gentleman.” He made an odd little bow at Steed. “Quentin Q. Venus, at your service.”

“Mr. Venus, how do you do. John Steed. May I present my wife, Tara?” said
Steed in his most engaging manner.

“Sir, Madame.” Mr. Venus bowed again in his odd fashion. “An honour and a pleasure.”

“You’ve quite a collection here, I see.” Steed pointed with his umbrella. “Perhaps you can help us.”

“There isn’t a costume in the world that I cannot provide,” huffed Mr. Venus, drawing himself up to his full height (which was about five-foot-four). “Just tell me what you require, sir, and I shall find it.”

“Excellent! You were recommended to us by an old friend, you know.”

“Indeed? May I be so bold as to inquire who?” Steed’s easy charm appeared to have soothed the slightly nettled, if morbidly sensitive, pride of Mr. Venus.

“A Major Boone. American chap.” Steed took out his pocket book and removed the receipt. “As a matter of fact, the major hired a costume here.” He handed the receipt to Venus. “Alas, he had a sudden change of plans and couldn’t stop by to collect it himself, so I said I’d do it for him.”

The little man grasped the delicate pince-nez hanging round his neck on a faded ribbon of indeterminate hue and clamped them on his nose, then examined the slip of paper. “Number 4356-UM; Major A. Boone; will call,” he read aloud. “Let’s see, now.” Venus reached under the counter and the sound of whirring machinery suddenly reverberated through the warehouse.

“Quentin Q.?” murmured Steed to Tara, while Mr. Venus busied himself with the plethora of costumes floating past on their racks. “What’s the ‘Q.’ stand for, I wonder?”

“Quaint?” guessed Tara. “You know, he reminds me of Mr. Toad of Toad Hall.” She suppressed a giggle.

“You’re too kind. I keep thinking of our mutual friend’s Dickensian namesake,” Steed whispered in her ear, then put his finger to his lips. “Shh. I think he’s found it.”

The gloomy vastness of the shop was again silent, Mr. Venus having turned off the rack mechanism. “Ah, yes, here it is,” exclaimed the little man gleefully, taking a costume off the rack and comparing the number tag on its paper wrapper to the number on the receipt. He peeked under the paper before hanging up the costume on the rail above the counter. “Now I remember your friend. He was the pilot from the Lafayette Escadrille.”

Tara and Steed exchanged glances. “I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” said Tara, “he wasn’t quite old enough—”

“I think Mr. Venus is referring to the costume, my love,” Steed smiled indulgently.

“Yes. Quite. I’m afraid I’m not much good with names. But the costumes I remember.” Mr. Venus made a notation on the receipt and handed it back to Steed. “Now, then, I take it you, too, are going to the Ball?”
“The Ball?” Steed pretended to read Venus’ scribble on the receipt.
“The Artists’ Charity Ball.”
“Oh, yes, of course, silly of me, the Charity Ball.”
“I am always inundated with a flood of requests for costumes this time of month for just that Ball,” Mr. Venus said fervently. “Great demand, great demand.”
“Indeed. It must be trying.” Steed gazed with sympathy at the agitated proprietor. “Lots of costumes hired for the Ball, then?”
“Oh, by just about everyone who attends, sir.”
“Mm. Same old crowd, year in, year out?”
“I suppose, sir, though the Ball’s only a few years old, you know.”
“Quite. Any unusual patrons of your establishment?”
“I fear so, sir. It isn’t easy accommodating every whim and fancy of each customer who requires to be outfitted. Particularly when some people have no sense of period, or style, and absolutely insist on wearing some grotesque parody of a proper costume.” It was evident that this was a topic dear to Mr. Venus’ heart.
“I should think not! I must say, I don’t envy you one whit.”
“A dedicated theatrical costumier is an artist in his own right, dear sir. My family have been collecting and recreating authentic costumes since 1756. The time, the painstaking research and effort that go into the creation of each and every one of the costumes in this establishment—” Clearly, Mr. Venus was very much moved by the subject, and was momentarily unable to continue. “This is not a matter to be treated cavalierly!”
“I do so agree.”
“And yet, some people think no more of wearing the cravat of an Incroyable with the breeches of a Sans Culotte than— than—”
“Than biting the ends off their cigars and drinking their champagne at room temperature,” interjected Steed, in his most aggrieved tone of voice.
“Just so!” Mr. Venus decided that there was still hope, after all. “I can see that you, sir, are a gentleman of discernment and taste.” He cast an admiring eye over Tara, who was standing off to the side, enjoying the conversation, and trying very assiduously not to laugh. “Now, how may I serve you, sir?” He pressed his palms together and made another of his unctuous little bows.
“Would it be possible to be outfitted at this late date for the Charity Ball?”
Mr. Venus waved at the abundance of costumes. “I am sure I can accommodate you, my dear sir.” He nodded at Tara. “And of course Madame.” He paused, looking slightly befuddled. “Forgive me,” he uttered humbly. “It is ‘sir’?”
“Beg pardon?” Steed smiled vacantly.
“Er, not ‘my lord’?”
Steed shook his head.
“Oh dear. Forgive me,” repeated Venus with some confusion. “‘Your Grace’?”
Steed beamed. “My dear Mr. Venus. ‘Mr. Steed’ will do.” He glanced at Tara. “We’ve never stood on ceremony, have we, my beloved?”

Tara smiled and looked adoringly at Steed.

“I see. Quite.” Mr. Venus began to bustle. “Shall we?”

“Splendid!” Steed beckoned to Tara. “Now then, my dove, have you decided?”

Turning back to Venus, he said quietly, “Let’s start with my wife. A delightful creature, but she can be rather, um, shall we say fickle at times, don’t you know.”

“Say no more, Your, er, Mr. Steed, say no more.” Mr. Venus raised the counter-top hatch and leapt out, measuring Tara with his eye. “Well, now— The Charity Ball has a theme, of course—”

“Hmm?” Tara picked up an unusually uncomfortable-looking ladies’ shoe and began to examine it.

“Indeed. Most guests come dressed as a character out of the arts—a literary character, or operatic character, or a character in a painting. Or the cinema. That sort of thing.”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

“Military uniforms are always popular, even though they’re not strictly in keeping with the artistic theme.”

“That’s not what I had in mind,” said Tara.

“No, of course not, Madame, of course not,” sputtered the little man, hopping from one foot to the other and rubbing his hands together. “Not to worry, we’ll find something suitable for Madame in no time.” He ceased hopping as abruptly as he had begun, and realigned his spectacles.

“I rather had my heart set on Scarlett O’Hara.” She gave Venus her most soulful look.

Mr. Venus harrumphed discreetly, and turned to Steed. “But Vivian Leigh was such a delicate little thing,” he said plaintively.

“Yes, she was, wasn’t she,” replied Steed, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He moved over to Tara, put his arm around her waist, and nuzzled her shoulder. “Perhaps one of the Valkyries, my angel?”

Tara pushed him away unceremoniously. “Scarlett O’Hara. Vivian wasn’t that delicate.”

“I will see what I can do,” exhaled Mr. Venus, going behind the counter once more and pressing an invisible button. The costumes again began to whirr about the warehouse. “I think we will be able to accommodate Madame,” he said presently, stopping the mechanical rack and reaching for a gown. “I think this should suit Madame’s purpose.” Venus held it out to Tara. “Madame may try it on over there.” He gestured toward some fitting rooms. “And for you, sir? What shall it be?”

“Rhett Butler, what else?” drawled Tara, taking the gown from Venus and strolling to the fitting rooms.

“Frankly, my dear, I rather had my heart set on The Scarlet Pimpernel. Sir
Percy Blakeney, Baronet, what?” The last sentence Steed delivered in the affected manner of the character he referred to.

Mr. Venus’ face lit up with artistic enthusiasm. “But of course, sir! A much more appropriate choice, if I may say so!” He rubbed his chins thoughtfully, then bent down and threw a switch. “I’ve always been rather partial to the eighteenth century myself, sir,” he confided. “You must allow me to dress you in early Georgian someday. I picture you as a contemporary of George Frederick Handel’s. A man-about-town, enjoying a not insignificant popularity with the ladies. Definitely embroidered waistcoats and silver shoe buckles.”

Steed inclined his head with a gracious smile, and watched Mr. Venus begin to assemble an ensemble worthy of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Meanwhile, Tara returned from the fitting rooms and announced that she would hire the gown. “What have you decided on?” she asked Steed.

“‘The damn’d elusive Pimpernel,’” he quipped. “Rather fitting, don’t you think, my precious?”
EIGHT

Emma Peel sat behind the vast oak desk in her office, poring over reams of graphs, charts, lists of figures, and assorted other arcana that make up the daily diet of business executives. She was tired and bored. She’d been at it all day long, and was ready to go home; or, more precisely, ready to leave the office. She had no real desire to go home. There wasn’t much to do there, other than mope and wax nostalgic. This time of year was particularly trying, what with everyone in Christendom caught up in the festive mood and gearing up for yet another onslaught of Christmas, when all she felt like doing was crawling into bed and hibernating until it was all over.

“Heigh-ho,” sighed Emma, ordering the papers into tidy piles. “Chin up, old girl,” she heard herself mutter, “there’s a dance in the old dame yet. I think.” She rubbed her eyes, then checked her diary. One more appointment, and then she would go on home, treat herself to a leisurely soak in the bath, and eat a simple home-cooked meal for a change. She swivelled in her leather chair, surveying the office. She had had it redone not too long ago, and decided she was pleased with the transition from the previously spare, even cold modern style to this more comfortable eclecticism. The walls were panelled in oak, to complement the desk and bookcases. In front of the fireplace, with its Adam mantel, were a pair of wing chairs and a Queen Anne table. An enormous Chinese rug in hues of dark blue and cream covered the polished hardwood floor. On the wall behind her hung a large seventeenth-century Dutch landscape. She was wondering idly if she oughtn’t perhaps do something to the house as well when her intercom buzzed. “Yes?”

“Your last appointment, Mrs. Peel. Lord Braine.”

“Send his lordship in, Dolittle.” Emma rose and crossed the room to a bar in the corner, where she deployed a decanter, a siphon, and two glasses on a tray. As she was setting the tray on the table by the hearth, the office door opened and a middle-aged man strode confidently into the room. Tall, grey-haired, with a clipped military-type moustache, and impeccably dressed, Lord Braine was not an unattractive man, and he knew it. Smiling and extending his well-manicured hand, he said in a hearty bass-baritone, “A pleasure to see you, as always, Emma.”

Emma grasped his hand firmly, and noted that here, at least, was a man with a real handshake. Not like that beastly creature from Auditing who had stopped by earlier in the day; his moist, pudgy fin always felt like a dead flounder in her grip. An involuntary shudder ran down her spine. “Robert. Do sit down. Care to join me in a drink?”

“I shan’t say no. The usual, please.” He moved to the desk while Emma poured two brandy-and-sodas, and picked up the photograph of Peter that stood, in its silver frame, beside the desk clock. “Handsome man,” said Braine, looking up at Emma.

She set his drink down. “Yes, he was, “ she answered without emotion, raising
“Cheers.”

Braine replaced the frame carefully. “Your health,” he said, picking up the glass and taking a sip from it. “Aviation accidents are somehow especially sad. How difficult for you, Emma.”

“More difficult for him, I’d say,” Emma dryly smiled.

“Forgive me for saying so, but isn’t it time you let go of the past? You’ve a lifetime still ahead of you.”

Having sat down in one of the wing chairs, Emma tasted her drink and held her glass near her lips, looking at Braine all the while. There was a time when she might have believed that, but the one person with whom it might have been worthwhile failed her when she most needed him. “One photograph hardly implies clinging to the past. As far as I’m concerned, my personal life ceased the day my husband was buried,” was all she said to Braine. She smiled winningly and changed the subject. “You are quite the aviation buff, aren’t you?”

“One might say that,” he replied, sitting down across from her. “But not in quite the same way as you.”

“I haven’t had much interest in flying since my husband’s death,” she shot back, rather too abruptly.

“And yet you are still adamant about keeping Knight Avionics within your corporate fold?”

Emma set her glass on a small lacquered coaster. “It is my business to consider what is best for Knight Industries, regardless of any biases I may have. My personal feelings are no reason for any of our subsidiaries, or their employees, to suffer.” Crossing her legs, she settled more comfortably in her chair, her eyes never wavering under Braine’s gaze.

“Well, perhaps we should postpone business for a while and talk of more pleasurable matters to start with,” Lord Braine murmured.

“Ah, but I find business a most pleasurable topic of conversation,” countered Emma, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “I know perfectly well why you requested this meeting. Certain rumours in certain financial quarters have not escaped my notice.”

“Rumours? What rumours?” Lord Braine took another sip of brandy, eyeing Emma with studied disinterest.

“Come now, don’t insult me,” she remonstrated with a brilliant smile. “You want Knight Avionics. I won’t give them up. You’re prepared to declare war.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that—”

“Wouldn’t you? Forgive me, but your reputation precedes you.” Emma reached for the siphon.

“Does it indeed?”

“Don’t trifle with me, Robert,” she said, adding a dash of soda water to her glass. “When you want something, you spare nothing in trying to get it. However, I
will not give up Knight Avionics without a full-scale battle. It may be a costly one, but I’m not about to hand my father’s company over to anybody, not even you.”

“I admire your spirit, Emma. But would such a battle be advisable? After all, Knight Avionics is only a minor subsidiary, and not exactly indispensable.”

“My father started that company, as Knight Aeroplane Controls, and it’s what he built Knight Industries on. Call me sentimental, but I shan’t give up Knight Avionics. I owe my father’s memory that much, at least.” Emma looked directly into Lord Braine’s eyes. “I may not have many virtues, but I do count loyalty among them.”

“You’re a very shrewd businesswoman, and a very honourable one. Such a combination is, sadly, all too rare these days.” Braine rolled his glass between his palms and regarded Emma appreciatively. “We’re two of a kind, you know,” he said after a while.

“We are?” Emma’s eyebrows arched.

“We’re both headstrong, tenacious, and possess the ability to overcome even the most difficult of setbacks. We’ve both experienced adversity, indeed catastrophe—and both emerged all the stronger for it. We both know what we want, Emma, and we’ve both gone out and got it. You and I are capable of great things, if we only put our minds and efforts to the task.”

“You’re being too dramatic, Robert. Fortune had a good deal to do with it—”

“Don’t put such stock in ‘fortune’, my dear, and never underestimate yourself. You and I should consider pooling our resources and talents. Form an alliance.”

“What have you in mind?” she asked with a wry grin. “A conglomerate, or a merger?”

“That’s entirely up to you. You’re the one who’s insisted on maintaining a businesslike distance between us. Even though I’ve never made a secret of my attraction to you. Still, I promised you I wouldn’t press the issue. But at least consider a business alliance, Emma. Together we could take over the world, if we’d a mind to.”

“That’s a bit more than I want,” she said, “or need.”

“I was speaking metaphorically,” smiled Braine. “Don’t you think this discussion would be more pleasant conducted elsewhere, over filet mignon accompanied by a good claret?”

“It might, but I don’t think we’re meant to find out,” replied Emma smoothly. “Perhaps some other time,” she added, not wishing to appear utterly unfeeling. She then resumed her efficient manner. “What initiated your trend in recent years to diversify into aviation and aviation-related industry?”

“As you observed earlier, I do have an interest in flying.” Braine withdrew a chased silver cigarette case from his inside breast pocket. “Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked, before opening the case.

“Not at all.” With graceful economy of movement, Emma propelled a weird-
shaped mass of brilliantly-glazed ceramic that was conceived as an ashtray toward him.

“Actually,” resumed Lord Braine, lighting a Du Maurier, “my interest is purely economic. You know that when my grandfather founded the firm we were primarily involved in armaments. Developments in aviation and air warfare since the last war were of considerable interest to us, and we naturally wanted to expand into those areas.” He sipped his drink slowly.

“Naturally.”

“Unfortunately, we suffered some financial setbacks in the fifties, and as a result were undercapitalised during certain—to us—critical moments in, how shall I put it, international corporate manoeuvring. It wasn’t until relatively recently, when I became chairman of the board of directors, that we were able to reorganise and infuse some much-needed capital into our aviation division, and I was finally able to realise our hopes of competitive expansion into lucrative new markets.” He watched Emma for a few moments. “So you won’t give up Knight Avionics?”

“No.” She shook her head firmly. “Not without a fight.”

“Pity. You’d realise an enormous profit,” he said.

“No.”

“Very well. We’ll see. Perhaps I can convince you some other way.”

“I doubt it.”

“Don’t let’s be hasty,” cautioned Braine, finishing his brandy and soda. “You may have a change of heart yet.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Well, if you won’t sell me your shares in Knight Avionics, at least promise me you’ll come to the Charity Ball.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, do come, it’s lots of fun. Music, food, champagne, fancy dress—”

“Fancy dress?” Emma was surprised to discover she still felt a childlike delight in the idea of a costume ball.

Lord Braine sensed her nascent enthusiasm. “It’ll do you good.” He stubbed out his cigarette and reached for her hand. “Don’t disappoint me, my dear,” he murmured, raising her fingertips to his lips and kissing them softly. “Now, then, are you sure you won’t reconsider dining with me this evening?”
By the time Steed and Tara left Mr. Venus' establishment the sky had grown dark, and black clouds, vanguards of the coming storm, were visible on the horizon. The platinum disc that was the sun had already dipped well below the city skyline, and in a very short time would sink completely out of view.

“What do you know about this charity ball?” he asked Tara, as they walked back to the car.

“Only that it’s been held for the past three or four years, in aid of starving artistes,” said Tara. “Lord Robert Braine—the fellow who’s been such a big noise in the City in recent years—graciously offered his house for the inaugural event, and has been hosting it annually since then—but then he’s always doing something for charitable causes. He’s quite the philanthropist, you know.”

“And he shows an extraordinary philanthropic interest in wealthy widows,” growled Steed. “Braine and Mrs. Peel have been an item, as the vulgar press term it, on not a few occasions. Seems they’re regularly popping up together at the more fashionable social functions. The gossip is, he’s set his sights on her.”

“Well, maybe it’s time for you to make your entrance onto the stage, and steal his thunder,” Tara replied. He held open the car door for her. “Not much left of the day. What do you say we drop our costumes off at my apartment, then go out for an early dinner?”

Tara snuggled into the passenger seat, and waited for Steed to get in the car. “When are you going to see Mrs. Peel?” she asked, ignoring his suggestion.

“In my own good time,” he said, cranking the engine. “How about it?”

“Steed—”

“You’ve something else on for tonight.” He had already known what her answer would be, and wasn’t sure why he had even bothered to ask. “He seems a very decent sort,” he remarked, pulling away from the kerb.

“He is.” Tara stared straight ahead at the rapidly-darkening city streets.

“Well, then, I suppose I’d better get you home without delay.” Steed turned north, eventually navigating his way to the Tottenham Court Road and from there to Albany Street, which would bring him to Primrose Hill and Tara’s flat.

“Steed,” said Tara, fidgeting all the while in her seat, “you know how very fond I am of you—”

“But you’re even fonder of the dashing young Baron von Thingummy. No, you needn’t say any more, and you needn’t make any excuses.” They drove the rest of the way in silence. “Here we are!” he said, double-parking in front of Tara’s digs. By the time he climbed out from behind the wheel and came up to her Tara was already halfway out of her seat. She stretched her hand out to him as she stepped out of the car, and stood on the pavement looking directly at him, her hand still in his. His usual polish and grace could not completely hide, however, the strain his eyes betrayed.
“Steed—”

“Off you go, then.” Steed smiled genially, following a squeeze of her hand with a playful pat to her rump. He walked with her to the building’s entrance. “Good night, Tara,” he murmured, kissing her. “Don’t do anything I would do.”

Tara threw her arms around his neck, nearly knocking all the wind out of him. “Oh, Steed—”

“Steady on,” he wheezed, disengaging himself and catching his breath. “Hey, what about Scarlett O’Hara?” He loped back to the car and returned shortly with Tara’s costume. “Here you are. Now go. You’re keeping me from my duties!”

Tara cocked her head, not certain she understood his meaning. “You’re right, I owe it to Mrs. Peel to tell her myself about her husband.”

Steed took a deep, bracing breath of cold air before taking out his watch and checking the time. “If I hurry, I just might manage to get hold of her at her office.” He snapped shut the watch and slipped it back into his waistcoat pocket.

Tara glanced at Steed before mounting the stairs to the front door. He followed her but hung back on the top step, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the railing, watching her as she rooted in her handbag for the keys. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you were in love with the fellow.”

“Perhaps I am,” she replied gently. She found her keys. “Mrs. Peel needs you, Steed. Go to her. And this time, don’t let anything stand in your way.” She gave him a peck on the cheek before letting herself in.

Steed drove aimlessly through the streets, still anxious about calling on Emma. She was hardly likely to receive him, much less his news, with equanimity. It was awkward enough that they had been estranged for so long. And his bearing tidings of murder was hardly the means to heal the rift between them. Still, he’d have to see her sooner or later, and the longer he postponed the occasion the harder it would be to rise to it at all. By the time he passed the Royal Courts of Justice for the third time, he had unenthusiastically resolved to get it over with as quickly as possible.

Once he got to the Knight Industries building, Steed had no difficulty getting past the security personnel and gaining access to the appropriate floors with his slick new Trade Ministry pass. Good job he managed to pinch it without some humourless toady noticing and making him give it back. He sighed as he walked over to the lift bank that would take him to the suites which accommodated Knight Industries’ administrative staff. Skulduggery wasn’t half the fun it used to be, he brooded, stepping into a waiting lift and pressing the button for the fifteenth floor. What with all the pencil-counters and paper-shufflers and memorandum-writers and policymakers and accountability officers and myriad other faceless grey beings who worshipped at the Temple of Bureaucracy, well, one could hardly get away with anything any more. Any day now, one of these bureaucrats would run amok, and everyone henceforth would be required to submit requisition chits in quintuplicate for everything from political assassinations to toilet paper. He shook his head sadly as the
lift glided to a halt and gaped open.

Steed sprang out of the lift just in time to avoid being flattened by its doors. That was another thing he disliked—automatic lifts, everywhere one went. And they were all apparently in a conspiracy to crush unwary passengers in their stainless-steel jaws. Have we run out of little old men in drab uniforms to tame these monsters, he wondered, prowling down a characterless hallway in the general direction of Emma’s offices. After a couple of missed turnings, thanks to the stultifying sameness of the corridors, he found the heart of Knight Industries’ management labyrinth.

“Good afternoon, sir.” Mr. Percival Dolittle (“Arsy-Versy Percy”, as he was known to all save himself and his mother) looked up from his desk as Steed sauntered into the outer office of Emma Peel’s suite, jauntily swinging a tightly-furled umbrella and looking critically about the room. “May I help you?”

“I doubt it. It’s Mrs. Peel I’m here to see.” With precision and economy of movement Steed doffed his bowler and scrutinised it for dust.

“Have you an appointment, sir?” Dolittle’s brow wrinkled as he glanced at a typed sheet of paper listing the name and time of Mrs. Peel’s scheduled appointments for the day.

Steed looked down his nose at the pinch-faced little man. “Appointment, indeed,” he grunted, taking out a card and handing it to Dolittle. “Wayne ffitch. With two small f’s. Risk Management Consultants.”

Dolittle took the card between the tips of his thumb and forefinger, and read it. It told him no more than Steed already had. “Sir, I’m afraid—”

Steed walked slowly around the room, casting disapproving looks at the spartan décor. The place reminded him of an airport lounge. “I want to see Mrs. Peel,” he demanded.

“Not without an appointment, I’m afraid, Mr. ffitch,” replied Dolittle in a prim voice. “Mrs. Peel is an extremely busy woman.”

“And I’m an extremely busy man. Still—” Steed leaned against Dolittle’s desk, “I’m here, and I mean to see her.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Mrs. Peel is in a meeting,” said Dolittle, flushing. “With Lord Braine,” he emphatically added, as if that fact should impress Steed. “One may make an appointment and come back.”

“Or one may sit here and wait for her.” Steed ambled to one of the vinyl-upholstered settees standing against the far wall and began to look through assorted periodicals lying on the chrome-and-glass end table.

“Mr. ffitch!” Dolittle abandoned all pretence of corporate impersonality. “One cannot see Mrs. Peel without an appointment, and that’s flat!”

“There you are mistaken, young man. I can, and I will.” Steed arranged himself as comfortably as possible on the settee. “She’s got to come through there eventually,” he remarked, pointing at the door to Emma’s inner sanctum with his umbrella before setting it down beside him and unfolding the newspaper he’d brought
tucked under his arm.

“Mr. ffitch.” Now Dolittle employed his best beseeching manner. “Mrs. Peel is in a meeting—”

“With Lord Braine,” said Steed without looking up from his paper. “So you’ve already informed me.”

“Quite,” huffed Dolittle. “She’ll be in it for some time. She won’t want to see you—”

“How d’you know that?” interjected Steed suavely.

“Look here, you can’t just sit here—”

“And why not? I think I’ll do just that and have a nice quiet read while you get back to whatever it is you do, there’s a good chap.” Steed applied himself to reading his paper comprehensively.

Bloody toffs, thought Dolittle blackly, always think they can do as they please. He flung himself in his chair and rustled some papers. Mrs. Peel was definitely not to be disturbed, per her orders. He stole a glance at Steed. “Right, you prat,” he muttered under his breath, “sit there all bloody night if you want to. Mrs. P. I’ll deal with you, right enough.” The felicitous mental image of his employer dealing with this office squatter filled Dolittle with perverse pleasure and he was able to resume his tasks with some measure of equanimity, which was upset only when he happened to glimpse Steed reclining imperturbably on the settee, engrossed in his reading.

*   *   *

Emma rose from her chair. “I’ve just realised what the time is, and I must have a word with my secretary,” she said, walking back to her desk.

“Of course.” Lord Braine helped himself to a second brandy and soda, and lighted another cigarette.

“Dolittle?” Emma pressed a button on the intercom.

“Yes, Mrs. Peel?”

“It’s getting late. Why don’t you go on home? We shan’t be much longer, and I can lock up.”

“That’s very good of you, Mrs. Peel, but there’s a . . . person here to see you—” Emma frowned, flipping open her diary. “Who? I made no other appointments.”

“That is correct. I told him he’d need an appointment to see you, but he refuses to leave. His card says ‘Wayne ffitch, Risk Management Consultants’.”

“Does it, now?” Emma paused, then asked drily, “That wouldn’t be ‘ffitch’ with two small f’s, would it?”

“As a matter of fact, yes—”

“Right.” She moved to the door. “Do excuse me, Robert, this will only take a moment.”
She strode out into the middle of the outer office, where she stopped and stood, arms folded across her breast, coldly regarding Steed. He leapt to his feet, hastily folding his newspaper and tossing it aside. She noticed it was a tabloid.

“One should always have something sensational to read in the boardroom,” said Steed. He waved at the publications lying on the table nearby. “All that dry financial stuff? Dangerous. Could bore one to extinction.”

“Obviously, it didn’t work.”

“Really, Mrs. Peel, you’re too unkind,” said Steed, pretending to be hurt.

“Really, Mr. ffitch, you’re too annoying.” Emma’s irritation was unfeigned.

“Will you leave quietly, or will I be forced to throw you out?”

He got the impression she was in no mood for clever badinage. “Mrs. Peel, I really must speak with you,” he said, his expression now serious.

Emma turned to her secretary. “Dolittle, would you please see about the papers the lawyers want me to review tomorrow?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Peel.” Dolittle reluctantly took the hint and slithered out of the room.

“Before you say—” Steed barely managed to protest, when he was cut off by Emma.

“What do you think you’re doing, coming here under God knows what kinds of false pretences, harassing my staff, laying siege to my office—”

“I have to talk to you.”

“Oh, you do, do you? And what, pray, prompts this sudden urge?”

“Well, it’s rather complicated,” said Steed in a conciliatory tone.

“And I’m rather busy. I’m in a meeting—”

“I know, I know. With Lord Whatsits. Rumour has it that you two—”

“—and I haven’t time for this absurd, this impertinent intrusion—”

“Lord Braine, that’s it,” continued Steed, heedless of the interruption. “Seems he’s got his eye on one of your companies—and on you, too, I gather.”

“Mind your own business,” snapped Emma.

“But I am. That’s why I’m here.” Steed smiled, leaning on his umbrella. “Why don’t you get rid of his lordship, then you and I can have a quiet dinner somewhere, and I’ll tell you why I came.”

“I’m not in the least bit interested. Whatever it is, I don’t want to get involved. Not now. Not ever.”

“I’m afraid it’s not quite as simple as that.” Steed looked Emma in the eyes.


“When can I talk to you, then?”

Emma stared silently at Steed for several uncomfortable moments. “If you think you can just drop into my life like this, on a perverse whim, think again,” she uttered, tight-jawed, turning away from him, forcing herself to remain calm. “Not a
peep out of you in all this time, and now all of a sudden here you stand—” She wheeled about. “You didn’t even come to the funeral. The one time I needed you most, and you couldn’t be bothered. Yet you show up here expecting me to drop everything for you—” She took a step toward him, fully intent on grabbing him by his collar and booting him out the door. Fortunately for Steed, Dolittle returned at that precise moment.

“I’ll just take these papers through to your office, Mrs. Peel, if you like.”

“Yes. Thank you.” Emma reined in her anger, and was once again cool and self-possessed.

“As a matter of fact, it was your husband I came to talk to you about,” said Steed quietly, as soon as Dolittle was out of earshot.

“That’s all water under the bridge, isn’t it? There’s absolutely nothing to talk about. Not any more.” Dolittle reappeared in the room. “And now I must get back to Lord Braine. I’m sure you understand. Good bye.” Emma turned on her heel and strode back to her office.

“Mrs. Peel—”

“Good bye. Dolittle, show him out.” She shut the door behind her.

“With pleasure,” said Dolittle. “You heard Mrs. Peel,” he sneered at Steed. “Didn’t I tell you you’d need an appointment? Not that you’ll ever get one now!” He moved toward Steed, who adroitly side-stepped him and sauntered nonchalantly toward the exit.

“And I told you, young man, I never make appointments. Good night.”

Well, that’s torn it, concluded a dispirited Steed as he walked out to the car park. Manifestly, any further attempts on his part to charm his way back into Emma’s life were doomed to fail. A feeble drizzle began to fall. He wondered how he would ever be able to tell her about her husband.
“So much for finesse,” muttered Steed under his breath, still put out by his signally unsuccessful encounter with Emma the previous evening. He decided to regroup and do some more snooping before he even considered approaching her again. Better if he could give her more information than he currently had—which wasn’t much at all—assuming of course that he could get her to listen to a word he had to say. Thus it was that he set out for the Ministry’s Office of Procurement and Contracts, where he hoped he might turn up something useful.

The Pro and Con, as it was familiarly known, was housed in an appropriately unimaginative, late neo-classical hulk of an edifice that shrieked Bureaucracy from its granite foundations through its colonnades and up to its pediments.

The steady drizzle that had been the order of the day since dawn suddenly turned into an icy rain, and Steed dashed under the building’s massive porte cochère just in time to avoid a thorough drenching. He bounded up the smooth, damp steps to the heavy mahogany doors and into the immense lobby.

“Papers, please,” commanded the middle-aged woman behind the highly-polished wood counter which constituted that part of the lobby designated, by a large sign, “Visitor Control.” The no-nonsense tone of her voice complemented her well-but-severely-tailored suit, plain white choker-collar blouse, and tightly pulled-back hair. Steed’s amiable smile produced no effect whatsoever on this specimen of ministerial efficiency. She stuck her blue pencil behind one ear and repositioned a tastefully engraved brass sign, which Steed had accidentally nudged askew, so that it once again stood perfectly parallel to the counter’s edge. The sign bore the legend, “Procurement and Contracts.”

Reaching into his coat pocket for his pass, Steed tried smiling again at the woman, but was rewarded with a cold glare of thinly-veiled disapproval. He was reminded of his headmaster, who had worn an identical look of distaste just before meting out corporal punishment to wayward pupils. “Ah, here it is.” He handed the woman a mauve-coloured, gold-embossed, moroccan-leather-bound set of credentials.

With the merest twitch of an eyebrow, the woman took Steed’s papers and examined them thoroughly.

“I trust everything’s in order?” Steed essayed yet another charming smile.

Wordlessly, and with great solemnity, the woman handed Steed his pass. “Unquestionably,” she finally replied. “Thank you, Mr. Steed. I am privileged. It isn’t every day that one sees an MI Code Purple, Class Alpha, Category Triple One pass.” She spoke in hushed, almost reverent tones.

“I’d have thought all this hush-hush stuff was mere routine for you, dear lady,” murmured Steed, leaning on the counter. He was careful not to disarrange the brass sign again.

“Hush-hush?” exclaimed the woman, her eyes widening in disbelief. “Surely,
my dear sir, you must appreciate that an MI Code Purple, Class Alpha, Category Triple One isn’t just hush-hush. Oh, no, sir, it is beyond hush-hush.” She lowered her voice. “What you have there is—” She glanced about, then bent forward toward Steed and whispered, “—Absolutely Mum.” She put her index finger to her lips.

“Quite,” whispered Steed, also putting his finger to his lips. “You are absolutely correct, Mrs., er—”

“Throgbotham. Miss.”

“Miss Throgbotham. I must say, I’m most impressed with your appreciation of the sensitive nature of my business.” He adjusted his boutonnière. Miss Throgbotham looked as though she might actually smile. “Well, I shan’t waste any more of your valuable time,” he said, straightening up. “Would you be so kind as to direct me to Archives?”

“With pleasure, Mr. Steed. Through here, please.” Miss Throgbotham raised a hinged section of the countertop and stood aside to let Steed pass. “The particular Archive you require is downstairs. D Level, straight down Corridor D-2, last door on the left. You may use the stairs over there.”

“Thank you, Miss Throgbotham. Good day.”

He descended the four flights unhurriedly, trailing his hand down the mahogany banisters which countless other hands had worn to a smooth burnish. The place hadn’t changed very much since the last time he was here, shortly after the war, when the ancestor of his present Department was quartered in these very catacombs. He looked around. Overhead, incandescent lights still cast their soft yellow glow in the corridors. The faint but ineradicable odour of dust, ammonia, and stale tobacco still clung to the oatmeal-coloured walls. Typewriters still clattered rhythmically in the various offices, their sound echoing through the corridors in counterpoint to the other sounds of human activity.

Quickening his pace, Steed headed for Corridor D-2, which, if his memory served him, was just beyond the large room that once functioned as the officers’ lounge. He turned into the corridor, glancing right and left at the thick doors which now opened onto administrative offices or archives, and remembered what it had been like down here during the war when the Ops wallahs ruled their little empire from behind those very doors.

“Anybody home?” Steed rapped the glass window of a partially-ajar door with his umbrella handle and poked his head into the room. A small desk stood a few feet from the door, and appeared to be in imminent danger of collapse from all of the files, folders, and papers piled upon it every which way. The walls were lined with tall filing cabinets.

“Be right with you,” floated up a voice from somewhere behind the desk. Someone was busily scuttling about on the floor, it sounded like. “Got a screw loose, you see—”

“Oh, dear,” said Steed, beholding a bald pate rise, like the dawning sun, from
behind the piles of paper on the desk. The pate was followed by the smooth pink face of a fellow about the same age as Steed, but with none of the latter’s elegance. He was dressed in shapeless brown trousers and a shabby cardigan, under which shimmered a particularly hideous specimen of striped shirt. A trendy necktie whose hues clashed jarringly with those of the shirt completed the ensemble. The man had on a pair of ugly bottle-bottom-lensed spectacles, the left earpiece of which was attached to the frame with a twisted paper clip. He shuffled around the desk, squinting at something he held between thumb and forefinger.

“Blasted thing fell out, and the old specs fell apart. Can’t see a bloody thing without them. Thank goodness for little wire bits. Found the screw, though.”

Steed took a closer look at the man as he approached, and grinned. “Teddy Bunson?”

“Mmm. That’s me.” Bunson was still squinting at the object in his fingers, and hadn’t yet looked up.

“Bunny, old chap! Fancy finding you here, after all these years!”

Bunson finally glanced up as Steed gave him a hearty clap on the shoulder. “Good heavens! John Steed!” He grasped Steed’s hand and pumped it warmly. “Haven’t seen you in ages! Since that Berlin business, back in ’55, wasn’t it?” He paused, staring at his hand. “Oh, no,” he moaned, “I’ve dropped it.”

Steed bent down and picked something up from the floor. “Here it is,” he said, dropping a tiny screw into Bunson’s palm.

“Thanks awfully,” said Bunson. “Perhaps I’d better replace it immediately, before I lose it somewhere. He scurried back to the desk and pulled open a drawer. “Now then, what brings you to my lair? Can’t be a social call. You’d never get past Cerberus.” Having found a jeweller’s loupe and small screwdriver, Bunson set about repairing his glasses.

“That’s right, I’m afraid it’s not a social call,” acknowledged Steed. “And who is Cerberus?”

“Miss Throgbotham. Indefatigable guardian of this our temple of forbidden knowledge.”

“Ah, yes. The good Miss T. I agree, quite the _femme formidable_.

“Mmm. Quite. Some wag up in Budget calls her ‘Flogbottom.’ Behind her back, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Well, then, old son, what can I do for you?”

“Project Tempest,” was Steed’s laconic reply.

“Tempest, Tempest,” muttered Bunson. “Ah, yes. Tempest.” He peered myopically at Steed. “Now why would anyone be interested in that fiasco?”

“Never you mind, Bunny. Get me the file on ‘Caliban,’ would you?”

“‘Caliban?’” Bunson scratched his downy crown.

“The weapons system.”
“Oh, that. ‘Caliban’, eh? I like that. Consistent. Originally, it was called ‘Chimera,’ you know. Working title, as it were.” Bunson’s face contorted into a thoughtful grimace.

“Chimera,” repeated Steed softly to himself.

“That’s right. And I think I know exactly where to find it,” said Bunson, his face relaxing into its usual carefree expression. “Anything specific you want?”

“Let me see the list of companies that manufactured Caliban’s components.” Steed thought for a bit, as Bunson calmly waited. “And let’s have a look at who all the bidders on the Caliban contract were. That should do for starters.”

“Right-ho.” Bunson returned shortly with a manila folder. “Here you are.” He slapped the folder on top of a pile of similar folders precariously heaped on the desktop. “Just don’t go removing anything from it, there’s a good chap.” Bunson grinned. “I’ve got all the pages catalogued up here, you know,” he said, tapping the side of his head with his forefinger.

“All I want’s a quick peek.” Steed picked up the folder and flipped it open casually. “Mind if I sit down somewhere?”

“Not at all. Here, why don’t you use the back room? I can make some tea, too, if you’d like.”

Steed followed Bunson into a small kitchenette of sorts, which had a miniature refrigerator, two-burner hotplate, tiny table, and rickety chair. “Don’t bother, thanks. I shan’t be long.” Lowering himself carefully onto the rickety chair, Steed opened the folder flat on the table and began to examine its contents.

“Well, I expect you’re safe enough in here. Can’t escape without my seeing you. I’ll just get back to my desk, old chap. You can return the file on your way out.” Bunson left the kitchenette and returned to the mess on his desk.

Steed waited a couple of minutes, making sure that Bunson wasn’t popping back in, then swiftly laid out the few papers in the file across the table top. Next, he took out what appeared to be a cigarette lighter from his waistcoat pocket. A few deft manipulations, and the lighter was transformed into a miniature camera. Within minutes Steed had photographed the papers, stowed the lighter, and returned the file to its original order. He then sat back and waited awhile before going back out to Bunson, who might otherwise marvel at the speed with which Steed examined the documents.

“Find what you needed, then?” Bunson looked up from his work at Steed, who handed back the manila folder.

“I’m afraid the answer’s in the negative.” Steed brushed his hat with his sleeve.

“Bad luck!” Bunson flipped through the file with the expertise of longstanding habit. “All accounted for,” he announced, to no one in particular.

Steed assumed a look of wounded pride. “Bunny, old boy, surely you don’t think that I would be capable of snatching secrets out from under your very nose! We were at school together!” He took out the lighter as Bunson fished out a cigarette
from his shirt pocket. “Permit me,” he murmured, reaching across the desk toward Bunson.

“Thanks, old chap.” Bunson took a deep drag on his cigarette, which, as Steed observed from the cut and aroma of the tobacco, was of French manufacture. “Of course not. Just force of habit.”

“Well, I’d best be toddling off,” said Steed, turning to the doorway.

“Cheer-o! Oh, I say, old boy,” Bunson peered over the rim of his glasses, “give my regards to old Throggy, eh?” His mischievous cackle followed Steed through the door and echoed hollowly in the corridor.

Miss Throgbotham was waiting for Steed as he neared her sanctuary. “Identification badge, Mr. Steed, please, and would you kindly empty your pockets?”

Steed gave Throggy another heart-warming smile and complied.

“Lumkin!” Miss Throgbotham summoned a uniformed man standing watch at the head of the staircase, then turned to Steed. “All visitors must be patted down before leaving,” she announced.

“With pleasure,” murmured Steed. “Whenever you’re ready.”


Lumkin’s pronouncement came quickly and succinctly. “Clean,” he growled, and ambled back toward the stairs.

“You may go, Mr. Steed,” said Miss Throgbotham, glancing swiftly at the unremarkable contents of Steed’s pockets displayed on her countertop. “Don’t forget your personal belongings.”

“Thank you.” He picked up his keys, lighter, and several other small items and casually distributed them through various coat and waistcoat pockets. “Oh, I nearly forgot. Bunson sends his love.”

Miss Throgbotham raised an eyebrow. “Is that some sort of password—?”

“Hardly,” said Steed in a low voice. “Bunson. Down in Archives. Simply aflame with passion, is Bunson.” He shook his head and sighed. “But he’s convinced it’s unrequited. Good day, Miss Throgbotham.” Steed clapped on his bowler at a jaunty angle and, resting his umbrella on his shoulder, strolled out of the lobby, leaving Miss Throgbotham pondering these sensational revelations in awe-struck silence.
The dreary rainfall of the past couple of days finally ceased, and the south of England was enjoying a spectacularly sunny, if frigid, afternoon. Great billowing white clouds scudded across the brilliant sky, and everywhere there was the wonderful odour of sweet, damp earth and vegetation. Even Steed, tired and keyed up as he was, couldn’t long remain indifferent to the invigorating freshness of the landscape.

Past experience had taught him that a long solitary ramble, be it on foot or in the car, along city streets or down country lanes, helped him sort things out when he was preoccupied with a problem. In the last few days, he’d picked up several discrete pieces of information that suggested a possible link between Boone’s death and Peel’s, but he wasn’t sure what to make of them. The possibility that Peel had been deliberately got rid of was no longer willing to dismiss out of hand. But what evidence did he have to prove wilful murder? He mulled over Boone’s last words. What Tara had mistaken for the name “Peggy” was, he now felt certain, a reference to Hogwood, Tempest’s Project Officer, so obviously and unimaginatively nicknamed “Piggy.” Hogwood’s background certainly bore probing. Then there was that business about the camera; now what could Boone have meant there? Steed scowled. Something nagged at the back of his mind. Maybe it wasn’t literally a camera; something in camera, perhaps, or a camera obscura. . . Chimera. Now that had a familiar ring to it. What was it Bunny said the other day? Chimera was the original working name for Caliban. And Caliban was the top secret one-of-a-kind device that, ostensibly, went down with Peel’s plane. Steed’s mind raced. In his excitement, he accelerated too rapidly through the next curve in the road, and nearly collided with an oncoming minivan. “Oops, sorry!” he exclaimed as he swerved out of the minivan’s way, heedless of the litany of imprecations hurled at him by the other driver. He slowed down, and brought his mind back to the problem at hand. Boone, with his history of trading in stolen arms, had somehow got wind of Project Tempest, and evidently knew something about Chimera (even if he couldn’t pronounce it properly) and Caliban. A security leak was not only possible, but virtually certain. Very likely, Peel and Hogwood discovered the leak, and were got out of the way by whoever was doing the leaking. And that person, or persons, might have got rid of Boone to keep him from spilling what he knew about Tempest’s compromise.

A yawn escaped from Steed, derailing his train of thought. He realised just how tired he was, given how little sleep he’d had during the past week. He decided he’d done enough thinking for a while; anyway, before he did any more, he’d better develop and examine the photos he took at the archives. He settled back to enjoy the remainder of his drive.

Sussex was one of Steed’s favourite counties. He let his car glide down the country lanes with minimal interference from himself as he drank in the sights and smells of the countryside with bittersweet pleasure. Many were the times that he and
Emma had taken a drive along these roads, sometimes stopping for a lazy picnic, sometimes for a simple but hearty meal at a quiet pub. He grinned at the memory of Emma struggling ineffectually to keep her windblown hair out of her eyes as they roared down country lanes in the Bentley, hood down and throttle wide, occasionally chastised by disapproving lows from cattle foolish enough to graze too close to the road. His grin turned to a wistful half-smile as he remembered the sultry, still August Saturday a few weeks after their first encounter, which had begun as a day trip to Hastings and which eventually turned into a memorably oddball week-end at a tiny seaside inn owned by a former music-hall danseuse and four cats. How he missed those days, when they had pitted their wits against assorted villains bent on disrupting those brief interludes of bliss that mankind is altogether too rarely blessed with; more precisely, he missed Emma, painfully at times.

Whatever was left of their friendship had taken a disastrous turn after his conspicuous and, to Emma, inexplicable absence from her husband’s funeral. Now Emma was impossibly distant, if not downright hostile. Telling her about her husband was going to be far more difficult than he’d originally anticipated, particularly as she seemed intent on making it practically impossible for him to see her.

As if the logistical problems weren’t enough. He knew that when the time finally came for him to confront her with the news that her husband was likely murdered, he wouldn’t be able to offer her any solid facts, never mind explanations. Anyway, how could one ever really explain murder? He also feared he would lose whatever slim chance he might otherwise have had at mending any fences with her.

Steed felt a constriction in his chest. Still, Tara was right; he owed it to Emma, to tell her gently, privately, irrespective of the consequences to him.

The road took a familiar turn. The parish in which Emma had spent her childhood summers with her grandparents was just over the next hill. She’d brought him here more than once, years ago. Here was the lovely Norman church, basking in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun, its tidy graveyard hidden from the road by the high stone wall Emma had been so fond of scaling as a girl. And in that graveyard was buried Emma’s husband.

Steed pulled off the road and parked next to the wall, behind a dark green Morgan Plus 8. He eased himself slowly out of the car. After stopping to admire the immaculately-kept Morgan, he ambled up the road toward the church, but without swinging his umbrella as he typically did.

The church was empty, its damp chill air thick with the smell of mildew and beeswax. Steed removed his hat and reverently admired the tattered battle standards hanging overhead, above the regimental rolls of soldiers killed in action in various wars spanning the centuries. Inscribed somewhere along this wall was the name of a great-uncle of Emma’s, a cavalry captain killed on the Somme.

Steed plodded back out outside into the sunshine, feeling strangely disquieted. He stared at the horizon, suddenly unsure of himself and of what he was doing here, of all
places. “Emma,” he breathed, closing his eyes. A walk through the graveyard might calm him. With a sigh, he turned in the direction of the lich-gate.

It was so still within the churchyard walls that even the birds refrained from their usual clamour. The graves were extraordinarily well-cared-for, and many had fresh flowers placed upon them. Steed’s pace was measured as he moved among the headstones, hands loosely clasped behind his back. Now and then he halted in front of a headstone to read its inscription. This was obviously the new sector of the graveyard, the graves dating from the last war.

The inscription on an austere grave marker made Steed hold up abruptly. “PETER J. P. PEEL. AD PATRES 12 DECEMBER 196—,” it read. This was followed by a neatly-executed rendition of the RAF pilot’s wings insignia; underneath the wings was engraved “SIC ITUR AD ASTRA” in large block letters. “Thus do we reach the stars,” he translated, dredging up some long-forgotten schoolboy Latin. He had never met the man, of course, but he remembered Emma mentioning how much her husband loved flying. Faster, and higher, and faster still. Only to end up murdered?

Steed tried to recall when it had happened. Two years ago to the day, he realised suddenly, glancing once again at the date on the headstone. Emma telephoned him that evening precisely two years ago and coldly told him of her husband’s death. And then rang off. He shivered slightly. Her self-control had seemed, not to put too fine a point on it, inhuman. If she’d given him the slightest hint, the merest indication, there was nothing he wouldn’t have done for her. Steed rubbed his aching head. He should have listened to his instincts and gone to her anyway. But there was no point in dwelling on that now. The immediate problem was how to tell her that her husband had probably been murdered. “What am I going to tell her, Commander?” he said, staring pensively at the gravestone, conscious only of the eerie silence of the place.

“You’re a bit late for the funeral.” Those clipped vowels were unmistakable. Steed wheeled about and came face to face with Emma Peel. “Don’t tell me I startled you,” she said in that faintly mocking way of hers.

He raised his hat. “I could say, better late than never, but you’d never believe it.”

Emma held a few sprigs of rosemary in her hands. “You’re right, I wouldn’t.” She brushed past Steed and knelt down to place the rosemary on her husband’s grave. She was as startled to see him as he was to see her, and wondered what he could be doing here, what he wanted. And of all the days in the year for him to choose, he would pick this one. Well, she wanted to be alone, and he could just go away. She started to rise.

“Never say that I was false of heart, though absence seem’d my flame to qualify —” was the best Steed could offer by way of conversation. He hadn’t stirred, except to offer her his arm.
“How quaint. Now here’s a thought for you: ‘You get no more of me; shake hands forever; and when we meet at any time again, be it not seen in either of our brows that we one jot of former love retain.’ Now leave. Surely it must be apparent even to you that on this of all days I prefer to be alone.” She glared at him. Hadn’t she made it clear that his intrusions were most unwelcome and that she would take steps to prevent them in future? Indeed, hadn’t she made it equally clear that she had no desire to see him again? Nevertheless, here he was, here, of all places, and of all days. Yet, despite her indignation, she sensed that something was amiss. He certainly was behaving uncharacteristically: he wasn’t trying to charm her. “What do you want?” Emma’s voice lost some of its harshness. Her initial impression of something being not quite right intensified.

“Why don’t we go over there and sit down?” Steed nodded toward a wooden bench in the distance. There was no getting out of it now; come along, Emma, and let’s get this scene over with, he thought to himself, at the same time dreading the very idea. Drawing her arm through his, he led her in the direction of the bench. Neither spoke. She could feel the tension in his arm, and hear it in the short, sharp intake of his breath.

“Did your husband ever talk to you about what he did during the time he was presumed dead?” Steed asked quietly.

“What do you mean, ‘what he did’? His plane crashed. He was captured by rebels. He was busy surviving.” Steed’s odd and completely unexpected question threw Emma off balance. “Of course he talked to me about that. To an extent.” In point of fact, he hadn’t really told her much, she reflected, but that was no concern of Steed’s.

“What do you know of his mission at the time of his death?”

Steed’s weird inquisition, coming as it did under such peculiar and undoubtedly not-so-coincidental circumstances, further disconcerted Emma. “He was flying an experimental plane, as doubtless you well know. That’s what he told me at the time, and that’s what the Air Ministry told me when they delivered his body.” These questions of Steed’s were bringing up a plethora of memories she had no desire to relive; Emma also did not care for the feeling that her self-control seemed to be in danger of faltering. “Surely you know all that. Why this sudden interest?” she demanded. “Or is it simply morbid curiosity?” She tried to disengage herself from Steed.

“Let’s sit down, shall we?” Steed offered Emma a seat on the bench.

“Must we?” She had no desire to continue this interview.

“Sit down.” It was no longer an offer, but a command. Emma found herself doing as she was bidden. Steed joined her on the bench, and sat looking in silence at the lovely old church, the bare-branched trees clumped in a corner of the graveyard, the neat paths among the graves, the dazzling slanting rays of the afternoon sun. It had grown colder, and he huddled more deeply into his overcoat, still saying nothing,
avoiding Emma’s eyes.

“Get to the point, Steed, and then go.”

“Mrs. Peel,” began Steed in a weary voice, shutting his eyes. His head really ached now. “There is reason to believe that your husband’s death might not have been an accident.”

Emma went rigid. “What?”

Steed continued to sit with his eyes closed. After a time, he finally brought himself to look at her. “Your husband may have been murdered.”

He watched the colour drain from her face, and her eyes glaze over into an unseeing stare. She remained motionless, her breathing shallow and rapid.

A short while later she slowly rose from the bench. “I see. And you had to tell me this here, today.” Pulling her coat more closely around her, she started for the gate.

Steed got up and followed her. “I didn’t want to tell you at all.”

Emma wheeled about. “Then why did you?” she asked, her eyes flashing. “What possible difference does it make? He’s dead, Steed, dead, can’t you understand?” She glared at him in rage. “No, I don’t imagine you can . . .”

“That last remark was unworthy of you,” he replied bitterly, feeling another constriction in his chest.

Emma was herself too bitter to notice any effect her remark may have had on him. “It doesn’t matter how, or why, or where, or anything, because he’s dead, and nothing will ever change that.” She turned, and with long strides hurried out of the graveyard.

Steed followed her to her car, the Morgan he’d seen earlier. He managed to catch her by the arm and turn her around to face him. “Mother asked me to tell you. At first I didn’t want to; but better I told you, than you found out some other way.”

Emma twisted free of his grasp. “Let me go.” She said the words very coldly and deliberately. “What difference does it make? It shan’t bring him back.”

“I’m not trying to bring him back, I just want to lay him to rest once and for all!” he exclaimed in exasperation.

Emma pushed him aside and got in her car. “Leave me alone, Steed, just leave me in peace!” she cried, wrenching the key in the ignition. “I thought I made myself perfectly clear.”

“You did that. Quite some time ago!” he shouted above the roar of the car’s engine. Emma gave him one last withering look before she sped off, leaving him, swearing under his breath, to brush the dust off his clothes.
“Steed!” exclaimed Tara, opening the door.
“Are you alone?” Steed hesitated on the threshold.
“Yes, of course. Come in!”

It had been a few months since he had last been in Tara’s flat, and in that time, she had made a few changes. He followed her into the living room. The entire place had recently been repainted in a subdued colour, and the draperies and upholstery were no longer quite so brightly patterned and hued as before. Steed glanced at the fireplace. The penny-farthing bicycle—could one really call it a sculpture?—still hung above it, but the eclectic jumble of knickknacks that once littered the mantelpiece was gone, replaced by a tasteful selection of small sculptures in bronze and stone. Floor-to-ceiling shelves flanked the chimneypiece, and held more sculptures and *objets d’art*, in between books of various sizes. Against one of the walls stood a formidable *étagère*, home to a state-of-the-art stereophonic sound system. Several very attractive etchings and paintings, unpretentiously matted and framed, decorated the other walls.

“Like it?” Tara pirouetted gracefully, her arms outstretched.
“Yes, it’s lovely,” he replied with sincerity. On top of everything else, Rudy had excellent taste. This neo-classical revival was obviously influenced by his preferences. Well, the chap seems a decent sort, decided Steed, grudgingly perhaps, but with sportsmanlike admiration nonetheless.
“Sit down, Steed; can I get you anything?”
“As a matter of fact, a double brandy would be most welcome right now.” He sank into one of the armchairs near the fireplace.
“Have you spoken to Mrs. Peel?” Tara crossed the room to a small bar.
“It’s no use.” He fidgeted, then stood up again. “Mind if I put a log or two on the grate?”
“Not at all.” She poured a couple of drinks. “What do you mean, ‘no use’?” She brought the glasses to the fireside, and watched Steed lay the fire.

Once the wood ignited, he resumed his seat and took his drink from Tara. “I tried to talk to her on two separate occasions. Both times, she in so many words told me to go to the devil.”

Tara sat down beside the fire, across from Steed. “Doesn’t she want to—”
“She wants no part of this business, least of all anything to do with me,” he cut her off irritably, taking a hearty pull at his drink. He tugged at his collar, the atmosphere having suddenly grown stifling.

“Do you want me to have a word with her?” Tara looked up at Steed sympathetically. “It hasn’t exactly been lost on me, what your feelings for her—”

Again Steed cut her off. “No. As far as Mrs. Peel is concerned, there’s nothing to talk about.” He took another swallow of brandy. “And my feelings, as you put it,
have nothing to do with anything.”

Tara set her glass down on the hearth, came up to Steed, bent down, and kissed him. “Sometimes, you can be so damnably proud,” she murmured, and kissed him again. “When are you going to admit to yourself that you’re still in love with her?”

Steed struggled to his feet. “Don’t be absurd!” he sputtered, picking up the poker and taking a few stabs at the logs. “Your judgement is understandably coloured by your own present affliction.”

“Don’t change the subject.” Tara took him by the hand. “Now sit down and tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened,” he said, dropping back down in his chair. She doesn’t care about her husband being murdered.”

“Of course she does. But perhaps she just would rather let things be.”

“Perhaps she’s got the right idea.” Steed downed the remainder of his drink. “I’ve read the files on Peel and the crash; I’ve read the file on Boone; I think I’ve read every bloody file there is that has any bearing on this business, and the one thing I come up with is—nothing! Nothing, that is, save speculation and surmise. Even if Peel’s plane was sabotaged, it doesn’t necessarily follow he was deliberately marked for murder. There’s no hard evidence—”

“There’s got to be a connection somewhere, Steed.”

“If there is, most likely it’s between Boone and Project Tempest. We know Boone was an arms thief and smuggler. Seems logical to think he might have had something to do with trying to steal Caliban. But we have no evidence whatsoever that the one and only prototype of Caliban didn’t sink in the sea along with Peel’s aeroplane. And so far, I can find no connection between Peel and this Boone fellow. Or anybody, for that matter. Shortly after Peel’s death, Boone was caught in a sting operation and deported for attempting to smuggle stolen Army rifles out of the country. Pretty piddling stuff, compared to a weapon like Caliban. So Peel’s death may well have been incidental to the destruction of his plane, which by the way was plagued with malfunctions practically since its maiden flight. As I said, even if the crash was deliberately caused, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the pilot was anything more than a collateral casualty. As for Boone’s last words, well, who’s to say he wasn’t making up a load of rubbish, just to cover for someone else?”

“Does learned counsel for the defence rest?” asked Tara. “That’s unlikely, and you know it. It makes no sense for Boone to waste his dying breath fabricating a story about murder. Now, who is Caliban, and what is Project Tempest?”

Steed didn’t seem to hear her. “There is the curious connection of Piggy and Peel . . .”

“Who is Piggy when he’s at home?”

“Piggy Hogwood,” said Steed.

“Steed, what are you talking about?”

“When Boone was uttering his last syllables, you thought he said something
about cameras and someone named Peggy.”
   “Yes, that’s right.”
   “Well, it seems he was talking about someone named Piggy. Piggy Hogwood. Project Tempest’s project officer.”
   “Maybe you should start with this Tempest project,” Tara suggested. “I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about, you know.”
   Steed leaned forward. “Sorry. We haven’t really had a chance to go over any of this, have we?”
   “No, but it’s hardly your fault. I think you’d best begin at the beginning.” She got up to fetch the brandy.
   “Peel was involved in a top-secret weapons development project code-named Tempest. He flew the experimental aeroplane which was to carry an extraordinary new weapons system called Caliban. Which was originally code-named ‘Chimera.’ I suspect that what Boone tried to say was ‘Chimera,’ not ‘camera.’”
   “I see.” Tara poured Steed another drink before sitting down again. “Where’s Piggy these days?”
   “Dead. Killed in an aviation accident.”
   “And you say you have nothing to go on?” She gazed steadily at Steed. “Mrs. Peel’s husband killed in an accident? The Project Officer killed in an accident? Boone conveniently killed, but not before he chokes out some intriguing last words, with specific mention of the late Piggy and this Chimera thing?”
   “I know, I know,” Steed growled, “but that’s not enough. I have nothing more, absolutely nothing more, to go on. Maybe Peel and Piggy stumbled on some nefarious plot or other. But they’re both dead, so we can’t bloody well ask them. And nothing has happened since Peel’s death to even remotely suggest that Caliban or Chimera or whatever didn’t sink to oblivion, just like the entire Tempest project.”
   “Save for Boone’s deathbed confession. What does Mrs. Peel know about any of this?”
   “How should I know? I told you, she wants nothing to do with me.” Steed finished his second drink.
   “I think we should wait and see who or what turns up at the charity ball. I wonder, what would a disreputable character like Boone be doing at such an exclusive fund-raiser?”
   “Well, that’s something we can try to find out, I suppose.”
   “Oh?”
   “One of our chaps is going to the ball, masquerading as Boone.”
   “There you are, then. Maybe we’ll learn something more. We just don’t have all the pieces to the puzzle yet.”
   Steed didn’t respond right away. “Does it really matter?” he finally said.
   “You know perfectly well it does.” She gave him a pointed look. “In fact, it might matter a great deal to some.”
“Tara—”

“You don’t want to find the answers, do you? What are you afraid of, Steed? That Mrs. Peel will shoot the messenger? It’s your job to find the pieces and put them together.” She smiled. “Come on. You look like you could use some food.” Steed tried to protest, but Tara wouldn’t hear of it. “Where’s your spirit of adventure? There’s this fantastic new Mexican place, absolutely amazing what they do—”
For the fourth successive year, the Artists’ Charity Ball was hosted by Lord Braine at his estate, modestly known as “Xanadu.” Steed spotted a small sign, reading “A.C.B.” followed by an arrow, affixed to a lichen-stained stone gatepost set a few yards back from the road, and manoeuvred his car through the narrow gateway into a magnificent alley of old yews. The alley wound gracefully through wooded grounds for approximately a quarter of a mile before terminating in the gravelled forecourt of Lord Braine’s house. This evening, the trees were festooned with brightly-coloured lights, and as Steed neared the alley’s end he could see the glow of the brilliantly-illuminated house and grounds through the thinning woods.

The original manor, dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, had sunk into disrepair many years earlier, and eventually fell into such decay that the heirs of its last owner found themselves compelled to sell the property, having insufficient capital left over after death duties to maintain, much less restore, the place. Thus it was that the freehold passed to Lord Braine, shortly after he had secured his peerage, in the late nineteen-fifties.

Braine was a shrewd and practical man. Conscious of his recent elevation in rank, he quite deliberately set out to recreate the old when he decided to rebuild the house, in a kind of ironic gesture of deference to those who had come by their titles through accident of birth rather than personal industry.

What ultimately rose from the ashes of the stodgy old Georgian pile was nothing short of exquisite. Enchanting, thought Steed, suddenly afforded an unobstructed view of the structure. He circled the fountain at the centre of the forecourt, admiring the floodlit porticoed façade of the house as he looked for a place to leave his car.

He soon found a suitable place to park. Easing himself carefully from behind the wheel, he planted his feet on the damp grass and took a deep breath. His breeches were quite snug when he stood, but sitting they were positively constricting. Having assured himself that his circulation was more or less back to normal, he reached back in the car for his hat, and lingered to adjust his cravat in the side mirror before strolling to the house.

If the exterior of the house was exquisite, then the interior could only be styled breathtaking. Even Steed was impressed as he stood in the spacious entry hall. Splendid flying staircases on either side of the entry curved down from the first floor gallery in a sweep of grey Portland stone and black wrought iron. He twirled the lorgnette dangling from a silk cord around his neck, and admired what he beheld. The black-and-white tiles under his boots were of the finest Italian marble. The smoke-grey and white plasterwork ceiling could only be the work of Adam, probably salvaged from the original house. Against the far wall an ebony table supported a bronze sculpture, which closer inspection confirmed to be a Bernini. The off-white walls
were occasionally punctuated by colour in the form of small, delicately-framed oil paintings. Lord Braine had the sense not to overwhelm his canvases with large, distracting frames, like those heavy gilt Baroque horrors that seemed de rigueur, in certain quarters, for everything from the vast fleshy expanses of Rubens to Turner’s delicate suggestions of light and colour. Steed counted two Turners, in fact, as well as a pair of Constables and a Sisley, before noticing the small portrait by Ramsay hanging inconspicuously to one side of an antique mahogany hatstand.

Rousing himself from this pleasant but idle contemplation, Steed decided to take advantage of the fact that he was alone at the moment to take a look around and get an idea of the layout of the house.

A gallery ran the length of the house, bisecting it. Two small staircases at either end of the gallery connected with identical galleries directly above, traversing both of the upper storeys. On the ground floor were a sitting room, dining room, library, and gun room, as well as the kitchens and other utility rooms. The other floors would have to wait, however, as Steed could hear more guests arriving. Slipping out of the gun room, he made his way back to the entry hall, and from there to the saloon.

The saloon, or ballroom, was filling with ballgoers, and the variety of costumes was impressive. “Everyone from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf,” he remarked with a bow to one of the guests entering the saloon simultaneously with him. The ballroom took up nearly one quarter of the ground floor, and looked to be about half the length of the house. At one end of the room a band played swing music. To the band’s right was the rear wall of the house, made up of French windows which opened on a flagstoned courtyard skirted by a pretty rockery and featuring a pond at its centre. Tall hedges of dogwood flanked the courtyard on three sides; through a break in the far right hedge a gravel path led to the outer gardens and grounds. The same coloured lights as lit the yew alley hung in the courtyard, their reflections dancing gaily on the rippled surface of the pond; canvas canopies sheltered itinerant revellers from the elements. A couple of the French windows stood open, and occasionally a pair of costumed guests danced out into the crisp night air.

Steed finally spotted Tara among the dancers. He couldn’t help smiling as he watched her, thinking that there was something faintly ludicrous about Scarlett O’Hara jitterbugging with Marley’s Ghost.

The band segued into a slow dance just as Tara and her partner neared Steed, who promptly cut in. “I was wondering where you’d got to,” said Tara, easily following his lead.

“I was having a discreet look round,” he replied, scanning the room. “Looks like a good turnout this year.”

“When is Boone’s stand-in supposed to show up?”

“Chivers. As soon as I give him the signal.” Steed guided Tara across the floor and out into the courtyard. “We are to stay clear of him, and wait for his report in the morning.”
“Anything you want me to do?”
“Just keep your eyes and ears open. Otherwise, try to enjoy yourself. That shouldn’t be hard, particularly if you stick close to your young admirer.”
“And what will you be doing?”
“Oh, hanging about as inconspicuously as possible. Thank God for masked balls.”

They danced back into the ballroom just as the band was concluding its first set.

“Right. I’ll see you later.” Tara made a small curtsey before making her way to the other side of the room. He watched her sidle up to a tall Pierrot, whom he correctly guessed to be Rudy. Steed turned away. Refreshments were in order.

A liveried waiter carrying a tray of champagne glasses passed by. Steed helped himself to a glass and threaded his way through a cluster of guests. Sipping his champagne, he looked over the assembly with amusement. There in one corner were Athos, Porthos, and D’Artagnan, chatting up Macbeth’s Weird Sisters. Meanwhile, over by the bandstand, Beethoven toasted Cleopatra with two glasses of champagne. Joan of Arc consorted cosily with Mephistopheles, while Hamlet pinched a squealing Columbine’s behind.

After he finished his drink and set down the glass on the tray of the next passing waiter, Steed fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and extracted a handsome enamelled snuffbox which doubled as a miniature transmitter. He raised the lid and quickly pressed a tiny switch inside, then helped himself to a pinch of tobacco. He was savouring the effect when someone behind him said, “I’d recognise those calves anywhere.”

He wheeled about to come eye to eye with a tall, green, ivy-entwined figure. Even the visage of this apparition was green. But the expressive brown eyes behind the elaborate feather-trimmed mask could only belong to Emma. “I’ll met by moonlight, proud Titania,” he said, somewhat sternly, startled by this verdant vision. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“I was about to make the same observation,” she drily replied.
“Surprised to see me contributing my shilling to a worthy cause? My money’s as good as milord’s.”
“You never go to balls. Not off-duty.” The band struck up a Cole Porter melody just as another champagne tray floated past, and they both reached for a glass.
“Don’t tell me you’re just fighting the old ennui tonight,” she said airily. “Or is this some ruse,” she continued in flinty tones, “to corner me again?”

Steed lowered his voice. “Neither. I didn’t know you’d turn up. As you divined, I’m here on business.” Her earlier unkindness still rankled him. “We shouldn’t be seen together.” He made a formal bow and was about to move away when she impulsively grasped his arm.
“Steed—”
“You must excuse me, Mrs. Peel, if you don’t want to compromise me.”
“Wait. Please.” Her grip on his arm tightened. “What’s going on?”
“Nothing that should concern you. Quite possibly something to do with . . . your husband’s death.”
“I should have guessed,” muttered Emma, swallowing the rest of her drink and looking about for another. “I say—” She glanced hesitantly at him.
“What?” Steed was preoccupied with watching the crowd, looking out for Chivers.
“About the other day—” She took a deep breath. “It came as rather a shock, you know. I oughtn’t have been so . . . beastly. I owe you an apology.”
“Accepted. Think no more about it, Mrs. Peel.” Standing in one place while everyone else danced wasn’t the best way to remain inconspicuous. He took Emma’s glass from her hand and tossed it in a nearby potted plant. “Shall we?” Before she could reply, she found herself gliding gracefully across the floor toward the French windows. Steed was a good dancer, much better than her husband ever was. She realised that she’d rather missed taking the occasional turn or two around a dance floor with him.
“By the way, who, or what, are you?” Steed finally asked, after a few minutes of mutual silence, during which time he had looked at everyone in the room but Emma.
“Take a guess.”
“Well, I doubt it’s Lady Macbeth,” he said, with a hint of sarcasm, “and, notwithstanding my greeting, I’d guess that Titania would be much more scantily clad—”
“Try Puck,” said Emma. “And who are you? Little Lord Fauntleroy?”
“Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet. Better known as the Scarlet Pimpernel. At your service, Ma’am.” He raised her hand to his lips.
“The only service I require at the moment,” she said, yanking her hand away and glancing over Steed’s shoulder, “is that of the sommelier. Or one of the attendant Ganymedes flitting by with the nectar.”
“Take it easy with the fizzy stuff,” he growled, leading her out onto the terrace. “It’s early innings yet, and you know what happens when you—”
“You needn’t fuss.” Emma tried to pull away from him as a waiter hove into view. “I can manage. Whatever it is you’re up to, I want no part of it. I don’t particularly want to think about . . . my late husband . . . or anything else, for that matter. I’m trying to have a good time. You get on with your skulking, but leave me out of it.”
“I have every intention of doing just that,” he drily replied, letting go of her and turning away. “You’ve made it perfectly clear you’re to be left alone.” He noticed that Tara was now boogying with Sherlock Holmes, but there was still no sign of Chivers. Steed stalked back into the ballroom. The band began to play “Begin the Beguine.”
“Hang on a minute,” Emma called out, trailing after him into the house and thinking that in all the time she’d known him he had never been so stand-offish with her. “You’re still upset with me, aren’t you?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Steed smiled his most debonair smile, and looked through Emma. “Anyway, it’s you who are upset with me, remember?” At the moment, he had neither the time nor the inclination to worry about her sensibilities.

“Dance with me.” She drew him toward her and they eased with practised effortlessness into the rhythm of the music, moving in abstracted silence, each thinking how lovely the melody was and how poignant its lyrics.

A man clad in a Lafayette Escadrille pilot’s uniform had just come through one of the French doors. Steed stiffened, peering at the figure. “Looks like the cavalry’s arrived, if I may mix my metaphors. I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me, Mrs. Peel. Some other time, perhaps.” He bowed curtly, and strode toward the newcomer.

“Steed!” cried Emma to his retreating back. “Steed.” She wandered out to the courtyard and dropped down on the low wall encircling the pond. Next to where she sat someone had left a tray with a few glasses of champagne. She helped herself to a glass. “Oh, Steed,” she sighed, swallowing some champagne. “Oh, damn.”

Steed forged a path through the dancers toward a pair of doors at the far end of the room. On his way, he signalled Chivers, who discreetly acknowledged him before mingling with the other guests.

Slipping out into the gallery, Steed paused for a few moments to make sure he was unobserved. There didn’t seem to be any activity anywhere else in the house. A perfect opportunity to prowl around, he smiled to himself, stealing upstairs.

It was growing quite chilly outside. Emma drained a second glass of champagne before retreating inside. More guests arrived with every minute, and the ballroom, whose size appeared to have shrunk in the past hour, positively seethed with costumed dancers swirling shoulder to shoulder across its hardwood floor. She looked about for Steed, but he had vanished. Never mind; she didn’t need him. Nor was there any sign of Lord Braine. Emma found herself indifferently dancing with different men, none of whom she knew, and drinking more champagne with even more people whom she didn’t know.

The noise and crush of bodies oppressed her. She thought of going back outside, but it occurred to her that she wasn’t likely to find anything more to drink out there. Emma pushed her way through the throng and out into the gallery. Somewhere nearby was the library where she would find a handy store of assorted refreshments.

Her memory, though slightly impaired, hadn’t failed her. Emma found the library without too much difficulty, and located Lord Braine’s bar with even less trouble. She sampled several of the bottles, but nothing appealed to her particularly. If only there were a bottle of champagne she could have all to herself. She tried to
think where the entrance to the wine cellar might be. A door at the far end of the room caught her eye. It blended neatly with the rest of the panelling, and but for its well-polished brass handle would have been difficult to detect. Emma recalled seeing it once before, and seemed to remember Lord Braine saying that it led to the cellars. It was worth a try.

The door was unlocked, and indeed opened on a staircase descending directly to a wine cellar. Brushing a cobweb out of her way and feeling the wall for a light switch, she made her way down the stairs. Once she reached the bottom, she had no difficulty in finding the champagne, much less selecting a choice and perfectly-chilled vintage from the compact refrigerator that stood in a corner.

Emma took a swig from the bottle and began to wander among the bins. Braine’s collection of clarets alone would tempt Steed to larceny in his own right, she thought wistfully as she swallowed another mouthful of the illicit champagne.

She had got through about half the bottle and was nearing the end of a row of bins holding some especially venerable and highly tempting vintages when she spotted a door in the far wall of the cellar. Funny place for a fire exit, she mused, nearing the door and trying the handle. The door opened outward with a rusty creak of its hinges into some kind of passage. A rush of cold air laced with a heavy musty odour streamed into the room. “Ugh,” shuddered Emma, pulling the door to and thinking it was time she got out of the dank cellar and back to warmer, more cheerful surroundings.

Emma eventually retraced her steps to the staircase at the wine cellar’s entrance when she heard a door opening upstairs, followed by the sound of muffled voices. She had a little trouble switching off the light before cautiously ascending the stairs to the library door, which was barely ajar. Pressing against the wall, she peeped through the crack in the door. A fine time to be discovered, raiding mine host’s private stores. Oh, what the hell, in for a penny . . . She quaffed some more of the excellent though by now less-than-cold champagne.

She wasn’t able to see who was in the room, but she could hear someone speaking.

“It’s not him,” said the voice. “He’s dead, I tell you. They obviously got on to the fact that he was coming here tonight.”

A second voice muttered something in reply, but Emma couldn’t make out a single word.

“I saw that Steed bloke here tonight, dancing with Peel’s widow . . . He’s the one who took him away the other night.”

Emma sipped some more champagne, unable to make any sense of this one-sided conversation.

“Nothing happened!” said the first voice with vehemence, “and nothing will! I told you I’d take care it.”

She could barely make out the reply. “If . . . done . . . right . . . wouldn’t be . . .
problem . . .” The rest was unintelligible.

“There is no problem, I tell you! There never was, and there isn’t about to be one. Just leave this to me.”

The second voice interrupted the first, and Emma could sense the anger in its low growl, even if she couldn’t understand a syllable.

“Don’t you threaten me!” hissed the first voice. “I can make things rather unpleasant for you, too, you know.”

She heard someone cross the room, with the other person following and muttering something. A door opened, then slammed shut, and then silence fell once more in the room.

Emma waited several minutes before venturing out into the library and sneaking back to the ballroom. Nobody in that throng would pay the least bit of attention to her drinking the rest of her purloined bottle.

Some while later, Steed slipped back into the ballroom, dancing his way across the floor with several attractive women, and was about to step outside when Tara sauntered up to him, fanning herself energetically. “I do declare, I’m feelin’ jumpier’n a cat on a hot tin roof,” she announced loudly. “Fetch me a mint julep, honey, I’m positively parched.” More quietly, she asked, “Where’ve you been?”

“Snooping.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary. That is, in terms of what one might expect to find in a wealthy, cultivated man’s house. You should see some of the paintings Braine has.”

“While you were cataloguing the art collection, I kept an eye on Mrs. Peel. Some fellow dressed as the Red Baron seemed rather insistent with her, and she didn’t appear to enjoy his attentions at all.”

“When was this?” Steed was half-listening, not really caring to hear about Emma’s amorous peccadilloes.

“Not ten minutes ago. She went off in that direction, with him hot on her heels.” Tara nodded toward the ornamental pond.

Steed raised his lorgnette to his eyes and superciliously regarded a passing waiter. “I require some punch for the lady.” The waiter nodded and moved off. Turning once more to Tara, he said, “Am I imagining things, or do I detect, underneath the powdered wigs, lace, and brass-buttoned frock coats of the servants, one or two distinctly Nepalese-looking chaps?”

“No, you’re not imagining things. The hired help tonight is quite international in flavour. Don’t tell me you’ve overlooked the very tall and very handsome Sikh serenely standing guard at the front doors,” said Tara, peeking out mischievously at Steed from behind her fan. “Not to mention the Greek caterers and American musicians.”

Steed chuckled. “Anything else I’ve missed?”
“Not really. But as I was about to tell you, I thought that Mrs. Peel was acting a bit peculiar.”

“How’d you mean ‘peculiar’?”

“Well . . .” She batted her eyes and fanned herself, as a short, pudgy Musketeer swaggered up, ogling her from top to bottom.

“Hi, gorgeous,” said the Musketeer, in unmistakable New Yorkese. “Where have you been all my life?”

“Odd’s fish, man, your manners and your tailor both are a provocation,” articulated Steed in stifled, condescending tones, peering intently at the Musketeer through his lorgnette.

“You got a problem with that, Jeeves?”

Steed let the lorgnette drop from his fingers. “The lady and I were speakin’ of pressin’ matters when you interrupted.”

The Musketeer turned to Tara. “This guy your boyfriend or something, doll?”

“Pardon me, my dear,” sighed Steed, glancing at Tara, who was keeping a commendably straight face so far. He grasped the man’s wrist and gave it a painful twist. “Push off before I break it, bucko.”

“OK, OK, pal, no harm meant,” said the Musketeer with a flash of preternaturally white and undoubtedly expensive teeth. “You can let go now, OK?” Steed’s grip loosened, and the Musketeer hastily backed off and lost himself in the crowd.

With a flick of her wrist, Tara deftly folded her fan and tapped Steed playfully on the chest with it. “Naughty, naughty,” she grinned.

“Damnation, m’dear, the fellow was a fool, and I do not suffer that tribe gladly,” he said, then resumed his normal voice and manner. “I was about to ask, what struck you as so peculiar about Mrs. Peel?”

“She seemed— She wasn’t acting the way one would expect her to.” Tara lowered her voice. “Strictly entre nous, I think she’s had a skinful.”

Steed knit his brow, intently searching the many faces in the crowd. He couldn’t see Emma anywhere. “Can I leave you to the predations of assorted artsy vagabonds while I go in search of the apparently inebriated Mrs. Peel?”

“Absolutely.” Tara adjusted one of her stays. “You ought to take her home. She’s in no state to be driving. I can take over your watch, now that Chivers is here.”

“We’ll see. She’s more likely to prefer our host’s hospitality to my officious meddling.” Taking her hand, Steed made a low, formal bow, largely for the benefit of a herd of nymphs and satyrs cavorting nearby. “I am at your service, Ma’am.”

Tara curtseyed, smiling. “Be kind to her,” she murmured, fluttering her eyelashes and glancing coyly in the direction of the satyrs before hiding her face with her fan and swaying off.

Steed hung about for a few minutes, looking mindless, then strolled in the direction of the pond.
A masonry wall approximately three feet high encircled the pond. In summer, water lilies and goldfish shared the opaque waters; now only a feeble jet of water plashed noisily in the centre. There was no one there but Emma, standing atop the wall.

“‘Green grow the rushes, O!’” sang Emma tunelessly. “‘One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so.’ Mmm. Alone and palely loitering like Patience on a monument.” She slurped some champagne from the glass in her hand, and balanced somewhat unsteadily on the pond wall, struggling to right herself and not topple in the water. “I’ll sing you two, O! Green grow the rushes, O!’ What’s two?” She shut her eyes tightly, concentrating on the lyrics. “Ummm . . . ‘Two, two, the lily-white breasts’—” Her eyes giggled open wide, a sly look spreading across her features. “Oops, naughty me!” she slurred, taking another gulp of champagne. A bottle of Dom Perignon stood on the wall a few feet away from her, and she lurched toward it with attempted dance steps. “I’ll sing you six, O! Six for the six proud knockers’—” She knocked back the rest of her drink, then held the glass out at arm’s length, scowling. “Damn. All gone.” She swayed in the direction of the Dom Perignon.

“Mrs. Peel,” said Steed, in a voice halfway between a growl and a whisper, afraid of startling her and having to fish her out of the pond.

Emma, in the meantime, had succeeded in closing the distance on the bottle and stooped to pick it up. She straightened up and was about to pour some more champagne in her glass when she changed her mind and flung the glass into the pond. “Who needs that?” she said to the bottle, and took a drink straight from it. “‘Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest, Yo ho ho and a bottle of Dom,’” she chanted. “‘Drink to the devil and the hell with the rest, Yo ho ho,’ et cetera, et cetera, and— Whoa!” She turned slowly and deliberately, teetering on the very edge of the wall.

By now Steed had moved behind her, and caught her by the leg to keep her from tumbling into the icy waters. “Mrs. Peel,” he called softly.

“Hmmm?” She lowered the bottle from her lips, spilling a little, and concentrated on focusing her eyes and turning. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me. Steed.”

“Oh, no, John, no, John, no, John, no!” crooned Emma. “Have a drink, darling?” She thrust her arm sideways, holding out the bottle, fixing her eyes on him.

“Hadn’t you better come down from there?” He took the bottle from her and tried to take her hand.

Emma continued to stare at him. “Hey! What’re you doing here?” She took a few quick steps along the wall, nearly losing her balance.

“Come on, let’s get you down from there.” He was following her unsteady progress around the pond, hand outstretched. “I want to talk to you.”

“I’m busy. Singing.”

Steed couldn’t help smiling. “I heard you. And before anybody else does, perhaps you ought to take a little rest.”
“Spoilsport. Give me the bottle, there’s a good chap.”
“Later. Tell me about the Red Baron.”
“Who?” She swiped at the bottle.
“Tara saw him following you, talking to you. He followed you out here.”
Emma waved her hands. “Pest. Kept asking me things.”
“Such as?”
“Things.” She paused, her expression suddenly sombre. “Peter,” she muttered sullenly.

Steed handed her the bottle. “What did he want to know?”
“I don’t know. I don’t remember,” she pouted, finishing what was left of the Dom Perignon and dropping the empty bottle into the pond. “Let’s have a drink.”
“The only drink you’re going to get will be from this pond, if you’re not careful,” he said, leaping up beside her and taking her firmly by the hand. “Steady, old girl, down we come.” He coaxed her down from the wall, jumping to the ground after her.

Emma nearly fell over him, but he managed to hold his balance and keep her more or less on her feet. “I’ll drive you home, shall I?”
“I don’t want to go home! Why’d you make me come down? It was fun up there!” She pulled on his arm. “Let’s find another bottle and we can both get up there and sing!”
“And both fall in? No thanks! Anyway, you know I can’t carry a tune properly. Let’s go home. It’s cold, and it’s late.”
“No.” Emma pulled away from Steed and dropped down on the wall. “The way you wear your hat,” she began to sing softly, “the way you sing off-key . . .”
“What’s the matter, then?” He sat down beside her.
“Leave me alone,” she sulked, around a partly-stifled yawn. “I’m singing.” She tried to swallow another yawn. “I’ll just rest here for a while . . .” The yawn slid out, and she leaned against his shoulder, unable to keep her eyes focused. “Just rest a little . . .” Emma hiccupped.

Gently he put his arms around her, to keep her from falling backwards into the pond. She drifted back into consciousness a few moments later, and he was able to persuade her to get to her feet. “Come along, my dear, we’re just going to the car,” he murmured, supporting her about the waist.

She was too tired to argue. Draping her arm around his shoulders, she began to hum softly as he led her down the gravel path and through the opening in the hedge. He was helping her into the car when he heard Tara’s voice.
“Is she all right?”
“Your diagnosis of an excess of holiday cheer proved correct,” Steed replied. “She’s too tired to talk. I’ll see what she can tell me tomorrow.”
“We haven’t found the Red Baron yet. Maybe he left the ball. In the meantime, I’ll track down Chivers and see what he’s found out, if anything.”
“I’ll have to leave you in charge—I’ve got to take Mrs. Peel home.”

“Don’t worry. As I said, I’ll take over from you. Good night, and behave yourself!” Tara kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Steed drove slowly down the yew alley to the main road. “Are you awake?” He glanced at Emma.

“Mmm?” Her head lolled on the back of her seat.

It occurred to him that he didn’t know where she lived. She had moved to a house after her husband’s return, somewhere in or near Hampstead, he thought; beyond that he knew nothing. Needless to say, he’d never been there. “What’s your address?”

Emma struggled to open her eyes. All she could think of was climbing into a warm bed and sleeping for the next week or so. Where did she live? She tried to think. It wasn’t the place Steed used to come to. No. It was the one she and Peter—But she didn’t want to think about Peter. She bit her lip, forcing herself to concentrate on Steed’s hand gripping the gearshift lever. Such a nice hand, too, she found herself thinking, but was interrupted by another urgent appeal from her companion.

“Will you please tell me where you live?” Steed was beginning to sound the slightest bit exasperated.

“I don’t really care to think about that just now,” said Emma in her iciest tone. Her eyes were practically rolling in their sockets, and it was too much of an effort to think or stay awake. The hell with it. She fell back in her seat.

“Damnation,” muttered Steed under his breath. “Now what am I going to do with her?” She hadn’t exactly been the soul of conviviality lately. He was tired, and his patience had nearly run out. If she didn’t want to cooperate, well, then . . .

By the time Emma came to, Steed had already put his car in the garage and had managed to guide her up the back stairs into his kitchen. Propping her up against a wall, he quickly mixed a glass of bicarbonate of soda and held it to her lips. “Drink this!”

She clutched the glass and swallowed the concoction. “Are we home already?” She absently handed the glass back to him. “God, I’m sleepy,” she yawned, swaying and pressing against him. “Let’s go to bed, darling.”

Steed said nothing as he watched her struggle to keep her eyes open. Once more putting his arm firmly about her waist, he led her up the stairs. Emma vaguely apprehended climbing what seemed like a very steep but nonetheless familiar staircase and then seeing a large inviting bed through a doorway before she lost her fight to stay awake.
FOURTEEN

The muted ringing of the telephone beside the bed roused Emma to semi-consciousness. She groped for the handset and mumbled unintelligibly into it.

After the merest hesitation, the female voice on the other end spoke up.

“Good morning. May I speak to John Steed, please?”

“Wrong number,” Emma managed to croak before ringing off.

She was about to roll over and go back to sleep when she suddenly froze, her eyes wide open. “This isn’t my bed!” she whispered. Nevertheless, she recognised her surroundings, and it dawned on her where she was. “What on earth am I doing here?” A rare sensation of embarrassment crept over her. She glanced to her left, at the dishevelled bedclothes, and caught a glimpse of a pair of Hessian boots lying on the floor in the corner. A saffron-coloured satin tail coat, with an extremely stiff, high collar, was carelessly hung on one of the bedposts. Emma’s embarrassment was displaced almost immediately by indignation. Swinging her legs out from under the covers, she leapt out of bed. “Steed!” She happened to catch her reflection in the mirror, and saw that she was dressed in a kind of green elfin costume. She also sensed at that very moment the unpleasant ache that gnawed her body from the top of her head all the way to the tips of her toes. “Oh, Lord, the ball,” groaned Emma, sinking back down on the bed, images of ponds and champagne bottles mingling with those of herself and Steed. He brought her home from the ball. After she’d probably made a complete ass of herself. Dear, gallant Steed, she thought, not without a twinge of guilt. She wondered where he was.

Steed, too, was awakened by the ringing of the telephone. He had fallen asleep on the Procrustean sofa, and now painfully dragged himself off it and into the kitchen. He was still rubbing his stiff neck and thinking about making a pot of tea when he heard hesitant footsteps on the stair, followed by a husky voice calling his name.

Emma descended the stairs with magisterial detachment, steadying her progress with a firm grip on the handrail. “Steed?” she called out again, but less acerbically than before.

“Good morning.” He turned in the direction of her voice.

Their eyes met, and each regarded the other wordlessly for several moments. Emma, wrapped his dressing gown, loosened the belt, revealing her green costume. “I imagine my complexion this morning matches my attire.” She winced, feeling the effects of the previous evening’s excesses all too acutely.

“I’ve always said you look particularly fetching in green. Complements your eyes,” replied Steed, trying to take her hand and finding himself hampered by the extravagant lace cuff of his shirt. “Uncommon handsome, Ma’am . . . But I must be a sight for sore eyes.”

“Let’s just say you lack last night’s flair.” She avoided his gaze. “You look a bit rumpled.”
“It’s that slept-in look.” He paused to appraise her. “Though I must say, it certainly seems to suit you.”

“I bet I look about as good as I feel, which is uncommon ghastly. My entire body hurts, down to my toenails.” She leaned against a wall and shut her eyes. “I swear I’ll never do that again as long as I live,” she moaned.

“Or at least not until I uncork the Taittinger ’47,” he interjected. “Come on. I’ll give you something for it.” She followed him into the kitchen, where he foraged in the refrigerator, quickly producing an egg, tomato juice, Worcester sauce, and one or two other ingredients, which he then proceeded to mix together in a glass.

“Oh, no, not that...” Emma turned a shade greener.

Steed offered her the glass. “Now don’t be difficult. It’s only my Auntie Esme’s morning-after remedy. She called it ‘National Anthem’—one sip’ll bring you to your feet. Remember? You’ve had it before.” He proffered the glass to Emma, who shrank back from him. “Down the old hatch, there’s a good girl.”

She looked at him with a pained expression. “How about a nice cup of tea instead?”

He shook his head. “Not until you’ve had your medicine. You don’t want to get any greener than your leggings, now, do you?” He put his arm around her as she took the glass from his hand and raised it unwillingly to her lips. “That’s my girl,” he murmured silkily, “all the way down.”

Holding her breath and squeezing her eyes tightly shut, Emma complyed. Steed, his arm still around her shoulders, gave her a squeeze as he whispered, “And because I’m so fond of you, I left out the anchovies this time.”

With a look of verdant horror, she shoved him aside. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

“No, you’re not.” He noticed that she was about to set down the glass. “Ah, ah, drink it all down—if you won’t behave, I’ll push you under a cold shower.”

“Just you try it.” Emma poured the dregs of Auntie Esme’s potion down the drain and set the glass on the countertop in front of him. “And speaking of behaving, how exactly did I end up in your bed last night?”

Steed opened the refrigerator and searched for the orange juice. “You had a wee bit too much grape juice whilst dancing round the pond, serenading the stars and charming your listeners with eccentric versions of venerable English ditties.”

“I had? I did?” muttered Emma, remembering with blinding clarity their pas de deux atop the pond wall.

“I kept you from falling into the pond. Which, I might add, you were about to do when I came to the rescue. You had all your topgallant sails out, so I offered to navigate you back to harbour. Except you wouldn’t tell me where you’re berthed.”

“What do you mean, I wouldn’t tell you! Anyway, you know perfectly well where I live!”

“I’ve never been to your current address.” He poured a glass of juice. “At any
rate, before I could drag it out of you—the address, that is—you’d passed, er, fallen asleep. So I brought you here. And rather than leave you in that draughty old garage overnight, I hauled you upstairs and tucked you in.” He held out the juice bottle to her. “Any port in a storm, eh?”

“How very thoughtful of you.” She took the bottle from his hand. “Is that all?”

“There’s plenty of juice, help yourself.”

“That’s not what I meant. You know what I’m talking about.” Emma drummed her fingers on the kitchen counter. “Did I . . . that is, did we—?”

“No, we didn’t. You went to sleep, I went downstairs, and now here we are, breaking our fast together in blissfully domestic fashion.” He gave her a sour look. “Your faith in my integrity is so very touching.”

She turned away, twisting the dressing-gown’s belt in her hands, and wandered out of the kitchen. “Perhaps I ought to be getting on home now.”

“I need to talk to you first.”

“Maybe some other time. Would you take me home? Please?”

“And if I refuse?”

“I can’t very well go out in public looking like this.”

“You’re right. Take off that nasty old dressing gown.”

“You’re not funny.” Emma wheeled about, and regretted it immediately as her temples began to throb. “I want to go home!” She crept back into the kitchen.

“Will you be all right by yourself? You’re welcome to stay here, if you like.”

“I can take care of myself; you needn’t bother—”

“I wouldn’t call it bother,” said Steed. The look he gave her made Emma bite her tongue and think that perhaps she was being somewhat insensitive. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. And by the way I have never doubted your integrity.”

“I suppose that’s some comfort.” He put away the juice and rinsed his glass. It was a while before he spoke again. “I did go to the funeral, you know,” he stated in quiet, measured tones, without looking at her.

Emma didn’t immediately grasp what he was talking about. She stood unmoving, staring impassively at him as he pulled open a drawer full of neatly-folded tea towels. “It’s not important any more,” she started to say, but he interrupted her.

“It is to me. I was unavoidably delayed, and by the time I got there the services were pretty much over.” He finally raised his eyes and looked at her. “I watched you from the lich-gate, standing off to one side of the grave all by yourself, and I realised I wouldn’t be able to go through with it. Whatever I might have wanted to say to you at that moment, or do, would have been selfish and unseemly. Even worse, it would have been, under the circumstances, in unspeakably bad taste. So I went away.” Having turned over nearly the entire drawer, he finally straightened up, clutching a colourful tea towel.
“But later— Never a word, nothing,” she gently reproached him.
“I didn’t think you needed me.” He massaged his glass dry to a spotless brilliance.
“And what made you think that?”
“You never gave me any indication to the contrary. When you rang to tell me your husband was dead you were so . . . clinical about it. Uninvited, I didn’t wish to intrude.”
“That’s a lot of rubbish and you know it!” Fatigue, pain, and exasperation all mingled together in her tone and facial expression. “Why do you think I rang you in the first place? What else did you expect me to say to you? Surely you must have guessed— For God’s sake, Steed, you and I were once—” Her voice faded, and she did not finish the sentence.
“You made a choice, Mrs. Peel. The only one you could have made, I grant you. Nonetheless, it—” He searched for the right word. “It grieved me. Surely you knew that.” He looked into her eyes, so lovely in the morning light. The tea towel lay next to him, and he picked it up, carefully folding it into a tidy square. “You made the right choice, and the honourable one. You didn’t need me any more.” Still the same old hollow excuses. He faltered, and the towel dropped to the floor. “Damnation,” he muttered, snatching it up.
She looked away, not trusting herself to speak.
Steed collected himself. “Well, let’s get you home and out of those clothes, shall we?”
“I think I can manage the latter by myself.”
He smiled. “Now there’s a thought . . .”
“Just take me home.” Emma turned her back to him. He could be perfectly maddening at times.
“No sense of humour this morning. I keep forgetting.”
“Just take me home,” she pleaded, rubbing her temples and doubting she would ever recover her well-being, never mind her sense of humour.
“Very well.” All lightness vanished from Steed’s voice and manner as quickly as it had appeared. Emma still stood obdurately with her back to him. “Look at me.” He grasped her arm and turned her around to face him. “I never said this to you, but you were the only—” Once again his courage failed him, as well as his tongue. Just as abruptly as he’d seized her, he let her go, and brushed past her up the stairs. “I’ll take you home as soon as I’ve showered and changed,” he said in a gruff voice, disappearing up the stairs before she had the chance to say another word. Emma wandered back into the kitchen, quite astonished at his behaviour, and made herself some tea. It wasn’t like Steed not to speak his mind.
Twenty minutes later Steed reappeared on the stairs, patting his pockets for his keys. “I’ll take you home now.”
Emma looked up at him. “About that phone call earlier—it was a woman—"
“Ah. Probably Miss King. My colleague.”
“That’s a tactful way of putting it.”
He paused on the stairs. “I beg your pardon?”
“And Antony and Cleopatra are just good friends,” said Emma with a wry smile.
“Very droll,” muttered Steed, flushing. “How could you possibly know—"
“C’est un secret de Polichinelle, mon vieux,” she replied with convincing Gallic insouciance.
“Humph. In that case, you should also know it’s ancient history.” Steed found his keys and descended the last few steps. “Well, did you talk to her?”
“No, I hung up on her.”
“Oh, dear.” He arched an eyebrow. “Even your savoire-faire has its limits, eh?”
“Actually, when I picked up the phone I hadn’t yet realised exactly where I was, you see,” she patiently explained. “I thought it was a wrong number.”
“Never mind, if it’s important I’m sure she’ll ring again.” He glanced at the kitchen clock. “Which reminds me, Chivers was supposed to phone in with his report this morning.”
“Who’s Chivers?”
“One of our chaps. He was at the ball last night. He masqueraded as a dead man.”
“And this has something to do with my husband’s alleged murder?”
“It might. Shall we go?”
She leaned against the wall and folded her arms. “Is that all you’re going to tell me?”
“I thought you didn’t want to get involved,” he said frostily. “As it happens, there’s nothing else to tell.”
“That’s not exactly what I meant,” she started to say, but was pre-empted by the ringing of the telephone. The kitchen extension was not muted and she whimpered as he sprang for the receiver. “Steed here,” he said curtly. “What? When did this happen? . . . Why didn’t you ring me at once? . . . Are you still there? . . . I said, why didn’t you ring— . . . Ah, yes, she did mention . . . Right . . . yes . . .”
Emma, who to this point had been paying scant attention, turned to Steed, recognising, with another pang of nostalgia, the undercurrent of keen excitement in his otherwise even demeanour, which signalled that the call had been sounded and the chase was finally on.
Steed’s eyes met Emma’s. He covered the mouthpiece with one hand. “It’s Tara.” He paused, listening, then uncovered the mouthpiece. “Hold on . . .” He caught Emma’s eye again. “Your car. Tara can drive it back to your place—”
“My car . . . I’d quite forgotten. The key’s under the mat, on the off side.”
Steed relayed the information to Tara. “I’m afraid I don’t know . . . Hold
on—” He looked at Emma again. “What’s your address?”

Steed really had kept his distance. She gave him the street and number. “Better pass on my telephone number as well,” she said, giving it to him.

He repeated the information into the telephone. “Right. We’ll meet you there.” He rang off and turned to Emma. “Chivers is dead. He was found early this morning at Lord Braine’s estate, along with a second corpse, who hasn’t been identified yet, but who fits the description of the man who was following you around last night. It appears they had a confrontation, and shot each other. In a hedge maze, of all places.” Frowning, he stroked his chin. “This rather complicates things. D’you recall what your pursuer wanted?”

“It may come as a shock to you to learn that my recollections of last night—such as they are—can hardly be described as lucid,” she stated drily.

“Try anyway.” The tone of his voice left her with no doubt that she had better make an effort. “Did you recognise him?”

“The Red Baron.” Emma rolled her eyes up at the ceiling, trying to picture his face. Or what little she saw of it, in view of the fact he was wearing a leather flying helmet and goggles at the time.

“That’s right. Tara saw him talking to you.”

“I don’t believe he introduced himself. And no, I didn’t recognise him. I don’t think we’d ever met before.” Emma shook her head. “He can’t have said more than a dozen words to me, Steed, I’m sorry—”

“All right, never mind,” said Steed, pacing back and forth, “perhaps something’ll come to you later.” He rubbed the back of his still-sore neck. “I don’t think you should stay home alone. Mightn’t be safe.”

“I told you, I can take care of myself,” she replied, but with less bravado this time.

Too weary to argue, he merely shrugged his shoulders. “As you wish. Let’s go, then. Tara should be by with your car within the next couple of hours.”

Emma slowly followed Steed to the back door. “He said something about my husband, something about him being killed, as a matter of fact, but I didn’t want to think about any of that, so I told him to push off.”

“Obviously he knew who you were. Did he say who killed your husband, or why?” Steed glanced sharply at Emma.

She shook her head slowly. “It was more like he was asking me if I knew anything about Peter’s death. He was afraid of something. Or someone.” Emma contemplated the ceiling again. “I can’t remember anything else—”

“I suppose I’ll just have to wait until he’s been identified, and go from there.”

Steed pulled open the door.

“Steed . . .”

“What is it?” He saw her perplexed expression.

“It may have been this Red Baron’s voice I heard in the library. He was talking
to someone—"

Now it was Steed’s turn to look puzzled. “I’m not sure I follow you.”

“I left the ballroom for a while. I sneaked into the library, where Lord Braine keeps an assortment of alcoholic beverages,” explained Emma with an abashed grin. “I thought I’d sample a few. When I didn’t find anything I fancied, I decided I’d look for some more champagne.” She told him about her raid on the wine cellar. “As I was about to come back up to the library, I heard the voices. Or, more precisely, voice. The other person spoke in such low tones I couldn’t really make out what he was saying. I hid behind the cellar door, so I couldn’t really see much of anything.” She then told him what she had overheard.

“He knew who you were, he recognised me, and I think he was talking about Boone’s interrogation,” muttered Steed, “which means that someone who was present during that interrogation was the proverbial cat among the pigeons. We were right about there being a leak.” He started down the stairs to the garage. “I’ll meet you out front with the car.”
Tara stopped to admire Mrs. Peel’s black and silver Bentley before climbing inside to look for the spare key. In her opinion, the car wasn’t as sexy as the ones Steed fancied, but it was no less well-maintained than his latest fad. She guessed it to be an early 'fifties model. Its interior, recently refurbished, was redolent with the smell of new leather and wood polish. She found the key and slid behind the wheel, examining the burled walnut instrument panel as she cranked the motor. Her ample figure nestled comfortably in the seat, she took a moment to glance at her watch before releasing the brake and engaging the gears. It wouldn’t take too much more time to get to Mrs. Peel’s house by way of secondary roads than it would taking the motorway, she calculated, and it would be more fun to drive through the countryside. Surely Mrs. Peel would have no objection, argued Tara to herself; anyway, she’d never know, so what difference could it make?

Tara turned the Bentley into the yew alley leading away from Lord Braine’s estate. The clear skies of the previous day were now almost completely darkened by storm clouds. The sun was only intermittently visible overhead as a faint disc, and large drops of rain were beginning to fall as Tara headed down the road in the general direction of north London.

The route she chose took her through a few picturesque villages before winding into more sparsely populated and hilly country. The road gradually narrowed and abruptly grew more tortuous with every curve. The rain had begun to come down in earnest, and the wipers were barely able to sweep the windscreen clear.

She had just reached the crest of a hill and begun her descent when she noticed that the brakes seemed to have faded slightly. Probably wet from all those wretched puddles at the bottom of the last hill, she thought, pumping the brake pedal in an effort to dry the shoes with friction. The car accelerated on the downgrade, unresponsive to Tara’s footwork. She then depressed the brake pedal firmly, only to discover that she was not succeeding in slowing the car at all. By now, she was nearly at the bottom of the downgrade, where the road took a sharp turn leftward. Trees and hedges hemmed her in on either side. The Bentley was rapidly gaining momentum, and grew increasingly trickier to handle. Gripping the wheel firmly with both hands, she took the curve on what felt like only two wheels, at the same time brushing against the hedge on her right. With the rain now pelting down in earnest, she could barely see ahead of her.

Coming out of the curve, Tara managed to make out that the road straightened out for approximately a thousand feet before twisting into another sharp turn. She reached for the gearshift lever and changed down. Nothing happened. She then grabbed the emergency brake lever and gave it a sharp tug, only to find it waggling uselessly in her hand. “Oh, no,” she gasped, letting go of it just in time to wrestle the car into the next curve.
It then occurred to her, as she sped along the next bit of straightaway, to try switching off the motor. But, as with her other attempts at slowing the car, nothing she tried worked. Giving up in exasperation, she had barely enough time to get her hand back on the wheel before entering the next twist in the road.

Unchecked and uncheckable, the Bentley roared through the countryside with ever-increasing velocity. Tara prayed for something that would enable her to slow the vehicle down, but if anything the road seemed to twist and turn and rise and dip all the more, and the vegetation on either side seemed to grow denser by the yard.

Thick overhanging tree branches suddenly loomed ahead, absorbing the deluge sufficiently to enable her to see a break in the hedges several hundred feet beyond the trees. If she could somehow manage to turn the car— A warning sign stood at the road's edge. She barely glimpsed it as she sped by. She did, however, register its meaning, and recalled with dismay that there were quarries in this district, which probably meant that the break in the hedges was a lorry crossing. “Oh, no,” she moaned, as her supposition was confirmed by the appearance of a cumbersome vehicle, laden with slabs of rough-hewn stone, nosing its way through the hedge break and directly into her path. Tara switched on the headlamps and leaned on the horn. The lorry continued to creep forward. She tried several long blasts on the horn, then gave up and simply clung to the wheel. The lorry had managed to creep out about halfway across the road, and loomed alarmingly near. Alternately cursing and praying, she clenched her jaw and wrenched the wheel, sending the Bentley into a skid as she fought to swerve around the lorry before it effectively blocked her path. The nasty screech of metal on metal pierced the air, startling her for a moment, as she careened between the lorry and the hedge. The car continued to skid and swerve as Tara put every bit of her strength into steering. She finally managed to regain some semblance of control, and became aware of a rising sensation of helplessness. Don’t panic, keep calm, she kept muttering to herself, her anxiety climbing to new heights. The fact that she found herself approaching a village did little to ease her mind.

“Welcome to Little Storping-in-the-Swuff,” proclaimed the neat hand-lettered and decorated sign at the edge of a green bordering a large pond, where the road took another turn in the direction of a roundabout the locals grudgingly tolerated as the one blot of modern progress on their otherwise idyllic little community. Unfortunately, Tara was too preoccupied to read the sign, much less savour its aesthetic merits, as she barrelled toward Little Storping’s high street at breakneck speed.

The downpour suddenly eased to a drizzle, so she could at least see where she was headed. Not that it really made much difference, she thought; at best, she’d know when and how she would meet her doom. Hurtling straight for the roundabout, Tara scarcely managed to avoid flattening a cyclist who had drifted carelessly into the centre of the roadway, and who now lay in the muddy ditch cursing her and all her ilk roundly in particularly creative Anglo-Saxon idiom. Fortunately, there was no other
traffic to speak of in the village at this time of day, and the only problem facing Tara at the moment was negotiating the roundabout in defiance of centrifugal forces, and staying more or less on the road.

White-knuckled, she clutched the steering wheel and shot into the roundabout. The car immediately began to lose traction on the slick paving, and the small orange sign reading “slow - loose chippings” did little to inspire her with confidence in her ability to remain in control. She felt the rear end of the car slew around and wrenched the wheel in the direction of the skid. It was impossible to try anything else at the moment, and she abandoned any hope of manoeuvring the car into the road that would take her to London. If she could hang on long enough, she just might manage to slide into the high street before losing control and rolling the car.

A pair of locals had stepped out of the village newsagent’s just as the Bentley flew out of the roundabout and streaked into the high street. They watched in silent disapproval as the flash of black and silver metal whooshed by, then regarded one another sagely. Finally one of the men spoke up. “City folk,” he pronounced.

“Aye,” came the terse reply.

“Tearabouts and hooligans, Derek, that’s what they are. Young rascallions.”

“Aye, that they are.” Derek calmly produced a pipe and proceeded to fill it from a weathered tobacco pouch.

“I’ve said so before, haven’t I?”

“Aye, that you have.”

“And I’ll say so again.”

“Aye, that you will.” Derek was now rummaging in his pockets for a box of Vestas.

“Mebbe I should ring the constable?”

“Aye, mebbe you should.” Derek was still searching his pockets for the matches when his companion turned and re-entered the newsagent’s.

It took Tara no more than the blink of an eye to traverse the length of Little Storpings’s main thoroughfare before she again found herself on a country road barely wide enough for one car and hemmed in by hedges thicker even than any she’d passed earlier, if that were possible.

With dismay, she noticed that the road cut through this part of the countryside in a dead straightaway for about a quarter of a mile, on a slight decline, before veering sharply to the left into a wooded area. She thought about angling the car into the hedges to bring it to a stop, but when she caught a glimpse through a thinned-out section of hedge of all the cattle ruminating lazily on the other side, her nerve failed her. As the Bentley picked up speed, Tara, seeing the greenery on either side of her as a mere blur, uttered a scatological curse.

Her hands were numb in their white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, making her efforts to control the vehicle all the more difficult. The turn in the road loomed nearer and sharper with every second. She wasn’t at all confident that she
could negotiate it at this speed, and shuddered at the thought of flying into the inevitable herd of cows that must surely be standing directly where the laws of physics would compel her course off the roadway.

The Bentley hurtled into the curve at blinding speed, with Tara hanging on to the wheel with all her might to keep the car from flying off the road to the right. She was losing the struggle, but as it happened there was a right-hand fork in the road just as the car entered the curve. It was into this fork that the car careened, due more to natural laws than any effort on her part.

“Oh, hell!” she exclaimed, nearly losing her grip on the wheel as the car hit a couple of water-filled potholes. Barely missing an ancient oak tree at the side of the road, she managed to regain her handhold and wrenched the wheel this way and that to straighten out the car. The road she was now on was practically identical to the previous one, only the hedges weren’t quite so thick, and there appeared to be side roads here and there, presumably leading to the local farms. She prayed that she wouldn’t encounter any more cross traffic.

Tara’s prayers were answered, to the extent that her dizzying progress down the country road was unimpeded. She was beginning to calm down, and even managed to glance right and left in search of something that might aid her in slowing down without causing excessive damage to the car. But the gods were moving in typically mysterious fashion on this day, so while they granted her immediate supplications, they sat idly by when her next surprise came.

The road curved gently, then straightened out, and Tara could see that she was approaching another village. The hedges on either side of the road were suddenly supplanted by quaint cottages and shopfronts. The road widened at mid-village, where there stood in the centre a cenotaph, no doubt commemorating the war dead. Beyond the cenotaph the road narrowed and the cottages thinned out, giving way to open fields on either side of the road. There was no stopping here, she concluded, straining to see what lay ahead. The cenotaph made it difficult for her to see much, particularly as she was trying very hard to steer around it.

From somewhere in the distance came a low rumble, followed by a couple of shrill whistle blasts. Down the road, past the last of the cottages, some lights began to flash.

“Oh, damn!” she cried, recognising the all-too-familiar two-tone horn blast piercing the air. The cenotaph was no more than a grimy blur as she streaked past it toward the flashing lights. With no more cottages and buildings to obscure her view to either side, she could see the reason for the flashing lights: a railway crossing. As the lights continued to flash, the crossing gates suddenly shuddered to life, and she cursed again in despair.

Drawn by three diesel locomotives, the train was bearing down on the crossing at an alarming speed. Tara could see it hurtling along the track to her right, coming closer and closer to annihilating her with every breath she took. The crossing gates
were now coming down, and she realised that the train would be in her path right about the time she traversed the tracks. “Oh, no,” she whimpered, horrified at the thought of meeting death by several tons of machinery. She glanced ahead at the crossing, then back at the train, and it occurred to her that since there was no hope of stopping, her only chance lay in accelerating and praying that she could beat the train.

With that thought, Tara floored the accelerator, aimed the car directly at the descending crossing gates, and shut her eyes.
SIXTEEN

Steed was already waiting at the kerb with the car when Emma emerged into the street, her Puck outfit hidden from view by Steed’s old Army greatcoat.

“What happened to the Bentley?” she asked, as he sprang out of a black Jaguar saloon to open the door for her. And what happened to his penchant for unconventional motor cars, she wondered.

“Mothballed the old girl,” he grunted, reading Emma’s thoughts as he gathered up a lap rug from behind the seats and arranged it around her. “She had a lot of miles on her.” He got behind the wheel. “Rather like me.”

“Hardly,” replied Emma, pulling the rug closer about her, shivering slightly. “In any case, I can’t imagine you in mothballs, ever.”

“How kind of you to say so.” He started the motor and eased the car into gear.

“A museum would be more appropriate.” She burst into laughter. Auntie Esme’s nostrum appeared to have worked once again, to her unending amazement. She was actually starting to feel refreshed, and even energetic, notwithstanding the toxic effects of the previous night’s excesses. Or had her feelings more to do with being with Steed again? She remembered the exhilaration she always felt when they were together, hot on the scent of some diabolical mastermind or other. For the first time in many, many months, Emma admitted to herself that she was still rather fond of Steed after all. And that she’d missed him.

She watched him guide the agile and responsive car expertly through the congested London streets. This time, though, they were together for a very different, and entirely unromantic, reason. He was merely taking home a cold, tired, hung-over fool of a woman who had not only come unpardonably close to disgracing herself in public, but also required urgent intercession before keeling over into an icy pond and suffering complete mortification, never mind the death of cold. Emma shivered again. Shocking. Thank heavens Steed turned up as her gallant rescuer. A faint groan escaped from her. God only knows what might have happened otherwise.

“You all right?” Steed’s voice startled Emma out of her ruminations.

She hung her head, shamefaced. “I’m fine, Steed.”

“You’ll feel better soon, you’ll see,” he said, unpersuaded. “Are you hungry? I’ll treat you to a slap-up lunch, anywhere you like.”

She took a deep breath, coughed, and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry I’ve been so short with you.” In all the time she’d known him, Steed had unfailingly responded to all her moods with good-natured indulgence. Until now. She took a long look at him. Outwardly, he’d hardly changed. The impeccable clothes, the beguiling ease of manner—the old hallmarks were still evident. But there was something else there, some undercurrent that was unfamiliar to her. Emma listened to Steed’s banter with half an ear, watching him intently as he drove. She sensed that his entire manner was forced, as though he were playing an old and all-too-familiar role for the thousandth
time, a role that had grown unspeakably weary and stale, and which no longer held any meaning for him. Trust that bastard Mother to burden Steed with the task of unravelling Peter’s death, she thought angrily; this whole business was unpleasant enough without the added personal complications. And yet she couldn’t help but smile at Mother’s transparent scheming. He might be a crafty bugger, but as a matchmaker he left a great deal to be desired. “Poor old Steed,” Emma murmured aloud, much to the latter’s astonishment.

“Poor? ‘Old’? Am I as pitiful as that? Plotting to pack me off to the Victoria and Albert, are you?”

“Not at all, my darling. And when I do decide to do that, you’ll be long past it and won’t know the difference,” she teased, tickling the back of his neck. “Next turning on the left,” she exclaimed, noticing for the first time the familiar precincts through which Steed was threading his way. “It’s easier to go round the back way.”

“Port my rudder, aye,” he acknowledged, executing the turn handsomely into a small lane. “The tradesmen’s entrance, eh?” He finally smiled. “Mustn’t let the neighbours see what company you’re keeping these days.”

“You can’t be serious—this is the first place they look,” replied Emma smoothly. “My torrid affair with the milkman is, after all, local legend.”

“That’s encouraging.” Steed forced his eyes back on the road just in time to avoid flattening a stray wheelbarrow. “How much—er, further?”

She gave him a mild shove. “Just past that hedge, then left.”

* * *

Steed followed Emma into the garden behind her house, and tried to imagine how it would look when spring came and brought it back to life. Now, bereft of leaf and blossom, it stood barren, indeed forlorn, and he couldn’t help recalling the dreary grounds of his parents’ house, so forbidding in their lifelessness by the time he came home from school for the Christmas holidays that he would seek comfort for days on end in the cheery, ample warmth of Cook and her bright, well-ordered kitchen.

Emma picked up a loose paving stone under which she had hidden a spare house key. They were at the back steps now, and she was bounding up to the door when she halted abruptly, causing him to bump into her. “Someone’s knocked over the empties,” she observed, scraping aside the shards of a broken milk bottle with her foot.

“Cats?” Steed glanced about the yard.

“They’ve never done it before, but I suppose there’s always a first time.” She stepped up to the back door and turned the key in the lock before drawing back. “I could’ve sworn this door was bolted when I left.”

The hairs on the back of Steed’s neck prickled, a sure portent of mischief being abroad somewhere; his grip tightened on his umbrella. He brushed past Emma and
warily opened the door.

“Now don’t get excited, Steed, it’s probably the cleaning woman—”

“Shh!” He listened intently at the door. “If it is, I suggest you sack her immediately. Sounds like a demolition crew in there.” He pushed the door ajar and waited. The noises were coming from the front of the house, and grew more audible. “You’re not renovating, are you?”

“No that I’m aware of,” she said drily.

“What’s the lay of the land?” he asked in a low voice.

Emma succinctly described the floorplan to Steed.

“Permit me,” he murmured, proceeding ahead of her into the house.

They crept through the kitchen and into a hallway. Stopping short of a door on the left-hand side, Steed motioned to Emma to halt. “Sounds like someone’s giving your parlour a thorough going-over,” he whispered. “And unless I’m mistaken, more than one person is responsible for what’s going on in there.”

“Are we just going to mill about smartly while my dwelling is systematically destroyed?” Anger mixed with dismay washed over her, as she heard the crash of shattered glass followed by several dull thuds. “Or have you a plan?” She wondered if this violation of her house had anything to do with the purported murder of her husband, and whatever else Steed might be mixed up in at the moment. She was reaching for the doorknob when she felt his firm grip on her wrist. His steely glare arrested her. He shook his head, slowly letting go of her wrist and putting a finger to his lips.

“Dining room?” Steed glanced at the door Emma was about to open.

She nodded in assent. “It opens on to the living room.”

“Right.” He pointed to himself and then to the door, then gestured to her to head toward the archway at the far end of the hall leading into the living room. She nodded again, and hugging the wall made her way toward the archway, as Steed slowly depressed the handle of the dining room door.

With an uncanny precision of timing and co-ordination, Steed and Emma launched the offensive by simultaneously cutting off the only two avenues of retreat from the living room, where the intruders were. What met their eyes when they stood at the entrances to the living room was a shambles. Books that had been swept off the shelves lay scattered over the floor amidst broken crockery and glass. Some of the furniture was overturned and tossed aside. The upholstery of one or two pieces was ripped, and bits of fluff still drifted in the air. Nothing, it seemed, had been left untouched. Even Emma’s huge sculpture, at one end of the room, bore a few bruises. The cause of all this mayhem was a pair of very large thugs, who continued to wreak havoc, oblivious to the presence of anyone else in the room.

The more ham-fisted of the two burglars was about to pick up a vase full of chrysanthemums and empty its contents on the rug when Emma, unable to contain her fury any longer, flew across the room at him with a kick to his kidneys. Steed
took his cue and lunged toward the other man, who was busy dumping things out of an antique cabinet near the fireplace.

Emma’s kick sent Ham-Fist crashing to the floor, vase and all, directly into a concentration of stuffing and broken glass. His cry of painful surprise was followed by a sneeze, and then a grunt as she jumped astride him, twisting his arm and forcing him to his feet. “You’ve been very naughty,” she said, spinning him about. Ham-Fist made the mistake of trying to slap her. She landed two well-placed blows to his throat and gut, and he doubled over, clutching his body. Ham-Fist’s second mistake was attempting to butt Emma with his head. She took a few steps backward, letting him gain some momentum, and then delivered a knee to his face. He grunted again before collapsing on top of an overturned settee. Nevertheless, he struggled to his feet and grabbed Emma by her arm. She twisted around thinking she’d flip him over her shoulder, but realised it might be rather more difficult than it looked on television. So she gave him a backward kick in the groin instead. Ham-Fist crumpled to the floor, moaning, and lay there in a fetal position, temporarily out of action. She gave him a final kick in the backside, dusted off her hands, and turned to see how her partner was faring.

Steed, in the meantime, was having a rather rougher go of it. Wielding his umbrella like the batter in a game of baseball, he managed to whack his opponent’s head with the handle, but to no apparent avail. Blockhead’s skull was too thick to be dented by anything short of the time-honoured lead pipe. Steed had merely succeeded in arousing the brute’s wrath, which could prove complicated, for Blockhead weighed at least eighteen stone, if he weighed a pound. Blockhead glowered at Steed through bloodshot piggy eyes glinting with malevolent stupidity. Falling back into a crouch and warily waiting for the thug’s reaction, Steed cursed himself for not taking his sword cane instead of the ordinary, useless bumbershoot he now held in his hands.

Blockhead lumbered toward Steed, crushing a couple of small pieces of furniture under his hobnailed boots like so many twigs. Steed continued to retreat to higher ground, or any ground for that matter, keeping larger objects such as the sofa between himself and this rhinoceros. He turned to leap over a broken stool when he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. He stumbled aside, turning back around to face his attacker, who was brandishing a poker with obvious relish. Unfortunately, Steed fell over something just as Blockhead raised the poker over his head with a malicious grin and came at him. Before Steed could scrabble out of the way, he looked up to see Blockhead looming over him. The latter emitted a nasty low chuckle and swung. Steed tried to roll out of reach, but wasn’t quick enough, hindered as he was by an overturned armchair to his left and an up-ended table to his right. Another much more intense pain shot through his left shoulder blade as the poker sliced downward. Groaning, Steed pulled himself back and away from his assailant, who was getting ready to have another go at him. But the room suddenly started to grow dim, sounds
faded, and Steed found himself sinking into darkness, unable to stir.

Emma had turned around just in time to witness Blockhead’s attempt at decapitating Steed. She heard the sickening thud of poker meeting flesh, followed by a choked grunt from Steed. Leaping over remnants of her furniture toward the piggy-eyed giant, she dealt him the same blows she’d meted out to his accomplice, but she could see that this bastard would be three times harder to bring down than the other one. Her furious kicks and blows did, however, distract Blockhead from his original purpose of crushing Steed’s skull. She finally succeeded in wresting the poker out of his paws, and gripping it firmly jammed it into his paunch.

Blockhead didn’t even blink. Emma jabbed again, but the effect was about as deadly as kneading dough. She backed off, feinting to one side, swinging the poker from side to side. As her adversary clumsily manoeuvred toward her, she saw her chance. Emma waited for him to get closer, continuing to wave the poker in front of his face. Sneering, Blockhead made a grab for the weapon. As he raised his arms, Emma took a roundhouse swing at his ribcage. The crack that ensued when iron met bone brought a grim smile to her face. “A hit, a palpable hit,” she said, following up with another blow to Blockhead’s upper torso. This time she broke his clavicle. Behind her she heard Ham-Fist stir into activity.

Emma grabbed Blockhead by the scruff of the neck and helped him up to his feet with a few kicks to his backside. Bellowing fearfully and clutching his shoulder, Blockhead tried to wriggle out of her grasp. His efforts to free himself were unsuccessful, but they did serve to divert her attention from Ham-Fist long enough to give the latter the opportunity he needed to get her out of the way.

Just as Emma was about to give Blockhead one last boot in his stern, two hairy paws grabbed her upper arms and jerked her away. She twisted free of one paw and turned to face Ham-Fist, whose little eyes gleamed evilly. “Troublesome bitch, ain’t you? Look what you’ve gone and done to ’Arry.”

“’Ere, why don’t you just shut up?” ’Arry was still clutching at his shoulder as he lumbered toward the entry. “Let’s scarper, before we get hurt any more!”

“You always was a useless bloody coward!” Ham-Fist snarled back at ’Arry as he hit Emma across the face with the back of his hand. “How’s that for starters, duckie?”

Emma reeled backwards, momentarily stunned.

“Let’s get out of ’ere,” urged ’Arry, more firmly this time, with a murderous look at his companion.

“I don’t like being pushed around,” said Ham-Fist, landing a blow to Emma’s gut and knocking the wind out of her, “especially by a bloody bint!” He watched with satisfaction as she sank to the floor, doubled over and gasping for air. “Keep out of it!” he barked, as ’Arry grabbed him by the arm and dragged him toward the front door.

Still struggling for her breath, Emma was barely aware of the two men
slamming the door behind them as they fled the house.
SEVENTEEN

As soon as she recovered her breath, Emma picked herself up and made her way to Steed, who was crumpled up in a corner amidst assorted debris.

He opened an eye just enough to see that he was lying more or less on his right side, with his head in her lap. She had sat down beside him, and was gently stroking his forehead. “Steed? Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

He quickly shut his eye and pretended to still be unconscious. A severe pain in his left shoulder made his eyes smart, but Emma’s ministrations certainly had a soothing effect. Might as well make the best of the situation, he thought, prepared to enjoy her hands on his face as long as possible.

She, however, was not prepared to spend the afternoon caressing him, and so to revive him she reached for a vase full of flowers standing on the floor nearby, miraculously unscathed in the earlier mêlée. Tossing out the flowers, she picked up the vase and poured the water over his head.

Sputtering and snorting, Steed sat bolt upright and nearly passed out again from the pain in his shoulder. Emma caught him in her arms as he fell back, only to hurt his shoulder yet again.

“Are you trying to finish what that brute started?” he gasped, heaving himself to his feet and unsteadily making his way toward the hallway.

“Oh, dear,” said Emma with a small voice, putting her hands to her face. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking.” She stood up and started after him. “Let me see what’s wrong with you.”

“Oh, don’t fret on my account,” growled Steed, gingerly moving his left arm. Nothing appeared to be broken. His shoulder still hurt like the devil, but it was nothing distilled spirits wouldn’t anaesthetise. “I could do with a drink.” He stopped, staring at the enormous concrete block Emma had been chiselling and drilling away at for years. It was already a Work-in-Progress when he first met her, and here it was, still unfinished after all these years. Astonishing.

Emma, too, examined the block. “Oh, no, they’ve ruined it!” she wailed, running her hand through a couple of crevices and over several dents.

Steed eyed the block sceptically. “How can you tell?” He had long ago given up hope of grasping what it was she was trying to achieve. Quite possibly his uncertainty had something to do with the fact that he wasn’t sure Emma had any idea what it was she was trying to achieve, either.

“Philistine.” She was about to shake Steed by the shoulders when he stopped her.

“Ah, ah—careful, now. Don’t touch, unless of course you want to curl up with me and caress my cheeks again.”

“There should be some whisky in the study. Or what’s left of it,” she said and, casting one last sad glance at her oeuvre, picked her way back through the debris to the
The room that had at one time served as her husband’s study was also in a state of disarray, but far less so than the living room. Evidently ’Arry and his chum found it too cramped a venue for them to really put their backs into the job. Emma crossed to a cabinet from which she retrieved a bottle and two glasses.

Mechanically, she poured the drinks, handed one to Steed, then set the bottle down on the cherrywood Georgian escritoire. Her nervous energy having mostly worn off, Emma grew numb at the sight of her vandalised home. She leaned over and picked up a drawer that had been yanked out of the desk. “What could they possibly have wanted?”

“Ahh, that’s better,” he said, after a reviving swallow of whisky. He set his glass down beside the bottle and ran his hand along the desk’s well-polished wood. “Something belonging to your husband, I’d guess.”

“His medals? Our wedding portrait?” Emma rolled her glass between the palms of her hands. “There’s nothing much left, and what there is— What could anyone possibly want with that sort of stuff?”

“Papers, photos, letters? Something found on his . . . person, after he was recovered from the crash?” Steed made a show of scrutinising a corner of the desk. “Although as I recall from the files, he didn’t have anything of apparent significance on him. Ditto for the effects in his office and locker.”

“There isn’t anything,” exclaimed Emma. “There hadn’t been, for a long time,” she muttered, picking up some papers that lay scattered at her feet and placing them on the desktop, and struggling to keep the unwelcome memories she’d kept suppressed until now from bursting forth all at once and completely undermining what was left of her self-control. It really wouldn’t do to let Steed know that her last months with Peter weren’t as idyllic as they might have been. It also wouldn’t do to let him see that she was, after all, vulnerable.

Steed looked up at Emma. “My grandfather had a desk like this,” he said to distract her. He moved closer to her and bent down to look at one of the drawers. “Many of these things had secret drawers. I know Grandfather’s did—he kept his cigars hidden there, so Grandmama wouldn’t catch him with what she called ‘the contraband’.” He exploded into a hearty laugh at the memory, and was pleased to see Emma smile wanly. “I found it, you know, both the drawer and the contraband, when I was, oh, seven or eight. I took one of Granddad’s Havanas to the stable and climbed into a stall and started smoking it. Damn near choked to death. The old bay mare didn’t much care for it, either. Damned lucky I didn’t burn the place down, while I was at it.”

Emma pictured Steed as a boy, sharing a pungent corona maduro with a horse in a stable, and the image she conjured up widened her smile. That he had never quite outgrown that boyishness only increased her affection for him. “And were you caught?” she asked, stepping behind him to examine the rent in his coat made by the
poker.

“Alas, I was. Mind you, my father’s primary objection rested on the grounds that smoking would ruin my palate.” Steed delicately felt along the upper part of the escritoire.

“Like your forbidden indulgence in lemon soda and gob stoppers.”

“Just so. Now, my guess is that somewhere up here—” He peered intently at the section of the desk he was feeling with his fingertips.

“Take off your coat, Steed, you’re bleeding.”

She had hardly got the words out when he gave a triumphant exclamation. “What’d I tell you? Voilà!” He pressed something, and suddenly a little drawer popped out, heretofore undetectable. “Clever devil,” he murmured, no less pleased with himself than with the ingenious eighteenth-century artisan who had crafted the desk. “No cigars, though.”

Emma rested her chin on Steed’s uninjured shoulder and stared at the drawer. “My goodness me. Had it all these years and never knew— And there’s something in there.”

The hidden drawer did indeed hold something—a small, thick envelope, which Steed removed and cursorily examined. “It’s addressed to your husband.” He handed it to Emma, who turned it over in her hands, frowning. Surely she’d seen it somewhere before?

“Does it contain anything of interest?” He picked up his glass and swallowed what was left of his drink.

She shook out the contents of the envelope. A small key, along with two folded pieces of paper, fell on the desktop. The key was threaded with a cheap chain, from which dangled some kind of emblem. Steed picked up the key, while she took a look at the papers.

“Looks like a key to a strong-box, or possibly a safe.” He turned it over in his hand and looked closely at the object depending from the chain. “Any idea what this medallion thing might be?” he asked, handing the key to Emma.

“I’ve seen this, I’m sure of it, but I can’t think where—”

“The medallion?”

“The key. This key, on this chain. The fob, or medallion, is no mystery. It’s the emblem of PROP, the flying club my husband belonged to.” She dropped the key in Steed’s upturned palm, then handed him the papers. “What do you make of these?”

“‘Hamelin pigeons 34036.3,’” he read aloud, and looked up at her. “I’ve heard of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and the rats, to be sure, but this reference escapes me completely. Have you any idea what it might mean?”

“No. I thought you might.” She was staring off into the distance as if in search of something that might shed light on the matter. “What do you find so amusing?”
“It gets better,” he chuckled. “‘One L, two R, two L, one R,’ et cetera. Knit one, purl one? A pattern for a pair of Argyll socks?” There was nothing else written on the sheet.

He read the other sheet. “‘Peel—keep key etc. in safe place until I ask for them. Should anything happen to me, turn lot over to MI.’” The note appeared hastily scrawled, and the signature was barely legible.

“Wasn’t Hamelin that air base you were flown out of a few times, during the war?”

“Why, yes. Yes, it was. Fancy you remembering . . .” He studied the signature more closely, comprehension illuminating his features. “Does the name ‘Piggy’ mean anything to you?” He gazed at Emma, who still seemed lost in thought. “As in Squadron Leader ‘Piggy’ Hogwood?”

She shook her head. “Who’s he?”

“Was. Killed in an air mishap shortly before your husband died. Piggy sent this to him, it appears. He was the Project Officer in charge of a secret weapons system your husband was testing.” Steed looked anxiously at Emma, whose demeanour had suddenly changed. “What’s wrong?”

She did not reply. She suddenly remembered where she’d seen the envelope before. It had come in the morning post on the day Peter died. She remembered handing it unopened to her husband, and also remembered with bitterness what he had said to her afterwards. It wasn’t so much what he had said, but how he had said it; the accusation was as plainly written on his face as it was expressed in the tone of his voice. But that was all finished now; it simply wouldn’t do to get upset in front of Steed. There it was again, that insistent “it wouldn’t do, it wouldn’t do,” throbbing in her head like some kind of primitive tattoo. She heard herself saying, “Peter wouldn’t forgive me,” then quickly looked away, furious with herself.

“Let’s have another whisky, shall we?” Steed interjected urbanely, reaching for the bottle. He could only guess at what her remark implied, but for him to confirm his suspicions at this time would plumb the depths of indelicacy.

“Help yourself; I’ve not even tasted mine.”

“Cheers!” He saluted her with his tumbler. “Come on, then, hair of the dog, and all that.”

Emma was about to take a sip of her whisky when she paused, tumbler to her lips, and looked directly at him over the rim of the glass. She then set the glass down and walked out of the room.

He snatched up the envelope, key, and Piggy’s notes, shoving them in his coat pocket, and went after her.

With shoulders thrown back and head held high, Emma strode through the wreckage of the living room in silent dignity, but couldn’t quite blink back her tears. Damn and blast, such frailty just won’t do, she kept thinking, it just won’t do at all.

Stooping to pick up an occasional undamaged object in his path and place it
out of harm’s way, Steed navigated the debris in Emma’s wake. He was beginning to grasp what Group Captain Miles had been hinting about Peel.

By now Emma had reached the entry where she halted at the foot of the staircase. Without turning around, she said, “Would you make some coffee, please?” before running up the stairs.
EIGHTEEN

Steed wandered back to the kitchen, peeling off his coat and grimacing when he moved his left arm. The kitchen was spacious, light; all kinds of gadgets and appliances lined the counters. In a nook at one end stood a couple of chairs and a table, where Emma occasionally ate a solitary meal and regularly solved the Sunday Times crossword. Above the sink was a window-cum-greenhouse, whose shelves held several small pots planted with herbs; she was still growing her own, as she’d always done.

Draping his coat over one of the chairs, he looked around for the coffee. Emma generally kept on hand several varieties, and he had no difficulty finding where she kept them. Measuring out the precise quantity of beans he required for a perfect brew, Steed poured them in the grinder and switched it on. He enjoyed playing with the noisy machine, grinding the beans in short bursts until they were reduced to the consistency he and Emma both preferred. Once he got the coffee brewing, he sat down at the table, fished out the key and Piggy’s notes from his coat pocket, and examined them anew.

“I see you haven’t forgotten your way around my kitchen,” said Emma, materialising a short while later.

Steed stuffed the notes and key in his coat pocket and rose from the table. She was no longer green, having scrubbed off the remnants of her makeup and changed out of her costume into a fetching dark-blue catsuit. She moved more easily now, with renewed vigour. Tiny droplets of water, shimmering with reflected light and imparting a radiant vitality to her appearance, dewed her hair. Struck by the effect, he forgot his own discomfort for the moment and permitted himself to gaze at her with unconcealed admiration.

“Come here,” commanded Emma, jolting him out of his reveries. “Turn around. You are bleeding.” She glimpsed a stain on his shirt spreading out from the armhole of his waistcoat. “Or at least you were.”

“Another shirt ruined.”

“It’s not the first time,” she sighed, opening a cupboard door. “Now, off with your waistcoat and shirt. I’d better tend to your wounds.”

“Oh, don’t bother. Sit down and have a cup of coffee.”

“Don’t argue. Take off your clothes, or I’ll have ’em off myself.” Emma held a bottle of rubbing alcohol and some cotton wool in her hands.

“You will?” purred Steed, sidling up to her.

“Won’t I just!” Setting down the alcohol and cotton-wool on the counter, she grasped his waistcoat, pulling him toward her.

“All right, all right!” he exclaimed, smarting. “You can be so persistent at times.” He proceeded to remove his waistcoat and unbutton his shirt.

“And you can be so childish at times,” she retorted, but not unkindly. “Let’s
have a look.”

Steed removed his shirt and surveyed the damage to it as Emma examined his injury. “You’ve a nasty gash, all right. I’m afraid this will hurt.” She soaked some cotton wool with alcohol and gently applied it to his back. “And it looks like you’ve rather an ugly bruise, too.”

“Ouch!” Steed flinched and lurched forward.

“Come back here, I’m not quite finished.”

“I’ll take my chances with gangrene. Ouch!”

“Coward. I’ve got some gauze and plasters somewhere around here.” Emma thought for a moment, then pulled open a drawer. “Here we are. Oh, do stand still!” She found the dressings, and proceeded to cover his cut. “There. You’ll live,” she said, turning him around and playfully touching the tip of his nose with her forefinger.

“Thank you.” He moved to the table and picked up his coffee. “Um, you wouldn’t by chance have an old shirt about the place, would you? I’m afraid this one’s completely hopeless.”

“I might.” She left, returning several minutes later with a folded white shirt. “It’s rather shabby, I’m afraid, but it’s the only one I have.” She held it out to him.

“D’you think it’ll fit?”

Steed put it on. It might have been made for him.

Emma poured herself some coffee and sat down at the table. “I owe you an explanation,” she stated flatly, staring at the steaming mug.

“Eh?” He slowly buttoned the shirt.

“It dawned on me, back there in the study, where I’d seen that envelope before. It came by morning post the day Peter died.”

Steed stuffed the shirttails into his trousers and picked up his tie, waiting for her to continue, but she sat mutely regarding her coffee. “Did your husband say something to you? I mean, about Piggy’s message?” he prompted her gently.

“Not about that, no. In fact he hardly said much of anything. He had just finished breakfast and was getting ready to leave when I brought in the post.” Emma drew in her breath and was about to add something, then hesitated.

Steed patted her on the back. “Never mind, I’ll have a go at Piggy’s scribblings later.” He put on his waistcoat and took his coat from the back of the chair. “Pack a few things; I’ll drop you off at a hotel. You shouldn’t stay here alone.”

“It’s all right, Steed. Sit down.” Emma looked up at him. “Peter was particularly uncommunicative that morning. He left the table, and then he left the house.” She absently ran her finger around the rim of her mug. “He didn’t even say good-bye. Before he left, we had another stupid, trivial row, and then he said, ‘You’re still friendly with that Intelligence chappie of yours, aren’t you?’” She blew on her coffee before venturing to take a sip. “I hadn’t seen Piggy’s note, you see. But the way he said it—”
Once again, delicacy kept Steed from responding. He cloaked himself with an air of imperturbability, and concentrated on the knotting of his tie.

“I thought he was accusing me again,” she said presently. “Of infidelity.” Emma put her cup down on the table with such vehemence that she spilled her coffee. “He could be so—what’s the word I want?—uncompromising.”

Steed put his arm around her shoulders. “Let’s let it go at that, shall we?” He waited until Emma, who was massaging her face, finally nodded. “Would you like another cup?”

She managed another nod, and he bent down to kiss her, handing her his handkerchief.

“I’m sorry, Steed, I’m not exactly making this any easier for you,” she said, twisting the handkerchief in her hands.

“Don’t apologise.” He poured some more coffee and set the mug in front of her before sitting down in the chair opposite.

“I want to help you get to the bottom of this business. I want to get to the bottom of it. That is, if your Miss King won’t mind.”

“Tara!” He found his watch. “She should have been here with your car by now. No, she won’t mind. And she’s not mine. She’s all agog with the dashing Baron von Kurt, who’s no doubt going to pop the question any day now.” He avoided Emma’s eyes and pushed his mug about.

“Steed, you’re jealous.” She stopped tugging at the handkerchief, and glanced at him with a sympathetic eye.

“I wouldn’t say that,” he replied, still avoiding her gaze, and pulled a small porcelain sugarbowl toward him. He stirred some sugar into his coffee and watched the shimmering pattern of oil swirl on its surface.

“What would you say, then?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He stirred the coffee again, abstractedly. “Regretful? Spineless?”

“It’s not too late, you know.” Emma managed a smile, despite private regrets of her own. “When did you suddenly become so shy?”

“I ought to have told you a long time ago...” Steed still hadn’t looked up from his study of the coffee oil.

“You didn’t have to tell me anything,” she protested. His relations with that lusty young wench were none of her business.

Steed finally looked up at her. “In retrospect, I think I should have. You see, I could never bring myself to tell you—” Removing the spoon from his mug, he took a sip of coffee. “Never mind, what does it matter now? Just put it all down to a colossal failure of nerve.” Slowly he set his mug down on the table, and again focussed his gaze on it.

The steady ticking of a wall clock was the only sound in the kitchen. Steed continued to stare pensively into his mug, and Emma got to thinking that their
conversation had either taken a turn she’d somehow missed, or Steed was being more elliptical than ever before.

He looked up at the clock. “I wonder what’s keeping Tara,” he muttered, tapping his fingertips on the table. He glanced at Emma, but misread the perplexed expression on her face. “Not to worry, I’m sure she’ll be along soon.”

“No doubt. Steed,” said Emma, still wearing an enigmatic look, “I think it’s high time you and I had a tête-à-tête.”

“Not now. Not here.”

“Look, if we’re to collaborate—”


Emma could hear rapid, animated sounds emitting from the receiver. “Is something wrong?” she asked, but Steed motioned for her to be quiet.


“Sounds like Tara’s in chokey,” said Emma with a wry smile.

“Mm. But that’s not the half of it.” He straddled his chair. “You’re not going to like this one bit,” he began, summoning his most charming smile. “Tara’s in the brig all right, but her boyfriend is already there, effecting her rescue—”

“I don’t mind that at all,” said Emma.

“Yes. Well.” He took her hands in his. “I’m afraid she’s had a sort of . . . mishap.”

“Mishap?” Emma’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes. Er, yes, the police were after her to stop—”

“Police?” she echoed, thinking that her conversations with Steed were becoming increasingly enigmatic.

“After she nearly derailed a train. But she couldn’t. She had no brakes.”

“Steed,” Emma exclaimed in some exasperation, “what are you driving at?”

“I’m afraid your car is in need of some extensive reconstructive surgery.”

“What happened?”

“It seems the brakes were tampered with.”

“I’m not sure I want to hear the rest,” groaned Emma.

“Tara’s progress was eventually arrested by police barricades and a small duck pond.”

“Oh, no! I just had that car all fixed up not too long ago.” She glanced at Steed. “Tara’s all right, though?”

“Yes, she’s fine. Banged up a bit, and frightened half out of her wits, but otherwise all right.” Steed was still holding her hands when Emma felt his grip
tighten. “You were meant to drive that car, not Tara.” He looked directly into her eyes. “I’d rather you not stay here by yourself.”

“You mustn’t worry about me, I can look after myself,” she replied with a touch of self-derision. “However,” she continued, over Steed’s protests, “if it makes you feel better, I can move into my offices for the time being. You needn’t look so revolted, I’ve a very serviceable and very private penthouse apartment there. For all those working weekends, you know.”

“Well— “

“You’ve seen the security. I’ll be all right. Anyway, if I’m going to help you, you’ll be keeping your beady eye on me.”

Steed looked her over thoughtfully. “That part shouldn’t be difficult,” he said. “Argus himself, one hundred beady eyes and all, couldn’t be more watchful.”

“Well, that’s settled, then. I’ll just go and pack a few things.”
NINETEEN

Emma finished tossing her belongings into a suitcase, and was carrying it downstairs when she heard a tentative knock on the front door. She bounded down the stairs, nearly colliding with Steed in the entry as he was about to open the door. She dropped the suitcase to the floor as the door swung open to reveal a dishevelled and anxious Tara.

“Hullo, Steed. Good afternoon, Mrs. Peel. I’m awfully sorry about your car. Rudy’s having it taken to a garage. It was perfectly awful—” Tara’s torrent of apology and explanation ceased abruptly, and she stood awkwardly before Steed and Emma.

“Never mind, it wasn’t your fault,” said Emma soothingly.

Tara was about to make some polite noise when she happened to glance into the living room. She looked back at Emma, then at Steed. “What happened?”

“Oh, that.” Emma waved a hand at the debris. “Steed and I had a bit of a dust-up—”

Steed’s eyebrows shot up.

“—with a pair of Neanderthal intruders. Shall we go through to the kitchen? You look like you could do with a cup of coffee, Miss King.” She extended her arm, indicating the hallway. To offer the girl a drink at this hour seemed indecent to Emma.

Tara caught the suitcase with her foot. She looked from it to Emma, and then to Steed, but said nothing. “It’s not what you think,” he said to her in an undertone, picking up the suitcase.

“I didn’t say a word,” whispered Tara.

With a lopsided grin, Emma stood aside to let them pass, then fell in behind, bringing up the rear.

Steed was about to pour Tara’s coffee when Emma entered. She sauntered toward the table, where Tara had taken a seat, and as she passed Steed she impishly patted his rump.

Emma dropped into the chair across from Tara. She’d met the girl only a couple of times, and quite briefly at that. One had to hand it to Mother, he certainly hadn’t wasted any time arranging a consolation prize for Steed. Emma glanced up at Steed as he served the coffee, then resumed her contemplation of Tara. The latter shifted in her seat, crossed her legs with self-conscious dignity, smoothed her rumpled skirt, and undertook her own study of Emma. “How rude of me to stare!” eventually exclaimed Emma with exaggerated contrition. “Do forgive me.”

There was a time when Tara might have been jealous of Emma, but no longer. The cooling of her relations with Steed, precipitated by Rudy’s reappearance and renewed attentions, and helped along by her own growing self-awareness, gave Tara a more mature perspective on their lives and on the past few years. She smiled. “I
hadn’t noticed.” She turned her head and looked at the suitcase, which was just visible in the corner. Emma followed her gaze. “Paris? St. Moritz? Or has he told you yet?”

Without waiting for her reply, Steed glared at Emma, mouthing the words “be nice,” and slipped out of the kitchen.

“East London, actually,” said Emma. “Steed doesn’t think it’s safe for me to stay here, so I’ll be moving into my penthouse for a while.” Her eyes met Tara’s, and Emma felt a twinge of guilt for the superciliousness with which she’d thought of her for so long. The girl was remarkably self-possessed, considering the busy morning she’d had. “I should have offered you a drink, Miss King,” she submitted, “after all you’ve been through. What can I get you?”

Tara shook her head. “Mother doesn’t like it when I drink this early in the day,” she said, with a wide-eyed, faux-naïf expression.

“My dear Miss King—“ Emma’s tone was conciliatory.

“Tara. Please call me Tara. The only people who call me ‘Miss King’ are Mother, when he’s about to give me a twigging, and my bank manager, whenever I’m overdrawn. Seriously, thanks just the same, but I don’t want a drink right now. Coffee’s fine.”

Steed prowled back into the kitchen. “All right—”

“Just as we were getting round to comparing notes on the old roué, he has to come bursting in,” said Emma with a grin at Tara, getting to her feet. “Hey, where d’you think you’re going?” She caught Steed’s arm before he could escape again. “I shan’t let you get away this time.” Then, gently pushing him aside, she said to Tara, “I want to help. If my husband was in fact murdered, I want to know who did it, and why.” Emma’s eyes flitted briefly in Steed’s direction. “It’s high time all the ghosts were laid, once and for all.”

“Good,” said Tara simply. “Has Steed filled you in on what we know so far?”

“The opportunity hadn’t yet presented itself,” Steed growled.

“Show Tara the envelope, Steed,” said Emma. “Speaking of which, something comes to mind. The afternoon my husband was killed a man turned up here asking about that envelope. Claimed there was some mix-up in addressing it. He showed me a note, addressed to Peter, which he said was what ought to have been sent. And he appeared rather anxious about the key. I had no idea what he was talking about. But now it seems a bit queer, don’t you think?”

“Quite,” muttered Steed, reaching in his pocket. He handed Tara the envelope, Piggy’s notes, and the key.

“I remember looking around for the envelope, but I assumed Peter had taken it with him, and that’s what I told the man. And then he thanked me and left.”

“Did he give you a name?”

“He may have done; I don’t recall. It hardly seemed important, afterwards.” Emma concentrated. “Seems to me his accent was Canadian. Or American.” All of a
sudden she went cold, overcome by the memory of the telephone call that came later that day from George Miles. He had said nothing to her over the phone, of course, and simply asked if he could call on her right away, but she had known from that moment that she would never see her husband alive again.

Tara, in the meantime, studied Piggy’s messages and examined the key. “Does the name ‘Boone’ mean anything to you, Mrs. Peel?”

“No . . . Should it?”

“Boone was the chap we were taking to Site Delta for further questioning the other night. He’s the one who told us just before he died that your husband was murdered,” said Steed.

“I see.” Emma hugged herself, unable to shake the nasty cold feeling.

“How about ‘Daniels’? Ring any bells?” pressed Steed.

“Daniels, Daniels . . .” Forcing herself to recall the incident again, Emma tried to remember exactly how the man had introduced himself. “Could be, but I’m just not sure. He said he was a member of Peter’s flying club. As for his name, I just can’t— I’m sorry.”

“I’ll show you some photographs later.” He watched Tara re-examine the piece of paper with the diagram and cryptic notations. “What do you make of it, Tara?”

She pursed her lips. “Nothing.” Emma’s obvious discomfiture had distracted Tara, filling her with new-found sympathy for the woman she had until recently perceived as her rival for Steed’s affection. Once more she concentrated on the sheet of paper in front of her. “What’s all this mean?” she asked.

Steed shrugged his shoulders and immediately regretted the gesture, as a sharp pain shot through his upper back.

“Something wrong, Steed?” Tara looked at him solicitously.

He laughed ruefully. “No. Lost my shirt in a poker game . . .”

Incomprehension clouded her features. “What?”

“He means,” interposed Emma, with an impatient look at Steed, “he was coshed by a poker-wielding goon.”

“Back there?” Tara jerked a thumb in the direction of the living room. “I see.” She found herself staring blankly at the diagram again.

“Not to worry, I patched him up. He’ll be fine in a few days,” said Emma, misinterpreting Tara’s vacant look.

“Good.” Still wool-gathering, Tara dropped the key and papers on the table.

“Perhaps you ought to take Tara home, Steed. She’s had a rather trying morning,” said Emma, suddenly recalling something else concerning the man who’d come about the envelope. “A rally. That’s what it was. If I remember correctly, the key was connected to a motor rally.” She clapped her hands together. “A treasure hunt. That was it. In aid of the Braine Trust for Crippled Orphans. Something my husband’s flying club organised, I think. The key was to the treasure chest. Or at least that’s what I was led to believe.”
“Another Braine child,” said Steed. “Fancy that.”

“What’s so odd about it? The Braine Organisation is well-known for its generosity,” retorted Emma.

“What’s odd is that Piggy’s missive supposedly got mixed up with an invitation to a fund-raiser in aid of a trust created by Lord Braine; that your husband just happened to go to great lengths to hide this missive; that Friend Boone just happened to be going to charity ball hosted by Lord Braine; and that two bodies just happened to turn up on Lord Braine’s estate,” elaborated Steed. “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if those two thugs were searching for Piggy’s letter. But at whose behest? Boone’s dead.” He rubbed his brow. “And then there’s that flying club,” he muttered. “Curiouser and curiouser,’ as Alice said.”

“You know perfectly well that Lord Braine has always been most generous with his time and money when it comes to charitable activities.”

“Do I detect a note of defensiveness there? Exactly what do we know about this Braine fellow, other than that he’s Britain’s answer to Daddy Warbucks?” Steed’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you can enlighten us—you and he have been quite cosy of late—”

“Must you behave like a peevish schoolboy? My relations with Lord Braine are strictly business. And, I might point out, they’re none of your business.”

Steed stared down at the envelope, key and Piggy’s notes lying on the table, lost in thought. He hadn’t heard a word of Emma’s reply. “Now why would Piggy send a mysterious message, along with a key, to the soon-to-be late lamented Wing Commander Peel for safekeeping? And why did the man who came looking for those things give you some cock-and-bull story about mix-ups and treasure hunts, other than to minimise the envelope’s importance? And what connection does that flying club have to any of this?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, you two carry on without me. I’ve a couple of matters to attend to.”

“What about the lunch you promised me?” Emma folded her arms and eyed Steed critically.

“Make it dinner. I’m not fit to be seen in these clothes.” He crossed to the back door. “I’ll collect you at your penthouse this evening,” he called out. “And do try to stay out of trouble!”

Emma and Tara looked at each other as the door slammed shut. “In certain respects, he hasn’t changed one jot,” Emma observed wryly. “Come on. I think we can manage lunch on our own.”
TWENTY

For the fourth time in half an hour, Emma looked up from the book she was reading to glance at the clock on the mantel. It was nearly nine, and still no sign of Steed. During the past thirty minutes, hunger pangs persistently interrupted her concentration, and she found herself thinking more about Steed than about the substance of the novel resting in her lap. With a sigh, she turned back to the preceding page and reread the last paragraph for the fourth time.

After her husband’s death, Emma devoted herself to Knight Industries, which left her little time for other pursuits, especially recreational reading. Even when she made time for other things, she was unable to concentrate for very long on anything except work. Thus she found herself working almost incessantly. Anything short of total immersion in her day-to-day tasks led to idle ruminations about things she found profoundly disturbing, and which she had no desire to contemplate. She focused all her effort on improving and modernising Knight Industries, and achieved notable success in her endeavours, if the quarterly earnings reports were any indication. But these efforts had drained her remaining reserves of strength to the point where, one afternoon a few months ago, she found herself staring uncomprehendingly at some memorandum or other clutched in her hands, and gradually coming to the realisation that she’d been staring blankly at the sheet of paper for nearly a quarter of an hour without so much as twitching. That was when she decided it was time to ease up and find some form of mental recreation before she really went round the bend. And so she turned to her once-beloved pastime of reading fiction, inclined toward novels that depicted an age less frenetic, less impersonal than the present one. In particular, she was drawn to the novels of Jane Austen, whose grace and wit and incisive understanding of humanity provided Emma not only with an escape into a period of history she’d always found attractive, but also afforded her some solace in rediscovering a broader context for her own existence.

Emma’s mind again wandered from the text. Shutting the book and nestling more comfortably into the soft leather depths of the armchair, she let her fancy roam unimpeded, since it obviously wouldn’t be governed by her will. Allowing the passage she had just reread to suffuse her, she gave herself up to the spontaneous associations it elicited. She’d forgotten how much she had enjoyed Emma when she first read the book as a schoolgirl. A smile illuminated her features as she recalled her adolescent infatuation with Mr. Knightley, the heroine’s steadfast friend and mentor, and she remembered her exasperation with her namesake for not immediately recognising that gentleman’s unerring good sense, sensibility, and, above all, desirability. Emma startled herself by laughing aloud at those ingenuous presumptions of youth, underlying the unshakeable conviction so many young people have that they alone have the insight and clarity of vision to discern, where none other can, what is genuine and valuable. The thought that one could ever misjudge people, or anything else for
that matter, would be inconsistent with such notions of infallibility. Now, had she been in Emma Woodhouse’s shoes . . .

Emma’s laughter subsided, along with her grin. It occurred to her that now, every time Mr. Knightley appeared in the novel, she found herself thinking of Steed. Not that Steed was much like the fictional Emma’s suitor. Not really; he just seemed an apt counterpart to the old family friend in the novel. Or did her association of the two men perhaps have to do with something in herself, with her recognition of the same shortcomings in her personality as those which clouded the fictional Emma’s apprehension of people’s natures and motives? As unlikely a candidate as Steed might be to play the role of Knightley, he, like Knightley, possessed a keener understanding of matters she either steadfastly refused to address or which she insisted on seeing in her own stubborn, parochial way. Emma wondered just how many errors of judgement she had made, and most likely was still making, about all sorts of people. Tara, for one. For another, Steed. She didn’t much care for the direction in which her thoughts were leading her. She picked up the book and tried to find the page where she had left off reading. “Emma Woodhouse, Emma Knightley, Emma Knight, Emma Peel,” she repeated softly, slowly turning the pages.

A firm rap-rap on the door broke the silence. Emma uncurled from the armchair and eagerly strode to the door.

“Good evening, Mrs. Peel.”

Emma’s expression changed from eagerness to surprise as she opened the door to behold the stout assistant chief of building security standing before her partially obscured by two dozen long-stemmed crimson roses.

“Sorry to trouble you, lass,” he said with a pleasant Scots accent, “but there’s a gentleman in the lobby who asked me to deliver these to you with his compliments.” He handed over the blooms to Emma with great dignity. “And a lovely bouquet they are, if I may say so,” he added, smiling.

“Thank you, Munro. So they are. Did the man give his name?” Emma closed her eyes, inhaling the heady aroma of the roses. “Mmmm.” Lord Braine? Had it been Steed, he’d have charmed his way past Munro and come up himself.

“He didna say, but I believe there’s a card.” Munro gazed up and down and round about as Emma fished out a small card from amongst the stems.

Munro didn’t fool Emma. Doubtless he examined the card at least a half dozen times on his way up in the lift. She didn’t miss the canny gleam in his eye, either.

The card read, “How like a winter hath my absence been from thee’.”

She was wrong. It could only be Steed. Emma shifted the bouquet to the crook of her left arm and nibbled on the edge of the card as she thought about what to tell Munro.

“Och, lassie, mind the thorns!” The man’s bushy grey eyebrows knit together in an expression of solicitous concern for Emma, whom he still thought of as the
leggy, freckle-faced girl coming to visit her father in the very offices which she herself now occupied.

"Dinna fash yersel'," grinned Emma. "Really, I'm a big girl now."

"Aye, that you are, and a bonnier lass I never did see. If only I were younger, like that lad downstairs, I'd dance a reel or two wi' ye!"

"Speaking of whom—" She scratched the tip of her nose with the card. "Perhaps you'd better let him come up, eh?"

"Very well, Mrs. Peel." Munro resumed the formality of manner which signalled protectiveness on his part.

"You needn't look so sceptical, darling Hamish! He's— He's an old family friend. And—" She lowered her voice, leaning closer to the man, "he comes from a long line of Highland brigands and thieves."

"Jacobites?" Munro raised an expectant eyebrow.

Emma nodded vigorously.

"Och, well, I suppose he'll do." He gave his tunic a tug and squared his shoulders. "I'm away, then."

"Oh, Hamish—tell him to let himself in, would you, please?"

"Aye, I will," said Munro, stepping into the private lift.

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"Mrs. Peel?" Steed shut the door behind him, dropping his bowler, umbrella and a manila folder on a pier table in the entry. He shrugged off his topcoat and looked around. The apartment wasn't at all as grim as he'd imagined; indeed, it had a noticeably cosier and more lived-in appearance than what he'd seen of Emma's house.

"In here—to your left," came the muffled reply. "I'm in the galley."

He cautiously poked his head around the corner. "Are you decent?"

"Yes, I am. Not that it would matter one way or the other, surely, after my party piece at the ball."

"Mrs. Peel!" he demurred with a smile.

"Here you are at last, my Knightley in shining armour." She was arranging the roses in a large vase.

"Beg pardon?"

Emma took a step back to admire the roses. "There! Thank you, Steed. They're lovely."

He followed her into the living room, where she paused to seek out the best place to put the vase. "Sink me, m'dear, but next to you they seem mere weeds," he said, affecting his Scarlet Pimpernel manner.

Emma set the vase down on a corner table next to a roomy middle-eastern-looking divan. "Please, sit down. These really are splendid."

He shifted his gaze from the roses to Emma. "Meine Liebe, meine Rose'," he
said softly.

“Hmm?” She was making some final adjustments to the floral arrangement and did not immediately register what he had said. When it sank in, she coloured. “Oh, honestly, Steed . . .”

“That watchman of yours is quite a character,” he said brightly. “What on earth did you tell him? He acted as though I were Bonnie Prince Charlie, or someone equally grand.”

“Old Munro?” said Emma, in a casual tone of voice, after a brief pause. “Oh, I told him you’re a scion of an ancient Highland clan. He probably thinks you’re descended from Rob Roy himself.”

Steed chuckled, picking up the book she’d left lying in the armchair. “I had no idea you were a Janeite. *Emma* is a favourite of mine, did you know?” He leafed through the book. “So I’m your ‘Knightley in shining armour’. How very encouraging.”

“Ah, well—”

“At least this Emma met with a happy ending,” observed Steed, putting down the book.

“Unlike *this* one?”

“Unlike that other literary Emma, Madame Bovary. I have high hopes for you yet.”

“That’s a comfort,” said Emma, wrinkling her nose at him.

“Well, then,” he said, after a brief lull in the conversation, “where would you like to dine this evening?”

“Over there.” She nodded at a table and chairs that stood at the opposite end of the room. “I picked up a few things this afternoon—including your favourite beverage—thinking we could spend a nice quiet evening at home. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Having you all to myself in this aerie?”

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just see about the food.” She escaped into the tiny kitchen.

Steed ambled over to an inlaid wood chess board set up in a corner of the room. Only a few chess-men were arranged on the board, obviously some problem Emma was working through. He picked up the one remaining black knight, turning it in his fingers before carefully replacing it on its square. Next, he picked up one of the white rooks. “Did you lunch with Tara, then?” he asked, when Emma returned from the kitchen bearing a tray.

“No, she was fagged out, poor thing; I drove her home.”

“Did she tell you anything about—?”

“As a matter of fact she didn’t. She said she’d leave all that to you.” Laying the table, Emma watched him replace the rook, then move one of the other chess-men with studied concentration. “We just chatted. About this and that. And about
Rudy.”

“Quite a pretty little problem.” Steed moved around to the other side of the chess board for a different view, and frowned at the new configuration of pieces.

“It won’t be quite so pretty if you don’t do something,” Emma observed, uncorking a bottle of champagne and pouring two glasses.

He feigned complete mystification. “What can you be talking about?”

“To continue the chess metaphor, if you don’t launch an immediate counter-offensive, you’re going to lose your queen to the knight’s next move.”

“C’est la guerre,” he replied, throwing up his hands. “Actually, the endgame was played out some time ago.” He walked around the chess board again. “At this point, the honourable thing to do is to resign.” With his right forefinger, he toppled the white king, then turned to Emma. “In any case, even if I were to win the game, I’d lose the match in the end.”

“I never expected you to give up so easily.”

“It’s not a matter of giving up. Rather, it’s a matter of letting go.” He came over to the table and picked up his glass. “Something I’ve become quite adept at.” He raised the glass to Emma. “In the end, the best man always wins. As for the rest of us—well, let the dead bury their dead.”

“I shan’t drink to that. The best man doesn’t always win.” She looked away. “And you and I aren’t exactly dead.”

“Very well, then, why don’t you propose a toast?”

Emma thought for a moment, then raised her glass. “To gathering rosebuds,” she drawled, with a glance at the vase.

Steed tapped his glass against hers. “Then the bouquet was a step in the right direction?”

“Twenty-four steps, I’d say,” she assented, her eyes twinkling.

“Each one of ’em called ‘Desire,’” he murmured, taking a sip of champagne.

Emma suddenly took a great deal of interest in the bubbles fizzing in her glass. “Steed!” she uttered, colouring again.

“It’s the name of that particular variety, ‘Desire,’” he explained, enjoying as he often had in the past his gentle teasing of Emma. “You know, like ‘Crimson Glory,’ or ‘Queen Elizabeth.’ Florists must sell them by the gross for weddings, St. Valentine’s, other special occasions . . .”

“Shall we eat?” she said, thinking it best to change the subject. “I’m positively famished!”

Steed responded by inclining his head, and pulled a chair out for her. “My dear,” he said, as she took her seat, and reached for the champagne.
TWENTY-ONE

They busied themselves with the familiar, comforting rituals of the table, neither one of them having any notion of what conversational gambits to employ. They had known one another so intimately, at one time, that intervals of contented silence were not uncommon between them. Now they sat mutely across from each other like awkward strangers, too uncertain to risk the superficial banter most of humanity pass off as conversation.

Emma was the first to speak. “Shall we secure from silent running, and surface?”

Steed looked up at her.
“I think it’s time we had our little chat now,” she announced, reaching for the champagne bottle.
He gently covered her hand with his as she grasped the neck of the bottle, and took over the task of recharging the glasses. “What chat?” he asked. “Oh, you mean about your husband?”
“You know perfectly well what I mean,” she replied, nibbling on a scone. “The tête-à-tête I mentioned earlier today.”
He reached for the pâté. “Not now.”
“Yes, now.” She snatched the pâté away from him. “Until we do, we’ll just go on circling each other like two nervous cats. If we’re to work together, we might as well clear the air before we do anything else, don’t you think?”
“My dear Mrs. Peel,” implored Steed, trying to take the pâté out of her hands and failing, “why don’t we just have a quiet, uncomplicated dinner—”
“Will you let go of the damned tin!” She finally succeeded in wresting it from him, and tossed it aside. “I’ve had enough quiet! We neither of us had the sense to talk two years ago—”
He picked up a shrimp and dipped it in some sauce. “About what? Your husband was dead. You didn’t even give me a chance to offer my condolences.”
“Don’t stray from the subject,” warned Emma, reaching for a shrimp herself. “That’s not what I’m getting at.”
“Did you miss the old excitement, is that it?”
“It wasn’t the excitement I missed,” she replied evenly. “Still, I realise there’s no turning back the clock.” She pushed her glass toward Steed. “How about another splash?”
He obligingly topped off her drink. “No, there’s no turning it back. But that’s no reason not to get it going again.” He watched the bubbles rising in the glass. “I’d hoped, foolishly perhaps, for some sort of rapprochement after he died . . .” His voice trailed off.
“Don’t you think Tara would have taken rather a dim view of our renewing our acquaintance?”
“She has rather more perception than you credit her with.”

“Does she now?”

“Don’t be coy. She’s known all along how I felt.”

“Oh? And how was that?”

He held up his glass, twirling it by the stem, and concentrated on the bubbles.

“Had we but world enough and time, this coyness, lady, were no crime,” he said.

“What do you say to restoring diplomatic relations?”

Emma slowly rose from the table, hesitated, then headed for the kitchen. She had just passed through the doorway when she changed her mind and walked back to Steed. “Are you quite sure that’s what you want?” she asked, coming up behind him and putting her hands on his shoulders.

“My dear Mrs. Peel—”

“Tara was by no means the only variable in the equation,” she said. “Sit down and hear me out.” She pushed down on his shoulders as he attempted to rise. Mustering her thoughts, she moved away from him, wandering across to the chess board. “As you pointed out earlier, when my husband returned, I made a choice, one which—”

“My choice of words was unpardonably vain,” he broke in, turning around in his chair. “There was no choice. You did what anyone in the circumstances would have—indeed, should have—done.”

“In hindsight, and in spite of what you just said, I can only tell you it wasn’t exactly the right choice,” continued Emma dryly, ignoring his murmured protests. “Let’s cut to the chase, shall we? No doubt you’ve discovered for yourself by now that all was not bliss in the House of Peel.” She picked up the toppled white king and stared at it as it lay in her palm, then absently began rolling it back and forth with her thumb. “And if you haven’t, you’re bound to, before too long.”

Steed said nothing, still watching the bubbles in his glass.

“Peter came back a changed man.” Laying the king next to the board, she began pacing the room.

“Hardly surprising,” softly interpolated Steed.

“I thought that in time everything would right itself. But, as usual, I was grossly mistaken.” She found herself standing behind Steed once more, and again she placed her hands on his shoulders. It was several moments before she could speak. “For one thing, he couldn’t forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” exclaimed Steed, turning to face her. “For what? For living?”

Emma stared out of the window into the darkness. “There was constant, unspoken reproval—in his voice, in his demeanour. And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.” Steed felt the pressure of her hands increase. “I finally realised I couldn’t go on with it any longer. And then the poor sod got himself killed. Now wasn’t that convenient?”

Steed couldn’t think of anything clever to say.
“Things did not improve, however.” Emma laughed a low ironic laugh. “On the one hand, my immediate dilemma was resolved; on the other hand, so much more was left unresolved by his rotten timing. Perhaps I should have—”

“Perhaps you did everything you could have done,” he cut in, looking her directly in the eyes. “Let go, Mrs. Peel, just let go.”

“I thought I had, until I saw you again. I knew I’d made some bad decisions, ones I’d have to live with, irrespective of—” She smiled feebly. “No matter which way one looks at it, I made a right muddle of things, wouldn’t you say?” She drifted back toward the chess board, fighting to keep a grip on her self-control.

“Rubbish!” Steed stood up and crossed to where she was standing. “When are you going to start living again? Your husband is dead.” He looked at her, picking up the king as he did so. “The grave’s a fine and private place, but none I think do there embrace,” he said, squeezing the wooden chess-man so hard that its crown snapped off. “Damnation,” he muttered as he realised what he had done. “I think I’d better go home before I do any more damage.” Flinging the broken king aside, he turned to leave.

“Steed—” Emma put a hand on his arm, plucking distractedly at his sleeve. “After Peter died, I just couldn’t— In any case, it didn’t appear that you needed me any more.”

“You might have asked,” he shot back, moving to the door.

Her composure ebbing, she retreated to the divan. “I suppose I hadn’t the courage.”

Steed closed his eyes. “You’ll feel better in the morning. I’ll just shove off.”

His hand was on the door handle.

“Don’t go. Please.”

He hesitated, his hand still on the door handle, then ambled back to the divan.

“Chin up, old girl,” he said, resting his hand on her shoulder. “Friends again?”

“What do you mean, ‘again’? Haven’t we always been?” Emma rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“There, there, we can’t be going on like this, now can we?” he murmured, kneeling beside her and brushing her hair out of her face.

“I can’t answer for you, but I have every intention of going on like this as long as I please,” she sniffled. “Yes, I feel sorry for myself, and why the hell not? You have no idea—”

“I think I do,” he gently contradicted her, hushing her when she started to speak. “All right, I shan’t go. But on one condition.”

Emma succeeded in pulling herself together more or less. “What’s that?”

Steed got to his feet, and taking her by the hand pulled her up from the divan. “That we sit down and finish our supper.” He led her back to the table. “Part of your problem is you obviously haven’t been eating properly. And I think it’s time we sat down for a more comprehensive chat about your husband.”
They resumed their places at the table. Steed poured some more champagne, making sure that Emma had a few bites of food before he took up the conversation.

“Last week, a American by the name of Boone was picked up by military authorities for unauthorised entry on board an airbase. A couple of years ago, Boone entered this country but was detained by the authorities after an anonymous tip that he was involved in arms thefts from military bases. An investigation was conducted, but no hard evidence against him was ever turned up. In any event, he was deported as an undesirable alien, having been convicted by a U.S. Army general court-martial in the late forties, while stationed in occupied Germany, for arms theft, smuggling, and black marketeering. At that time, he was known as ‘Daniels,’ so naturally he wasn’t on the lists when he slipped back into the country this time around.”

“He was the one you asked me about earlier today. The one who claimed my husband was murdered.”

“That’s right.” Steed reached into his pocket and brought out a photograph. “Here’s a recent snapshot of him.”

She examined the photograph. “This is the man who came round the day Peter died. Minus the horrid little moustache, to be sure, but the hairline, the cleft in the chin— The features are all the same.”

“There’s one suspicion confirmed,” said Steed. “Can’t say I think much of the photographer. The expression on this fellow’s face is rather lifeless.”

“Hardly the photographer’s fault, considering Boone was dead when that was taken,” Steed remarked, reaching for another scone.

“Ugh!” Emma thrust the photo back at him. “All right, so Boone and Daniels are—were—one and the same. What had Peter to do with him?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Do you think Peter was mixed up in arms smuggling?” She raised a defensive eyebrow, suddenly protective of her late husband.

“No. The thefts from the bases occurred during the time he was missing in South America. What I find more interesting is the connection Boone made between your husband, Piggy Hogwood, and ‘Chimera.’”

“You’ve lost me.”

“From the time he returned to England until his death, your husband was dedicated to Project Tempest. As was Hogwood—he was the Project Engineer.”

“What’s Project Tempest?” interrupted Emma, a perplexed expression clouding her features. “I never heard Peter mention the word, let alone ‘Chimera.’”

“He never mentioned Tempest because it was—and in fact still is—top secret. At its heart was a novel weapons system. It was originally christened ‘Chimera’, then changed later to ‘Caliban’, no doubt by someone bent on consistency in code-names.”
“Hence ‘Prospero’ and ‘Ariel’,” she said. “Peter identified himself as ‘Ariel’ in his transmissions to the tower.”

“That’s right. As for Caliban—essentially, it was a device capable of projecting three-dimensional holographic images of, well, whatever—men, matériel—for purposes of confusion and deception of the enemy.” Steed rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “And aeroplanes . . . I wonder . . .”

“What?”

“What can you tell me about that flying club your husband belonged to?”

“Not much at all. It was one of several subjects he never discussed in any detail with me,” she replied with a chilly little smile.

“Nobody knows who Boone, or Daniels, or whatever his real name was, actually worked for once he got out of prison several years ago,” continued Steed in a vague, abstracted manner. “I doubt anyone bothered trying to find out. The official conclusion was, and remains to this day, that the arms thefts were a small-scale operation run by a handful of renegade ex-soldiers merely out to make a profit for themselves, and organised loosely into a kind of small cartel. Boone may well have been brought in because of his smuggling and black marketeering activities in post-war Germany.”

“But you just said you didn’t think Peter had anything to do with any of that.”

“Boone may have started out on a modest scale, but I think he, or whoever he was working for, decided to go after a much richer prize.”

“You mean ‘Chimera’, or ‘Caliban’, or whatever it’s called?”

“Precisely.”

“But surely, what with Project Tempest being so secret, the security measures against your theoretical thieves would have been insurmountable.”

Refilling his glass, Steed gazed at it for several moments before continuing. “Unless, of course, there was an inside man. Or men.”

“Whatever else he may have been, my husband was neither thief nor traitor!” Flushed with indignation, Emma rose from her chair.

“Sit down, I’m not suggesting he was. Just hear me out. Suppose someone wanted Caliban. Now, the only device in existence was the prototype mounted on your husband’s aeroplane. The development of Caliban was what’s known as a ‘blind project’—that is to say, the various components of the device were not all manufactured by one firm, but rather by several firms unconnected with one another. That was of course done for security reasons. The original plans for Caliban are unique, and still remain under lock and key under the most stringent security. Very few people would have had access—” He stared off into the distance. “Unless of course one were the Project Officer. I wonder what that key unlocks.”

“What key?”

“The one Piggy took such pains to send your husband for safekeeping. Which was to be turned over to military intelligence, should anything happen to Piggy.”
Steed brought his attention, and his gaze, back to Emma. “You were about to say something?”

“I was about to say, if you can’t steal the plans, or the parts, and build one yourself—”

“—you have to steal the one and only existing exemplar.”

“That’s a nice theory, Steed, but remember, Peter’s plane disintegrated.”

“To be sure. Nevertheless, just suppose Caliban were spirited away before your husband’s last flight.”

“Come now, that would have been spotted in an instant!”

“Not necessarily. The project was cursed with problems almost from the start. There was no sign during the pre-flight check that Caliban wasn’t on board the plane. The device was mounted inside a sealed pod on the plane’s underbelly, and one couldn’t really tell if it was there or not unless one engaged the system. And that of course would not have been done until the plane was airborne. And then, if Caliban didn’t work, its failure would have been ascribed to yet another in the series of malfunctions that had plagued the project all along.”

“Well, that means someone had to have sabotaged the aeroplane some time before Peter took it up that day.”

“I think so.”

“It also means that Peter couldn’t have been sure, one way or another, whether Caliban was simply malfunctioning, or not there at all.” Emma went to the kitchen and returned with another bottle of champagne. “Which also means that Peter’s death was merely incidental to the sabotage of that plane. Whoever it was who caused its destruction, did so to obliterate any evidence of what was, or wasn’t, on board. And that’s assuming, of course, that Caliban was in fact stolen.”

“Possibly.” Steed slowly untwisted the wire cage and uncorked the bottle. “Perhaps whoever was behind this not only feared that your husband would discover that Caliban was stolen, but also feared that your husband knew something that would lead to the exposure of the saboteurs’ identities.”

“What do you think?” asked Emma.

“I think Caliban was stolen. I think your husband suspected that the entire Project had been compromised.” He leaned back in his chair. “I’m guessing that Piggy was involved in Tempest’s compromise, but had a change of heart. He had something sufficiently important in his possession to make him fear for his safety. And the only person he trusted with the key—literally and figuratively—was your husband.”

“And killed him with that trust. Maybe Piggy stole Caliban and hid it in a luggage locker at Victoria Station,” she said, hoping Steed wouldn’t notice the resentment, anger, and grief all at once overcoming her.

“Somebody’s got Caliban, I’m sure of it. Piggy’s note to your husband, along with that key, leads to that somebody. You don’t really believe it was coincidence that
Tempest’s Project Officer suffered a deadly mishap shortly before your husband’s crash, and after he’d posted that key?”

Emma stared at her glass of champagne, lost in thought.

“Somebody got the wind up, and got rid of Piggy, but not in time to intercept what was in that envelope he’d posted to your husband. Boone found out that Piggy had posted those items, and to whom. Boone also knew, or guessed, what those things would lead to. They were sufficiently important for him to brazenly ask you about them, try to get them back. Obviously, your husband recognised the significance of Piggy’s correspondence, because he hid it, and because he was determined to make sure it got into the proper hands.” Steed was looking directly at Emma. “That’s why he went to the trouble of asking you about your... ah... intelligence connection.”

“Then why did he have to ask me in such an insinuating, accusatory manner?” burst out Emma, turning in her chair away from Steed. “Why couldn’t he tell me the real reason he asked? Why not confide in me?”

“Quite obviously, to keep you out of danger,” he calmly stated. “I’d have done the same myself.”

Emma snorted derisively in response.

“You see how Boone didn’t waste any time in coming round to look for that key. He was a cunning man, yet he believed you when you assured him you knew absolutely nothing of the matter.” Steed watched as Emma got up and moved to the fireplace.

“Oh, and I suppose that explains why Peter hid Piggy’s letter in a secret bloody drawer I never bloody knew existed!” she exclaimed, stabbing at the grate with a poker.

“No doubt he assumed you did know. After all, you’ve had that desk for years, haven’t you? Long before you married him.”

“I hardly ever used it. That’s why I gave it to my husband when we got married.”

“And he used it for his papers and documents.”

“Yes—”

“After his death, you went through that desk very thoroughly, I imagine.”

“Of course.”

“Obviously, he was certain you’d discover Piggy’s letter. I have no doubt he held your intelligence and resourcefulness in very high esteem.”

Emma bent down to toss another log on the fire before sitting down on the divan. “My husband no longer gave a damn about me.” She was cold, and hugged herself.

“That’s simply not true, and you know it.” Steed rose from the table, picking up the champagne bottle and their glasses, and came over to her.

“How the hell would you know?” she muttered, deliberately avoiding Steed’s
eyes.
“...married you, which is more than can be said for anyone else.”
She finally looked up at him, but he was staring into the fireplace.
“I also know you loved him.” Steed sipped some champagne. “And still do.”
“Whatever I may have felt for him, once upon a time, has long since given way
to other feelings,” she retorted tartly.
“Has it? If that were true, you’d have let go of him by now,” he said, looking
directly at her. “You might even have given someone else a chance.” Swallowing the
rest of his drink, he set his glass down on the table and padded toward the front door.
“Steed.” Emma turned around, watching his retreating figure. “Steed?”
He picked up the manila folder lying on the table by the door, leafed through
several sheets of paper, and pulled one out.
“Don’t leave,” she pleaded, stretching her hands out toward him.
“I’m not going anywhere yet,” he growled, returning to the divan with the sheet
of paper and sitting down beside Emma. “It should be right about here. Look.” He
thrust the sheet at her. “Go on, read this.” He poked his finger at a spot about three
quarters of the way down the sheet.
She turned to him. “Why? What’s this?”
“A page from the transcript of your late husband’s last flight transmission. His
last words.”
“What’s this got to do with—”
“Read it,” he insisted, looking away from her and into the fireplace. “Read it
aloud.”
Emma took the page from his hand, scanning the lines until she came to the
place he had pointed to. “Systems failure, pressure loss,” she read, her voice barely
above a whisper. She glanced up at Steed, who still watched the flames.
“Go on,” he prompted, without looking up.
“The key . . . prop— . . . tell them . . . Mayday . . . punching . . .” Her hand
shook as she handed the piece of paper back to Steed.
He tossed it on the table. “Don’t you see?” he said presently, his eyes meeting
Emma’s. “He knew Tempest was compromised. He knew how important it was to
get word to the right people.”
She sat very still, watching him lean forward for the bottle and pour himself
another glass of champagne. He barely tasted it before he set it down and resumed
gazing into the fire, his forearms resting on his thighs, his fingertips tapping together
repeatedly.
“He trusted you to do that,” Steed said eventually. “What he was driving at
was that flying club, PROP, and Piggy’s letter with the key in it, and getting word to
you. Tower misunderstood. Don’t you see? And he didn’t say ‘tell ’em’ or ‘tell
them’; the radio cut out at that moment. What he in fact said was, ‘Tell Emma.’ He
knew you’d seen the envelope, brought it to him that very morning.”
Emma neither moved nor spoke. It had never occurred to her, not when reading the transcript shortly after Peter’s crash, not at any other time since, what her husband could have meant by those words. She began to shake. “He knew he was going to die,” she heard herself say. “Dear God . . .”

Steed studied his hands. “He trusted you to carry on. That’s why he asked you about me that morning, and that’s why he went to the trouble of leaving you that message in his last transmission to the tower. He wasn’t accusing you of anything.” He shifted uneasily. “He was relying on you to contact me. Peter wouldn’t have involved you unless he had no other choice. And when it became obvious to him that he wasn’t coming back, he turned to the one person he knew he could trust with his suspicions and information.” He fell silent, not daring to look at Emma. There were other things he thought of saying to her, but hadn’t the courage. All he did say in conclusion was, “Damn it all, Mrs. Peel, for all his jealousy, he couldn’t have trusted you unless he also loved you! Don’t you think you may have misjudged him just a wee bit?” He grasped the bottle. “You look like you could use some more of this,” he muttered, refilling her glass and holding it out to her.

“Dear God,” she repeated, taking the glass from him. “You’re saying he suspected, he knew, even before he went up that day—”

Steed slowly nodded.

“Dear God . . .”

“Mrs. Peel?” He took the glass from her. He nearly missed the table as he reached to set it down, so intently was he looking at her. “If I’ve upset you—”

She touched his face. “Never.” Trust him to defend Peter’s honour, to give him his due when she could not. “Dearest Steed,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

“There now, old girl,” he stammered; consoling emotional women was not one of his strong suits. “Shall I get you a brandy? Or perhaps make you a cup of tea, or something?”

Emma shook her head.

“What, then?” He put his hand to his breast pocket. “May I at least offer you my handkerchief?”

“Your shoulder would be better.” Tears filled her eyes.

Steed put his arms around her and drew her to him. “There, there now, my love,” he was saying softly, stroking her head, “there, there . . .”
TWENTY-THREE

Somewhere a ship’s clock sounded the time: one, two, three bells. Roused from a deep sleep, Steed peered groggily at the dimly-lit room, trying to think where he was but quickly giving up, finding it too much of an effort. His eyelids drooping, he slowly stretched a stiff leg and shifted his weight, ready to slip back into unconsciousness, unable to remember the last time he’d slept so tranquilly. Something warm pressed against his side and stirred. He turned toward the warmth and pulled its source closer to him.

His eyes opened again. Now he remembered where he was. The warmth radiated from Emma, who lay sound asleep beside him. As his eyes grew adjusted to the dimness he could make out her face, partly visible through the cascade of hair streaming across it. Propping himself up on an elbow, he gently brushed aside her hair, and saw that her features were still tense, even in repose. “Mrs. Peel,” he breathed, giving her a slight nudge.

She muttered something unintelligible.

He continued to gaze at her for a while longer, then leaned over and kissed her forehead. He called her softly, and kissed her again, this time on the cheek.

She stirred. “Mmm?”

“Mrs. Peel.” His voice was still low, but more insistent this time.

She was still half asleep, and concluded that she was having an unusually pleasant dream from which she didn’t want to be awakened. “Mmm,” she repeated, nestling against him.

“Mrs. Peel.” He kissed her rather more boldly than before.

“What time is it?” she yawned, opening an eye.

“Three bells,” he replied. “Either half past one or half past five. My guess is the latter.”

“In the morning?”

“I imagine so.” He listened to the faint patter of rain falling on some metallic surface just outside the window. “And by the sound of it, a wet one.”

“Two perfectly good reasons to stay in bed,” she sighed groggily, rolling over on her back with a catlike stretch.

“We’ll have to get in it first.” He ran his fingers down her arm and took her hand.

“Then let’s just stay right here.” She yawned again, and arranged herself more comfortably on the wide divan, dragging the blanket he had pulled over them earlier entirely onto herself.

“Are you awake?” He raised her hand to his lips.

“It’s only just gone five, darling. I’m never awake this early in the morning.”

“Not for anything?” He drew the blanket aside.

“What could one possibly do at this ungodly hour except sleep?” Her words
were punctuated by stifled yawns.

“One or two things come to mind,” he smiled, and kissed her yet again, only this time on the mouth.

Emma didn’t resist. She was rather enjoying herself, not having been kissed like that in some time. Anyway, she was only dreaming.

The penny finally dropped.

She awoke with a start, hastily disengaged herself from Steed and sat up, pulling the blanket up to her chin. “Dear me! I must’ve dropped off.”

“We both did.”

She turned away, blushing. “Sorry about all the histrionics last night, I can’t imagine what came over me.”

He put his hand under her chin and gently turned her face back toward him. “Emma,” he murmured, leaning forward to kiss her again.

She touched her fingers to his lips. “Don’t. I’ll only start crying again.”

“Emma, why should we delay pleasures shorter than the day—”

She picked at the blanket. “I had no right— Let’s not complicate matters any further.”

“Nothing complicated about it. It’s like riding a bicycle. One gets off to a wobbly start, but it gets easier,” he grinned, edging closer. “I need you.”

“What you need is a cold shower,” interrupted Emma. “If there were an icy pond handy, I’d push you in,” she added, with a faint smile.

Steed rolled over on his back, lacing his fingers under his head. “Well, at least your sense of humour’s returning.”

She settled into the cushions and gazed at him as he lay staring at the ceiling. “You’ve a job to do,” she said.

“All work and no play makes Jack a very dull boy indeed,” he rejoined dryly, glancing in her direction. “You’ve certainly changed.”

“Yes, I suppose I have.” She looked away. “You said it yourself, the last thing we need are distractions.”

Steed took his eyes off Emma and resumed contemplating the ceiling. “That’s not exactly what I meant, but you’re right,” he half-heartedly admitted. Eventually he raised himself into a sitting position and reached for the lamp. “Speaking of work, I did actually bring something with me I wanted you to have a look at.” He switched on the light. “Where’d I leave it?” He got to his feet, running his fingers through his hair and looking about. “Ah.” He crossed to the table in the entry and came back with a creme-coloured folder. “We never did get around to this last night,” he said, clearing his throat, and sat down on the divan before taking several photographs from the folder and holding them up.

She moved closer to Steed, who handed her the photographs one by one. “These look like contract bids. And why photographs, not photostats? Where’d you get these?”
“Smuggled them past Cerberus from the very bowels of Hades.” Steed buttoned his collar and knotted his tie. “Sneaked a mini-camera into the archives. What you see there are all the contract bids on Caliban, and to whom the contracts were ultimately awarded. You’ll find that one of the companies is quite familiar.”

She looked up from the photograph in her hand. “Knight Avionics! I had no idea.”

“That was the idea. As far as the manufacturers were concerned, they were just making another pricey toy under yet another lucrative defence contract.” His eyes went steely. “At least, that’s how it was supposed to work.”

“Back to the leak theory?”

“Yes, with Piggy a likely suspect.” Steed looked back up at the ceiling. “The various components of Caliban were fairly esoteric, and there aren’t many manufacturers who could make them to military specifications. So the pool of potential bidders was fairly small. Take a close look at the companies involved. See if anything strikes you as odd, or interesting, or whatever.”

“All right. Meanwhile, what will you be up to?”

“Oh, a few thousand feet, I should think.”

Emma looked comprehendingly at Steed. “Eh?”

“I’m going to see a man about a plane. I’m getting a ride in an antique in a couple of hours. If the weather clears. Courtesy of PROP—you know, that flying club your husband and everybody else seems to have belonged to. Should be rather fun.”

“Lovely. I get to do the work, while you’re off backseating some barnstormer. Some people never change.” She pulled a face, then assumed a serious expression. “Be careful.”

“Right. And now,” he said, standing up and stretching, “I imagine you’d like to go to bed. By yourself. I’ll be off, then.”

“Just like that, eh? The least you could do after sharing my divan for the night is stay for breakfast.”

“I don’t eat breakfast, remember?” He buttoned his waistcoat.

“You’ve been known to, on occasion,” she smiled, rising. “Oh, very well, off you go!” She gently pushed him along toward the door. “I’ll do your homework for you. It’s time we dredged up some information on this Piggy Hogwood person.”

Steed put on his coat, and picked up his hat and umbrella. “I’ll see you later,” he said, opening the door.

“Steed?”

He turned, his eyes meeting Emma’s.

“Steed—” She tentatively raised her hand to his face, then abruptly withdrew it.

“Go on, get you to bed. I’ll see you later.”

She waited until he disappeared from sight down the stairs before softly
shutting the door.
TWENTY-FOUR

Steed took great pains to sneak unobserved past Munro, who undoubtedly would take a dim view of any stranger (even if that stranger were Rob Roy himself) spending the night with Mrs. Peel.

Walking out to his car, Steed could just make out that the clouds were dispersing in the still-dark morning sky. The coming day promised to be beautiful: a perfect day for flying. It was cold, and he realised he’d left his topcoat behind.

When he got back to his apartment, he showered and shaved, made some tea, and rang Group Captain Miles. “George? Steed. Are we still on for this morning?” He looked at the clock; nearly a quarter past seven. “Excellent... Flight Lieutenant Goddard... RAF Hamelin—Yes, of course I know it... Right... Thanks.”

Shortly after eight o’clock Steed, dressed in flight jacket, jodhpurs, and leather boots, climbed into the Jaguar and roared off in the direction of Hamelin.

The sun was just coming up as he sped through the city. Christmas was only a few days away, and everywhere he looked he saw commercial reminders of the season, urging the heathens to buy, buy, buy. Perhaps he ought to get something for Emma. He began to think about gifts he’d got her in the past, and spent the rest of his drive to Hamelin in pleasant reminiscence.

Flight Lieutenant Goddard was looking over the Berliner-Joyce P-16 one last time as Steed drove up on the tarmac and guided his car toward the apron. Hamelin had been shut down a few years before, another victim of the Government’s austerity programme. The base had suffered significant budget cuts much earlier, and when Steed showed Emma around the airbase shortly before its closure, Hamelin was nothing like it was when he had been flown out of there during the war. Now, the weeds and grass pushing up here and there through the cracks in the concrete made the airstrips look more like garden paths gone to seed than runways.

“Mr. Steed?” Goddard waved as Steed leapt out of his car and walked briskly toward the aeroplane.

“You must be Lieutenant Goddard.” The two men shook hands. “I gather you’ll be taking me up in this grand old lady this morning.” Steed slapped the fuselage of the P-16.

“Yes, sir.” Goddard peered at the sky, and turned around to glance at the wind-sock atop the old control tower. “Whenever you’re ready, sir.”

Steed climbed into the plane, donned his helmet, and began fastening his harness. “You do this often?” he asked Goddard, who was just getting into his seat.

“Twice a month, sir, weather permitting. Flying these old beauties is the entire point of PROP.”

“PROP,” repeated Steed. “That’s the name of your flying club, is it?”

“That’s right, sir. We’re what you might call enthusiasts, flying nothing but vintage propeller-driven aircraft.” Goddard chuckled. “We started out calling
ourselves, rather prosaically, ‘The Propellers’, which we immediately shortened to ‘Props’, and then one of the lads came up with the idea of making PROP an acronym—in the best traditions of the RAF—for ‘Pre-eminent and Resplendent Order of Pilots.’ And so ‘PROP’ we became. We’re predominantly professional pilots, dedicated to keeping alive the art of flying old-fashioned aeroplanes, relying on our own eyes, ears, hands, and feet to keep our machines, and ourselves, airborne.” He smiled. “With a little help from radios and a few other electronic gadgets, of course.”

“I should hope so! What is this we’re flying?”

“U.S. Army P-16, sir. A replica, that is, built from original blueprints by several PROP enthusiasts. No surviving airframe of the original model could be found after the war, unfortunately. It was a damn fine machine in its day.”

Steed pulled his goggles down over his eyes, and gave his silk scarf an extra turn about his neck. “Splendid! I’m looking forward to our flight. Shall we pull chocks, then?”

“Right-ho, sir,” replied Goddard, making a few minor adjustments in his cockpit. He signalled to the RAF sergeant standing in front of the plane. “Contact, contact,” he shouted.

The NCO hung on the propeller blade and pulled it down, then leapt aside. The engine sputtered, caught, and roared to life, the plane lurching forward as it did so. Goddard then gesticulated with his hands, thumbs pointing outward, and the NCO pulled the chocks. The plane began to taxi down the runway.

“We were well acquainted with Wing Commander Peel?” yelled Steed above the noise of the engine. “He was a member of your flying club, I believe.”

“Yes, sir, he was, but I hardly knew him.” The aeroplane was still taxying down the bumpy runway. “He was killed in an air crash shortly after I returned from an overseas post.” The plane began to lift off the ground.

As Steed had predicted, it turned out to be a glorious morning for flying. Not a cloud remained in the sky, and visibility was virtually unlimited. They soared above the fens of Cambridgeshire and headed northeast, the sun reflecting brilliantly off their starboard side.

Steed had never really flown this low with a window seat before, and he was enjoying the experience immensely. Below him spread some of the loveliest countryside in England; above, he could see only an endless expanse of sky. The icy air cut to the bone at times, but he huddled more deeply in his seat, slapping his gloved hands together from time to time, and managed to stay reasonably comfortable. Goddard was an excellent pilot, taking full advantage of the plane’s capabilities to execute some elegant manoeuvres.

After they had overflown the northern Norfolk coast and were cruising above the North Sea, Goddard waved and pointed downward repeatedly. “That’s roughly the spot where Peel’s plane went down,” Steed heard him say over the head set. He
looked down, following the direction of Goddard’s arm thrusts, but there was nothing to be seen save the choppy grey sea.

Goddard circled the area a few times, relaying to Steed the details of Peel’s last few minutes of flight, and then turned back to head for the airfield.

Steed was thinking how welcome a steaming cup of coffee would be once they touched down when he heard something on the headset that made him sit up and pay attention to the flow of communications jabber. “Blue Sixteen, this is Hamelin. Blue Sixteen, call your pigeons, over.”

“Hamelin, this is Blue Sixteen, roger. My pigeons zero-four-zero, range fifty-two miles, over.”

“This is Hamelin, interrogative angels, over.”

“Hamelin, this is Blue Sixteen, angels five, over.”

“Roger, Blue Sixteen. Turn starboard to zero-seven-five and descend to angels three, over. You’ve got a bloody jet jockey showing off in the neighbourhood and we want to get you well out of his way.”

“Very well, Hamelin. Roger, wilco.” Goddard executed the course and altitude adjustments smartly and radioed his new bearing and altitude to Hamelin while Steed leaned out to get a better look at the scenery below.

They were still a good quarter-hour’s flying time from Hamelin when Steed chanced to see something quite extraordinary. There in the distance, at about four o’clock, was the bright red silhouette of another antique aeroplane. “I say, Goddard, is that another one of your PROP fellows over there?” he shouted into his headset, tapping the Lieutenant on the shoulder as he spoke, and indicating toward the red plane.

“If it is, I certainly wasn’t told about him,” replied Goddard. He followed the strange plane with his eyes for a few seconds, then turned his attention to his instruments. “Where’d that bloody Fokker come from?”

“I was wondering that myself. I just looked up, and there he was,” said Steed. “That’s a Fokker triplane, isn’t it? Like the one von Richthofen flew?”

“Yes.” Goddard was still watching his instruments. The Fokker, in the meantime, appeared to be gaining on the P-16. “That’s a museum piece—no one in our club has anything quite like that, I’m afraid. What in blazes is the bloody fool doing?”

No sooner had Goddard spoken than the Fokker was upon them, and heading straight at them. The lieutenant pulled the plane into a steep climb just as the Fokker flew by underneath.

“Get that bastard’s side numbers,” barked Goddard furiously, looping out of the climb and levelling out. “The bloody numbers on the fuselage!” He manoeuvred the plane back on course for Hamelin. The Fokker was nowhere to be seen. “Hamelin, this is Blue Sixteen, over. Who’s the lunatic who damn near knocked me out of the sky?”
“Blue Sixteen, this is Hamelin. Say again, please.”

“Hamelin, this is Blue Sixteen! I damn near had a mid-air with a Fokker triplane. Do you read?”

“I read you, Blue Sixteen. Radar shows nothing in your sector, over.

“Are you certain? He was just here, I tell you!”

After several moments of static silence, another voice came over the headset.

“Blue Sixteen, this is Hamelin. Radar indicates no aircraft in your sector. Do you read?”

“Yes, I read you,” snapped Goddard, “but we both saw what we saw. Out.” He glanced over his shoulder at Steed, who shrugged and spread his hands.

Fifteen minutes later, Goddard brought the plane down smoothly onto the old airstrip, and began taxiing back to the hangar. “You saw that Fokker, sir. We both couldn’t have imagined it, could we?”

“We saw it, all right,” replied Steed, pulling off his gloves and goggles, and unfastening his harness. “And now, if I were you, I’d forget about it.”

“Forget some bastard who shouldn’t be riding a bicycle, much less flying a plane? Sir, you can’t be serious!” fumed Goddard, and wondered what kind of nitwit this Steed fellow was.

“Forget it,” repeated Steed. His tone suggested to Goddard that, nitwit or not, Steed was very serious indeed. “Now, then, what was all that business about pigeons?” he asked, in more genial tones.

“Pigeons? Ah, yes, pigeons. Er, that’s just aviator talk, sir, meaning what’s your range and bearing to a given navigational beacon, which in this instance was RAF Hamelin.”

“And ‘angels’?”

“Altitude. In thousands of feet.”

The plane rolled to a halt in front of a small hangar, not far from Steed’s car. Goddard extricated himself from the cockpit and climbed out of the plane just as Steed jumped to the ground. “This has been a most edifying flight,” said Steed.

Goddard was still put out by the encounter with the Fokker. “I’m glad you think so, sir.” He was thinking what a peculiar fellow this Steed was when the latter pulled a small official-looking plastic card from his pocket and showed it to the young officer.

“Most edifying,” repeated Steed, very softly. “And most secret. Do you read me?”

Enlightenment slowly penetrated Goddard, who until now had only heard about the legendary document that shimmered before his eyes. He goggled at the little card for the several moments Steed exhibited it. “Yes, sir! Um, perhaps you would be interested in becoming a member of PROP,” he offered hesitantly. “Have you a pilot’s licence?”

“‘fraid not. Strictly infantry,” smiled Steed, removing his helmet.
“Pity. Although I suppose we could make an exception in your case, sir, and allow a non-pilot to join. I would be honoured to act as your sponsor. I’m with Group Captain Miles’s unit, if you decide you might be tempted. Meanwhile, sir, may I at least show you round the old officers’ club?”

“I’d be delighted.” They strolled in the direction of a group of single-storey clapboard buildings nearby. “You know, I was flown out of here on several commando raids during the war.” Steed began to recount a wartime anecdote.

“Well, here it is.” Goddard ushered Steed into what used to be the officers’ club. “No doubt this place holds many memories for you, sir.”

“Indeed it does, indeed it does,” rumbled Steed, slowly taking in the familiar surroundings. “It certainly takes me back a few years . . .”

“Of course, these days we use this mainly as our club HQ, but we do try to keep the bar reasonably well-stocked. May I offer you a drink?” Goddard swung round behind the bar and leaned on the countertop.

“I won’t say no. I say, d’you mind if I have a quick look around? Old memories, and all that, don’t you know—”

“Of course not, sir! Make yourself at home. In the meantime, what can I get you?”

“A small brandy wouldn’t be amiss, I think.” Steed wandered off to the back of the building. He waited until Goddard turned his attention to the rows of bottles behind the bar before slipping into what appeared to be an office of sorts. Steed reconnoitred and quickly found a file cabinet containing what appeared to be PROP’s membership records. He pulled open a drawer, riffled through several file folders, and found what he was looking for. “Curiouser and curiouser,” he muttered, scanning the papers he now held in his hands.

Steed put everything back exactly as he’d found it and sauntered back into the bar, where Goddard had his drink waiting for him. “Thank you, Lieutenant Goddard, for a most interesting morning,” he said, picking up his brandy.

“You’re welcome, sir. Are you sure I can’t persuade you to join our little group?”

“I’m afraid I’m not quite up to flying, terrestrial creature that I am. But I do have someone in mind who might be interested.”

“Excellent! By all means put your friend in touch with me, and I’ll put up his name for membership.”

“I’ll do that.” Steed raised his glass. “Here’s luck!”
TWENTY-FIVE

After leaving Hamelin, Steed drove directly to his apartment. An hour and a half later he was parked behind the nondescript granite building where he was to meet Tara, as instructed by Mother’s terse message on his telephone tape recorder, and where he hoped to learn the identity of the second of the two corpses discovered at Lord Braine’s estate after the charity ball. He walked briskly toward a concrete-and-steel stairwell that led to the basement of the building. There were no signs of any kind posted anywhere, nor any other clues either to the identity of the structure or of the activities carried on within it.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a solid-steel door, with no knob or handle, set in a burglar-proof frame. A small panel, with a series of numbered and lettered buttons, was set in the wall next to the doorframe; a red light glowed continuously at the top of the panel. Steed pressed several of the buttons, and a few moments later a green light flashed and the door silently swung open, admitting him to a narrow, ill-lit corridor that ran the length of the basement. Just inside the entrance, to his left, was a small guardroom, occupied by a sullen corporal kitted out in battle-dress. Steed showed his pass to the sentry, who gave him a curt salute in acknowledgement before stepping out to the door and making sure it was properly secured.

About halfway down the corridor Steed came to a pair of swinging doors resembling those on hospital wards. The transom overhead was open, and the unmistakable reek of formaldehyde seeped out into the corridor’s musty air. He looked through a small glass window in one of the doors, and spotted Tara standing several yards away. “Good morning!” he said heartily, pushing open the doors.

“Hullo, Steed.” Tara eyed his costume. “Another fancy-dress ball, or have you gone kinky all of a sudden?”

“You tell me,” he replied, turning around gracefully to afford her a complete view of his ensemble. “This rendezvous at the morgue was your idea, after all.” He wrinkled his nose. “Quite aromatic, though hardly what I’d call romantic.”

“Well, let’s see if they’re ready for us.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit premature?”

“To brief us, not embalm us,” she grimaced, and started down a corridor leading to some offices.

Steed followed her in silence. She seemed edgy this morning; not eager, as she used to be, but slightly impatient. “Look, why don’t you go on home? I can take care of this myself.” He caught her under the arm and held her up.

“Mother told me to—”

“Oh Mother be damned!”

A technician who happened to walk by cast a sceptical look at the eccentrically attired Steed, and smirked as he rounded the corner.

“I mean, now that Mrs. Peel’s dealt herself in, I don’t need you—” Steed
paused. “Oh, dear, that didn’t come out right at all. Sorry—”

Tara’s expression softened. “Never mind, I know what you mean.” She drew Steed’s arm through hers and they walked slowly down the corridor. “Mother was unable to reach you or Mrs. Peel this morning,” she said in an undertone, casting a perceptive glance at Steed. “That’s why he sent me here. In case you didn’t get his message.” She stopped in front of one of the offices. “I’ll just see this through, if you don’t mind. Now that I’m here, and all.”

“By all means.” Steed gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Afterwards, you’re on your own.” Tara opened the door to the office. “Unless, of course,” she murmured, “you’ve persuaded Mrs. Peel to renew your former alliance.”

“We’re still negotiating the treaty,” he answered with a half-smile.

At that moment a door at the other end of the office opened, and a tall man in an RAF wing commander’s uniform appeared. “Miss King, Steed, do sit down.” After a dubious glance at Steed’s outfit, he walked over to the neat wooden desk and waved at the chairs arranged in front of it.

“Devereaux!” said Steed, taking a seat. “Didn’t realise this was your bailiwick, too.”

“It isn’t. However, under the circumstances, Mother thought it best if I coordinated things.” Devereaux sat down at the desk and picked up a file folder which had been lying squarely in the middle of the desktop. “The corpse that was found along with your man Chivers was one Samuel Atkins, an NCO in my unit.” He offered the file to Steed. “I think you’ll find this interesting.”

Steed leaned across the desk and took the folder. Opening it, he immediately recognised the grainy black-and-white photograph, paper-clipped to the inside front cover, of the man in antiquated military uniform as the sergeant who had been present at Boone’s interrogation. And, apparently, this was the same man who’d followed Emma around at the ball. But why? And what was he doing there in the first place? “I take it the good Sergeant and our Chivers re-enacted the gunfight at the OK Corral?”

“If you will.” The Wing Commander’s tone of voice and facial expression suggested he was not amused. “It was made to look like they shot each other, but that’s not what killed them.” He picked up the telephone. “The surgeon who did the post mortems is available. He can tell you more.” He dialled a couple of numbers, then waited, playing with a pencil. “Watson? Devereaux. Got a minute? Yes, in the colonel’s office. I’ve got a couple of, ah, Ministry people here.” Putting down the phone, he said, “He’ll be here shortly. Name’s Watson. One of the Army surgeons on staff here. Excellent pathologist. Did Boone’s p.m. As soon as we identified the sergeant, I called Watson in to do both him and Chivers. Thought it best to have the same man on the case.”

“Quite right.”
“You summoned me, O master of the blue horizons?” intoned a wonderfully well-modulated baritone behind Steed and Tara.

Tara turned around in her chair a little too quickly, sacrificing discretion to curiosity, and beheld a very handsome, flawlessly groomed, impeccably-tailored officer leaning casually against the doorpost, his hands in his pockets, a pipe smouldering in his teeth. “Dr. Watson?” she uttered, rapt.

“Lui même.” The officer straightened up and sauntered in Tara’s direction. “No relation, though, I’m afraid. And you are—?”

“Tara,” she murmured, “King.”

“Enchanted.” He bowed, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. He then turned to Steed. “And a good day to you, too, sir,” he said, regarding Steed’s costume with a connoisseur’s appreciation. “I say, your flying kit is superb. Who’s your tailor?”

Steed rose, and shook Watson’s proffered hand. “How’d you do. John Steed. Er, that’s me. Me tailors are Braithwaite and Son.”

“You don’t say! What a coincidence—”

“Watson.” Devereaux interrupted the pleasant banter.

“Our servant, O master!”

“Do stop that nonsense, Watson. Be serious. Steed and Miss King are here about the two p.m.’s you just did, not to chit-chat about your wardrobe.”

“How frightfully dreary,” sighed Watson. “Such a messy subject. Post mortems, that is, not my sartorial tastes.” He studied his fingernails for the slightest hint of detritus, and, finding none, looked up at Steed and Tara. “Ah, well, everybody’s all work, work, work these days. No joie de vivre at all.” He grinned at Steed. “Although anybody who is daring enough to dress like Eddie Rickenbacker can’t be totally irredeemable.”

“You’re too kind,” said Steed with a chuckle. “We came about the two chaps found dead at the ball, and to confirm the identity of the second man. What can you tell us?”

Watson arched his eyebrows. “Don’t you want a goggle at the goners?”

“No.”

“Not even a blink at the bodies?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Have you no morbid curiosity, man?” exclaimed the Major, throwing up his hands. “No sense of the sensational?” He gazed dolefully at Tara. “No desire to give the lady a macabre thrill?”

“He may be unconventional at times, but he’s not depraved,” interposed Tara pleasantly. “Seriously, Major Watson, to all appearances the two men died of gunshot wounds; however, we are told that is not in fact the case.”

“Definitely not.” Watson patted his pockets for his box of Vestas. He struck a match and stuck it inside the bowl of his pipe.
"How did they die, then?" asked Steed. Watson pulled the match out of his pipe and snapped it in two with his fingers. "Like that."

"What Steed means is, what was the cause of death?" growled Devereaux, his patience wearing a bit thin.

"Oh, I see. Well, in my opinion, cause of death was severe trauma to the spinal cord, secondary to fracture of the cervical vertebrae by means of external application of force. In short, their necks were broken." Watson struck another match and lighted his pipe. "Quite skilfully, I might add."

"Perhaps by someone with commando training?" suggested Steed.

"Yes." The doctor took the pipe out of his mouth. "As a matter of fact, I've seen that kind of fracture once or twice before. Inflicted by special forces types, now that you mention it. I should note that in my report. Very perspicacious of you, sir. Excellent!"

Steed picked up the folder again and flipped through it. "Elementary, my dear Watson," he said, not about to let the opportunity slip by. "So the gunshot wounds were inflicted afterwards?"

"In my opinion, yes. A crude and ignorant attempt to divert attention from the actual cause of death, I should say."

"I think you have answered all my questions for the time being."

"Thank you, Watson. Carry on," said Devereaux.

With a perfectly executed bow in Cavalier manner, Major Watson retreated to the doorway and, with one final flourish, disappeared into the drab corridor.

"Well, we mustn't keep you any longer," said Steed, as Devereaux rose from the desk. He stood aside for Tara, who slowly got up and turned toward the door.

"If there's anything else, Steed, you can reach me at my usual number," said the Wing Commander.

Steed and Tara made their way out of the building. "I'll deal with Mother," said Steed, handing Tara into her car.

"Are you sure I can't be of more help?" She cranked the motor. "You know I'll do what I can—"

"I know. Thanks. There's really nothing you need do that I can't manage. Until next time, then!" He walked back to his car.

She watched him climb in the car and wave good-bye before roaring off in a spray of loose, wet gravel. She watched him until he was out of view, knowing that there would be no next time for the two of them.
TWENTY-SIX

After Steed left, Emma lay back down on the divan and drew the blanket over herself. It was too early for anything but sleep, she decided, closing her eyes, but she had no desire to crawl between the cold sheets of her bed. She pulled the blanket up to her chin and settled into the faint depression in the cushions where Steed had lain, letting her mind wander until eventually she dozed off.

The ship’s clock was striking eight bells when she awoke with a start. Emma forced herself to sit up and think about starting the day. The photographs Steed left behind were at hand, so she leaned over and picked them up. She began to look through them as she got up and slowly made her way into the bedroom. “How interesting,” she murmured, switching on the bathroom lights. With one last glance at the photographs, she put them down and drew a bath.

After an unhurried soak, during which she took another, closer look at the photographs, she felt sufficiently refreshed to get on with the job of finding out more about Piggy Hogwood. She dressed quickly, donning a very stylish black jump-suit, and, towelling her hair, padded into the tiny kitchen for a quick bite before chasing after the hapless Piggy.

Returning briefly to the bedroom, Emma collected the photographs, grabbed a coat and gloves and strode out of the penthouse. She pushed the lift button, then paused to look at herself in the mirror next to the lift. She was still grimacing at her reflection when the lift doors slid apart. Emma lingered in the lift after it had come to a stop and opened its doors to the lobby. Steed was right. It was time to let go, to get on with life. She marched into the lobby with determination. Knight Industries would just have to limp along without her for a while.

“Good morning, Hamish!” she called out vivaciously, on her way to the main lift bank. “What are you still doing here? Haven’t you a home to go to?”

Munro looked up from his tabloid with a warm smile. “And a guid mornin’ to you, dear! I’m filling in for young MacFarlane for an hour or two. His wife had their first bairn at four a.m., so he’ll be a wee bit late.” Emma’s dress this morning was rather unconventional, not what he was used to seeing her wear on a business day. “Going out, are ye?”

“In a while, yes.” She stopped to chat with him, and noticed his black eyes twinkling under the bushy eyebrows. “I’m just going to stop by my office, and then I’ll be out until this evening. I’ll leave you to mind the shop,” she said with a winsome smile. “And if I’m not home by the time Mr. Steed comes,” she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, “tell him to let himself in.” Emma took a key out of her coat pocket and tossed it on the counter in front of him. “Call the agency for a temporary replacement, and give MacFarlane the week off. And remind me to give him a rise!”

An astonished Dolittle greeted Emma as she entered her suite of offices. He had never seen her clad in such avant-garde attire.
“Ah, Dolittle.” Emma dropped her coat and gloves into the dithering young man’s arms and pushed him out of her way. “Find Stanhope and Chalmers and ask them to come up, please.”

“Yes, Mrs. Peel, right away!”

Tossing the folder with the photographs on her desk, Emma sat down to leaf through some documents. After she had finished, she took out a blank sheet of paper from a drawer, pulled the photographs in front of her, and re-examined them one by one, occasionally pausing to jot down some notes on the sheet.

A quarter of an hour later Stanhope and Chalmers arrived. “You wanted to see us?” said the former, a short fellow with a receding hairline and an advancing abdomen, clearly the older of the two.

“Yes.” Emma got to her feet and gathered up the photographs. “I’ve decided I need a rest from all this.” She waved a hand at the stacks of folders and piles of papers on her desk. “You’re in charge now.”

Stanhope regarded her doubtfully. “A rest, is it?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “You’re up to something.” He shook his head, looking at her the way an anxious parent might regard a favourite child. “Whatever it is, I’m not so sure I approve.”

“Dear old Stannie, since Father’s death you’ve been brooding over me like a mother hen. I assure you, I’ll be all right.”

“Humph,” he grunted, still sceptical. Stanhope took out an old briar pipe and fished in his pockets for his tobacco pouch.

“Our Emma can take care of herself, Stannie,” rumbled the other man, Chalmers. Like Stanhope, he had been with the firm ever since Emma’s father founded Knight Aeroplane Controls, and, like Stanhope, he too had grown somewhat overprotective of Emma. Tall and rangy, and of a saturnine disposition, Chalmers was Stanhope’s best friend. They were inseparable, and the incongruity of their respective appearance and temperament constantly provoked gentle mirth among their colleagues.

“That’s right. In any event, it’s nothing for you to be worrying about,” said Emma sweetly. “Now, then—”

“I suspect it has something to do with that bowler-hatted swell,” muttered the morose Chalmers. “I thought I recognised him the other day, skulking about—”

“As I was about to say,” interrupted Emma, with a keen glance at both men, “I need some information.” She handed the sheet of paper with her notes to Chalmers. “As you’re our best data analyst, I’m giving this to you. See what you can dig up on these companies—whether they were bought or sold since the war, who owned them then, who owns them now, that sort of thing.”

“Shouldn’t be difficult,” Chalmers pronounced. “I’ll run these through the computer. When do you need the data?”

“By tonight.”

“I think I can manage that. Shall I leave the printouts with Dolittle?”
“No, leave them at the main lobby security desk; that’ll save me a trip up to the office. I’ve moved into the penthouse for the time being.”

“I’ll start right away, then.” With a sepulchral smile, Chalmers turned to go.

“Thanks!” Emma called after him. She looked back at Stanhope. “Everything’s well in hand,” she said, picking up her gloves and coat, which Dolittle had dropped on an armchair. “All departments have been thoroughly briefed by their managers, following our last meeting, and you’re in charge of the audits as it is. You have the conn, Mr. Stanhope.” She stood to attention and gave him a saucy salute. “If you need me, just tell Munro.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am!” Stanhope returned her salute, then helped her with her coat. “I think after all these years I can captain the ship of commerce myself for a few days without running her aground.” He smiled genially. “Oh, and do give Steed my regards, will you?”

Emma pursed her lips at Stanhope as she finished pulling on her gloves, then dashed out of the office, nearly bowing over the agitated Dolittle on her way out the door.

* * *

The shiny green Morgan zipped through the streets to Westminster at speeds bordering on the suicidal. Rounding a corner on two tyres, Emma smiled at the thought of Steed desperately trying to look calm and relaxed whenever she used to get behind the wheel of her Lotus. Pity, Peter wrecking that car; she missed it. She changed down to a lower gear. No sense in getting killed just when life was becoming interesting again.

She pulled into a quiet street of elegant eighteenth-century buildings and squeezed her car into a spot under one of the plane trees only a few yards from the address she sought. She ran up a few steps to a door, knocking three times with the brilliantly polished brass knocker. Emma only had to wait a few moments before Rhonda opened the door to admit her. “Good morning. I’ve come to pay a call on your esteemed employer.”

The usually impassive Rhonda permitted herself a suggestion of a smile as she showed Emma into the drawing-room, where a small fire blazed on the hearth and a china coffee service beckoned from a cart rolled up next to the sofa. And then Rhonda vanished. Emma wandered across the thick Persian rug toward the windows and was gazing out at the street when she heard the sound of the door opening.

“Mrs. Peel! To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?” She turned to see Mother propelling himself toward the fire. “You’re looking well. Rather better, if I may say, than the last time I saw you.”

“You, on the other hand, haven’t changed at all,” she replied drily, crossing the room toward him.
“I was about to have my morning coffee,” he said, “when you called.” He motioned at the sofa. “Won’t you sit down and join me?” Not waiting for her reply, he reached for the coffee pot. “Black or white?”

Emma remained standing. “Neither, thanks. This isn’t a social call.”

Mother poured some of the rich Continental brew into one of the cups and took a tentative sip. “Oh?”

“It’s about my husband.” Emma eyed Mother languidly. Well, go on and squirm a bit and guess why I’m here; it’s payback time for sticking Steed with the job.

“I see. Yes, of course,” said Mother in his best conciliatory tones. “A distressing affair—”

“And just as I was beginning to think he was safely in his grave.” Emma sat down on the sofa. “On second thought, I will have a cup after all.”

Mother gave her a cagey glance. “If there is anything I can do to help—” His raised eyebrow and tone of voice suggested there most likely wasn’t.

You hypocritical old bastard, thought Emma, but not without some grudging respect for the man, whose stubborn tenacity had, over the years, kept not only himself but also a significant number of other people safe and alive. “As a matter of fact, I could use your help,” she said, moving to within several inches of Mother. “Or, more precisely, Steed could.” She watched his face.

“Steed?” Mother rolled back and away from Emma. “What kind of help does he think I can give him? I’ve already told him I’ve no resources to spare—”

“Do shut up, Mother, and for once in your life try to listen.”

“If Steed needs my assistance, then he should be the one making the request,” Mother pointed out. “What’s any of this got to do with you?”

Emma stood up and moved to the fireplace. “I’m the widow, remember?” she murmured, leaning against the mantel. “And I’m helping Steed. He asked me to do something for him, so I’ve come to you for information.”

“Well, why didn’t you simply say so in the first place, instead of wasting time beating about the bush?” huffed Mother, nearly spilling coffee all over his lap. “Botheration,” he muttered, eyeing the light brown pool threatening to overflow the saucer in his hand. He frowned, then looked up at Emma. “You two are working together?” he said with contrived indifference. The inflection in his voice, however, betrayed complete surprise. He managed to set his cup and saucer down on the table without further incident.

“Yes.” Emma was secretly pleased that she’d succeeded in provoking him, if only for a moment. “Now, then—”

“Well, well, well.” Mother began toying with his watch fob, another sign, Emma knew, of something akin to emotion in the curmudgeon. “I see.” He looked her in the eyes, harrumphed, then commenced an intense scrutiny of his flawlessly-kept fingernails. “Am I to understand— Er— Does this mean—”

“All you need understand is that I want information about Piggy Hogwood,
Project Tempest’s Project Officer. And I want it now.”

Mother knew Emma well enough to know when she was in no mood to be trifled with, which was generally ninety-five percent of the time. This time was no exception. He liked determination and purpose, especially in a woman. She’d been good for Steed. Kept him finely honed. Bad luck, Emma’s husband turning up like that. Steed was never quite himself afterwards, Miss King notwithstanding. And that stratagem seemed to have backfired recently. Steed had been rather careless lately; wouldn’t do anybody any damn good, him slipping over the edge again.

Mother looked Emma in the eye once more, this time with calculation. “Very well,” was all he said, wheeling himself to a bell-pull hanging next to the chimney-piece. He gave it two tugs. From a hidden doorway Rhonda appeared some moments later, bearing a white telephone. Mother took the telephone from Rhonda’s hands and dialled very deliberately. “Mother here,” he announced into the receiver. “Pull the Project Tempest files and bring me the dossier on Hogwood, the Project Officer. Immediately. . . Yes, that’s right, Tempest. . . Bring it here forthwith.” He put down the phone and handed the instrument back to Rhonda, who disappeared wordlessly into the walls. Then, turning to Emma, he said, “A courier will be here with the information you require within the half-hour.”

“Thank you,” said Emma, resuming her seat on the sofa.

Mother scooted up beside her. “Now, then, my dear Mrs. Peel.” He picked up the coffee pot. “While we wait, we can have a friendly chat over a cup or two,” he said with an almost genial smile as he poured her coffee. “I think you’ll like this concoction, it’s a special morning blend of my own creation. Been keeping busy, have you?”
TWENTY-SEVEN

Squadron Leader Walter Edward Jonas Hogwood, more familiarly known as Piggy, wasn’t a very interesting character at all, judging from the relatively thin dossier handed over by the Ministry courier. Dull was the kindest word that came to Emma’s mind as she scanned the dry paragraphs with swift efficiency. There didn’t seem to be anything helpful in these pages. Basic biographical details, wartime service, background investigations, the usual stuff. Compared to this, her husband’s file was a gripping page-turner. Still, the form listing Piggy’s next-of-kin caught her eye, for it yielded the address of a sister. Might be worth driving down and checking it out; possibly the sister still lived there, and might have something useful to contribute.

“I trust you will find that helpful,” said Mother, setting down his cup after draining his third café au lait.

“I’ve no doubt we will.” Emma smiled at him and turned to go. Their chat had gone quite well. For all his seemingly innocuous questions, Mother was none the wiser about her present relations with Steed “Good-bye. And thank you.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Peel.” He beamed at her, and then, almost as an afterthought, murmured, “Am I to take it, then, that you might, er, be coming back into the fold, as it were?” He accompanied her out into the foyer.

“That’s not really up to me, is it? Good day, Mother.” Emma left him to ponder the implications of her remark.

She got in her car and, checking the address in the file, confirmed that Piggy’s sister lived in a modest suburb of London south of the river. She looked at her watch; if she resumed her reckless driving habits, she just might make it in time to catch Sis at her elevenses.

Emma flew across Battersea Bridge in record time, and headed more or less south-west in the direction of Mrs. Mavis Etheridge’s semi with detached garage. At least that’s what she imagined Mavis inhabited.

Twenty minutes later, Emma neared the general vicinity of the Etheridge domicile. It was located in one of the newer estates, and with the aid of a map she eventually found the right cul-de-sac.

As she had pictured, Piggy’s sister lived in a neat semi-detached house with Nottingham lace curtains in all the upstairs windows. The front door and all the woodwork were painted a cheery if vulgar shade of mauve. A tidy little rose garden had been planted in front of the house, complete with plaster birdbath featuring a discreetly-draped cherub holding an urn over his left shoulder. From the urn sprouted a few plants of indeterminate species.

Emma pulled up in front of the gate, to which was affixed a small sign reading “L’Hermitage.” And I’m the Empress of all the Russians, she smirked as she got out of her car. She walked up to the front door and grasped the brass lion’s-head knocker.

“Whatever it is you’re flogging, we don’t need any,” boomed a voice from
behind the shrubbery.

Emma wheeled about, startled. “Sorry?” She looked around, and saw a large straw hat rising up from behind the hedge bordering the neighbouring property.

The hat crowned rather too rosy a face, which in turn was framed in red locks as artificially brilliant as the cheeks they brushed from time to time. Thickly applied beige powder, heavy black mascara, and a generous application of extremely pale pink lipstick completed the colour scheme.

“Don’t waste your time in this street, love,” said the face, floating behind the hedge in the direction of the path. “Last time anybody here bought anything was before the Crimean War.”

“Actually, I’m not peddling anything,” said Emma, stepping back onto the flagstone path. The face came around the hedge, along with the rest of its owner: wattled neck, large-bosomed torso in a blinding floral-print frock, and stout wool-stockinged legs in gardening wellies. A small ratlike canine slinked at the feet of this apparition, and immediately upon spying Emma began to shiver and yap hysterically.

The apparition looked Emma over shrewdly. “Well, you don’t look like you’ve come to read the gas meter, either.”

Emma smiled. “Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mrs. Etheridge?”

“I dunno if it’s such a pleasure, but I am Mavis Etheridge,” replied the woman with a hearty laugh, “and this—” she waved at the animal cowering behind her, “is Boadicea. Bo, for short.” She stared down at the ground. “Had a little mishap, did we, Bo darling?” she cooed, then looked back up at Emma. “She’s a touch nervous.”


Mavis clasped Emma’s hand in an iron grip and gave it a couple of enthusiastic pumps. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Emma Peel?”

“Um, the reason I’ve come to see you is—” Emma dropped her eyes and affected a melancholy deportment. “I understand Wing Commander Hogwood and my late husband were friends, and, well, I—” She pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes.

“Owed him money, did he?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Piggy owed your husband money, and that’s why you’ve come.”

“Certainly not! Really, Mrs. Etheridge, I come here as a friend, and instead I’m accused of—” Emma dabbed at her eyes again with her handkerchief, and turned as if to leave.

“There, now, don’t cry, dear, nobody’s accusing you of anything,” said Mavis Etheridge, putting her plump arm around Emma and steering her to the front door. “A recent loss, is it?” she asked, dragging first one foot and then the other across the boot scraper.

“Not exactly. It was two years ago, nearly to the day.” Emma hoped she
looked suitably grieved.

“What a coincidence.” Mavis eyed Emma with renewed, if cautious, interest. “You do know that Piggy—Squadron Leader Hogwood—is dead. Died right around the time your husband did, in fact.”

“Yes. I only just found out. I’m very sorry.”

“Time has a way of healing,” said Mavis philosophically.

“No it doesn’t,” sobbed Emma, hiding her face in her handkerchief. “I’m afraid I’ll never get over it.”

“You mustn’t think that, you’re far too young! Here, why don’t you come in for a cuppa?” Mavis smoothed the front of her frock, smiling kindly at Emma.

Emma followed Mavis into the house, with only the occasional sniffle as her contribution to the conversation. Mrs. Etheridge was some ten years Piggy’s senior, and not quite what Emma had expected. Judging from all the souvenirs and bric-à-brac displayed about the place, she’d lived abroad, obviously in Africa, for a considerable period of time. Emma correctly guessed that Mr. Etheridge was Colonial Civil Service. “Your husband, is he—?”

“Constabulary, he was. Kenya.” Mavis carefully removed her sombrero and placed it on a small side table. “Passed on, four years this coming February, may he rest in peace. Had a dicky ticker.” She stooped down to scoop up Boadicea. “Poor old Piggy. Bad business, that. Come into the kitchen with me, love, I’ve got to give my little darling her biccies.”

“How do you mean, bad business?” asked Emma, traipsing after her hostess.

“I didn’t think you looked like a punter’s wife. So your husband must’ve had something to do with aeroplanes, if he knew Piggy.” She set Boadicea down on the floor and began rooting about in the cupboards for the dog biscuits.

“He was a pilot in the RAF. He was killed in a fatal air mishap,” Emma explained, somewhat redundantly.

“See? That’s what I mean, bad business, all of it. Our Piggy got killed in some silly accident, too.” Mavis found the biscuits. “Now come to Mummy, precious, and have a biccie!” She turned to Emma as the tiny dog, smacking its little lips and growling contentedly, devoured its treats. “If the good Lord had intended men to fly,” she pronounced, shaking her head, “none of this would have happened.” Mavis folded her arms across her ample bosom and regarded Emma sympathetically. “And you so young. Let’s go through to the parlour, where we can sit down and have a nice cosy chat.”

Mavis again led the way. She turned on the electric bar in the fireplace and pulled up an extra chair. “Do sit down, love, make yourself at home.”

Emma took a seat next to the fireplace. “I was told a few days ago that the authorities are reopening their inquiry into my husband’s death.” She paused to dab at her eyes.

“You poor thing,” clucked Mavis, fetching a tray with a sherry decanter and
glasses. "I think you could do with a sherry, instead of tea."

Accepting the proffered glass, Emma took a sip or two of the sherry before speaking. "The other day I was sorting through some drawers and boxes and things, you know, going through the bits and bobs that one tends to accumulate—thought I'd do a spot of tidying-up before the holidays—" She smiled lamely at Mavis, who didn't seem to mind her prattle and was all ears. "Anyway, I came across a note from Squadron Leader Hogwood suggested he had entrusted something to my late husband’s safekeeping. Peter—that was my husband—had taken great care to hide that note." She watched Mavis for her reaction.

"Ooh, I say, you don't think there was something funny going on!" exclaimed Mavis, helping herself to a glass of sherry.

"I can't imagine what. I thought perhaps you might be able to tell me something about your brother that would give me a clue as to what he wanted Peter to look after for him. I can't imagine what it might have been. Since my husband’s death I've never come across anything in the house that didn’t obviously belong to us."

"Well, whatever it was, it can't have been worth anything," sighed Mavis. "Piggy died without a pot to—er, pretty much penniless. There was barely enough for the funeral expenses." She cocked her head at Emma. "You don't suppose he left a hidden fortune, do you?"

"If he had, surely he would have left the clues with you," said Emma. Mavis slowly nodded her head. "No, it had to be something else. Perhaps it was something to do with that plane Peter was testing at the time." That was close enough to the truth, thought Emma, hoping that she hadn't dragged Mavis into anything the poor woman might live to regret. "That's why I came to talk to you. Perhaps your brother said something—"

"I'm only too happy to help you, love, but I'm afraid there's not much I can tell you. I'm a good bit older than Piggy, and we were never very close. He went off to fight in the war, got himself a commission, and that was pretty much the last we saw of him. After the war, my Teddy and I went to Africa. We heard from Piggy now and then, but hardly ever saw him. He married, but it didn't last long. We never met the girl. She ran off with some bloody pilot or other. Oops, sorry, love, no offence meant."

"I thought Piggy was a pilot, too," said Emma.

"Not exactly. He was what they call a ‘flying arsehole’," grinned Mavis. "A navigator. After the war, he transferred into Engineering. Even though he was never an RAF pilot, he did fly aeroplanes as a hobby. Always liked the older planes, you know, like they flew in the Great War."

"My husband also liked to fly old aeroplanes," said Emma softly, twisting her handkerchief in her hands. "That must have been how he and Piggy became friends." And odds are Piggy belonged to that flying club of Peter's, she thought. Interesting.
“By the way, what was all that about Piggy owing us money, and my not looking like a punter’s wife?”

“Me and my big mouth. I meant no offence. It’s just that our Piggy was quite the one for the horses. Actually, he was quite the one for any kind of gambling. I thought maybe he owed— I take it your husband wasn’t—?”

Emma shook her head, and loudly blew her nose. “Peter had the occasional flutter on the dogs, but that was all,” she improvised, hiccupping. “Bless his poor heart!”

“Men . . .” sighed Mavis. “Piggy was perpetually in debt up to his eyeballs. Always hanging about the betting shop, or the racecourse when he had the time. Horses were his weakness. Funny enough, though, when he died, no one crawled out of the woodwork to call in any markers. Not that there was anything left after the expenses were paid. Mind you, I’m not complaining. At least I got back the money I’d loaned him. He paid it back, every penny, not a couple of weeks before he fell off his perch.” Somehow, Boadicea had found her way into the parlour, and was making a nuisance of herself, barking and shivering and dashing about. “Did you ever meet Piggy?”

“Only once, at a party. Peter and I were together barely six months before he got killed, you see.” Emma sobbed very convincingly.

“There, there, love, drink up, drink up,” said Mavis, feeling sorry for the pretty young thing crying her eyes out in her parlour. “I’m afraid I haven’t much more to tell you about Piggy.” She bent down and held her hand out to the little dog. “Come here, Bo, my precious, come to Mums!”

“Have you any of Piggy’s photograph albums, or anything?”

“Fraid not.” Mavis picked up the squirming dog and kissed its damp little muzzle. “There weren’t any. After he died, we sold all his things—what was left of ’em—and like I said there was just enough to bury him and put up a proper marker.”

Her brow furrowed for an instant. “Come to think of it, there may be one or two things in the spare room—” Anchoring Boadicea firmly under her arm, she gestured to Emma. “Let’s have a quick shufty, shall we?” She led the way through the parlour into the cramped little entry, and up a flight of stairs. “Here we are.” She flung open the first door on her left and stood aside for Emma to enter.

The room was originally a bedroom, but had been converted into a combination storage room and library. A pair of bookshelves stood against the walls, and a small desk stood under the window. Emma glanced at the spines of the books and was amused to see that most of them had something to do with the occult. Mavis certainly had quite a collection of tomes about the Tarot, Ouija, palmistry, crystal ball gazing, and practically every other pseudo-science devoted to spiritualism and soothsaying. On the desk rested an object, apparently spherical in shape, draped with a black velvet cloth. No doubt the crystal ball. That explained why Mavis tarted up her parlour with the fake Tiffany lampshades and heavy velvet drapes.
“Don’t mind the clutter,” said Mavis, scurrying over to some cardboard storage boxes stacked on either side of the desk. On the floor between some boxes and the wall lay a small brassbound strongbox. “Yes, this is all I have of Piggy’s.” She nodded at the strongbox. “As I told you, he didn’t have much when he died. Whatever he didn’t pawn or sell while he was alive wasn’t worth keeping.”

“What’s in it?” asked Emma in an off-hand manner, all the time eyeing the strongbox with interest.

“I dunno. Junk, no doubt. I don’t know what’s inside. It’s locked, you see.”

“How can you be sure it isn’t full of money?” Emma marvelled at the woman’s singular lack of curiosity.

“What, d’you think if it had been, Piggy’d’ve left it here with me?” Mavis laughed. “It doesn’t sound like there’s much inside it, anyway. I gave it a good shake, after Piggy died. As I’ve told you, he and money never kept company for very long. Whatever extra he had went straight into the bookmakers’ pockets.”

“When did he give you this box? Did he say anything when he gave it to you?” Mavis screwed up her face. “Hmm, must’ve been about the time he paid back the money I’d lent him. And no, he didn’t really say anything. Just ‘Hang on this for me, there’s a good lass,’ or words to that effect.” She looked at Emma. “Kind of odd, come to think of it. Why would he want me to keep a box of junk?”

Emma wasn’t about to share her speculations with Mavis. “Oh, you know how funny men can be sometimes,” she said. “He probably was thinking of getting rid of it. He gave it to you to see what it would be like to live without it.” She dropped her gaze and bit her lip, trying hard to keep a straight face after that load of cobblers.

But Mavis seemed to take her seriously enough. “Yes, you’re probably right. Piggy always was a queer bird.”

Emma had learnt all she needed from Mavis. “Well, I really must be going, Mrs. Etheridge—”

“Mavis. Please.” She shut the door behind her as they left the room, and followed Emma downstairs.

“Mavis. Thank you so much for your time. You’ve been most helpful.”

“I’m glad you think so, dear,” said Mavis, patting Emma on the back as they stood in the entry. “Now just you remember, a young girl like you needs to find herself a strapping lad and start a family. No point in dwelling in the past. But, if you’re interested, I hold séances here every Thursday evening, at eight. We could try contacting your Departed.”

“You’re very kind,” murmured Emma, stepping out on to the front steps. “I might just do that.”

“You’re always welcome. Thursdays, eight p.m.” Mavis stood in the doorway and waved. “Come to think of it, I’m doing a special session tonight, for a couple of old friends. You’re welcome to come!”
TWENTY-EIGHT

Munro was once again at his post when Steed entered the lobby of Knight Industries, another dozen roses in his arms. "Guid evening, sir," he greeted Steed with a sly grin.

"Good evening, Munro! Rather brisk this evening."

"Aye, especially when you've forgotten your overcoat." Munro studied his clipboard and scribbled a notation.

"Well, then, I suppose I'd better fetch it," said Steed, heading for the penthouse lift.

"If I were you, I'd use the fire stairs, like ye did this mornin'," Munro remarked, flipping a page on the clipboard. "They'll hear ye comin' up in the lift."

Steed returned to the desk. "They?"

Munro hung the clipboard on its hook and rested his elbows on the counter. "I've worked for the Knight family for over thirty years. I don't miss much. I've known Emma ever since she was a wee lassie, and I've seen a few things here and there." Leaning forward, he said quietly, "She can be hard as nails, but ever since her husband died the second time, she hasnae been quite the same. Still, something seems to have fired her up these past couple of days." He straightened up and tugged at his tunic. "Now, then, I was about to tell ye, she's got a caller."

"Has she, now? Perhaps I ought to come back later—"

"Don't be daft! It's only that Lord Harnless character; I never did like him much."

"Ah, you mean Lord Braine?" Steed murmured, shifting the roses from one arm to the other.

"Himself." Disapproval flashed in Munro's eyes. "Now, away wi' ye, and rescue her from that sneisty Sassenach birkie!"

Steed reached in among the roses and withdrew a bottle of malt whisky. "I knew I'd find an ally in you, Munro. After you go off your shift, drink a wee dram to me and Mrs. Peel, eh?"

Munro's eyes sparkled as he took the bottle out of Steed's hands. "Och, thank you, sir, thank you very much!"

"Good night—and thanks for the intelligence report. I think I'll take the lift, after all." Steed placed the roses on the counter in front of Munro. "And why not take these home to your wife? I imagine Mrs. Peel already has her hands full."

Emma, in the meantime, was trying to come up with some delicate way to get rid of Lord Braine. When he knocked on her door that evening, she thought it was Steed, and eagerly opened the door only to find his lordship standing there, two dozen roses in his arms.

"My dear Emma," he'd said, "I had the devil of a time finding you tonight. Tried your house with no luck, and then beat my brains trying to think where you
might be hiding yourself away.”

“Hiding?” Emma took the roses from him with an innocent smile. “What makes you think I’m hiding?”

“Oh, come now, I’ll be the first to admit I’ve been rather persistent these past several weeks—”

“Not at all,” she demurred, dropping the flowers on the table in the entry. “It has nothing to do with you at all. I just thought I’d stay at the office, save some time. All those audits this time of year, you know—”

“Quite. Well, now, what do you say to a quiet little dinner somewhere, just the two of us? You can’t put me off forever, my dear!”

Emma put on an apologetic face. “I’m frightfully sorry, Robert—”

Braine put his arm around her waist. “Aren’t you going to put those in some water?” he said, glancing at the roses.

“Yes. Of course.” Twisting free of him, she slid into the kitchen, pretending to look for a vase. “I’m awfully sorry, but I’m afraid I’ve made plans for this evening.”

“Aha, so there is someone else.”

“If there were, I’d have said something by now,” Emma smiled again, squeezing past him into the living room, ostensibly still in search of a vase for the flowers.

“Get rid of him, whoever he is.” Braine came up behind Emma and began playing with her hair, wrapping it round his forefinger.

“If you must know, I’m going to visit a friend of mine. Of the female gender.” She pulled his hand away and was walking back to the door when the bell rang.

“I thought you said you were going out,” murmured Lord Braine.

“I am.” Emma jerked open the door. “I can’t imagine who would be coming here—” There stood Steed. Before he could open his mouth, Emma pushed the door to, so that it was only open a few centimetres. “Think fast,” she whispered. “I’m not expecting you.”

“He’s being a nuisance,” whispered back Steed, a droll gleam in his eye.

“That’s exactly what I mean!” Emma exclaimed.

“Does he know who I am, d’you think?”

“The answer is no! How dare you come here at this hour, invading my privacy—”

Lord Braine sauntered up behind Emma. “Someone bothering you?”

Emma spun around. “Bother isn’t the word,” she fumed, loud enough for Steed to hear every word. “It’s the bloody Air Ministry. Lately, they’ve been pestering me about my husband’s death. Seems they think he was up to no good just before he died.”

“Indeed? And what brought all this on?” Braine look enquiringly at her.

“God only knows! These damned bureaucrats have absolutely no respect for anything or anyone these days!”
“Mrs. Peel!” Steed pushed against the door. “I demand that you admit me!”

Braine caught a glimpse of Steed’s face through the partially open door. “Isn’t he an acquaintance of yours?”

“Most emphatically not!”

“But surely I saw him chatting with you at the ball—”

“No doubt. Like a leech he was, asking me all kinds of impertinent questions about my poor dear husband. It was all I could do to get rid of him.”

Steed had pushed his way into Emma’s apartment. Producing an impressive-looking identity card, he waved it in front of them. “Mrs. Emma Peel, I have orders to take you away for questioning. Will you come along quietly, or will I be forced to summon my men?”

“Now see here, you—” cut in Braine, stepping between Emma and Steed. “You have no right—”

“I also have orders to bring in anyone who might be with her,” Steed murmured, prodding Braine out of his way. “This is none of your lordship’s concern, and I strongly suggest your lordship leave immediately. I do so abhor scandals, myself.”

“Really!” Braine exploded. “The nerve!”

“Leave,” reiterated Steed very quietly, “or I’ll drag you along just for fun.”

“Do as he says, Robert. It’s pointless arguing with these creatures. I can deal with him myself.”

“I say, I really must protest—”

“Please. Go. I’ve dealt with his kind before.”

“All right, if you insist.” Lord Braine acquiesced with obvious reluctance, and picked up his hat and coat. He saw it was pointless arguing with her. “I’ll ring you.”

He kissed Emma’s hand before shouldering his way past Steed and out the door.

Emma shut the door behind Braine, then leaned against it, exhaling a deep sigh of relief. “I wasn’t expecting him, of all people. When he knocked, I thought it was you.”

Steed glanced at the roses lying on the table. “He’s doing a fair imitation.”

Emma scowled at him. “I’ll just get my coat,” she said, stepping into the bedroom.

“Are we going somewhere?”

“You’re taking me to an interrogation, remember?” She returned carrying her coat and a folder full of papers. “Braine might be watching somewhere, possessive as he is. That’s all I need— Say, you wouldn’t happen to have that key of Piggy’s on you?”

Steed patted his breast pocket. “Right here, along with the rest of the stuff. Why?”

“Good. In that case, I’ve got an assignation tonight.”

“With whom?”
“With my dear departed husband.” Emma nudged Steed out the door and toward the lift.

“I think the stress has addled you,” said Steed, gently holding her back.

“Don’t be silly. You can drive me there.” She pressed the down button.

Steed held up abruptly. “My dear Mrs. Peel, you know I’ll do anything in the world for you, but there are lengths to which even I won’t go. Such as ferrying you across the Styx for a rendezvous with a ghostly rival.”

“Get in,” she ordered, shoving him into the waiting lift. “The only river you’ll have to ferry me across is the Thames. And it’s Mavis Etheridge I’m going to see, not the shade of Peter Peel.”

“And what is a Mavis Etheridge?”

“A medium.”

“I wasn’t referring to her size—”

“As in spiritualist,” groaned Emma. “Honestly, Steed—”

Munro was still lingering at his post when the lift reached the lobby and Emma burst out. He watched as Steed caught up to her and suavely linked arms with her.

“Guid night!” he called out, giving Steed another sly wink.

Steed’s car was parked in front of the entrance to the building. Quickly they climbed in, and Steed wasted no time in heading for the gate. As they turned into the road, he saw the silhouette of a large car slipping off in the opposite direction.

“Braine was watching.” He glanced at Emma. “He really is a possessive fellow. Just how friendly are you two?”

She didn’t answer immediately, her attention focused on other matters. “To answer your impudent question, not that friendly. Not that it’s any of your concern. Now, then, getting down to business—” She held up the folder. “I’ve got some interesting information about who bid on, and later got, the Caliban contracts. But that’ll keep until after the séance you’re taking me to.”

“Séance? Just where am I taking you? And just who is this Mavis the Medium?”

Emma gave Steed concise directions. “Mavis is Piggy Hogwood’s widowed older sister. The occult is her hobby—Tarot, palmistry, crystal balls, that sort of thing. Apart from that, she seems harmless enough. She hadn’t much to tell me about Piggy. They weren’t at all close. But I did learn that, one, Piggy was very fond of gambling, and of the racecourse in particular; two, that he had no money when he died, but then he had no debts, either; three, that his hobby was flying old planes; four, and this is the best part, Piggy left a strongbox with Mavis shortly before his death.”

“Anything interesting in the box, or did you get a chance to look?”

“The box is locked, and Mavis has neither the key nor the imagination to force the lock. She thinks it contains nothing but rubbish. Piggy apparently pawned or sold everything he ever owned of any value.”
“A gambler with no debts,” mused Steed.
“Just so. He even managed to pay off a loan from Mavis a couple of weeks before his death.”
“What does all this suggest to you?”
“Well, your theory that someone compromised Project Tempest comes to mind—Piggy may have sold information. Or, he might have been blackmailing someone.”
“I wonder what’s in that box of his . . .”
Emma looked at Steed, a smug expression on her face. She shut her eyes and passed her hand over her brow.
“Wait—I have a vision. I prophesy that the little key Piggy sent Peter fits the box.”
“Bravo, Madame Sosostris! You wouldn’t care to read my future, would you?”
Steed gazed thoughtfully at her.
“If you don’t keep your eyes on the road, there won’t be much of a future for either of us.”
“Are you going to try to sneak a peek into Piggy’s little strongbox tonight?”
“No. You are.”
“And all I wanted was a quiet evening at home,” he sighed. “Very well. You keep the old darlings busy at the séance while I’m housebreaking. Think you can act suitably distraught when your beloved husband suddenly materialises?”
“How do we know he’s going to?”
“Trust me, he will. I’m psychic too, you know.” He squeezed her hand.
“Wouldn’t want to see you disappointed, after all.”
“Steed—”
“Have faith, dearest, have faith! Tonight you shall have a séance to remember.”
Steed accelerated and sped down the road. Glancing at her with a faint smile, he added, “Let it not be said I ever stood between you and your husband.”
Emma stared straight ahead. “Turn left at that light,” she said quietly.
TWENTY-NINE

They were now only a few streets from Mavis’s house. “What’s the layout, and where’s the box?” asked Steed.

“Up the stairs, first door on the left, room directly above the parlour. The box is on the floor between some boxes and the wall, to the right of the desk. Parlour’s on your left as you face the house from the road, and that’s where the séance will be, I’ll wager. It’s all done in velvety drapes and Tiffany lampshades and stringy beady things in the doorways.”

“Right. Give me fifteen minutes to do a recce and get inside.” He slowed down as they approached Mavis’s cul-de-sac. “Anything else I ought to know? Any booby traps or man-eating beasts on the premises?”

“Dear me, I forgot.” Emma pulled a face. “She’s got a horrid little dog named Boadicea that yaps and snaps and pees and poos all over the place.” She looked at Steed, who was just drawing up to the kerb a few yards up the road from Mavis’s gate. “I’ve no idea if she’ll be on the loose—”

“Cry ‘Havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war,” he quoted jovially, setting the hand brake. “You’ll think of something.”

“Thanks.” Emma got out of the car. “That’s the Residence,” she said, indicating. “’L’Hermitage.’ I’ll see you later. Oh, and do mind where you tread.” She left him laughing softly in the car.

The burgundy-coloured velvet drapes in the bay window were drawn. Through the small gap between them shone a faint but steady glow, punctuated by the intermittent flickering of what could only be candlelight. Emma was just about to grasp the knocker when the door swung open. “I knew you’d come,” said Mavis. She was dressed in a flounzy caftan decorated with multi-hued spangles and sequins, and on her head she wore a turban made of silver lamé. At the centre of the turban, just above the forehead, was a paste sapphire that would make the Star of India seem a mere pebble in comparison. “I sensed your presence. Do come in, the others are all here.”

Mavis led Emma through a doorway hung with strands of multicoloured glass beads and into the parlour. Notwithstanding the candles stuck here and there and the imitation Tiffany lamp with its red lightbulb glowing in one corner, the room was dim and Emma had to make an effort to discern the faces she saw around a table that had been set up in the middle of the room. There were three other women besides herself and Mavis, all middle-aged and plump, all undoubtedly widows with little excitement in their lonely, uneventful lives. “Good evening,” smiled Emma, “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting.”

The three women murmured greetings in reply. “Mrs. Peel, I’d like to introduce Mrs. Sarah Jepson, Mrs. Dorcas Patterson, and Mrs. Edith Hoskins. Ladies, may I present Mrs. Emma Peel.”
The formalities concluded, Sarah Jepson took the opportunity to speak first. “What a shame about your husband,” she clucked, “and you so young, and all. Mavis was telling us. We’re all widows, you know.”

“We all have the same heavy cross to bear,” said Emma stoically, at the same time trying to look as pathetic as possible. “That’s why I was so grateful to Mavis, Mrs. Etheridge, for inviting me tonight. We were hoping to get in touch with—” Here she paused for dramatic effect, “—with Peter. My poor beloved husband.” Emma took out her handkerchief and dabbed at the corners of her eyes.

“Take a pew, love.” Mavis pulled out a chair for Emma. “Then we can get started. I can feel The Presence tonight,” she declared, rubbing her hands. Every finger sparkled with gaudy rhinestone rings, and bracelets jangled on each wrist.

Emma took her place at the table. It was covered by what was doubtless a home-made tablecloth decorated with various occult symbols. In the centre of the table, on its polished wooden stand and no longer hidden in the folds of its black velvet cowl, was the crystal ball. “I’ve never been to a séance,” she whispered to her companions at the table. “Is it terrifying?”

“Oh, no, dear, not at all! It’s so lovely when you can coax ’em into saying a few words to you!” Dorcas Patterson smiled an ethereal smile. “Just relax. They don’t always cooperate, though. Spirits can be very moody, just like they was in life.”

Emma thanked Dorcas for this bit of wisdom and, just to be on the safe side, sniffled discreetly. “Oh, I say, Mrs. Etheridge—”

“Mavis, love, Mavis. We don’t really stand on that kind of formality here, do we, girls?”

“Mavis, where’s your little doggie?”

“Bo? She’s shut up in the kitchen.”

“I thought I might just hold her in my lap, this being my first time—”

Mavis smiled kindly, shaking her head. “Can’t very well have her barking and carrying on, can we? She’d just destroy the Atmosphere and the Spirits wouldn’t come. Sorry, love. Afterwards, all right?”

Emma nodded. “Of course. I wasn’t thinking.” Well, Steed was on his own. If the wretched beast began to bark loud enough to raise the dead— She choked down a giggle, making it sound like a stifled sob, and buried her face in her handkerchief. She managed to regain her solemnity while acknowledging the several sympathetic noises her stifled laugh had elicited. “Forgive me, this is all so new to me,” she apologised, touching her handkerchief to her nose.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” said Mavis, crossing the room and fetching a tray with a sherry decanter and four glasses. “But, before I start, I always like to conjure up another category of spirits for my guests!” She laughed at her little joke, as she always did on these occasions, and set the tray down on the table. “Why don’t you do the honours tonight, Dorcas?”

Mrs. Patterson obliged. Mavis, in the meantime, took deep, measured breaths
and did unobtrusive stretching exercises. “Won’t you join us?” asked Emma, just as there came from the direction of the kitchen a couple of whimpers followed by a distinct yap.

“Oh, do shut up, Bo!” cried Mavis. “Dear me, no, I’m afraid I must keep the Body completely free of any Influences if I’m to call up Spirits from the Vasty Deep!” She took a few more sonorous breaths. “Afterwards, though, I generally require something a touch more robust to bring me back from the Beyond.” Several more canine noises emanated from the kitchen, and then all was silent. “It’s the cats, you know,” explained Mavis, aborting her measured breathing exercises. “My Bo can tell the minute they step foot into the garden.” She paused to listen. “It’s all right, she’s quieted down now. And how are we girls doing?” She turned back to her guests.

Emma peeked surreptitiously at her watch. Approximately twelve minutes had elapsed since her arrival; Steed should be in the house and upstairs by now. “Um, are we going to begin soon?” She rubbed her arms. “It feels cold in here.”

“Mmm,” intoned Mavis, taking a particularly deep breath. “It isn’t really cold, you know,” she uttered, closing her eyes and waving her hands about slowly, as if palpating the chill. “It’s Them. They are all about us.” She turned around slowly, arms out, rather like a dancer in slow motion. “You are unusually In Tune, Mrs. Peel. You are Sympathetic, I can feel that. Tonight, I have no doubt but that we will make Contact.”

With a vengeance, if I know Steed, thought Emma, finishing her sherry.

Without further ado, Mavis took her seat at the table and settled back in her chair, eyes shut. She took another deep breath or two before emitting a low, throaty rumble which eventually culminated in a resonant “Ommm!”

The three other women immediately grasped one anothers’ hands to form a circle; only Emma kept her hands in her lap. “Hands!” hissed one of the old trouts, a stern glare clouding her countenance.

“Sorry,” whispered Emma, and joined in the circle.

“Shhh!” Dorcas, on the left, pinched Emma’s fingers to emphasise her warning.

During all this time, Mavis, rocking gently back and forth in her seat, continued to moan “Ommm” in a kind of obbligato. Then, quite abruptly, her eyes flew wide open and she sat bolt upright. “Ommm,” she said, one last time for good measure, and stared off into space.

Emma was having a hard time keeping a straight face throughout this pantomime, but she did keep perfectly still, and held on to her partners on either side with a firm grip. She had to give Steed enough time to find the box and rifle it.

In fact, he had already made his way into the house and was upstairs, in the room where the box was kept. A vent in the room connected with its counterpart in the parlour, thus affording him the means to hear clearly what was going on at the séance.
“Black Spirits and white, red Spirits and grey, mingle mingle mingle, You that mingle may,” chanted Mavis in a flat monotone. “By the pricking of my thumbs, someone’s Spirit this way comes! Open locks, whoever knocks!”

The words were barely out of her mouth when there came from nowhere in particular a deliberate knock, knock, knock.

Emma and her companions gave an involuntary start. “Glory!” squeaked Mavis, spontaneously dropping her medium’s demeanour, and then hastily resuming her trancelike state. “Can you hear us, O Spirit?” she called, in appropriately reverent tones.

Much to everyone’s surprise, including Emma’s, a disembodied voice answered faintly, “I list, I list!”

This time, Mavis’s eyelids only went up a fraction of an inch as she peered at each of the women. Couldn’t be any one of them throwing her voice. Lord, she really bad done it this time!

“Tell us, dear Spirit, who Thou art.” Archaic forms of address were preferred, according to the guidance Mavis had received in matters spiritual.

“Peter, is that you?” cried Emma, her eyes wide with what she fervently hoped were mingled dread and hope.

Silence. But after a few moments of titillating suspense, the distant voice returned. “I am thy husband’s spirit, doomed for a certain time to walk the night, and for the day confined to fast in fires, till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away—” Here, the voice was momentarily interrupted by a loud gasp from the audience, and a stifled cry from Emma.

“Peter, darling, whereof dost thou speak?” she pleaded, getting into the spirit of things, as it were, but suddenly feeling uncomfortably cold.

“But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison-house, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, thy knotty and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porcupine. But this eternal blazon must not be to ears of flesh and blood!”

The ghost fell silent, and a tangible quiet settled over the group. By this time, Mavis had abandoned all pretence of acting the role of medium, and sat as wide-eyed and agog as her three friends at the table. Only Emma’s face was artfully hidden by her handkerchief. “Lord almighty, Mavis, you’ve done it this time,” breathed Sarah, awe-struck. “Maybe my Bertie’ll turn up one of these days after all!”

“Hush!” Mavis put her finger to her lips. “Let’s hear the rest of this. Come on, Mrs. Peel, ask him something!”

“Oh, Peter, what is it that troubles you?” sobbed Emma, marvelling at Steed’s talents.

More silence.

“Speak, Peter! Don’t leave me!”
“Beware!” echoed the sepulchral growl. “Beware the Ides of March! And beware the Steed of Stable Mews!

This manifestation clearly exceeded the women’s wildest expectations. They were positively bursting with spiritual ecstasy, hanging on every word of their ethereal visitor. “Coo, I wonder what the steed of whatstis is,” whispered Dorcas.

Emma, however, continued to act distraught. “What say you, husband? How now?”

“Fare thee well! Emma, remember me!” The voice faded, a distant knock was heard, and then nothing. Utter silence.

Emma simulated a swoon, sinking face down on the table. The others leapt to their feet, Dorcas lighting some more candles, Mavis dashing to a cabinet and bringing out the gin, Edith pulling Emma upright and patting her face and hands, Sarah grabbing the gin bottle from the ineffectual Mavis and pouring a liberal quantity into an empty sherry glass. “You’ll be all right, dear, have a sip of this,” said Edith soothingly, holding the glass to Emma’s lips. “And would somebody give Mavis a tot, too, while we’re about it?” she added somewhat crossly, with a critical glance at their hostess.

Emma’s eyes fluttered open and she rolled them around a bit, whimpering feebly and shivering. “Where am I?” she moaned, staring doe-eyed at the women huddled around her. “What happened? Was it really Peter?”

“We’ve just had a Visitation, love, and you’re among friends,” replied Mavis, albeit shakily. “Your husband came to us!”

Emma shut her eyes. “Merciful heavens! My poor Peter!”

“Drink up, you’ll feel better.”

Emma groped for her glass. “Thank you. I’ll be all right,” she gasped after gulping down some of the gin, and struggled to her feet.

“Have another drop, dear, to steady your nerves,” said Dorcas, reaching for the bottle.

“No, thanks, really.” Emma drew a few deep breaths, à la Mavis, and brushed the sleeve of her coat. “I . . . I think I’d like to go home now, if you don’t mind. I don’t wish to seem rude, but this has been quite an . . . eventful evening.” She remembered to dab at her eyes with her handkerchief.

“Of course. Will you be all right getting home?” Mavis asked, hovering anxiously over her guest.

“You mustn’t worry, I’m fine. Really.” Emma took Mavis’s hands. “Thank you. For everything. This evening has meant more to me than—than you’ll ever know.”

“Me, too,” Mavis muttered under her breath, then beamed at Emma. “Come back again, you’re always welcome!”

“Thank you.” Emma smiled weakly at all four women. “I think I’d best be off now. Good night!”
Mavis and her friends accompanied Emma to the door and waved their goodbyes as she wobbled out the gate and down the road. When she disappeared around the corner, they regrouped in the parlour. “Lucky girl!” Dorcas shook her head incredulously. “First time at bat and she chalks up six runs. And who have I got so far, after eight months? My ruddy mother-in-law!”

By the time Emma got back to Steed’s car, he was waiting for her, comfortably swaddled in his muffler and coat. He held out his hand. In his palm lay a small canister that could only contain film. “And how was your evening?”

“You were a howling success, Peter darling.” Emma snuggled in beside Steed and felt behind her seat for the lap rug. “In more ways than one. When you first knocked, you nearly had me believing there, for a moment. How’d you manage it, anyway?”

Steed started up the car. “The room with the box was directly above the parlour, as you said, and there happened to be a connecting vent. I could hear every word of your hen party. It was child’s play.”

“They’ll be talking about you for years to come,” said Emma, putting her hand on his arm. “I must say I was rather taken with your Elizabethan impression of my husband. Even if it was somewhat, um, eclectic.”

“Your humble servant, milady. I played Hamlet’s ghost when I was at school, you know,” he grinned. “Incidentally, you weren’t half bad yourself.” He inclined his head, then dropped the canister he held in his hand into her lap. “There’s tonight’s spoils.”

“So the key fit.” Emma opened the canister and took out a roll of black and white negatives. “Just as you predicted. There wasn’t anything else in the box worth mentioning, but I did find that.”

“You’ve a darkroom—shall we go back to your place, then, and see what develops?”

“In a flash!” Steed engaged the gears, trod on the accelerator, and headed north toward the river.
THIRTY

“I think it’s going to snow.” No sooner had Steed spoken than a scattering of wet snowflakes hit the windscreen. “Hardly a fitting end to an otherwise glorious day.”

“It’s not quite over yet,” said Emma, looking at him. “That reminds me, you haven’t told me how your flight went this morning.”

“Very uplifting experience,” he replied, “although if truth be told my spirits were soaring long before I ever climbed in the cockpit.”

“You’re making me positively giddy.” She peered out of the window at the deserted street. “What was the point of the exercise?”

“That’s a very good question.”

“I meant the flight.”

“Oh, that. I wanted to retrace your husband’s flight path, but at a lower altitude and speed. See if anything unusual popped up.”

“And did it?”

“A couple of things, actually. First, we were buzzed by a mirage.”

“Now what could the French air force be doing—”

Steed laughed. “Not that kind of Mirage. As Lieutenant Goddard and I were heading back for Hamelin, a Fokker triplane suddenly appeared from nowhere and made straight for us, as if to attack.”

Emma looked over at him. “What Fokker?”

“A phantom, it seems. I got the side number—Foxtrot One Niner One Seven.”

“Why do I get the feeling that should mean something to me?”

“I made some inquiries, and there are no Fokker triplanes in this country certified for flying. According to Hamelin’s tower, radar showed absolutely nothing in our sector when this plane appeared.” Steed slowed down and turned left. By now the snow was coming down in earnest, and small snowdrifts were beginning to accumulate here and there on the pavement.

Emma shivered, sinking even more deeply into the folds of her lap rug. “Peter thought he saw a Fokker on his last flight,” she said, watching the snow swirl in front of the windscreen.

“He didn’t think he saw it, he did see it,” Steed corrected her, changing down and grinding the gears as he did so. “He wasn’t suffering from hallucinations induced by anoxia, as the official explanation had it. The side number he radioed back to the tower may not belong to any airworthy Fokker, but it was the same one I saw.”

“It’s Caliban, isn’t it?”

A red light held them up. “Somebody did steal Caliban, and somebody isn’t too happy about our looking into your husband’s death all over again.” Steed rapped on the steering wheel. “I also got a look at PROP’s membership records this
morning. Piggy was a member, all right, and so was Boone—or Daniels, as he was then known.” He turned to Emma. “Don’t you think it’s high time you joined?”

“Already have. I’ve a meeting with the membership committee tomorrow.” She watched the snowflakes drifting down. “Though it doesn’t look like I’ll get to show off my aerobatics.”

The light finally changed, and Steed pulled into the intersection, wheels spinning on the slushy roadway. “When did you—?”

“After my meeting with Mavis the Medium this morning, I drove out to the air base to pay a call on George Miles. I was curious to find out if any of the Project Tempest crew might still be around. And what they might be doing. George wasn’t there, but Lieutenant Goddard was. We started talking about old aeroplanes, and I thought it might be rather fun to join PROP. So I did.” A coquettish smile played on her lips. “Goddard was terribly pleased, I might add.”

“I’m sure he was,” rumbled Steed, skidding around a corner and accelerating. “Here we are,” he said, turning into the lane behind his apartment. He manoeuvred the car into his garage and switched off the motor.

“You’ve told me about the Fokker and PROP; what else did you find out today?”

Steed got out of the car and came around to Emma’s side. “Remember that bit about the pigeons in Piggy’s letter?” he said, giving her his hand as she stepped out. “I think I’ve got the answer to that little conundrum.” They climbed the stairs to his apartment. Steed unlocked the door and held it open for Emma. “I’ll fetch us a bottle of wine. Meanwhile, if you would be so kind as to find the ordnance survey maps for the home counties—” He paused. “If you still remember where they are.”

“You see to the drinks and I’ll see to the maps,” she said, prodding him into the kitchen.

Emma was lying on the rug in front of the fireplace poring over a map when Steed came in bearing a plate of sandwiches, a champagne bottle, and a pair of wine glasses. “I thought we might have a bite to eat with the— You’ve laid a fire.”

“Mmm. It’s a bit damp in here.” She sat up. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why should I mind?” He set the plate and glasses on the table in front of the sofa. “It’s very cosy,” he said, his tone softening.

“I meant, my presuming to—”

“—make yourself at home?” Steed uncorked and poured the champagne. “There are things one hopes, however vainly, might never change.” He handed her one of the glasses. She looked so fetching by firelight that he forgot himself and just stood there, gazing at her.

Emma looked down at herself, then back up at Steed. “Ah, but you’ve detected some mutations,” she said. “That dramatic, eh?”

Her remark brought him back to the present. “Mrs. Peel—”

“Well, then, are you going to tell me what Piggy’s pigeons are all about?” she
interrupted, taking a sip of the champagne. “Mmm. Ambrosia.”

“Ah, yes. Pigeons.” He ambled to the desk and set down his glass. “What am I looking for?” he muttered, searching one of the drawers and finally pulling out a pair of dividers and parallel rulers. “Let’s have a look.” He took Piggy’s letter from his pocket. “Hamelin pigeons 340 36.3,” he read. “As our friend Lieutenant Goddard explained it to me, ‘pigeons’ is pilots’ lingo for the range and bearing from a given navigational beacon,” explained Steed, scooping up his wineglass and rejoining Emma by the fire.

“But of course!” she exclaimed. “How stupid of me not to have recognised that immediately.”

“Piggy’s message first identifies the beacon, which is Hamelin, then gives the bearings from that beacon, or three-four-zero—” He handed her his glass, and found the correct map. “The last set of numbers—thirty-six decimal three—should be the distance in miles measured from Hamelin, at bearing three-four-zero,” he said, spreading the map out on the floor and dropping down beside her. “Right, then.”

“Be sure you use the magnetic bearing,” said Emma. “And remember it’s nautical miles, not statute miles.”

“Yes, I know that,” growled Steed, manipulating the dividers and taking some measurements. “Well, well, well. What have we here,” he breathed, resting on an elbow and gazing once again at Emma.

“What?”

“Hmm?” Steed continued gazing at her.

Emma pushed him onto his back. “Still haven’t learnt to keep your mind from wandering, have you?” She reached for the dividers and map. “Let’s see, Piggy’s numbers put us directly in the middle of—” She repeated Steed’s measurements, then dropped the dividers and looked up from the map at him. “—Lord Braine’s estate?”

“Surprise, surprise,” said Steed, sitting up. “And I just bet—” He began going through his pockets. “Somewhere I have written down the co-ordinates—Aha!” He pulled out a matchbook from his waistcoat pocket and stared at a couple of sets of numbers hastily scribbled inside its cover.

“What is it, Steed?” Emma eased nearer to him.

“Let’s have a look at that map again.” He pulled it closer. “I have here the approximate fix on where your husband was when he saw the Fokker. It’s just as I thought. It was more or less exactly where we saw it this morning.” He indicated a spot on the map.

Emma’s eyes followed his hand. “Which means that if it were generated by Caliban, Caliban must be somewhere in the vicinity.” She looked up from the map at Steed.

“Right.”

“Lord Braine’s estate is near there,” she observed.

“Right again. Now isn’t that a coincidence.”
Emma picked up a folder lying on the floor beside her. “Have a look at this,” she said, taking out several sheets of computer printout and handing them to Steed. “Here are the data on those companies you asked me to check on.”

He edged closer to the fire and looked over the first few pages. “You’ll have to explain,” he said a minute or two later. “I’m afraid I can’t make much sense out of all this—” He gave the printouts back to Emma.

She put the sheets back in the folder, tossed it aside, and passed Steed his champagne glass. “There were six companies responsible for producing the various components of Caliban. One of those companies was Knight Avionics, as you know. Which left us with five companies to run through the computer. Hand me a couple of those, would you please?” She glanced at the pillows on the sofa. Steed obliged, and she arranged them near the fireplace, then sank back onto them with a deep sigh of pleasure. “That’s much better,” she purred, turning her head toward Steed. “Now, where was I?”

“The five companies who built Caliban,” replied Steed, sipping his wine and watching the flames leaping in the fireplace.

“Oh, yes. Well, back when Caliban was still called Chimera, and the whole Tempest thing began, two of those five manufacturers were branches of subdivisions of subsidiaries of companies—”

“Of the conglomerate that Jack, er, Braine built.”

“That’s right.” Emma groped for her glass. “Since then, Braine has acquired the three other companies. Which leaves only Knight Avionics. Which might explain his interest in my father’s company.” She raised her head and took another sip from her glass.

“Which might also explain his interest in your father’s daughter.”

“That could be a coincidence.”

“Yes, like everything else,” snorted Steed. “Braine controls five of the six original manufacturers of Caliban’s components. If he can’t buy your company, he’ll need the plans to make the remaining parts necessary to duplicate Caliban. If he has Caliban, he’s not going to risk destroying it by dismantling it. At least, not if he thinks he can still get the plans.” He looked at Emma. “That’s probably where Piggy fit in—”

“You’re making some very broad assumptions about Robert,” interrupted Emma with some vehemence, and sat up. “You’ve absolutely no evidence to suggest he is involved. I mean, his business is arms manufacturing. It’s hardly surprising he’d acquire companies involved in manufacturing armaments. It’s also no secret he’s been expanding— And speaking of Piggy,” continued Emma, before Steed could get a word in, “hadn’t we better take a look at his holiday snaps?”

For a fellow with ostensibly no claims on her, Braine nevertheless had himself a zealous advocate in Emma, thought Steed darkly, getting to his feet. “Of course,” he sighed. He patted down his pockets. “Now where’d I put the canister?”
“Steed.” Emma held aloft the small container, rising. She dropped the film in his upturned palm and took his hand in both of hers. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s been a long day,” he said, walking out of the room. “I’ll print these, shall I?”

Emma followed Steed. “Do we have a p.m. on the bodies found at the ball?”

Steed stopped at the foot of the staircase, and sat down on one of the treads. “Damnation. I neglected to tell you.” He rubbed his face. “The second corpse was a chap by the name of Samuel Atkins. Sergeant, Royal Air Force.” He told her what he and Tara had learned.

“Atkins.” She repeated the name softly under her breath. “Did you know that he was one of the original members of the Tempest team? And that his boss was Piggy Hogwood?”

“You’ve been thorough with your homework,” said Steed with approbation. “That’s very interesting. He was also present at Boone’s interrogation. I wonder how the good sergeant crashed the charity ball. It wasn’t exactly the sort of event one could afford to attend on an NCO’s pay.”

“Friends in high places?” suggested Emma, folding her arms.

“Could be. Did you know he, too, was a member of PROP?”

“No. But I should have guessed.”

“I should also mention that Atkins was Boone’s sponsor; Piggy was your husband’s.” How could he have neglected to tell Emma all of these facts?

“Are you all right, Steed?” Emma put her hand on his shoulder.

“Yes, of course I’m all right,” he said cantankerously, then caught himself. “Just be careful when you go to your PROP meeting tomorrow. I find their sudden decline in membership perturbing.” He stood up. “Another interesting coincidence. Atkins’s first tour of duty was in post-war Germany, at an installation very near where Boone was stationed at the time.”

“Before he got cashiered from the Army.”

“Just so.”

“You think they got to know each other in Germany.”

“I do. I suspect the sergeant was involved in the arms thefts along with Boone. I also suspect that Boone’s recent reappearance in this country was shall we say inconvenient to someone, and I bet the original plan was that Atkins would meet Boone at the ball and then quietly get rid of him. Of course no one could have anticipated that Boone would be arrested trespassing on an air base a couple of days earlier. That fortuity would explain the impromptu plan to kill Boone the night of the interrogation. And that had to be the sergeant’s doing.”

“How exactly were Chivers and the sergeant—?” Emma made a throat-slitting gesture with her forefinger, with an accompanying gurgling sound.

“Oooh,” she sucked in her breath, grimacing.  
“Very quick, very silent, and probably painless.”  
“So whoever did it was no amateur.”  
“I should think not.” He started up the stairs. “Take a look at the file I brought back, while I fool around with these negatives. It’s in the top right-hand drawer of the desk. See if I’ve missed anything.” He slowly mounted the stairs.

While Steed was occupied in his darkroom, Emma retrieved the file and reviewed it. She finally put it aside when she felt the room growing cool. The fire had died down, so she put on another log and watched it, snapping and sending sprays of sparks up the flue, as it struggled to ignite. Satisfied eventually with the revived blaze, she curled up on the sofa, at the end near the fire, and reached down between the armrest and the wall for the newspapers Steed always kept piled there. A few moments later, she came up with the Sunday crossword in her hand. Her lips twitched into a faint smile. He’d even left a pen clipped to the barely-begun puzzle, just as he had always done, week after week, in all the time she had known him. He would always start the wretched things, but she couldn’t remember him ever actually completing a single one. Probably because she was always finishing them for him.

She was concentrating on the crossword when Steed reappeared with a batch of prints. So she hadn’t forgotten about the crossword, either. He stood silently watching her for several moments as she sat with her brow furrowed in contemplation of some especially cryptic clue, the pen’s tip just touching her lips.

Steed was still standing there, trying to think of something witty to say, when Emma glanced up from the paper. Throwing it aside, she smiled at him and plumped the cushion beside her. “Come, sit down.”

“It’s warmer on the floor by the fire, don’t you think?”

“Undoubtedly.” She uncurled and slowly rose, stretching like a lazy, pampered cat. She moved gracefully around the table and sank down on the floor right in front of the fire, next to the two pillows she’d put there earlier. She held her hands out to Steed.

“Have you looked through Atkins’s file?” he asked, taking no heed of her gesture.

“I have.” She looked up at him, reading the ambivalence in his eyes. “I had a good look at his photograph. I’m fairly certain he was the chap following me about at the ball. It’s the same uniform, and there’s that funny scar just above the moustache, on the right side of the mouth. I wish I’d talked to him long enough to find out what he was after. Now I’m almost sorry I gave him the push.”

Steed sat down in the armchair next to her. “No point in dwelling on that now. Here, I’ve got some more pictures to show you.”

“No more still lifes, I trust?” said Emma with a sardonic smile.

“Quite the contrary. What life we do have depicted here whirls at a dizzying, and frequently blurred, pace. What do you make of these?” He started passing the
prints to her. “Use this.” He gave her an eyeglass.

Emma screwed the lens in her eye and examined several grainy photographs. “These are the plans to Caliban, am I right?” She let the eyeglass drop into her hand. “I’ll have to verify it later, but I’ve no doubt that’s what they are.” “What other offbeat snapshots did Piggy take? You promised me life in all its tumultuous splendour.”

“Have a look for yourself.” Steed gave her several more prints. “Aside from these, there was nothing else on the film.”

The photographs Emma was now seeing were of much poorer quality than those of the plans. They were unevenly exposed and often poorly focussed. “Piggy should have been a pornographer. Is this the best you could do?” “Afraid so. He didn’t have the luxury of a fixed light and steady desktop when he took these.”

“What is this?” She was looking at photographs of peculiarly-habited persons, their faces for the most part obscured by masks and hoods, who appeared to be members of some strange conclave. “Gaudy Night at Piggy’s alma mater? The West Sussex chapter of the Ku Klux Klan? A modern incarnation of the Hellfire Club?” “Have a closer look. At this one.” Steed leaned over and indicated the photograph he had in mind. “With the eyeglass.” Emma dutifully scrutinised it. “Aha.” She held it up and pointed at its upper left hand corner. “That circle thing. Is that it?” He nodded in assent.

“Some kind of emblem. Though I doubt very much it’s Rotary International or the Boy Scouts,” she grinned. Steed gave her another print. “I blew it up. Look again.” She only had to glance at it before she recognised what it was. “PROP. I should have guessed.” She drew her knees up under her chin. “But what’s PROP got to do with hoods and masks and gowns? And if Piggy wanted to take photos of a night out in drag with the boys, why use a spy camera?”

“I’m hoping you’ll be able to tell me,” replied Steed, taking the photographs from Emma and shuffling through them again. “Now that you’re a fully paid-up member of our local chapter.”

“I’ll see what I can find out tomorrow.” “Just promise me you’ll be careful.” Steed found the photograph he was looking for and handed it to Emma. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s Sergeant Atkins—” he pointed at a partially-hooded figure, “—and the chap next to him looks an awful lot like Boone, though the face is pretty much obscured.”

“Indeed . . .” Emma peered very intently at the photograph and started. “What?” Steed eased out of the armchair and onto the floor beside her. He watched her examine one of the costumed figures in the foreground of the photograph very thoroughly. The figure’s head was turned away from the camera, his
face partially hidden behind a half mask, and he wasn’t in focus, but enough of his features were visible to make an identification possible.

“It’s Peter,” she said, and fell back on the pillows.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, I lived with him, didn’t I?” she snapped, and immediately regretted her tone. She rolled over on her stomach, propping herself up on her arms, and stared into the fire. “Those costumes— I never saw him in anything like that. I had no idea—” She looked at Steed, who stretched out on his side next to her. “I had no idea at all, about anything,” she stated, her voice tinged with bitterness. She let the heat from the fire bake her face for as long as she could stand it, before turning her head and coming face to face with Steed. “You know, we ought to eat those sandwiches before they turn nasty.”

He looked out the window. “It’s still snowing, but not very hard. Might even clear up. Don’t forget you’ve your meeting with PROP in the morning.” He started to rise, but Emma held him back.

“Where are you going?”

“I’d better drive you home.”

“I’m in no rush,” she said. “I’m not expected until very late in the morning.” Emma stretched, and lay back against the pillows. “It’s so warm and comfortable here by the fire.” Stifling a yawn, she pulled one of the pillows out from underneath her head and pushed it toward Steed. “Here.”

“I think I’d better take you home.” He got to his feet.

“I don’t want to go home yet,” she said, picking up the pillow and hugging it to her chest.

“It’s getting late,” he pointed out gently, squatting beside her.

“I don’t want to be alone with my demons. Would you mind very much if I stayed a while longer?”

“No. No, of course not.”

She sat up. “How about a toast to old times?”

“Aye, we’ll tak’ a cup o’ kindness yet, for auld lang syne,” he replied with a faint smile, reaching for the bottle.

She started to brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead, but found herself kissing him instead.
The smell of coffee eventually registered in Emma’s mind, and awakened her from her fitful sleep. Yawning and stretching, she tried to sit up, and found that she couldn’t. Groaning softly, and running her hand through her hair, she rolled over on her side and nearly fell off the sofa. “Oh, Lord.” She struggled into a supine position and pulled her blanket over herself. From somewhere around a corner came a singularly unpleasant buzzing sound. Emma shut her eyes.

“Good morning!” Steed’s voice could scarcely be heard above the din.

Emma opened an eye and beheld his face, which he was massaging with an electric razor. “Must you?” she moaned.

“Rise and shine, you shameless lie-abed! Half the morning’s gone!” Mercifully, he switched off the noisy razor. “There’s plenty of coffee and orange juice to get you started.”

“Nothing will get me started unless you hoist me up. I’m stiff as a board.” She stretched a hand out to Steed. “Every time I’ve fallen asleep on this thing, I’ve regretted it.”

He pulled her upright. “I told you you could have the bedroom, but you insisted you were perfectly comfortable where you were.”

“You should have ignored my maidenly protests and dragged me to your bed. It would have been warmer, and less lumpy, than this mediaeval rack.” Emma rubbed her neck.

“No distractions, remember? Anyway, you needed your sleep,” he murmured. “Come on, at least let me get you something that passes for breakfast. You’ve a busy day ahead of you.”

“Good heavens, I’ve got those PROP people to deal with, haven’t I?” She lurched past Steed and staggered to the kitchen. “All right, a quick cup.”

Thirty minutes later, Emma glanced at her watch and got up from the table. “I think I’d better get going.”

“I’ll give you a lift home,” said Steed, also rising. “What time’s your initiation, or whatever it is?”

“Around eleven. I’ve just enough time to make myself presentable and drive down there. What’s on your agenda?”

“Oh, I thought I might do some research on your boyfriend,” Steed said breezily. “Kick over a few rocks and see what crawls out, so to speak.”

“He is not my boyfriend,” she said sternly.

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” said Steed, prowling out into the hallway in search of his coat.

“What was that, Steed?” Emma cast a frosty look in his direction as he walked back into the kitchen.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” he smoothly replied, holding out his arm.
“Shall we go?”
THIRTY-TWO

Emma circled the airfield and gauged her final approach. Her inaugural flight in a Sopwith Camel as a PROP initiate had been successful thus far despite the aeroplane’s capricious engine. She looked down and saw several of the other members standing in front of one of the hangars, waving to her, and she waved back, guiding the plane toward the airstrip. The engine sputtered and coughed again, as it had been doing periodically throughout her flight, and she swore under her breath as she gave it more throttle and re-circled the field. The engine responded with rhythmic grumbles, and she again prepared to approach for landing.

Lieutenant Goddard was among the PROP contingent watching Emma. Like everyone else, he hadn’t failed to notice that the plane’s engine wasn’t performing smoothly during her flight, but until now the problem had not seemed particularly serious. The engine’s most recent gasps, however, had an entirely different quality, and a murmur of consternation ran through the pilot spectators. “Hope she’s all right,” muttered Goddard, shading his brow with his hand, his eyes never leaving Emma’s plane.

“Not to worry, I’m sure she is. Still, someone ought to have a word with Sid. Maintenance seems to have been rather careless recently. Remember Arkwright’s hair-raising ride in the Spitfire just last week?”

Goddard turned to the wing commander who had just spoken. “Indeed,” he replied, squinting skyward as Emma’s aeroplane made a new noise. “I’ll have a word—”

“She’s spewing oil!” announced a man in greasy coveralls, emerging from the hangar. Emma was circling the airstrip on final approach, the erratic sputtering of her engine now complemented by a messy quantity of black lubricant streaking the fuselage.

An emergency vehicle came screeching around a corner and headed for the runways.

“She’s coming in, sir, but she’ll go arse over teakettle on that runway,” said the man in coveralls.

“Thank you for your insight, Miller,” said the wing commander coldly. “Now don’t you get back to work on the other planes, and see to it that this sort of thing doesn’t happen to anyone else?”

“Yes, sir.” Miller walked back to the hangar, muttering and occasionally glancing over his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Emma’s hands and feet were fully occupied with controlling the aircraft. The engine was now definitely out of kilter, and the oil pressure was plummeting. She was trying to keep an eye on her instruments when her goggles were suddenly covered by a gooey, inky film. “Bugger,” she said, rubbing a gloved hand across the lenses. The airstrip loomed larger underneath her, and she struggled to
steady the plane as it descended.

Goddard and the other PROP members ran to the runway and were shouting at Emma. “Watch the wings, watch the wings! Hold her steady! Cut the throttle!” Of course she couldn’t hear them. Not that it mattered. She had a good idea of what she had to do to control the plane.

“Damn! She’s lost her starboard tyre,” said Goddard as Emma touched down. He watched the Sopwith Camel screech along the tarmac, veer sharply off to one side and then do a couple of somersaults before thudding to a bone-jarring stop belly-up in the grass bordering the runway.

The emergency van roared up just as the aeroplane’s engine gave one last sputter and died. Thin wisps of smoke began to rise from the wreck as several men spilled out of the van and ran toward it. There was no sound. One of the plane’s wings had collapsed, and the craft pitched over onto its side so that its cockpit was invisible to the spectators. Goddard and the others had stopped in their tracks the moment Emma landed, and now stood anxiously by, silently watching the rescue team’s efforts.

A couple of men began spraying fire retardant on the wreck, while another man scuttled around to the other side of the aeroplane for a look into the cockpit.

“Are you all right, Miss?” shouted the thickset sergeant with bright red hair. He saw a crumpled form on the ground, almost directly underneath the cockpit.

The figure stirred and slowly began to creep away from the wreckage. The sergeant put a restraining hand out. “Don’t move, you might have injured something!”

“The only injury I’ve suffered is to my pride,” Emma replied, getting to her feet and dusting herself off. She stripped off her goggles, helmet, and gloves, and shook her hair out, absentely running a hand through it a couple of times. She took a step forward and winced.

“Will! Bring the stretcher round!” The sergeant scooped up Emma in his arms. “Hang on to me, Miss, until my mate gets here with the stretcher. Hurt your leg, did you?”

“Just banged my knee. I’ll be all right. I don’t need a stretcher.”

“But, Miss—”

“Missus. I’m all right. You can put me down. Just give me a ride back to the hangar.”

“Very well, er, Missus, if you’re sure—” He carefully lowered her to her feet.

“I’m sure.” Limping slightly, she allowed the sergeant to escort her to the van.

The pilots gave Emma a resounding cheer as soon as they saw her emerge from the wrecked plane. “Jolly good show!” exclaimed a young flying officer as Emma walked to the van, holding her head high and trying to seem very casual about it all. “Nerves of steel, what?”

“Just like her heart,” muttered one of the other pilots, who never recovered
from being roundly rebuffed by Emma a long time ago, when he became a little too persistent with his attentions to her.

“Stow it, Wetherby,” said the wing commander.

The men sprinted back to the hangar and crowded round the van when it rolled up.

Emma climbed out and faced her fellow pilots. “Am I a wash-out, or have I qualified for membership in PROP?” She swung her helmet by the chin-strap, to and fro, waiting for the verdict.

“My dear Mrs. Peel, not only are you a full-fledged member, but I think I can safely say you’ve earned a unanimous vote for a Broken Wing,” said the wing commander, whose name was Tolliver.

Emma gingerly flexed first her left arm and then her right. “I’m quite content with a bruise or two. I don’t think I want either of my wings broken.”

Tolliver smiled. “The Broken Wing’s a medal, awarded in the rare instance of a serious aviation mishap.”

“In that case, perhaps I should put up my late husband’s name for a posthumous award,” she said drily. “After all, he was such a devoted member.”

Tolliver glanced away. “Quite. However, his, um, mishap did not occur in the course of a PROP flight.” He smiled wanly at Emma. “Anyway, I should think the gong awarded to him posthumously rather outshines our medal.”

“I say, Mrs. Peel, would you care to join us in the Shed?” interrupted Goddard, coming to his commander’s rescue.

Emma gave him a sultry smile. “Depends on what you’ve in mind.”

“The club. We call it the Shed,” blushed the lieutenant. “For a celebratory drink. To welcome you officially and take you under our wing, as it were.”

“In that case, I’d love to. But in view of my anointment, I think I’d better change out of these clothes.”

“Use my office,” said Tolliver. He pointed to one of the smaller buildings. “It has a washroom.”

“Thanks.” Emma started for her car, then paused. “Where will I find you, then?”

“Just down there.” Tolliver pointed to another small building further along the airfield’s apron. “It’s the old officers’ club. There’s a sign.”

“Right. See you in a few minutes.” Emma strode off to her car to fetch the change of clothes she’d brought along.

Having tidied up, Emma was about to emerge from Tolliver’s office when she hung back and pushed the outside door nearly shut. She held it open just enough to peer out unseen. A large man dressed in coveralls, a mechanic by the look of him, was passing by the building a couple of dozen yards away. She had no difficulty in recognising him as Ham-Fist, one of the two thugs who had demolished her living room. “Now isn’t this a coincidence?” she breathed, watching him disappear into one
of the hangars. As soon as the man was out of sight, she slipped out of the office and sprinted after him.

Several empty oil barrels next to the hangar door offered Emma a handy screen. Crouching behind them, she cautiously peeked into the hangar bay. A Spitfire and a SPAD were inside, both undergoing an overhaul. The Spitfire’s engine had been removed. There was no sign of the man, or of anyone else for that matter.

Emma took another wary look round the hangar before going in. Still in a semi-crouch, she ran between the wall and the aeroplanes, pausing every few yards to look and listen. The vast bay was eerily quiet, its silence disturbed only once when she inadvertently tripped over a greasy chain someone had neglected to stow properly.

Small partitioned glass-fronted spaces took up part of the wall, and had once been used as offices. Now, for the most part, they were empty, save for discarded odds and ends of broken furniture, rusted bits of equipment, and sundry other abandoned items of dubious origin and utility. Emma glanced up, and saw that there were more partitioned spaces on a mezzanine above, which could be reached by an iron staircase leading to a catwalk running the length of the hangar.

Most of the mezzanine spaces were empty as well, but the last and largest one was evidently still in use. A grimey table and chairs stood at one end; at the other stood a small refrigerator, beside a counter with a hotplate and electric tea kettle. A couple of shelves above the counter held canisters of instant coffee, teabags, and sugar. Several faded photographs hung askew on the walls of the room, and beside an open window fluttered a yellowed calendar displaying the month of May 1945. Emma pushed open the creaking door and entered the room.

She glanced around, not really sure what she was looking for. The old photographs were about the only things of interest. She took one of them down and blew some of the dust off. Judging by the uniforms, this had to be the oldest of the lot, dating back to the second world war. A gaggle of eager young men, some in flying kit, others in battle dress, were grouped around a bar in what must have been the original officers’ club. A faint smile playing on her lips, she imagined Steed as a young commando having one last round with the lads for luck before flying out at dawn on another raid.

Returning the photograph to its place, she took the time to take a quick look at the others before rejoining her pilot colleagues. She was about to leave when she saw a photograph tacked up on the wall behind the door. She leaned forward to have a better look, then slowly removed the picture and examined it more closely. It, too, was a black-and-white photo of a group of men, but of more recent date than the others. Emma studied the faces. There was George Miles; Sergeant Atkins; and no doubt about it, the two chaps in coveralls, toward the back, were the two men who had ransacked her house. And the man in the leather flying jacket was Peter.

The sound of grinding gears brought Emma out of her thoughts and straight to a window. She barely had time to see a jeep turn a corner out of sight. In it was
Ham-Fist.

She ran out of the room and down the stairs, still clutching the photograph, and made for the rear of the hangar. Through its open bays she could see the jeep in the distance, speeding in the direction of the main gate. Emma’s first impulse was to run for her car and give chase, but she realised she’d never be able to catch up. And even if she could, what good would that do? She’d need Steed’s help to get that goon to talk. It shouldn’t be too hard to find Ham-Fist and his chum, now that she had an idea where to start looking.

Emma walked back to Tolliver’s office, staring at the photograph in her hand before tucking it inside her bag. Here was one clue, at least; she might turn up another at the Shed. The pilots were probably wondering what was taking her so long, she thought, walking briskly to the officers’ club.
From the outside, the Shed was unprepossessing in appearance, indeed running to shabbiness. Its interior, however, presented an altogether different appearance. PROP's members had been generous with their contributions toward fitting and decorating the premises with, on the one hand, the most up-to-date bar equipment, and on the other, genuine period posters, advertising signs, and assorted other memorabilia dating from both world wars. Emma shut the door behind her and looked around the large room. There was even a fireplace, opposite the long brass-railed mahogany bar, ablaze with a brisk fire. Pity Steed hadn’t come along; he’d like this place.

Her fellow-pilots greeted Emma with a rousing chorus of “For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” and raised their glasses in unanimous salute. “I’ll be a good deal jollier after I’ve had a drink,” she said with a grin, elbowing up to the bar. “Who’s buying?”

The pilots all volunteered, to a man. “What’s your tipple, darlin’? A pint of our very best engine oil?” cried one wit, only to be answered with a chorus of boos and catcalls from his confederates.

“I’ve had enough oil trickling down my chin for today, thank you very much,” Emma laughed. “I would prefer another form of lubricant.” She turned to Wing Commander Tolliver, who appeared at her side. “I can hardly permit everyone to stand me a round, but, as you’re the senior officer present, if you were to offer me a brandy, I wouldn’t say no.”

“With pleasure!” Tolliver motioned to the acting barman, a flight lieutenant standing behind the bar busily serving drinks. “Jolly good show, Mrs. Peel. Your skill and nerve are enviable.”

The flight lieutenant brought Emma’s brandy. “Here’s to those who’ve gone before, Commander,” she replied quietly, saluting him with her glass before taking a generous sip. Tolliver noticed that her hand trembled very slightly. “By the way, I saw a chap heading for Hangar Three just a few minutes ago. I think he’s a friend of a man called Harry. Won’t he be joining us?”

“Must be Sid. Hardly. He and Harry are mechanics, not pilots.”

“RAF?”

“Yes. Most of us are. They’re in Chalfont’s squadron.” He nodded in the direction of a thin, moustached man at the end of the bar. “They’ve been with PROP practically since its inception. They do routine maintenance on the aircraft.” He sipped his whisky. “Any particular reason for your interest in Sid?” he asked pleasantly.

“I seem to recall he and Harry were in my husband’s squadron, years ago.” Emma took another sip of brandy. “I ran into them briefly, a few days ago, but didn’t have time to chat.”

“Well, well,” interrupted a familiar voice, “what a pleasant surprise, my dear!”
“Lord Braine!” Emma shifted around on her stool.  
“Did I startle you? I didn’t mean to,” he said affably.  
“I would never have thought to find you here—”  
Braine chuckled. “Me, neither. But, as it happens, I’m planning a charity air show for the coming spring, and these gentlemen have graciously volunteered their services.”  
“Ah.”  
“There were a couple of details I needed to clear up with the liaison officer before making further arrangements.” Braine nodded in greeting to Tolliver and a couple of the other officers. “But what brings you here?  
“My inaugural flight in a Sopwith Camel.”  
“Indeed? How interesting.” Braine gave her an enigmatic smile. He was about to say something when Lieutenant Goddard appeared at Emma’s elbow.  
“Mrs. Peel’s our newest member,” said Goddard, flagging down the barman. “Thought I might have another recruit, after that fellow—what was his name? er, Steed, was it?—came for a spin in the old Berliner-Joyce. Something about retracing Commander Peel’s last flight—” Goddard was interrupted by the crash of Emma’s glass on the floor. “Oh, dear.”  
“How frightfully clumsy of me,” murmured Emma with an enchanting smile.  
“I’ll get you another, Mrs. P.,” Goddard stammered.  
“Don’t bother. Thanks just the same.” She passed her hand over her face.  
“Are you all right?” Tolliver and Goddard said in unison, peering solicitously at Emma.  
“Yes, of course.” She took a deep breath. “I’m just a bit tired.”  
“What happened?” Braine asked, taking out his cigarette case.  
“I nearly pranged,” said Emma. “Mechanical difficulties with my plane. Great way to start out in PROP, don’t you think?”  
“You had your initiation this morning.”  
“I certainly did.” Emma slid from her stool. “And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I think I’d better go on home. Even nerves of steel get a bit tarnished now and then.” She smiled at Tolliver and Goddard. “Please make my apologies to the others, would you?”  
Braine followed Emma outside. “I thought you said you weren’t keen on flying any more,” he said, catching up to her.  
“I thought you had some business to take care of.” She walked in the direction of her car.  
“I’m not trying to pry, Emma.”  
“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.” She slowed her pace, and they continued walking side by side. “You were right, you know, the other day when you said it was time I got on with my life.” They turned a corner and passed between two rows of abandoned outbuildings, toward the perimeter of the old airbase. “Peter
taught me to fly, and I loved it from the start,” she said eventually. “After we married, we used to go up in an old second world war-era trainer together practically every weekend.” They walked in silence for a while. “Later, I graduated to solo flights.”

Lord Braine drew her arm through his. “I loved the exhilaration, the freedom I felt when I flew those old aeroplanes. It’s indescribable. Those were real aircraft—the SPADs, the Curtiss Hawks, the Fokkers—” She glanced obliquely at Braine. “One really flew those, you know. Not like today’s technological marvels, which are just a bunch of sophisticated mechanical and electronic systems that do the flying for you, while you sit back and watch the gauges and hope to God nothing malfunctions. It wasn’t flying that killed my husband, it was technology.” Her voice trailed off, and she stared off at the horizon defiantly.

“Not all technology is necessarily bad,” gently remonstrated Braine. “In fact, there are certain emerging technologies that will enable us to enjoy a freedom and power yet undreamt of.” He smiled. “Never mind all that. Tell me how your session with that fellow Steed went the other evening. And what a funny coincidence, him turning up at PROP for a ride in an old aeroplane.”

Emma glanced at Braine. He was certainly taking a great deal of interest in Steed’s activities. She decided it might be prudent to string him along a bit, until she could be certain that Braine’s curiosity stemmed from his personal interest in her, rather than from some other motive. “Nothing funny about it at all,” she said with vehemence. “Steed and his cohorts think that my husband was a traitor, selling government secrets, or some such rubbish! And that his death mightn’t have been accidental.” She turned away, clenching her fists. “That’s why he came spying, and that’s what he interrogated me about half the night. Whether I knew anything, heard anything. That beastly man!”

“What makes them think your husband was not above suspicion?”

“How do I know?” she exclaimed, wheeling about to face Braine. “They’ve nothing better to do, I guess.”

“Didn’t they at least give you some idea of what brought him under suspicion?”

“No! Well, I suppose it had something to do with all the problems his plane seemed to have. I gather they think he might have been sabotaging it for some reason.”

“But why? Was anything missing?”

Emma threw him a sharp glance. “Missing? What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know, parts, things like that,” Braine replied casually.

“I have no idea.”

“It makes no sense that anyone would want to sabotage a plane one flew. That would be suicidal.”

“Exactly! I kept telling them that. Peter was a respected, competent, and utterly loyal pilot who happened to get killed in an aviation accident.” She bit her lip.
“Damn them, why can’t they just let him rest in peace, for God’s sake?”

Braine put his arm around Emma. “Forgive me if I’ve upset you—”

“It has nothing to do with you, Robert. I’m just so angry, so fed up, that they used him, abused him, even, to the point where he was— He’d hardly recovered from his captivity before they had him flying newer, faster, and more dangerous aircraft—” Emma turned away, wiping her eyes with her hand. “It’s the hypocrisy of it all . . . Peter was doing all that in the name of national security and moral imperatives, and now those bastards with Steed at the head are using the same excuses for their dirty work. I can’t stomach it any longer.” Once again she faced Braine, but this time managed a weak smile. “Now, perhaps, you can understand why I buried myself in work at Knight Industries after Peter died. The only way I’m going to become completely free is if I consolidate my holdings and become independently wealthy in the fullest sense of the phrase. Then those government flunkies won’t dare touch me or the memory of my husband. Wealth shall give me power, and then I’ll not only be in a position to avenge Peter, but I’ll also be able to make a noise of such dramatic proportions that it will be heard from London to Moscow to Washington.” She challenged Braine with a defiant look. “I’ve just not yet hit upon how to make that noise.”

Braine smiled sympathetically, but made no comment.

“You disapprove.”

“On the contrary, I think I understand you perfectly.” He looked hard at Emma. “I’ve often speculated on what will happen when all the leading nations collapse from the already unmanageable burdens of arms races, overpopulation, rising poverty, the steady erosion of the middle class. Governments will be powerless to counter the ensuing civil disorder and socio-economic collapse. Who, then, or what will fill the political vacuum?”

“Well, that’s a different issue.”

“Is it? You and I may be motivated by entirely different impulses, but our goals are identical. We both seek freedom from the very institutions that are bungling their way into disaster as we speak. They meddle where they’re not wanted or needed, and refuse to intervene in situations where they should. They make sacrificial lambs of people like your husband, when a glance in the mirror would reveal to them who the real traitors are.” They reached Emma’s car, and he opened the door for her. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Emma slung her bag behind the seats. “As to who will fill the political vacuum? I don’t know. Who do you think will?”

“International banking and multinational corporations may hold part of the answer.”

Sliding behind the wheel, she looked up at him, waiting for him to elaborate further. But if Lord Braine had any more thoughts on the subject, he wasn’t divulging them. All he said was, “Will I see you at my dinner party tomorrow evening, my
dear?”

Emma started her car. “Dinner party?” she repeated slowly.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten! When I reminded you, at the ball, you said you’d come.”

The ball. No wonder she couldn’t remember. “The ball. Of course.”

“You’ll hurt my feelings if you don’t come.” He regarded her solemnly.

“Hurt the feelings of the toughest industrialist in Europe?” Emma laughed.

“Surely it takes more than declining an invitation.”

“We’ve a lot more in common than you think. We could pursue our conversation further, if you like.”

“You just want Knight Avionics.”

“Emma, please, I’m not entirely mercenary!” he smiled. “Although I confess I usually get what I want.” Braine looked thoughtfully at the clouds gathering on the horizon. “We could always discuss mergers, and perhaps come up with a few ideas for that big noise you want to make some day.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “You’re an exceptional woman, Emma. I agree that you need to put your talents and your money to some higher purpose. Supplying the military-industrial complex with widgets whose ultimate use you have no say in is unworthy of you.”

“What do you suggest?” Emma depressed the clutch and engaged the gears.

“Come to my party. We’ll discuss it then.”

“You pique my curiosity, Robert. Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps we do have more in common than I originally thought.” She revved the engine. “All right, I’ll be there.”

“Excellent! I promise you a memorable evening!”
THIRTY-FOUR

The guard at the main gate saluted Emma, motioning with his left hand for her to proceed. She acknowledged him with a nod as she drove on to the air base.

It had been a while since her last visit to RAF Fenmarsh. Following a road that led in the direction of an old water tower looming anachronistically in the distance, she passed several familiar landmarks, still quite recognisable despite recent refurbishment. She hadn’t been to the base since the formal squadron dinner that autumn just before Peter died. Her concentration, already somewhat diluted by the events earlier in the day, was hardly improved by the jumble of memories now filling her mind. Emma’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. There had been a time when they enjoyed such functions. That particular event, however, was not one of them. Still, she had gone with her husband, if nothing else out of a sense of duty. He had his career, after all.

A sharp whistle blast rent the air. “Hoy, are you blind?”

Emma braked to screeching halt. A burly NCO stepped up to her car, glowering. “You’re driving on a military installation, missus, not pushing a pram in the park! Can’t you read the signs?”

Emma blinked at the man. “Sorry?”

“There’s a bleedin’ runway up ahead!” The sergeant regarded her severely.

She looked over to where he was pointing and realised that she must have strayed off the main road. Several hundred feet away a runway did indeed intersect the pavement. A few moments later a fighter streaked past in takeoff. “So there is. Thank you.”

“Everything all right, ma’am?” asked the sergeant, observing her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

“Yes, perfectly.” Emma’s hands gradually relaxed. “I was . . . distracted.” She reached for the gear lever and threw the car into reverse. “Can you direct me to HQ, TMF/X?”

“Only if you promise to watch where you’re going,” he answered, more politely. “Turn around and go back the way you came, until you get to those yellow stripes over there.” He pointed. “Turn left and stay parallel to the runway, until you come to Building 17. It’s directly opposite the control tower.”

“Thank you, Flight Sergeant. I promise I’ll be more vigilant.” She turned her car around and smiled at the sergeant, who saluted her in parting.

* * *

“Hell and damnation,” muttered Group Captain Miles, spilling pipe tobacco all over himself. He scowled at the leather pouch in his hand, wondering how in blazes he’d managed to make this mess, then flung it and its few remaining shreds of tobacco
on his desk. “Ballard!” he shouted through the open door to the adjoining room.

“Sir?” A tired-looking squadron leader stepped into Miles’s office.

“I’ve just spilt a bushel of tobacco all over the place. Can you find me a whisk broom, or clothes brush, or something, before the damned stuff gets on the floor?”

The junior officer coughed. “Um, will you be wanting to salvage it, sir?”

“I’ll be wanting to get rid of it!” snarled the usually-affable Miles, brushing shreds of Cavendish from his tunic into his lap.

“Right, sir.” Ballard disappeared into the outer room, returning a minute or two later with a small hand-held vacuum cleaner.

“Here, give me that. Plug it in, there’s a good fellow.”

Miles switched on the appliance and was struggling with its remarkable suction, with a grinning Ballard for an audience, when there was a rap on the partially open door. “Permission to come aboard, sir—or is that strictly Navalese?”

“What? Who’s there?” shouted Miles above the disproportionately loud noise emitted by the machine, wrestling with the hose before it ingested his necktie. Ballard glanced at the credentials in Emma’s hand, then stood aside to admit her.

“How do you do,” she said, smiling at the squadron leader as she strode toward Miles’s desk. “Doing your own housework, George? I know there have been some budget cuts, but this really is going a bit far.”

“Emma!” He forgot all about the tobacco and leapt to his feet. “Delighted to see you! To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?” He switched off the vacuum cleaner, only to realise that all the tobacco had fallen to the floor. “Oh, blast!”

“What on earth were you doing?” She seated herself on the edge of the desk.

He explained sheepishly, stepping around to where Emma perched and giving her a warm embrace. “Here, why don’t you have a seat in one of the chairs?” He turned to the squadron leader. “Ballard—”

“I’ll have the duty airman tidy up, sir, at your convenience. With your permission, sir, I was just on my way to check the signals.”

“Very well. Carry on.” After Ballard left the room, Miles turned back to Emma. “I must say, you look absolutely ravishing, my dear.”

“Rather better than the last time you saw me,” she said with a wry smile.

“You’re not too shabby yourself. How’s Diana?”

“Couldn’t be better. Still keeps busy with the horses and the dogs and the garden.”

“Well, married life certainly seems to agree with you.”

“Yes. Quite.” Miles cleared his throat, and stared down at the floor.

Emma reached into her bag and took out the photograph she’d found at Hamelin. “Have a look at this.” She held the photo out to Miles. “Can you tell me when it was taken?”

“Where’d you get this?” He squinted at the photograph, moving over to the window where the light was better.
“It was just lying around,” she replied evasively. “Peter’s in it, and you—”
“So I see.” He walked back to Emma’s side and handed back the photograph.
“It was taken a couple of months before, er—”
“—before Peter got killed.”
“Yes.” Miles avoided her eyes, and resumed his contemplation of the floor.
“I gather, then, that everyone in the picture is a member of the Tempest crew?”
Miles looked up sharply. “What do you know about that?” he demanded.
“Calm down, George, it’s all right,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’m working with Steed. Want to see my security pass?”
“Of course not, that won’t be necessary,” he said, ignoring the ID she waggled in her fingers. “This business must have come as quite a shock to you.”
“Oddly enough, it’s been quite therapeutic. Now—”
“Steed’s an awfully decent sort,” mused Miles, still following his own train of thought.
“Yes, he is. Now, George—”
“He’s rather fond of you, in case you hadn’t noticed.”
“George.” Emma folded her arms.
Miles’s gaze met hers, and he smiled. “Isn’t it time you were wed again, Emma?”
“I haven’t come here to discuss my private life with you.”
“Very well, I’ll shut up,” he sighed. “Carry on.”
“I merely wanted to ask you about the two behemoths in the photograph—the mechanics.”
“Sid and Harry? What about them?”
“I understand somebody named Chalfont’s their boss these days. Where can I find them?”
“Chalfont’s outfit’s just over there.” He waved a hand at a cluster of buildings visible through the window, across the runway. “But I doubt you’ll find anyone there now. Holiday stand-down. I can check with the duty officer, though, if you like.”
“Would you?”
Miles walked around his desk and picked up the telephone. “What’s this all about?” he asked, dialling some numbers.
“Friends Sid and Harry were the mechanics who serviced the XB-9, right?”
Miles nodded.
“I think Steed may have a few questions to ask them about Caliban.”
Miles raised an eyebrow. “Er, yes, Group Captain Miles here, CO, TMF/X,” he said into the telephone. “Is Commander Chalfont there, please? . . . I see . . . Can you tell me if the mechanics are on duty? . . . That’s right . . . No, I don’t think so; hold on.” He covered the mouthpiece. “Hardly anybody’s on board,” he said to Emma. “One of your chaps is on holiday leave through Boxing Day; the other one appears to be convalescing. Is this urgent?”
“Yes. Can you find out where they live?”

He nodded again, and spoke into the telephone. “We do need to get hold of one or the other, actually . . . Yes . . .” Miles picked up a pen and pad of paper. “Where can I find them? Uh huh . . . Right . . . Got that. Thanks.” He rang off and finished scribbling, then tore the top sheet off the pad. “Here you are.” He handed Emma the paper. “They share a house, it seems. One of them had some sort of accident.”

“Did he now?”

“The one on convalescent leave—can’t remember if it’s Sid or Harry. Whichever. He evidently broke a rib or two, and his collarbone.”

“In a brawl, I shouldn’t wonder,” Emma said in an off-hand manner. “More than likely, knowing him. What’s this all about?”

“Steed thinks Caliban was stolen.”

“I know.” Miles looked up at Emma. “So he’s still on that tack. But surely the security—”

“Wasn’t worth a tinker’s dam. Especially if it was an inside job.”

“And you think Sid and Harry had something to do with this?”

“Possibly.” Emma then told Miles about the incident at her house. “They might have been trying to frighten me off.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. But what’s all this got to do with Peter? Surely no one suspects him of any involvement—”

“No. But if Tempest had in fact been compromised, very likely he found out, and so was conveniently got rid of, along with the plane. There is no way of knowing for certain whether or not Caliban was actually aboard Peter’s plane. Its destruction was very thorough.” She paused. “Unless, of course, Caliban turns up somewhere else. It was one of a kind, wasn’t it?”

“But this is fantastic!” Miles looked aghast. “If that thing fell into the wrong hands—”

“Exactly. It also appears likely that the project officer was bumped off.”

“Piggy Hogwood? But he died in an aviation accident.”

“Just like Peter,” Emma pointed out tartly. “Next, that stolen arms dealer, Boone or whatever his name was, is killed, and just the other day, your very own Sergeant Atkins turns up dead at a posh charity ball. Not exactly the kind of affair you’d expect to find an NCO attending, I might observe. Except that Boone was planning to be there. And, just coincidentally, Atkins was part of the original Tempest crew.” Her eyes met Miles’s. “Then there’s PROP.”

“PROP? That harmless bunch of enthusiasts?”

“Peter, Piggy, Atkins, Sid, Harry, and Boone, too, all were connected to PROP . . .”

Miles gazed intently at her. “What?”

“May I use your phone?” Without waiting for his answer, she picked up the
handset. “It occurs to me that the Project Tempest alumni have an unusually high mortality rate.”

Miles watched apprehensively as Emma dialled.

“Though I don’t think you’ve anything to worry about,” she said to reassure him, and listened to the repeated ring-ring on the other end of the line. “It’s Sid and Harry I’m concerned about.” Emma twisted the cord around her fingers, still waiting for an answer. “Hullo, Steed?” she said, only to have her initial eagerness fade into annoyance. “It’s a tape recording.” She waited impatiently for the recorded message to end, then spoke. “Steed, Emma here. Meet me at——” She reached for the paper with the address Miles had jotted down and read it into the telephone, before slamming down the receiver. “Sometimes, I really loathe those machines!”

Miles smiled. “Me, too. But I’m afraid there’s no escaping them. Soon everyone’ll have one. And then no one will bother to answer the phone. Which in turn will lead to us all being locked in a perpetual cycle of leaving one another fatuous little recorded messages.”

“Dinner invitations, indecent proposals . . .” She laughed a sinister little laugh. “Well, I’d better pull chocks, as you say, and hope that Steed gets my message. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to our two mechanics before we have a chat with them.”

“Watch yourself.” Miles walked out with Emma to her car. “Good seeing you again. It’s been far too long. You should call on Diana and me, soon.”

“I might just do that. As soon as this business is finished.” Emma smiled up at him as she started the car.

“Bring Steed with you.” Miles’s eyes twinkled. He bent down and kissed Emma. “Even though he’s Army, you could do worse.”

“I’m doing very well as it is, Georgie darling. Happy Christmas!”
THIRTY-FIVE

Sid and Harry dwelt in a decidedly unfashionable district. Bands of dirty urchins roamed the drab streets, stirring into action only when the rare motor vehicle chanced to come their way, which they then would pursue with hoarse, unintelligible shrieks until it left them behind and disappeared from view.

Emma’s car was an exception, for it pulled up in front of one of the ugly characterless houses and actually stopped. Four or five grimy little boys had chased her all the way from the top of the road, and nearly tumbled over one another when they realised that their quarry apparently had no intention of evading them. This was a completely unexpected turn of events, and they loitered anxiously nearby as Emma got out of her car. The bravest of the lot came forward and glared at her. “That your car, missus?” he growled.

“No. It’s the Queen Mother’s. If you and your friends can keep an eye on it for a while, you’ll see an even nicer car here shortly.”

The urchin regarded her warily. “Yeh?”

“You.” Emma reached into a pocket. “I’m expecting a friend of mine. Here’s half a crown for your trouble. Now keep your eyes open, and if you see a gentleman in a black Jaguar saloon, let him know I’m over there in Number 29.”

“Ta, lady!” The little boy ran back to his friends to share his bounty.

Number 29 was distinguishable from the rest of the dwellings in the street only by its state of disrepair, which was considerable even for this neighbourhood. Its rusting gate opened on weed-choked paving stones leading to the front door; the remnants of what at one time must have been a garden spawned in riotous anarchy within the bounds of the front yard. The house seemed still and lifeless.

Emma looked at the front windows. Heavy drapes kept anyone from seeing in. Concluding that knocking on the front door would not be a prudent course of action, given the occupants’ proportions and proclivities, she walked down the side of the house to the back.

To her relief, there were no signs of life coming from either of the adjoining properties, and she promptly set to work on the rear door with a lockpick she brought with her for just such an emergency. Well, this was a sort of emergency, she rationalised, even if it did rise to common-law burglary.

A few moments later the door swung open and Emma cautiously entered. Pausing in the kitchen, she listened for signs of activity. A heavy silence, punctuated only by the occasional creaking of old timbers, hung over the place like a pall. Satisfied that there didn’t appear to be anyone moving about on the ground floor, she moved toward the front rooms. Suddenly she heard a voice. Freezing in her tracks, she pressed against the wall and strained her ears. “. . . And the forecast for tomorrow is rain, with sunny intervals, with light snow flurries likely after midnight. Looks like we might have a white Christmas this year after all! Now, stay tuned for
What’s Tops in Pops . . .” A cacophony of sound ensued, produced chiefly by squealing electric guitars and throbbing drums.

Emma let out her breath. “Bloody radio,” she swore, following the noise to its source. She switched off the offending appliance and surveyed the room. Besides the radio, there were an ancient television set; a sofa that looked like it had been salvaged from the wreck of the Hesperus; a couple of hideous armchairs complete with greasy lace antimacassars yellow with age; and a huge coffee table obviously knocked together by a talentless amateur. The table was littered with tabloids, empty beer bottles, and a pair of gaudy souvenir ashtrays from Blackpool overflowing with cigarette ends. The TV Times lay on the sofa, open to the preceding evening’s programme listings. Not exactly Better Homes and Gardens, thought Emma, walking out of the room. After a quick look in the other rooms on the ground floor, she mounted the stairs, treading softly on each step and freezing every time one creaked. There were still no sounds, no signs of life anywhere. She paused on the landing to get an idea of the floor plan. There appeared to be two bedrooms, a toilet, a bath, and a lumber room on this storey. All the doors but one were shut. She stole toward the door that was ajar. Positioning herself to one side of it, she gave it a wary push, then peered inside. On a bed lay Harry. He was wrapped in yards of bandaging, from his neck to his waist, and appeared to be asleep.

Emma watched him for a while. She couldn’t detect any signs of breathing. It was hard to tell, with him all bandaged up as he was. But he seemed unnaturally quiet; not a single snort or whistle broke the unnatural stillness of the room. She crept up to the bed and put her hand to his neck, feeling for the carotid pulse. Nothing. The man was dead. Her superficial examination of the corpse revealed no signs of violence, and no obvious wounds. She did, however, notice that Harry’s head was thrown back on the pillows at an odd angle.

She thought she’d check the adjacent rooms. In the second bedroom she found Sid slumped over in an armchair by the window. His chin rested on his chest, and he, too, appeared to be dozing. Like Harry, he was awfully still and quiet and his head was curiously askew. Emma’s suspicions were confirmed when she tried to find Sid’s pulse. He was dead as well. Once again, she could find no signs of a struggle or marks of violence, nothing other than the odd angle of the head. Whoever killed the two men was swift and economical in his technique.

She withdrew from the room, suddenly feeling quite unnerved by her grim discoveries, and bolted downstairs. She wished Steed were here. He’d have to make the necessary phone calls; she didn’t know the current protocol.

* * *

Steed returned to his apartment not long after Emma’s call, and listened to her message on the answering machine. He rewound the tape and played it back again,
verifying the address she gave. Queer sort of neighbourhood for her to be slumming in. What was she on to? He cast about for his street atlas, glancing at the clock on the desk and realising, with some annoyance, that she’d neglected to say what time she’d called. He quickly located the street and calculated that with any luck he might get there in a half-hour or so. The urgency of her tone prompted him to not waste any time.

* * *

After another fruitless look round the house for clues, Emma went back outside to see if she could find the urchins. One of the boys might have seen something.

A couple of the younger children were playing nearby with a scruffy puppy of mixed ancestry. Emma smiled and beckoned to them. They pretended not to notice, although she could see them casting furtive glances in her direction from time to time. The puppy wasn’t as bashful, however, and it toddled toward Emma with an eager expression on its affable muzzle. She wished she had a treat to give it.

The puppy’s uninhibited behaviour infected the children. They neared Emma, who had squatted down to pet the dog. “Aren’t you a sweet puppykins,” she crooned to the docile little animal, who rewarded her with a lick on the hand. She laughed, her eyes meeting the children’s. “Is he yours?” she asked softly, fondling the puppy.

“She.” The larger of the two waifs regarded her sceptically.

“I beg you pardon,” Emma apologised more to the dog than to the children. “What’s her name?” she asked the boy who had spoken.

“Fluffy.” A less suitable name for the scraggly, wire-haired creature could not have been chosen.

“And what’s your name?”

“Tom.” The little boy seemed to grow bolder. “This is Bertie,” he added, tugging at his companion’s vest and pulling him closer. “’e’s me bruvver.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Tom and Bertie. And Fluffy. I’m Mrs. Peel.” She extended her hand. Tom wiped his hand on his moth-eaten cardigan and gravely placed it in hers. “Where are the other boys?”

“Dunno.”

“Well, then, maybe you can help me. Did you see anyone come to this house earlier in the day?”

Tom’s brow furrowed in concentration. “Dunno.”

“Were you playing here all day?”

“Yeh.”

“Did you see any motorcars drive up to the house?”

Tom shook his head.

“What about you, Bertie?”
Bertie cast his eyes down and hid behind his brother.  
“Do you think one of the other boys might have seen something? It’s very
important.” Emma gazed imploringly at the laconic Tom.
“Jack, mebbe.” Tom looked down the road.
“Can you find Jack for me?”
“Dunno.”
“Please?”
Tom thought about it for a few moments, then turned to Bertie. “You stay ’ere
wif the lady, or I’ll pound ya,” he commanded with uncharacteristic volubility before
running off.
While he was gone, Emma tried to engage Bertie in conversation, but failed. The poor infant’s lexicon, if it could be so styled, consisted of three or four grunts and
mumbles, none of which resembled any known Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. Fortunately, Tom returned shortly with Jack, the very lad whom Emma had first met upon arriving at Number 29.
“Jack! I’m delighted to see you again.” Emma stood up. “Did you see anyone
at this house earlier?”
“No,” he replied, after some consideration. “Didn’t see nobody ’til you drove
up.”
“No cars, nobody on foot?”
“No.” Jack looked at her suspiciously. “Wot’s it to ya?”
“I just thought that gentleman I told you about might have been here earlier,” Emma glibly answered.
“Might ’ave,” said Jack. “There’s a halley be’ind the ’ouse. ’E coulda come in
that way, but we wouldn’a seen ’im, would we?”
“No, I suppose not,” she conceded. “Well, thanks anyway.” She pulled out a
ten-shilling note from her pocket. “If I give you this, will you promise to buy Fluffy
some food?” She held the money out to Tom.
The little boy took the banknote and carefully folded it up, then looked up at
Emma with grateful eyes. “Ta, missus,” he whispered, a grin creasing his soot-
streaked face. “Come on, Fluffy. Bertie!” He yanked his sibling’s arm, and together
they ran down the road, with the yapping pup scampering behind in the rear guard.
“Hoy, ’e re comes somebody!” cried Jack, who was busy watching the street.
Emma looked up to see a black saloon approaching. She searched her pocket
and found one more banknote, which she proffered to Jack. “Off you go, then.”
Jack was too busy ogling Steed’s spit-polished car. “Coo, she’s a beauty,” he
breathed in reverent admiration. “Proper toff that is, wot’s drivin’ ’er.”
“Very perspicacious of you, Jack. You’ll go far. Now, do you want this piece
of paper, or shall I put it back?”
Jack snatched the banknote from her hand and turned the note this way and
that. “A quid!” he finally pronounced, awe-struck. “Ta, lady!” He stuffed the note in
his pocket and ran off in the same direction as Tom and Bertie.

Steed pulled up in front of the house and got out of the car. “What was that all about?” he said, striding toward Emma.

“Just investing in Britain’s future,” she said. “Come on, let’s go inside. We’ve two fresh murders on our hands, I’m afraid.”

“What is this place?” Steed asked, as they walked up to the front door.

“Remember the two troglodytes who redecorated my house? They live here. Or lived, I should say.”

“How on earth did you—”

“I saw Sid earlier today, at Hamelin.” Emma related what she had found out about Sid and Harry.

“So they were part of the Tempest project. All of the primary team are dead, except for Miles. Did you warn him?”

“I don’t think he’s in any danger, but yes, I let him know what was going on. I stopped by Fenmarsh on my way back from Hamelin.” Emma led Steed upstairs and into Harry’s room.

“Broken neck,” said Steed, after a cursory examination of the body.

“Sid’s next door. He got the same treatment.”

They had a look at Sid. “No doubt about it,” he agreed. “Whoever did this knew what he was doing.” He glanced up at Emma. “These two were killed in much the same manner as Atkins and Chivers. I’ll wager a case of my best port that the same hand is responsible for all four deaths.” Steed walked back out to the landing.

“Where’s the phone? I’d better ring Forensics.”

They descended the stairs and Emma directed him to the telephone. While Steed was placing his calls, she wandered back into the front room and idly picked up a nearly-empty packet of Woodbines she’s seen earlier, lying on the sofa. She was puffing on a cigarette when Steed found her.

“When did you take up smoking?”

“I’ve had a long day.”

“Why don’t you go on home? I’ll see to things here.”

“I’m fine, Steed, I’m just . . . tired.”

“How did it go with PROP?”

She briefly described the morning’s events at Hamelin, but left out most of the details of her encounter with Braine. “Where have you been? Paying a call on your vintner?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, and on my butcher, too. I got a goose, and a couple of bottles of excellent wine to accompany it. What do you say to joining me for dinner tomorrow, to usher in Christmas?”

“I’m already booked. Robert is hosting a party.” She walked over to the window, and drew apart the drapes.

“Robert.”
“Lord Braine.”
“Ah, yes. Him. Getting quite chummy, aren’t you.” Steed picked up the packet of cigarettes and took one out.
“Well, what if we are?” she retorted truculently. “Anyway, he asked me.”
“You might have declined.” Steed struck a match.
“I don’t see that it’s any of your concern.”
“You’ve quite made up your mind to attend this party of his?” He blew a smoke ring.
“As a matter of fact I have. Why ever not? He absolutely insisted I be there.”
“Pretty insistent fellow.”
Emma turned to face him. “What makes you think you’ve the right—” she demanded angrily, then checked herself.
Steed took a deep drag on his cigarette before flicking it in the fireplace. “How you spend your time, or with whom, is your business. But the more I look into your husband’s death, the more I think Braine might be behind it. Or have you forgotten?”
“It seems to me you’re the one who’s forgotten you’ve no evidence, no proof of any kind—not much of anything, in fact,” she retorted, irked by Steed’s presumption.
“I happened to spend the better part of the day tracking down Braine’s war record,” he said in clipped tones. “Did you know he commanded a company of crack Gurkha commandos until his discharge?”
“No. What of it?”
“Did you know he was medically discharged, ostensibly because of severe mental stress?”
“Just what are you driving at? And what do you mean, ‘ostensibly’?”
“That’s the official reason. But I dug a little deeper. Seems your friend has an ugly temper. One night, during a reconnaissance patrol, Braine killed his sergeant. But Braine’s family managed to hush up the incident. They got the Army to buy off on a shell-shock defence, or some such rubbish, and Robin got a medical discharge instead of a court-martial.”
“That was a long time ago, under extraordinary circumstances. It could have been an accident.” Emma crushed out her cigarette.
“You know how he killed the sergeant?”
“I’ve a feeling you’re about to tell me.”
“Broke his neck with his bare hands.” He gave her a dour look. “Remember Chivers, Atkins, et al.?”
“But that’s absurd! What makes you think he could—”
“He had ample opportunity at the ball,” interrupted Steed. “And you yourself told me you were asking about Sid and Harry when he just happened to turn up at your PROP gathering.”
“Mere coincidence,” retorted Emma. “Lots of people at the ball had ample
opportunity, as you put it, to kill Atkins and Chivers. As for Robert being at Hamelin this morning, I already told you his reason for being there, and that it had nothing whatsoever to do with me. Not to mention the fact that he couldn’t possibly have predicted that I’d be there, much less what I might chat about with the men.”

“All the same, I wouldn’t trust him.”

“Don’t you worry about me, I—”

“I know, I know, you can take care of yourself.” Steed looked out of the window at a couple of cars pulling up in front of the house. “That’ll be the forensics people,” he said. “Go home. I don’t need you to finish up here.” He was about to leave the room when Emma held him back.

“Let’s not quarrel, it’s not worth it.” She looked in his eyes, but they were hard and cold.

“You’re right.” Steed’s voice was brittle. “It’s not.” He stalked out of the room to admit the forensics team.

Emma was taken aback by his surliness. He had never lost his temper with her before. “Steed!” she called after him. But he paid no attention to her. The entry suddenly filled with people carrying cameras, briefcases, and assorted other paraphernalia, and they had no time for distractions. Steed directed them to the two bedrooms upstairs before going outside.

Pushing her way through the throng of people, Emma ran after him but he had disappeared.

She drove home, exhausted and longing for a hot bath. Steed was just jealous of Robert and could think of nothing better to do than invent scenarios which he damn well knew were utterly fantastic.

After long reflection in a steamy, soothing bath, Emma calmed down and decided to ring Steed. But there was no answer, and this time his recording device was not connected. She tried a few more times as the evening wore on, without success, and eventually gave up, falling asleep on the divan.
Contrary to all predictions, the day before Christmas dawned with clearing skies and brilliant sunshine. By the time Steed finally awoke, late in the morning, the last few clouds had disappeared entirely, and sunlight was streaming through the window into his face.

He had fallen asleep on the sofa again, after a very long night. Now he sat up, rubbing his neck and blinking in the bright light. His head ached, and his mouth tasted like old Army boots.

He struggled to his feet, only to trip over an empty whisky bottle and the week’s accumulated newspapers littering the floor underfoot. “Damnation,” he croaked, kicking the bottle and some of the papers out of his way. He dragged himself to the kitchen, muttering something about being too old for this sort of nonsense, put the kettle on, and then slumped in a chair to wait for the water to boil.

A couple of fortifying cups of tea later, Steed began to feel semi-human again. He was idly turning the pages of the previous week’s Sunday Supplement when an article on hedge mazes caught his eye. Several photographs of well-known mazes, along with schematic diagrams of their designs, illustrated the piece. He recalled a childhood visit to Hampton Court with one of his aunts one wet summer so long ago that it might have been another lifetime. He poured himself a third cup of tea, and began reading the article. The ringing of the telephone distracted him briefly, but he ignored it and only got up to boil a fresh kettle of water.

He was finishing the piece about mazes when a second interruption disturbed him. This time, it was prolonged knocking and ringing at his front door. He ignored that, too, but just when he thought he was rid of whoever it was, he heard renewed knocking, this time at his back door. Whoever it was, was certainly a persistent bastard. “Damnation,” he muttered for the second time, getting to his feet and stomping out of the kitchen to the back door. “Oh, go away!” he shouted. “It’ll keep ’til after Christmas!”

The person at the door only knocked with renewed vigour. “Open the bloody door!” he heard in reply.

“God’s teeth!” Steed wrenched the door open and was surprised to see Emma standing at the threshold.

“What have you been up to?” Emma swept past him into the apartment. “You look awful.” She saw the empty bottle lying on the floor of the living room.

“No worse than I feel.” Steed plodded back into the kitchen.

“I tried phoning you last evening—”

“I wasn’t taking any calls. I was . . . thinking about things.” He dropped down in his chair, rubbing his unshaved face, and stared at the Sunday Supplement still lying open beside his cup.

Giving him a long look, Emma pulled up a chair and sat down at the table
across from him. Neither spoke. After some hesitation, she put her hand on his arm.

"Braine has a hedge maze on his estate," muttered Steed without looking up, more to himself than to her.

"So he has."

"Chivers and Atkins were found dead in that maze," he continued, and startled Emma by suddenly leaping to his feet. "Of course, that's it!" He bounded into the living room.

"Steed?" Bewildered, she followed him and found him going through some papers on the desk.

"That's it," he grunted, picking up a sheet of paper and scanning it. Emma looked over his shoulder. "That's one of the messages Piggy sent to Peter. I'm afraid I don't follow."

"See for yourself." Steed herded her back to the kitchen, where he picked up the Supplement and thrust it at her. "Read this bit about the Hampton Court maze," he said, indicating.

"'It is constructed on the hedge and alley system—’"

"The bit about the key," Steed prompted impatiently.

"The key, the key . . . Ah, here it is: 'The key to the centre is to go left on entering, then, on the first two occasions when there is an option, go right, but thereafter go left.'" She looked up from the page. "I still don't follow. What's this got to do with anything?"

"Don't you see? What did Piggy write? 'One L, two R, two L,' and so forth."

"Uh huh," she assented, taking Piggy’s letter from Steed’s hand and glancing at it, but still in the dark.

"It's the key to Braine's maze! First Piggy gives the fix for Braine's estate—that's the Hamelin pigeons bit—and then he gives directions to the centre of the maze. One L, that's left on entering; two R, that means right at the next two options, just like at Hampton Court; next two options, left again, and so on."

Emma switched off the whistling kettle. "Very clever," she said. "But what was Piggy's interest in the maze?" She took a second cup from the cupboard, and poured them both some tea.

"Maybe Cock Robin will share the secret with you tonight."

Emma blew on her tea. "Don't be so petty."

"You call him by his Christian name," said Steed.

"I don't fall asleep with him, though," she retorted frostily.

"Touché."

"I've been known to call you 'John'. On occasion. Anyway, everybody calls you 'Steed.' Including Tara."

Steed was about to say something but changed his mind. Best leave it alone.

"What time's the party?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Drinks at half past seven." More pleasantly she said, "I'll ring you when I get
back.”

“Maybe I’d better tag along and keep an eye on things.”

“You’re not invited.”

“I don’t mean to the party. I can lurk in the bushes.” He glanced at Emma.
“Your might need rescuing again. From Bacchus and the Muses, if nothing else.”

“Rest assured, I have no intention of flirting with Bacchus or the Muses again. And I can manage Braine.” She stood up. “I’ll be at home until this evening, if anything comes up. Otherwise, I’ll see you later.”

Steed rose and accompanied her to the door. “Right. Well, I suppose I’d better get some sleep.” He shivered and yawned.

Emma turned to look at him. “You haven’t been to bed yet?”

“I’ve not had a good night’s sleep in weeks. Last night I dozed off on the sofa—” He smiled drily. “You know how that feels.”

“Don’t I just,” she said. “Au revoir.” She opened the back door as Steed began to climb the stairs, and was about to step outside when she turned around and walked back to the staircase. “What is it you were thinking about all night, anyway?”

“The fact that I’m not a very good loser,” was all she heard him say.
Emma drove to Lord Braine’s dinner party with mixed feelings. Steed’s disclosure of her host’s military record piqued her, and she kept turning over in her mind the possibility that Braine was a murderer, and in some way responsible for the death of her husband. But that was simply too fantastic. Quite the opposite of a reclusive, mysterious eccentric, Braine was well-known and well-respected, both in social and in business circles. He played an active, highly visible role in the management of his industrial empire, and found time to give liberally of both his time and money to various charitable causes. And he was reputed to host the best dinner parties in all of the Home Counties. That she had no difficulty believing, having been a guest at a few of those soirées in the past couple of years. Steed was just jealous. On top of that, he was no closer to solving Peter’s murder today than he was a week ago. Assuming that her husband’s death was in fact murder, which she was now inclined to doubt.

And then there was her recently renewed, but increasingly problematic, relationship with Steed. Perhaps it was just as well they had remained estranged after Peter’s death. As Braine said, she had her own life. Knight Industries was something worth devoting one’s talent and energy to. As a businesswoman at the helm of a thriving enterprise, she could look forward to a successful, prosperous future. She might even remarry someday. Steed, on the other hand, could offer her no future. She had known that when they first met, and convinced herself it didn’t matter. But, at the end of the day, it did matter. Did it not? Emma didn’t care for the direction in which her thoughts were leading her, so she pushed all of these unsettling notions out of her mind, trod on the accelerator and raced up the alley toward the house, concentrating on the evening ahead.

The forecourt was brilliantly lit. Already there were a few cars parked in front of the house, which blazed with lights from every first floor window. Emma came to a halt behind an ancient Rolls-Royce, collected herself, and strode determinedly toward the house.

Lord Braine was a charming, gracious host. If he were diabolical, he certainly gave no sign. The dinner party, comprising six guests, was, as anticipated, a resounding success. The food was superb, the company convivial, the conversation brilliant. One of the guests, a retired Admiral, was an excellent raconteur who regaled the table with fascinating stories about all sorts of interesting people. The dowager duchess, eighty if she was a day, entertained the company after supper with a spirited performance on the piano. She evidently knew every popular song written since the turn of the century. The well-known actress, married to a prominent businessman and former associate of Braine’s, proved even more delightful than she appeared on stage and television. Emma found herself regretting that the party was drawing to a close. The evening had been congenial, relaxing, and so completely normal. Steed
was wrong. She enjoyed herself in the company of vivacious and intelligent people, and resented his insinuations about Lord Braine. Well, Steed could moon about and sulk all he liked; he had no claims on her.

It was a pity to go. Emma rose gracefully from the settee and picked up her bag. She would not be the last to leave.

As if reading her mind, Lord Braine excused himself from a couple of the departing guests and turned to Emma. “Don’t go just yet,” he murmured, laying his hand on her arm.

“Oh, but I must, really,” Emma protested with a smile. “It’s getting rather late—”

“Where’s your holiday spirit? Do stay—for a night-cap, at least.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’ll just see the Admiral and his wife to the door. I shan’t be a moment, my dear.”

* * *

Steed finished his solitary meal and had just settled down by the fire with a book he’d been trying to finish for weeks when the doorbell rang. He took out his watch: Emma wouldn’t be back from her party for a while yet. He got up from the sofa, cursing softly.

“Dr. Watson!” Steed opened the door and beheld the dashing pathologist, flawlessly dressed in white tie, lounging in the doorway.

“My dear Holmes!” riposted Watson with a dazzling smile. “I apologise for the intrusion, this being Christmas Eve, and so forth, but I’ve been trying to reach you all afternoon.”

“Come in.” Steed stood aside and motioned for him to enter. “I forwarded all my calls. Didn’t want to be disturbed—”

Watson winked at Steed. “Not to worry, I shan’t stop but a moment.”

“I’ve been asleep all afternoon,” Steed said restively. “And I’d rather hoped to finish my book this evening. What do you want?”

“Well, I thought you might want to have a look at this,” replied Watson, handing Steed a folder. “Preliminary report on the post mortems I did on the late but probably un lamented Fasold and Fafnir, also known as Sid and Harry. As I happened to be in your parish this eventide, I thought I’d pop round and drop it off.”

Steed flipped through the file. “Were their necks broken in the same way as Chivers’s and Atkins’?”

“Unquestionably.” Watson righted some invisible imperfection in his waistcoat. “I’d say all four were done by the same hand.” He looked back up at Steed. “About that sergeant chappie killed in the war—”

“Any luck?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I finally managed to dig him up. Metaphorically
speaking. Exhumed the autopsy report this afternoon."

"And?"

"Your hunch was correct, old boy. Exactly the same modus operandi. Neck snapped in the very same manner."

"I knew Braine was behind all this," muttered Steed. "I told Mrs. Peel . . ."

"Mrs. Peel?" murmured Watson, with a puzzled look. "I don't believe . . . She wasn't the young lady who accompanied you the other day—"

"Mrs. Peel's an old friend. I think Braine may have had something to do with her husband's untimely death a couple of years ago. She is attending a party at his lordship's this evening. I'm beginning to regret having let her go."

"Is there some way she could be warned discreetly, about Braine, that is?"

"I've already shared my suspicions with her. For what they were worth."

Steed's face grew taut. "She'll manage."

Watson shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "There's a bit more to it than just murder, I'm afraid, old chap."

"More than murder?"

"Sid and Harry were subjected to certain, ah, unpleasant stimuli before they were killed," said the pathologist. "If you want further particulars, you'll find them in my report."

Steed said nothing. He resumed paging through the folder in his hands, and read silently for a few minutes before speaking. "I wish I'd known this earlier," he exclaimed, throwing the folder down on his desk.

"I did try to telephone—"

"Yes, yes, never mind all that now." Steed opened a desk drawer to look for his pocket torch. "I'd better go out there."

"Aren't you going to say it?"

"What?" Steed checked his pockets to make certain he had everything he needed.

"'Quick, Watson, the game is afoot,' I believe was the phrase?" He raised his eyebrows and looked expectantly at Steed.

"Some other time," Steed said. "If anything's happened to Mrs. Peel . . ."
THIRTY-EIGHT

Emma wandered into the library as Lord Braine attended his departing guests. What could one small cognac hurt? She roamed about, examining the shelves crowded with all nature of books, pausing now and then to take down some volume that caught her fancy. One drink, and then she would make her excuses and leave. Robert was attractive enough, and quite clever, but she had no desire to encourage his attentions. Something about the way he occasionally looked at her, with that strange sidelong glance of his, made Emma vaguely uncomfortable. Of course, it wouldn’t be the first time that some middle-aged man bent on amorous adventure made a complete ass of himself over her. Not that she couldn’t take care of herself on that score. In any case, all she had to do was make a gracious exit if he got too lively.

She was looking at the painting hanging above the fireplace when Braine returned. “Like it?” he asked.

“It’s very well executed,” said Emma, taking a few steps back for a longer view. “The chiaroscuro is arresting, and the figures disturbingly lifelike.”

“Yes, but do you like it?” Braine poured a couple of cognacs.

“No.” She took her drink from his hand. “The subject is morbid, and those two figures in the foreground are positively sinister.” She studied his face, but could read nothing in it. “I’d like to know what you see in it.”

“Martyrdom is never pretty, regardless of the gloss Mother Church may put on it. It’s St. Agatha, by an unknown Spanish painter, probably last quarter of the seventeenth century. I got it only yesterday.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“St. Agatha was my mother’s patron saint.” Braine was the picture of serene sophistication. They continued talking about painting over their drinks.

Emma finished her cognac and was waiting for a suitable moment to take her leave when Braine suddenly changed the subject of their conversation. “We never did finish our chat, my dear,” he said, with an effulgent smile.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“The other day, at Hamelin. Surely you remember? You made some very provocative remarks.”

Emma set her snifter on the mantel shelf. “Some other time, Robert. It is late, and I—”

“I was about to suggest an evening stroll in the grounds,” interrupted Braine smoothly. “The maze is lovely by moonlight, and you really must see the grotto. And I did promise you we’d continue our conversation.”

Emma wanted to go home, but at the same time she was curious to find out what Braine had to say. A walk in the garden on this cold winter night did not, however, appeal to her at all. “Some other time,” she repeated, collecting her handbag and glancing about for her cloak.
“I think a moonlight promenade is just what you need,” insisted Braine, taking her by the hand. “Come. Let’s find something to put around your shoulders.” Ignoring her protests, he led her out of the library. On the coatrack in the foyer hung a heavy velvet cape, purple in colour, with gold frogs at the neck and a lining of gold-coloured satin. Braine draped it around Emma’s shoulders. “Quite becoming.” He admired the effect. “Shall we?”

The night was clear, but sharp with cold, and Emma pulled the strange, heavy cloak more closely about her. Odd sort of garment for a man to have hanging on the peg by the front door. It seemed strangely familiar, although she couldn’t think why.

“The stars are lovely tonight,” said Emma, tilting her head back and scanning the sky for Orion. “Sic itur ad astra,” she murmured. “I think I understand why my husband loved flying so much. Whatever it was he sought, it was up there.”

Braine didn’t even glance upwards. “It’s a pity men waste their lives on dreams of conquering the universe when they’ve this world still to conquer.”

“I’ve always thought of space flight as exploration, not conquest.”

“Then it’s an even greater waste of time. You never cease to surprise me, Emma. At one time I would have said that you and I were both empire builders, conquerors of commerce and industry, if you will.”

“Has something caused you to change your mind?”

“You’re still intent on conquest, but of a different kind, I think. Isn’t that so, my dear?”

She made no reply, and only smiled, wondering what he could mean by that remark. The hedge maze was some distance from the house, and was approached by a gravel path that ran parallel to the lawns all the way from the terrace garden. They walked along the path in the direction of the maze, neither speaking for some time. It seemed to her that the night had suddenly grown colder, and she shivered despite the heavy cape.

She broke the silence. “Where’s the grotto you mentioned earlier?”

“You’ll see.” Her host’s voice had lost its edge, and seemed almost tender.

“Mazes, grottoes,” said Emma, turning to him. “Rather quaint, and not exactly what I would expect a man like you to take an interest in.”

“Ah, but I’ve always fancied our ancestors’ tastes in architecture and landscaping, not to mention their penchant for follies of all kinds.” He looked at Emma. “And what do you think is more in my character, then?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Formal French gardens, perhaps—they’re so... organised. Or, perhaps at the other extreme, Gothic Revival, à la Walpole. A folly on a grand scale, a Strawberry Hill.” They approached the entrance to the maze.

“Interesting.” He laughed softly. “If it’s something on a grand scale you want to see, I might be able to accommodate you. Come with me.” He led her into the maze. “You said the other day that you wanted to make a noise in the world.”

“I still do,” she said, her earlier feeling of uneasiness returning. The tall hedges
hemming them in cast unearthly shadows in the moonlight, and seemed to be closing in on the two of them. It was very still and very cold.

“There was a time when I thought you and I might join forces in such an endeavour. I’ve always thought you an exceptional woman: intelligent, articulate, beautiful.” Braine and Emma stood at the centre of the maze. In the very centre itself, atop a granite pedestal, loomed a huge bronze sculpture. Emma recognised it as Rodin’s Penseur, The Thinker. Braine walked up to the pedestal and ran his hand along the cornice. A panel in the dado slid open, revealing a staircase leading down into darkness.

“But something’s changed your mind about that?” Her hands shook as she drew the cape closer about her, all of a sudden overcome by extreme fatigue.

“Let’s go down to the grotto, shall we?” Braine took Emma’s arm and led her to the opening in the pedestal. As she passed through it he flipped on a light switch at the top of the stairs. He then pressed another button, which caused the panel to slide shut with a loud click. Emma looked back. She could just see the edge of the panel, on which was mounted what appeared to be a type of combination lock. Braine pressed the buttons on the lock and smiled at her. “There. Now no one can intrude.” He stepped aside and swept his hand outward. “After you, my dear.”
THIRTY-NINE

The night was eerily silent when Steed climbed out of his car several yards from the alley leading to Lord Braine’s house. A guard huddled in a small guardhouse just inside the gates, which were locked shut. Steed weaved along the verge toward the gates, whistling.

“I say, anybody there?” He rattled the gates and peered at the guardhouse. “Hallo!”

Presently the guardhouse door opened and a man emerged, carrying a shotgun. “Private property. Push off!”

“I say, I’ve had a spot of trouble with the old buggy, don’t you know,” slurred Steed, swaying and grinning idiotically. “Can you help me shift the old girl, there’s a good chap?”

“I said, bugger off!”

“Oh, come on, I’m just a couple of yards down the road, here,” begged Steed, pulling out his notecase and after some effort producing a twenty-pound note. “The wife’ll have a blue fit if I’m not home soon, if you know what I mean,” he said, with a leer and a wink. He rubbed the new banknote between his fingers. “Have a heart, it’s Christmas Eve!”

“Well . . .” mumbled the guard, hungrily eyeing the money, “all right.” He unlocked the gates and stepped out into the roadway.

Steed handed the banknote to the guard, and as the latter examined it he grabbed the shotgun from under the man’s arm and struck him with the butt of the weapon. “Sorry, old boy,” he grunted, dragging the unconscious figure into the guardhouse. After jerking the telephone cord out of the wall, Steed removed the guard’s belt and with it secured the man’s hands behind his back, then stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth.

He came within several hundred yards of the house before switching off the motor and slipping out of the Jaguar. Steed stole toward the house, on the alert for other guards. But there were no signs of activity either inside the house or out. The only sound came from the gentle splashing of the fountain at the centre of the great forecourt. Everyone must have gone home, except Emma. Her car still stood in the drive.

Under cover of the shadows, he skirted the front of the house and made his approach from the terrace. Keeping as close as possible to the dogwood hedge, he paused to listen. Unbroken silence. The stillness was unnatural. He wondered where the guards were.

A few minutes later, he was inside the house. The silence within was even more ominous. He strained his ears, but heard only the distant ticking of a clock. Where were Braine and Emma?

He was glad he had taken the opportunity to reconnoitre the premises the night
of the ball, for he now had no difficulty finding his way about. What other guards there were, were most likely outside, patrolling the grounds. The first priority was dealing with them. And to do that, he needed to be very quiet, and very swift. No sense in alarming Braine. He must act quickly; no telling what Braine might be up to. But first he needed a suitable weapon. His pistol would be too noisy.

Satisfied that he wasn’t about to be disturbed, he stole into the gun room. Duelling pistols, morning-stars, arquebusses, crossbows, and assorted other implements of death were displayed on the walls and in cabinets. He went directly for a small crossbow which he took down from the wall, along with the quiver of bolts hanging next to it. He stopped to listen again. The silence was sepulchral. He then took down a steel shield, highly polished to a mirror finish, and slipped out of the room.

Once outside, he stopped to arm the crossbow, squatting beside the pond from whose icy waters he had spared Emma a few nights earlier. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted. And somewhere closer by a footstep fell on gravel. He froze, straining his ears. There it was again, a soft footfall, behind and to the left of the break in the hedge. He inched toward the opening in the hedge. Very carefully laying down the shield, he picked up a couple of stones lying nearby. The footsteps were coming closer. Steed tossed the stones over the bushes and raised the crossbow.

A few moments later, a black-clad figure armed with what appeared to be a small sword appeared in the hedge break. Another moment later, the figure lay on the ground, a bolt through his chest. He never uttered a sound as he died.

Steed bent down to pick up the broad, curved blade. “A *kukri*,” he breathed, immediately recognising the traditional weapon of the Gurkhas. He removed the guard’s hat and ski mask; the face was unmistakeably Himalayan.

* * *

Emma regretted not having followed her original inclination to leave with the last of the other guests. She descended the stairs, somewhat unsteadily, into a cavernous rectangular room that she recognised, with an unpleasant turn of the stomach, from Piggy’s photographs. That’s where she’d seen the cape she had on: one of the hooded figures in the photographs wore one identical to it.

“Let me show you something,” said Braine, leading her toward a large draped object at the farther end of the grotto, next to what looked like an aeroplane cockpit on stilts.

With a quick tug he flung aside the cloth covering the hidden object, revealing a strange-looking mechanism mounted on a rotating pedestal. “A freckl’d whelp, hag-born,—not honour’d with a human shape’,” he said, never taking his eyes off Emma.

She stared at the apparatus in fascinated horror. “Caliban! So it was you!”

“Yes.” Braine’s lips twisted into a triumphant grin. “But surely you and that
Steed guessed as much already.” His grip on her arm tightened.

“Steed has n-nothing to do with this.”

“Do you take me for an utter fool?” Braine jerked her around to face him. “I know all about you two.”

“I— I’ve nothing to do with him,” insisted Emma, trying to think how she might escape.

“Liar!” Braine raised his free hand and slapped her across the face. His powerful grip on her arm kept her from staggering backwards from the blow.

“How dare you!” she spat, her face burning. The slight dizziness she had felt earlier intensified.

“I dare to do what I please.” Braine’s expression was full of scorn. “Pity you lied to me, Emma. I can forgive many things, but disloyalty is not one of them. You lied to me about Steed. About your relations with him.”

“What relations? Even if there were any, they would be none of your concern.” Emma tried to twist herself free, but only succeeded in provoking Braine to an even tighter grip.

“You’re making me angry, Emma,” whispered Braine with a malevolent sneer. “Not only have you and that Steed been meddling in my business, you’ve also been having an affair. You’ve betrayed me, my dear. You’ve been unfaithful to me, and that I cannot forgive.”

The man is mad, thought Emma with mounting fear. “Don’t be ridiculous, Robert. You and I are friends. I can’t imagine ever leading you to believe there was anything more than that between us. I most certainly have not betrayed you, not with Steed, not with anyone.” There was no reasoning with him; the best thing to do was to try to placate him somehow.

“The more you lie, the angrier I grow,” he snarled, pulling her toward the flight simulator. Emma, growing dizzier and more unsteady on her feet by the minute, resisted ineffectually. “I came to love you, Emma, and had hoped that, after your husband was out of the way, you and I might— We have so much in common, you know. But now it’s too late.” He herded her in the direction of the ladder that led to the cockpit. “Feeling a bit tired, my love?” Braine pushed her up the ladder. “I didn’t want to take any chances on your getting frisky on me, so I took the precaution of lacing your cognac with a drug. This little exercise should prove interesting. Climb up!”

Emma did as she was told, having no other choice. Her head felt leaden, and her vision blurred intermittently. She found herself inside the cockpit, which was crammed with gauges and instruments and looked for all the world like the real thing. She stared at the large screen above the instrument panel.

“Sit down!” Braine pushed her into the seat.

“Don’t come any nearer,” Emma gasped, struggling to her feet and assuming a defensive stance.
“And what are you going to do, take me down to the mat?” Braine burst out laughing. “You’re in no condition to do much of anything, my dear, except sit.”

Her only reply was a swipe at Braine’s face with the palm of her hand.

Braine easily caught her arm and twisted it. “Do as you’re told. Sit down!” He stripped the cape from her and flung it aside. Still twisting her arm, he forced her into the pilot’s seat. “Your husband was never this much trouble.”

“What did you do to him?”

Braine began to strap her into the harness. “You mean, what did he do to himself,” he corrected her with a nasty smile. “Anyway, why should you concern yourself about his death? From all accounts, yours wasn’t exactly the most blissful of unions.”

“What did you do to him?” demanded Emma, her heart pounding. She felt as though her chest would burst. Vaguely she recalled having brought a small revolver with her. But where was it? If only she could remember . . .

“That prig of a husband of yours became a nuisance. He got to snooping about, whenever Tempest had any technical or mechanical problems. He got it into his head that the project was being sabotaged.” Braine finished buckling the harness and stepped back, folding his arms in front of him and gazing languidly at Emma’s face. “He should have minded his own business. And minded his wife.” A low, sarcastic chuckle rumbled in Braine’s throat.

“Was it sabotage?” In her handbag, that’s where the gun was. She’d brought the bag along on her walk with Braine. She’d had it under the cloak, hanging from her shoulder. Braine hadn’t noticed . . . If only there were some way she could slip her hand inside it and get the gun . . . The drug’s effects were making it difficult for Emma to do anything with any degree of subtlety. “Well, was it?” she repeated, thinking only of distracting Braine long enough to enable her to reach inside her bag.

“Some of it. The XB-9 had legitimate mechanical problems from the very beginning. But that helped our cause. It would be easy to commit occasional minor sabotage and get away with it, since nobody’d think it was anything but another in the series of problems that cursed that plane from the beginning. Nobody, that is, except your interfering husband!”

“Why were you sabotaging Tempest?” Very carefully, Emma slid her left hand down, feeling for the flap of her handbag.

“Why, to get my hands on Caliban, of course!”

“How did you learn about Caliban?” Her bag had slid off her shoulder. She feared she wouldn’t be able to get to it without inviting Braine’s attention. She had to keep him talking. “It was the sergeant, wasn’t it? she continued, fighting to concentrate. “He leaked the information.”

“Very good, my dear. Five points for you,” said Braine.

“My guess is he told Boone, and Boone told you.”

“Right again! Full marks!”
“But what made Boone approach you?” Emma finally succeeded in extracting her gun and now levelled it at Braine. Her vision started to blur again, and her arms shook as she trained the weapon on him. “Give it up, Robert, you’re finished.”

“Don’t be absurd,” sneered Braine, stepping forward and snatching the revolver out of her hand. Once more she felt the sharp sting of the back of his hand across her face. He leaned back against the bulkhead, staring disdainfully at her.

“You want to know how I learnt of Caliban? As you correctly guessed, it was the good sergeant Atkins who put Boone up to it. As for my connection with Boone—Boone was an arms dealer, as no doubt you know. The rest should be quite obvious to you. I’d had some dealing with him in the past—don’t look so shocked, Emma, arms are arms, doesn’t matter who one sells them to, as long as one profits. At any rate, Mr. Boone and I had several lucrative transactions in the past, and when he approached me with an offer to procure the one and only Caliban in existence, why, how could I say no? Caliban answered my needs—with it, I could realise my ambitions in no time at all.”

“And for that, you had to kill my husband.” Emma’s face burned. She felt sick.

“Of course. His end was quite deliberately planned. We had to spirit Caliban away and then scuttle the aircraft as soon as possible, without arousing suspicion. What better way than to orchestrate an apparent accident? That way, no one would know Caliban was missing, and no one would even begin to grow suspicious. Except, of course, your husband. Constantly snooping about, he was. I had to get rid of him. But, as he was the pilot, that posed no great difficulty. We kept an eye on him by getting him to join the Inner Circle—”

“Inner Circle?” Emma stared at Braine, who was lighting a cigarette.

“Ah, yes, you wouldn’t have known . . . Commander Peel was a member of PROP—”

“I know that much.”

“It was easy enough getting him to join, what with his penchant for old aeroplanes. Never could understand it myself. Suffice to say, Peel was initiated into what we dubbed the Inner Circle, so we could watch him. That proved to be child’s play. Amazing, isn’t it, how a schoolboy fantasy of cloaks and masks and pseudo-ritualistic mumbo-jumbo could instantly convince a man like your husband that our sinister little cabal was up to no good. He fancied himself some kind of secret agent, I imagine. He was consumed with the importance of his mission, which was to gather intelligence and then inform on us all.” He snorted. “Your husband was a by-the-book, swagger-stick-up-the-arse type who would keep quiet until he felt he had enough information with which to impress some Ministry underling. That’s what made it so easy, you see. All we had to do was watch, and wait. Peel was no threat as long as he kept his mouth shut. Which of course he did. He played his game of I-spy-with-my-little-eye so very well.” Braine glanced at Emma. “I knew he’d never tell
you anything, either."

“You arrogant bastard!” hissed Emma, straining against the harness.

“I used PROP as a cover for the men I trusted with the secret of Caliban. Except for Boone, they were all connected to Tempest, one way or the other.” He indulged in another malevolent chuckle. “So much for your precious security. People are so cheaply bought, you know.”

“And now they’re all dead.”

“There will be others.”

“Whom you will also kill when they’ve outlived their usefulness. Just as you did Piggy, and Boone, and Atkins, and Sid and Harry.”

“Piggy was a coward. As for Boone, well, the little man got greedy. I arranged to have him deported, and for a couple of years he left me alone. I didn’t think he’d be stupid enough to slip back into this country again and play games with me. I was wrong. He actually had the audacity to try to blackmail me. Then he claimed to have the plans to Caliban, and threatened to sell them to the highest bidder. Cretin. Atkins was supposed to get rid of Boone, but he botched the job. The idiot panicked. Boone hadn’t revealed anything at his interrogation. Atkins was there to make sure of that. It would have been easy enough for him to arrange a simple fatal accident when Boone was handed over to your Mr. Steed. But Atkins got too fancy, and dragged Caliban into it.” Braine’s eyes flashed with fury.

“You killed him for that.”

“I killed him because he got cold feet and was planning to expose me to the authorities. They wanted us to believe Boone was still alive, and sent someone to the ball masquerading as Boone. Atkins spotted the impostor, and told me. What he didn’t know, however, was that I had overheard him telling this impostor to meet him in the maze later that night. I correctly guessed that Atkins was planning to lead him to Caliban and destroy everything I’d worked for. So I waited for the two of them, and killed them both. And made it look like they had killed each other.”

“It was you in the library, with Atkins,” Emma said slowly. “At the ball . . .”

Braine’s eyes flashed. “How did you—”

“I was pilfering your cellar at the time. What about Sid and Harry? Were they plotting against you, too?”

“Sid and Harry were witless and crude. It seems they tinkered with your car the night of the ball. Later I paid a visit to those two morons. I was furious that someone should try to kill you.”

“How touching.”

“That was to be my pleasure, if I failed in convincing you to become my . . . partner,” he murmured. “I finally persuaded Sid and Harry to tell me that that turncoat Atkins had put them up to it. They also told me that Steed was with you when you came upon them ransacking your house,” continued Braine, an evil glint in his eye. “That’s when I realised that you and Steed were in league against me, and that
you were deliberately lying to me about your involvement with him.” Braine bent over Emma, his face inches from hers. “Your charade with him that night, back at your penthouse, didn’t deceive me. I watched you drive off with him.”

“I know. We saw you.”

“What you don’t know is that I watched you return. And Steed didn’t leave until the next morning.” Braine stepped back from her and regarded her with scorn.

“Whore!”

Emma rose as far as she could in her seat, before the harness arrested her.

“You contemptible—”

“I knew then I had to kill you. You betrayed me, Emma, on two fronts.”

“You’re mad!”

“And you’re entitled to your opinions, however misguided,” said Braine. “Not that they matter one way or the other; you shan’t be holding them for very much longer.”
FORTY

Steed dragged the dead guard into the shadows behind the hedges, and scurried back to the terrace, where he took up a position behind the pond wall. From where he now crouched, he had an unobstructed view of not only the house but also the entrances to the terrace garden. He wondered how many more of the wiry Himalayans were in Braine’s employ. Exceptionally skilled in the arts of war, fiercely loyal, and unflinching in their courage, Gurkhas were no ordinary soldiers, exemplifying to a man their motto, “It is better to die than to live a coward.”

He thought back to the charity ball and remarking to Tara that a few of the liveried waiters appeared to be Nepalese. He tried to remember exactly how many of them he had seen. Three, four?

His thoughts were interrupted by another hoot of an owl. This time, the sound seemed very near, and was repeated. He armed his crossbow with another bolt. There it was again, the faint hooting of an owl, only closer. He edged to the left, raising the crossbow and fixing the near gap in the hedge squarely in his sights. He listened for the next hoot, then answered it in kind. A few moments later, another black-clad figure appeared just where he had anticipated. The figure took a direct hit to the throat and crumpled to the ground, dead.

Rearming the crossbow, Steed decided to make his way back into the house. He had to find Braine and Emma, and take his chances with the remaining guards. He darted across the terrace to the French doors leading into the ballroom. He tried the handle of one; locked. He tried a second and third door, with no better luck. Then he ran toward the gap in the hedge that would take him back to the front of the house. He’d have to make a dash for it, as there was no adequate cover.

He was skirting the fountain in the forecourt when he glimpsed a shadowy figure stalking toward Emma’s Morgan. This guard, however, was armed with what looked like a submachine gun. Silently easing a bolt into place, Steed prayed his crossbow would be accurate at this distance. He knelt beside the fountain, in the deepest shadow he could find, and took deliberate aim. If only the guard would stop moving about so much. Tight-jawed, he waited, his fingers cramping in the bitter cold of the night, until finally the guard stopped, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and cupped a lighter in his hands. With a grim smile, Steed waited until he could see the cigarette’s glow. The still night air was once more sliced by the sound of a bolt loosed from the crossbow. This one, too, unerringly found its mark, skewering the man’s guts.

The guard swayed, then folded over and fell to the ground. Steed ran across the forecourt, keeping the Morgan between himself and the house.

He was about two-thirds of the way across the open forecourt to the car when a fourth guard ran out from the house, pulling back the bolt on his machine gun.

* * *

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“Did you also betray your husband? With Steed, perhaps?” Braine laughed softly.
“How dare you!”
“Oh, spare me the righteous indignation, Emma, your marriage was hardly what anyone would call idyllic.” He studied the tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. “It was so easy to get rid of your husband.”
“Spare me the details. It hardly matters now,” said Emma, feeling queasy again.
“Ah, but it does. As you will shortly see, your death will have a great deal to do with his.” He paused to savour the fear he saw reflected in her eyes. “As your husband was the only pilot for Project Tempest, all we had to do was pick the date of a scheduled test flight, remove Caliban from its pod under the fuselage immediately beforehand, and then sabotage the plane in such a way that no one and nothing would be left after it crashed.” Braine reached over to an electrical panel set into the bulkhead, opened it, and threw a switch. The instrument gauges in front of Emma leapt to colourful life. “Commander Peel grew tiresome, just as you have done.” Braine watched her face. “What do you think he was trying to prove by playing at spies, my dear? Was he trying to prove something to you?” He laughed. “Well, it hardly matters, as you observed. It all worked out quite neatly, wouldn’t you say?”
“You murdered him.” Emma struggled with the harness.
“Stop fidgeting, it’ll do you no good,” said Braine, adjusting one of her straps. “And don’t be such a hypocrite. Widowhood has always suited you.” He glanced at the instrument panel, and adjusted a couple of dials. “Just think, if your husband hadn’t gone down with that aeroplane, you wouldn’t be spending your nights with Steed, would you?”
“You bastard! Let me go!”
“Tsk, tsk, such language. After all, we’re old friends. Or were. I’m very upset with you over your infidelity. In that regard, I can empathise with your late husband. Perhaps I was wrong in thinking I could someday have you all to myself. You’re not that kind of woman, are you?”
“Damn you, let me out of here, you slanderous assassin, and I’ll show you what kind of woman I am!”
“It’s pointless struggling, my dear. I know exactly what kind of woman you are. No, it’s time you answered for all the pain you have caused.”
“Aren’t you man enough to say what fate awaits me?” Emma gave up trying to free herself and turned to glare at Braine. Her temples throbbed painfully, and she suddenly felt utterly, completely terrified.
“But of course. I’ll tell you exactly what I have in mind for you. What you are in is a sophisticated flight simulator. I’ve made a few adjustments to it, however. Remember I told you that your death and your husband’s would be linked? You will be embarking shortly on the final flight of the XB-9. Every moment of your
husband’s last flight will be recreated in detail. In a word, you will be able to relive his final moments, step by fatal step. And all this is thanks to Caliban, which can take the most ordinary data and turn them into the most extraordinary phenomena. A most versatile instrument, as I have discovered.”

“Caliban had something to do with that Fokker Peter and Steed saw,” she murmured, shuddering and feeling as though she had awakened out of what she thought was a nightmare, only to find it wasn’t a dream at all.

“Correct.” He eyed her sorrowfully. “Pity to waste such an intellect, but, there’s nothing to be done about that.” He continued to gaze at Emma, and one could almost believe there was a glimmer of regret in his eyes. “Yes, Caliban created the illusion of that Fokker in the air—I couldn’t resist having a little private joke with Steed, just like I had with your husband. Caliban also created the illusion of the car that came at Steed and Boone. It’s quite a capable device. And, as I have said, it’s even more capable than originally conceived. Soon I’ll be able to manufacture more Calibans, refine them, perfect them. You wanted to shake up the world, Emma, you said so yourself the other day at Hamelin. Well, you had your chance and threw it away. But I will still have mine!” Braine turned to go. “I suggest you put your hands on the throttle, and check your instruments. Your last flight is about to commence.”

“You can’t be serious—”

“Deadly serious. I mean that literally. If your aviation skills are on a par with your late husband’s, you, unlike him, will survive my little entertainment. And then I shall have to devise some other way to kill you.”

“And if my skills are inferior to Peter’s, what then?” Emma struggled to focus her eyes on Braine.

“You die. Not exactly as your husband did, but you die. A fiery death, my dear. Caliban is, after all, a laser device, and one can do so many creative things with lasers. You will, of course, die one way or another, but it’s up to you how long you postpone the inevitable. I have faith in your abilities, especially after your inaugural flight for PROP.”

Emma felt the panic rising in her gorge. “Was that your doing, too?” The flight simulator blinked into action.

“No, that was Sid’s brain child, after the trick with your car backfired—if you’ll forgive those rather ghastly puns.” Braine chuckled, then resumed his humourless demeanour. “If no one had panicked, and taken matters into his own hands, none of this would be necessary. I would have been able to buy out the manufacturers of Caliban’s components and go into production long before anyone would have noticed, or cared.”

“You’ve drugged me—that’s hardly sporting.”

“Sporting?” sneered Braine, taking a deep drag on his cigarette. “When were you and that Steed fellow ever concerned about sportsmanship? You wouldn’t let sleeping dogs lie. What’s it to you how, or why, your husband died? Your marriage
died long before your husband did. But you just had to join with that meddlesome Steed in finding out if your husband really was . . . disposed of. Does it really matter, Emma, how he died? Does your knowing change anything? If only you’d left things alone . . .” Braine dropped his cigarette and crushed it under his heel. “If only you’d left Steed to his own devices. I’m going to have to kill him, of course. You and I could have had such a wonderful life together. I loved you, you know—” He put his hand to her face, gently stroking her cheek. “Such a pity,” he whispered. “He knows you’re here, I imagine.”

Emma was silent. There was no way to get word to Steed now.

“Did you bring him along without telling me?” Braine bent down so that his eyes were level with Emma’s. “Is he lurking about somewhere?”

“I came alone. Leave him out of this.”

“Oh, no, my dear, he’ll die. Perhaps not tonight. But he’ll die, and very soon, I promise you. Pity he’s not here—it would have been interesting, making you watch him die. An oversight on my part. It would have been so simple to arrange. Ah, well. You’re not lying to me again, Emma, are you?”

“What does it matter? Why don’t you just get on with it and kill me?”

“All in due course, my dear Emma, all in due course. Keep your hand on the throttle. I suggest you pay attention to your controls and monitor. You’ve just taken off, I see.” With a sardonic grin, Braine took one last look at her before turning and descending the ladder to the main control console.
The stillness of the night was shattered by a burst from the guard’s machine gun, the sound masking the hiss of Steed’s bolt.

The missile came home in the guard’s thigh. His gun clattering down on the stone steps, the guard stood staring at the strange projectile protruding from his leg, wondering why it didn’t hurt and watching amazedly as the blood soaked through his trousers. Steed was halfway to the guard before the man looked up and saw him.

Steed grasped the guard’s arm and twisted it behind his back. “How many of you are there?”

“Four,” gasped the guard, now bleeding profusely.

“Where’s Braine?”

The guard was swaying on his feet, about to faint. “Maze . . . grotto . . .” he gurgled, and passed out. Steed let him fall down the steps.

He ran into the house. What was it Emma had said about a door in the wine cellar?

* * *

Braine adjusted a dial on the console. “You’ve done splendidly so far, Emma,” he said into a small microphone. “Now, let’s see, where are you in your flight?” He glanced at a monitor overhead. “Oh, dear, your hydraulic systems are beginning to go.”

“I’ll see you in hell!” came Emma’s voice over a speaker in the console.

“Very likely. But you’ll have to wait a very long time. I still have so much to do,” he replied with a mocking smile.

“Damn you!”

“Concentrate, Emma, concentrate! You haven’t much time left.” He had his back to the doorway leading from the grotto into a subterranean tunnel. Emma, however, could just glimpse it from the cockpit. So it was that Braine didn’t see the door slowly swing open to admit Steed.

“Turn around with your hands up,” said Steed with a deadly glint in his eyes. He was carrying the shield, but instead of the crossbow he now held his pistol in his hand.

“Steed. Why am I not surprised?” Braine didn’t bother to move. “I shan’t be disappointed after all,” he said to Emma. “This is turning out better than I had planned.”

“Turn around.” Steed moved closer, covering Braine with the pistol.

“My hand is resting on a toggle switch, Mr. Steed. One flick of my finger, and several lasers will simultaneously fire into that flight simulator, immolating your beloved Mrs. Peel. Leave me alone, and she might just survive. I suggest you give up
your foolish notions, and put down your weapon.”

“He’s got my gun!” Emma’s cry came over the speaker. “Don’t listen to him, Steed, he’s going to kill us both!”

Braine now faced Steed, who stood motionless but still aiming his pistol at his adversary. “By the time you fire, Emma will be incinerated,” he said, his finger on the switch. “And if you distract her in any way from completing her programmed flight, Caliban will kill her. Checkmate, I think.” Braine burst into a loud, triumphant laugh. Before Steed could react, Braine flicked another switch on the console. A thin shaft of brilliant red light sliced across the room, missing Steed by inches. “Lasers, Mr. Steed. They slice through things like a hot knife through soft butter.”

Steed leapt aside. There was no place to hide. He glanced up at the simulator, which moved erratically on its hydraulic lifts. If only there were some way to deactivate it and free Emma . . .

As though reading his mind, Braine turned a couple of dials, causing the red beam to change direction. “Like a knife through butter,” he repeated. Emma still had some minutes to go before the end of the simulated flight. Plenty of time to sport with Steed and his puny mediaeval weapons. He wouldn’t have time for Emma as long as that laser kept him hopping. Braine laughed again, delighted by Steed’s diminishing success in evading the deadly beam.

The clatter of the pistol falling on the stone floor was followed by a faint whiff of singed flesh. Steed winced in pain as he lunged toward the simulator. He hoped Braine wouldn’t be reckless enough to aim the beam too close to the machine and risk spoiling his macabre plan for Emma.

Once again, Braine read Steed’s thoughts. “That won’t help you, I’m afraid,” he said, adjusting his controls. “In fact, perhaps you two should die in each others’ arms. One could say you were consumed by your burning passions.” Another malevolent laugh erupted from Braine, and he swept the laser directly toward Steed. “What will you do now?”

Steed dropped to his knees and held the shield in front of him. The beam hit the shimmering steel surface and bounced off, hitting the console squarely. He heard Braine give a shriek of wrath as the console began to smoke and intermittently emit sparks. Almost immediately the simulator ceased moving and sank into immobility with a loud pneumatic sigh. Steed leapt to his feet. “Mrs. Peel!” He wrested the kukri from his pocket and tossed it up to her.

She watched the monitor in the cockpit flicker and go dark. All the lights on her instrument panel blinked off. She took a deep breath, and struggled to reach the knife. All she could think of was cutting her way out of the harness as quickly as possible and coming to Steed’s aid.

Stunned, Braine staggered away from the smouldering control panel. Steed hurled aside the shield, picked up his pistol and ran toward the door, hoping to cut off Braine’s escape.
But Braine had no desire to escape. In his hand he held Emma’s revolver, which he now trained on her. “Didn’t I tell you to drop your weapon, Steed?” he barked.

Steed froze.
“Do it!”

Slowly, deliberately, still holding his gun, Steed moved to one side and backward, closer to the simulator. “Let her go.”

“Your gallantry is touching,” mocked Braine, “but, I’m afraid, quite pointless. Are you going to drop that ridiculous gun, or will I have to shoot Emma to persuade you?”

Steed stole a sideways glance at the simulator. He had no idea how far along Emma was in getting herself free. All he could do was stall for time. “Why don’t we both put down our weapons and have at it mano a mano?” he said, slowly raising his hands.

“Don’t insult me. If you had the advantage, you would not suggest anything so ludicrous.” Braine pulled back the hammer on the revolver.

“Put the gun down, Robert,” implored Emma, nearly free of the harness.

“Shut up!” Braine took aim, then swung his arm around and pointed the weapon at Steed. “Emma will see you die after all!” His finger began to squeeze the trigger. “Quite piquant, my dear, killing your lover with your gun.”

“No!” shouted Emma.
Steed fired at Braine.

The bullet struck Steed in the abdomen, slamming him against the wall and sending him reeling. He clutched at his belly, struggling to right himself. The pistol flew out of his hand and slid across the floor.

Grinning, Braine fired again.

Once more Steed was slammed against the wall, his head hitting a sconce. Emma finally extricated herself from the simulator and jumped to the floor. Too late, she watched as Braine emptied the revolver into Steed’s chest. As crimson stains began oozing from the bullet holes in his shirt, Steed’s eyelids fluttered and he slid slowly down to the floor, never uttering a sound.

Braine turned to Emma, who stood rooted to the spot. The sight of Steed’s bloodied form, contorted in a heap against the wall, paralysed her. Everything else in the room seemed to fade and recede into shadow. Her eyes were fixed in horror on the pool of blood slowly spreading under the body. Without taking his eyes off her, Braine flung aside the emptied revolver. Emma remained motionless, transfixed. She wasn’t going anywhere for a while. Indeed, she had nowhere to go. He had plenty of time to get away from the grotto and settle on an interesting way to kill her. He picked up Steed’s pistol and, throwing one last glance at Emma, vanished into the dank shadows of the subterranean passageway.
Emma found herself crouching beside Steed. “Dear God.” Her hand shook as she touched his face, his skin still warm, and rough from the stubble of his beard. “Dear God. John—” She stroked him tenderly, sick with a grief she never expected or wanted to feel again. Gradually rage filled her, driving out for the time being her anguish. Braine had caused her husband’s death, and she wanted to pay him back for that. But seeing him execute Steed before her very eyes, with such undisguised pleasure, so enraged and revolted her that she could think of nothing else but paying Braine back in kind.

Emma steadied herself, and searched Steed’s pockets. She found with grim satisfaction that he had brought along a torch. Picking up her revolver, she hitched up her gown to reveal a garter above her right knee which served as a bandolier and held six .357 magnum rounds. Slowly, methodically, she removed the bullets, one by one, dropping them into the revolver’s chambers. She then slapped the cylinder back into place, smoothed her gown, took one last look at Steed, and stepped out into the passageway after Braine.

The damp passageway was dark, but the torch enabled Emma to follow it easily. The tunnel ended at a thick wooden door, which stood open. She could just see into the wine cellar beyond, dimly illuminated by light coming in from above. She switched off the torch, made her way through the cellar and ascended the stairs to the library.

The door giving on the library was partially open. Hugging the wall next to the doorframe, she peered into the room. Flickering shadows cast by the firelight danced grotesquely on the walls; a lamp on the desk cast a small but unnaturally bright pool of light. Braine stood with his back to the door, near the desk, refreshing himself with a large brandy. Steed’s pistol lay on the desktop, beside the brandy decanter.

Very deliberately and very quietly, Emma pushed open the door and walked into the room. “Turn around!” She trained the revolver on Braine.

If Braine was startled, he didn’t show it. “Emma, my dear, I didn’t expect you so soon,” he said suavely, then wheeled about, snatching up the pistol as he did so. “I expected you to grieve a bit longer for your dead lover.” He raised the pistol. “Put down the gun,” he said. “It’s empty, remember?”

“Is it?” she said without flinching. “Why should I put it down? You’re going to kill me anyway.” She pulled back the hammer.

“Guns are so messy. It would be a pity to spoil your death with such a crass, unoriginal instrumentality.” He smiled for an instant, then snarled, “Put it down! Or do you want to end up like that fool Steed?”

“You know, I really don’t give a damn,” said Emma. “You killed the man I loved.” She took deliberate, careful aim.

“How noble. Your husband was becoming dangerous. I had to kill him.”

“Him, too,” muttered Emma under her breath. “Damn you, you monster! Damn you to hell!” she cried, and squeezed the trigger.
Braine’s face contorted into an expression of complete astonishment as a loud noise erupted. It occurred to him, seeing the pistol fall from his hand and feeling something akin to a punch to his gut, that she had shot him. He heard another ear-shattering crack, and this time felt something penetrate his chest. A third explosion followed, and he felt another blow to his gut. He sensed his legs weaken and give out. He was falling to the floor, sort of drifting down, like a dead leaf, with something hot and sticky running down his chest and abdomen, causing his shirt to stick to his skin. He was on the floor now, rolling onto his back, and having difficulty focusing in the increasing darkness. He could make out Emma looming above him, her arms extended, levelling the barrel at his head. The last thing he saw was the muzzle flash of the revolver just before the final bullet burst his skull.

Emma stared at Braine’s lifeless body for a long time before slowly lowering her arms and moving just as slowly toward the fireplace. She stopped beside the desk, and mechanically reached over to turn off the lamp. Now the only light in the room came from the fire. The flames were dying, flickering wildly and casting even more grotesque shadows on the walls. She stared at the eerie forms leaping crazily about, then collapsed in a leather wing chair facing the hearth. Her right arm was flung over the armrest of the chair, the still-smoking revolver dangling by its trigger guard from her index finger.

She sat there for what seemed like an eternity, conscious only of tongues of flame licking at remnants of logs on the hearth, and watched the fire with detached fascination. The flames, now blue, now smoky orange, now a brilliant yellow, absorbed her completely. Nothing else existed.

A piece of wood crumbled through the grate, sending up a shower of sparks. She started, her gaze following the glowing orange-red pinpoints of fire as they swirled up the flue. Her mind, numbed into idleness by the shock of Steed’s death, now began to drift. She tried to concentrate once more on the hypnotic flames, but instead was carried by her thoughts from image to unbidden image.

A loud snap, followed by another rather more vivid shower of sparks, abruptly brought her back to the explosions and muzzle flashes of her gun as she fired at Braine. She had shot him. Killed him, more precisely. Just as he had killed Steed. No, executed him. And Peter, as well. The grave’s a fine and private place . . . There hadn’t been world enough, and time, after all. Not for Steed. He’d brought her roses that evening, what were they called? Now he was dead. The Cole Porter song they had danced to at the ball suddenly filled her mind, its lyrics echoing hollowly in her ears, and she began to recall in minute, grotesque detail, as if she were watching a film frame by frame, the last few moments of Steed’s existence. Braine couldn’t have devised a more complete torment for her than murdering him as she stood uselessly by.
FORTY-TWO

She was still staring into the dying fire when there came a faint clatter from the direction of the wine cellar.

“Mrs. Peel! Mrs. Peel, are you all right?”

It was Steed.

He burst into the room and saw Braine lying dead beside the desk. “Mrs. Peel!” Moving to one of the windows, he tore down one of the drapes and threw it over the grisly corpse. “Mrs. Peel?” he called out again, looking anxiously around the shadowy room as he switched on the desk lamp and picked up the telephone. “Steed here . . . At Braine’s house . . . He’s dead . . . No, you’d better send him along, too . . . Right.” He put down the phone and finally saw her, still sitting motionless in the chair.

She hadn’t moved, or even looked up, at the sound of his voice. “Mrs. Peel,” he exhaled with relief, coming up to her. Without another word he took the revolver from her hand and laid it on the mantel shelf. “Mrs. Peel?”

She did not move or speak.

“Are you all right?” He brushed a few stray strands of hair out of her eyes.

It was some moments before she finally managed a reply. “I thought you were dead,” she said, without looking up.

“I must’ve lost consciousness when I hit my head—” He contemplated his riddled, bloodstained shirt. “I do look rather lurid, don’t I? Borrowed this new bullet-proof vest from Special Branch. Nobody told me it came with special effects. Then again, I didn’t stop to ask,” he added with a grin.

She didn’t seem to hear. “I watched him shoot you. Then I followed him up here, and I killed him, just as he killed . . . as he . . .”

Steed moved in front of her, taking her hands in his, and gently pulled her up from the chair. “My dear Mrs. Peel,” he murmured softly, drawing her near. “I might be a bit worse for wear, but I’m very much alive, as you can see. I haven’t used up all nine of my lives yet.”

Emma pulled away from him, suddenly nauseous and light-headed. She took a few deep breaths to try to calm herself. “I’ll be all right.”

“What you need is a drink.” Steed noticed the decanter of brandy on the desk and looked about for a couple of glasses. “Here. Drink this.” He poured a small amount for her. Emma’s hand shook so much when she tried to take the glass that he had to hold it to her lips. “How you can wear such flimsy garments in the middle of an English winter defies comprehension,” he growled. “You’re positively quaking with chills.”

She managed to take the glass from his hands and swallow a little more brandy. “I feel sick.”

“Let’s go out on the terrace. Some fresh air will do you good.” After pouring a
drink for himself, he found her cape, wrapped her in it, and led her outside. A sliver of moon shone through the naked tree branches in the distance, and the stars above them flashed like diamonds against a velvet backdrop.

Steed raised his glass to Emma. “To the good old days—_Le bon vieux temps où nous étions si malheureux!”_

Emma looked away, saying nothing.

He sipped his drink pensively, and looked up at the sky. “It’s a lovely night. You know, it’s Christmas Day already.” They sat down on the terrace wall. “Happy Christmas, Mrs. Peel. You don’t think I’m going to let you get away without a kiss under the mistletoe, do you?”

“There’s no mistletoe here.”

“Where’s your poetic faith? A little suspension of disbelief, my dear, is all that’s needed. Now quick, before the man from Porlock intrudes and ruins everything.”

Though her face was partly turned away from him, Steed could see that she was distraught. He put his hand under her chin, turning her head toward him, and kissed her. “You mustn’t cry, it’s all over,” he said, arranging her cape more closely about her.

Emma rose. “I thought so, too, when I saw you lying there,” she said, unable to hold back her tears.

“You mustn’t think about that.”

“I can’t not think about it!” she sobbed. “I was so wrong about everything—”

“Stop it,” said Steed. “So you were wrong about Braine. Everyone’s entitled to a mistake now and then—”

“I don’t mean him! I had it all wrong about Peter, about you—”

“Mrs. Peel.” Steed caught her hand as he got to his feet, drawing her back to his side. He leaned over to kiss her again, but she pulled away.

“Don’t.” She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. “Don’t make this any more difficult for me than it already is.”

“Don’t you think it’s been equally difficult for me?”

She didn’t answer. Pulling the cape more tightly about her, she walked across the terrace and into the library. Steed watched her in mute resignation.

The fire had burnt out, leaving only dead embers and ash on the hearth. Emma was staring at Braine’s draped body, nausea again rising in her, as Steed came in through the French widows. She swallowed hard several times, shuddering.

“You might as well sit down,” he said, switching on another lamp. “Reinforcements will arrive before long.” He set his brandy on the mantel shelf, then crouched in front of the fireplace. In a basket beside it were a few logs, and he picked up a couple and put them on the grate. He found some kindling and soon had a small blaze going. “There, that’s better,” he grunted, rising. “Would you like another drink?”

“No, thank you,” she said, in a barely audible voice, sitting down in the wing
chair. “I’ll be all right.”

Leaning against the mantel, Steed rolled his glass between the palms of his hands then raised it to his nose. “Not bad. Are you sure you won’t join me? Whatever else one might say about Braine, one can’t fault him for his taste in spirits. Or women.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Steed, it’s not funny!” burst out Emma, shivering and huddling closer to the fire.

They said nothing more to each other, Steed sipping brandy and Emma trying to warm herself by the fire. A while later, he finally broke the silence. “Sounds like the troops have landed,” he said, hearing noises coming from the front of the house. “Do you want me to take you home?”

“It’s late. You must be very tired.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I’ll manage—”

“No doubt. You always do.” He swallowed the rest of his drink and headed toward the door.

Warily, she got up from the chair. “Steed—”

But he was already out of the room and on his way to admit Mother’s legions.

The first man to enter the house was Dr. Watson. “Good heavens, man!” he exclaimed as he beheld Steed’s ripped and bloodied torso.

“I’m fine,” growled Steed. “See to Mrs. Peel. She’s had a trying evening.” He pushed his way past some men just coming in the front doors and disappeared into the darkness.
Casting a critical eye at the steel-grey sky as he opened the back door, Steed stooped to pick up his bottle of milk. Another cold day, with an even colder night to follow. Shivering, he ambled back into the steamy kitchen for a cup of tea and a glance at the morning papers before getting ready for his meeting with Mother.

He had spent another restless night, having returned late in the evening from a week-long visit to his favourite sister in Derbyshire, and was feeling singularly cranky this morning because it was New Year’s Eve and for the first time in his adult life he was going to be on his own. He half regretted not having stayed on at his sister’s through the new year. That wonderful old house of hers, filled with the joyful noise of boisterous children and baying hounds, and redolent with the reassuring odours of roast beef, mulled wine, pipe tobacco, and fir trees, was a cheerful and cosy home, the kind of place he’d have liked for his own.

He looked around the kitchen, and conducted a mental tour of the rest of his apartment. It wasn’t too bad, even if it was on the quiet side. No joy and laughter within these walls any more. He poured himself a second cup of tea. Can’t get much quieter than spending New Year’s Eve all by oneself. Not that it mattered, not really, not any more. He could do with a long rest, and what better time to embark on a period of solitude and solitary thought than the present?

Munching abstractedly on a piece of toast smothered with lime marmalade, Steed turned the pages of the newspaper, idly scanning the columns when an item caught his eye. Putting down his toast, he read the text. Yes, there it was, the formal announcement. Baron Rudolph von Kurt and Miss Tara King were engaged to be married in the coming spring, etc., etc., and so forth and so on. He blew on his tea. The news came as no surprise. Nevertheless, coming upon the announcement in the paper like that did nothing to salve his still-bruised ego. He took another bite of toast and drank some tea, wryly amused at his vanity. His split with Tara was disconcerting, to be sure, but after all he did see it coming, months ago. Steed slowly replaced his cup on the saucer. What was far more disconcerting was the fact that he would probably never see Emma again.

* * *

It was a rare day that found Mother in his tasteful, if minimalist, office in Whitehall. Rhonda lurked in silent attendance as Mother amused himself by honing his skills at shove ha’penny on his brilliantly polished and utterly bare desk.

“What do you want?” he bellowed in response to a rap on the door, motioning at the same time to Rhonda to make herself scarce. “Well, don’t loiter, come in!”

1. “Mother,” purred Steed, gliding through the door and shutting it quietly behind him. “In your usual high spirits, I see.” He stopped in front of
Moth
e's desk, rocking casually back and forth on his heels. “You wanted to see me?” He wondered idly where the customary array of telephones had got to, for none was visible in the room.

“Sit down.”

Steed glanced about the room. The only furniture in it, apart from the rug covering a section of the hardwood floor and the huge bookcase taking up most of the wall opposite the doorway, was the desk now occupied by his superior. “Thank you, but I think I’ll stand, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Ah. I see. Yes. Well.” Mother fidgeted with his watch chain. “Your conduct in that business at Lord Braine's was inexcusable. I should have you keel-hauled.”

“I should never have pinched that bullet-proof vest,” said Steed, feigning contrition. “It shan’t happen again, Mother.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, as well you know!”

Steed stood to attention, prepared to bear with manly fortitude whatever Mother had to say. The old boy could be a pill, but he really wasn’t such a bad lot, once one got to know him and learnt how to manipulate him.

“First, you deserted your post. Then you compounded your offence by deserting Mrs. Peel. Your absence of compassion, not to mention gallantry, was reprehensible.” Mother punctuated each sentence by pounding his fist on the desk. “Well, what’ve you to say for yourself?”

Steed stared at the tops of his brilliantly-polished boots, muttering under his breath.

“Eh? Speak up, man! Look at me!”

Steed raised his eyes and fixed them on the other man. “I am a cad and a bounder, sir.”

“Damn right,” shouted Mother. “Women are sensitive creatures, and require sensitive treatment. Particularly when one has dallied with them.”

A fit of coughing kept Steed from responding immediately.

“Just because you think I’m long past it doesn’t mean I’m deaf and blind, y’know,” said Mother. “Your latest liaison seems to have foundered as well. Miss King has resigned.”

“Has she, now?”

“That’s not the half of it!” Mother reached down, then flung a couple of newspapers across the desktop toward Steed, scattering coins as he did so. “You’ve seen the society pages in these?”

“Haven’t we had a not entirely dissimilar conversation once before?” Steed crossed one leg in front of the other and leaned on his umbrella. “To answer your question, I have. But this time the news didn’t come as a shock.”

“Speak for yourself. Personally, I am quite distressed by this habit you have of being abandoned right and left by your partners.”

“I’m not exactly over the moon myself,” muttered Steed.
“Can’t seem to hang on to ’em, can you? You might consider improving your bedside manner.”

Steed’s lips curled into a sarcastic grin. “Sorry I’m such a disappointment to you, Mother.”

“Sorry’, indeed. More of a disappointment to the ladies, I’d say.” Mother wheeled out from behind the desk and propelled himself energetically toward Steed. “At least Tara seems to have done all right for herself. Which is more than can be said for Mrs. Peel—“

”On the contrary, Mrs. Peel has done very well for herself,” interrupted Steed, his composure showing a crack or two. “Just ask her.”

“Don’t presume I haven’t.” Mother silenced any response Steed might have wanted to make with a peremptory wave of his hand. “You should not have deserted her that night,” he repeated sternly.

“She didn’t need me,” snapped Steed. “And what I needed was some time to myself.”

“How do you think Mrs. Peel felt? Or are you incapable of thinking of anyone but yourself?” He circled Steed slowly.

“Mrs. Peel is a remarkably resilient woman,” replied Steed, in a tone of voice that made it plain he did not wish to pursue the topic any further. Mother, however, was not so easily deterred.

“You should not have left Braine’s house that night, much less Mrs. Peel, before making your official report—“

”I wasn’t needed. Mrs. Peel was in a much better position than I to make a report.”

Mother halted abruptly directly in front of Steed. “What makes you so sure Mrs. Peel was in any fit state to answer any questions, much less deliver a coherent report?”

“She seemed perfectly coherent to me. In any case, it was quite obvious what occurred. Your well-trained elves should have had no difficulty sorting out for themselves the salient facts.”

“As it happens,” began Mother in a low, disdainful voice, “your instincts about Mrs. Peel, however callous, were correct. I am told she pulled herself together long enough to give a detailed account of the evening’s events.” “There, you see?” Steed gave Mother a supercilious smile. “You ought to trust my instincts by now.”

“As you said, she’s a resilient woman.” Mother’s eyes narrowed as he fixed them on Steed. “But only up to a point. Afterwards, Dr. Watson ordered her to be taken to hospital, for observation. You’ve heard of shock? Then wipe that smirk off your face!”

“She’s all right, though, isn’t she?” muttered Steed, his conscience giving him a sharp prod.

Mother snorted. “What with being drugged by Braine, then nearly killed, and
on top of that witnessing your apparent execution, only to see you resurrected as something out of a third-rate horror film, I dare say she’s had better days.”

“Is she still—”

“She was released in twenty-four hours. In fact, I had lunch with her the other day.”

“A swift recovery for such a sensitive creature. Apparently she’s a good deal stronger than you thought.”

“Don’t be so arrogant. What can you know about it?”

Steed paced back and forth. “I know that this whole business wasn’t exactly a plum assignment.”

“There was a job to be done, and you were the best man for it, I thought.”

“You thought wrong. If you were half as omniscient as you fancy yourself, you’d know that making me investigate the death of a man married to a woman for whom I had . . . a certain affection was bound to be mildly distressing.” He turned away from Mother, seething.

“‘Mildly distressing?’ mocked Mother. “Are you speaking only for yourself? Or are you at last sparing some thought for Mrs. Peel?”

Steed did not move. “You cold, unfeeling—”

“Under the circumstances, that’s rather like the pot calling the kettle black, wouldn’t you say?” Mother wheeled furiously about the room. He was compelled to admit, however, that Steed was partly right. Mother knew he had made some errors in judgement in the way he had handled certain matters, beginning with Peter Peel’s return. Admittedly, he had been a trifle insensitive in his assessment of both Steed and Emma. He adopted a more genial manner as he approached Steed. “Now then, we can’t have you at loose ends again, can we?”

“In point of fact—” Steed started to say, then just managed to jump backwards to avoid having his toes run over by Mother’s wheelchair.

“I’ll have to find you a replacement—”

“I point of fact,” broke in Steed, “that brings me to something I was about to ask you.”

“I’ll summon Rhonda to fetch us a couple of brandies, what?” Mother rubbed his hands together. “Want me to get to work on Mrs. Peel, eh? She was my favourite, too, you know,” he confessed with a wink.

“Forget Mrs. Peel. And I don’t want or need any replacements. I’m formally requesting a leave of absence, effective immediately.”

“But of course, of course, dear boy. Do you good, a couple of months—”

“Indefinitely.” Steed cut Mother off. “I’m exhausted, and fed up to the back teeth with everything, and right now I don’t know that I shouldn’t just retire and go out to pasture.”

“Nonsense! And do what, live in the country and keep bees?”

“Horses are more my line.”
“A spirited little filly in your paddock mightn’t be such a bad idea, at that.”

“No horse has ever faulted me on my bedside manner.”
“Cheeky devil,” said Mother. “How d’you expect me to manage without you?”
“You’ll manage. Everyone else seems to.”
“I have no right to stop you, of course. And even if I had, you’d get your own way in the end. You always do.”
“Not always,” retorted Steed, but very softly, so Mother wouldn’t hear.
“Humph.” Mother looked sharply at Steed. “Very well, I’ll see to it that you are placed in ‘leave of absence’ status forthwith. But don’t think of submitting any retirement papers yet, I shan’t approve them. You need time to weigh your options. Carefully. Then we’ll see.”
“Very well.”
Mother took a quarter-turn about the room before speaking again. “Look here, John, I’ve had you batting on a sticky wicket far too long. I didn’t see that until very recently, and I apologise.”
“It no longer matters.”
“You’re crafty, Steed, and you can be tough as old boots, but you’ve still a good deal to learn about women.”
“If you’re still thinking of thrusting another ‘replacement’ on me—”
“That’s my decision, not yours. I am not prepared to lose a good man who allows his infernal pride to get in the way of his good sense. You’re no use to anyone dead.”
“I don’t think I’ve done too badly, all things considered.”
“You could have done much better if you hadn’t lost your nerve.”
Steed glowered at the floor. “Will that be all, Mother?”
“Not leaving Town again, are you?”
“Not right away. I thought I’d spend a few quiet days at home, thinking about things. Very carefully.”
“Good. Then we’ll see you at the Horse Guards’ Ball this evening.”
“I’ve had quite enough of balls and parties for a while. If that’s all—”
”Just one final observation, my boy. Remember your Vergil. ‘Audentes fortuna juvat.’”
“Happy New Year, Mother.” Steed strode out of the room.
Mother’s smile vanished. Once more all business, he wheeled himself purposefully behind the desk and pressed a small button on the underside which summoned his assistant. “Well, don’t just stand there, Rhonda, fetch me a telephone,” he barked, pulling open a drawer and rummaging fiercely. “We have work to do.”

Once more Rhonda performed her disappearing act, rematerialising a brief while later with a rotary-dial telephone of American manufacture, circa 1934, which she
plugged into a receptacle behind the desk. Mother snatched the instrument from Rhonda’s hands, dialled impatiently, waited a few moments, then spoke. “Mother here . . . I have . . . He’s gone all sulky, and is even making noises about resigning . . . No, I doubt he will. He’s gone to ground in his apartment . . . Happy New Year to you, too. And good hunting!” Mother put down the phone and turned to Rhonda. “I may be many things, but unromantic I am not, eh, Rhonda?”

Rhonda gazed serenely at Mother.

“Steed is a capable fellow when he puts his mind to it. I simply will not stand having him at loose ends again, like the last time.”

Rhonda’s expression grew solemn.

“And if he insists on being foolish and pigheaded, well, then, I suppose I have no choice but to take appropriate measures.”

Rhonda arched her eyebrows.

“Fortune favours the daring, my dear, but the old girl also favours fools from time to time, no doubt because she is blind.”

Rhonda’s head inclined in assent.

“In which case, she shan’t notice our fiddling her wheel before she spins it again, eh, Rhonda?”

Rhonda smiled her enigmatic smile and said nothing.
Steed almost went to the ball. He’d already dressed and gone downstairs in search of his cloak and top-hat before he scuttled the entire idea. He was just too tired, and he grudgingly made up his mind to spend a sensibly sedate and uncomplicated evening at home.

He put a couple of logs on the fire before going to the kitchen for a bottle of champagne. He took his time filling the ice bucket and uncorking the bottle, then carefully polished a crystal flute, and finally brought the lot out into the living room on a large silver tray which he set down on the table in front of the sofa. Several colourful travel brochures, gaily advertising sunny Spain, sunny Italy, sunny Greece, and countless other blindingly bright venues, lay scattered across the tabletop. Ignoring them, he picked up a newspaper, folded to the society pages. Here it was again—another announcement of Tara’s engagement to Rudy. Steed flung the paper aside and poured himself a glass of champagne. As for Emma . . . There had been nothing more to their reunion than the facile intimacy of an old friendship briefly revisited. At least as far as she was concerned. How dare she take him for granted!

He stood in the middle of the room, drinking and looking for something to distract him. He picked up one of the travel brochures, but tossed it aside a few moments later, unable to stomach the hyperbolic praises heaped upon some otherwise unremarkable and economically-depressed little Caribbean island struggling to sell itself as a paradise regained. He moved to a cabinet and flipped through numerous record albums and tape recordings, but he couldn’t keep his thoughts from returning to Emma. Maybe he should have gone to the ball after all. That would have provided distraction, at least. He finally selected a tape and put it on. Untying his bow tie and removing his tails, Steed returned to the sofa and sat down. No. No more parties for him for a while. No more playing the thoroughly-rehearsed and by now tiresomely perfect role of the carefree bon vivant.

He sat back, sipping his champagne and trying to listen to the music. Memories of one particular New Year’s Eve filled his mind, one they’d spent together in Vienna: the Strauss, the champagne, the splendid suite at Sacher— Damnation. Must he think about that? Must he think about Emma? Steed reached for the bottle. If he got drunk, he wouldn’t have to think at all; and tomorrow he could wallow in misery and self-reproach for being so idiotic. He stared at the bottle in his hand. Not a very efficient beverage to get sloshed on. He stood up again. What he needed were spirits.

He set up half a dozen short glasses on the table, splashed whisky into each one, and was about to swallow his third shot when a loud knock on the door roused him from his torpor. “There’s a knocking indeed.” He heaved himself up from the sofa. “Who’s there, in the name of Beelzebub?” he called out, flinging open the door.

“Steed!” Tara brushed past him breathlessly. “Where have you been all week?
I was frantic. And when you didn’t show up at the ball tonight—“

“I spent Christmas with my one of my sisters and her brood,” he replied, wandering into the kitchen and returning with a champagne flute. “What brings you here? I thought you’d be with your Baron.” He poured some champagne into the glass. “May I offer you a drink?”

Tara glimpsed the newspaper lying on the floor in front of the fireplace. “Oh, Steed! You’ve seen it . . .”

“Yes. So it’s official now.” He handed her the glass of champagne.

“I wanted to tell you myself—“

“That’s quite all right, my dear.”

“No, it’s not! I had no idea he was going to make it public right away—“ Tara bit her lip. “For you to find out about it this way—“

“There’ve been plenty of other things occupying us lately,” interrupted Steed urbanely. Still, he thought to himself, to be given the conclusive push by two women within one week was a bit thick. “Which reminds me, I never did get around to giving you your Christmas present.” He went to the desk and retrieved a long, narrow box from one of the drawers. “I hope you like it,” he said, handing it to her.

Tara’s hands trembled as she unwrapped it. Inside the box was a delicate gold bracelet, linking exquisite forget-me-nots of sapphires and diamonds. “It’s stunning,” she breathed, putting it on. How like him, she thought, to make such an elegant farewell gesture; so he had guessed all along. “Thank you.”

Steed picked up one of the whisky glasses and held it up. “Here’s to true love, and the triumph of experience over hope,” he said with a wry grin. “At least my luck at cards should hold. Cheers!”

“Steed,” she said, after an uncomfortable silence, “I’ve always been very fond of you—”

“But fonder still of the dashing young Baron von Kurt.”

“I’m not going about this very well, am I? I don’t want you to think—” She paused, and looked directly at him. Tara felt like crying. She really was very fond of Steed. “This really is quite awkward. And no matter what I say, it’s going to come out sounding glib, or worse yet, revoltingly maudlin.” She was absentedly twisting the bracelet round and round her wrist. “Oh, hell,” she sighed, putting her arms around him. “Please, do try to understand.”

“Oh, I think I’ve come to understand a thing or two by now,” he replied with self-deprecat ing irony. “You’re in love.” He gently disengaged himself from her and turned to the fire. “I have not been a complete stranger to that affliction myself.”

“I know.”

Steed raised an eyebrow.

“I was here when Mrs. Peel left, remember? It was obvious.”

“Rot,” muttered Steed without any conviction. “Whatever my feelings for her may have been at one time, they evaporated the day her husband returned.”
“Did they?”
Steed became aware of a dull ache behind his eyes. “She certainly didn’t need me after that.”

“Not even after he was killed?”
He avoided her eyes. “I could never give her what she needs,” he said, walking back to the door. “Shouldn't you be at the ball? It's New Year's Eve, my dear. You should be with your fiancé.”

Tara set down her glass and came up to him. “Steed—“

"Fare thee well, and if forever, still forever, fare thee well," he quoted, giving her an avuncular kiss on the forehead. “Tara, I—“

She put her fingers to his lips. “No pretty words, I beg you. Not for me. Save them for Mrs. Peel.”

“That’s finished. I have nothing to say to her.”

“Yes, you do, Steed.”

“No.” Steed massaged his temples. “I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“Can’t, won’t, what’s it matter?”

“Why not? Is it because you’re afraid of what you might let slip?” Tara’s unflinching and eerily penetrating gaze unnerved him.

“Because I’ve been forced to admit to myself I am still in love with her, damn it!” Steed finished the whisky in his glass. “Alas,” he laughed drily, “it was doomed to be an unrequited love, and as unrequited love’s a topic far too tedious for light social banter it’s best left to dissection by poets of melancholy bent.”

“Be that as it may, I think you should broach the subject with her.” Tara put her hand on his arm.

“No.”

“What are you afraid of? Being rebuffed?” she asked. “Or are you afraid,” she continued, over Steed’s attempt to interrupt her, “that Mrs. Peel might not be as indifferent to you as you seem to think she is?”

“I’ll keep an eye out for your agony column in the tabloids,” growled Steed. “Might even write in for advice on coping with loneliness in my declining years.”

“You're too stubborn to take anybody's advice,” she said with a weak grin.

“Good-bye, Steed.”

“Good-bye, Tara. And thanks. For everything,” he said softly, opening the door for her. “I wish you every joy.”

“And I you,” she replied, her eyes moist. Tara gave him one last quick kiss before dashing out the door and to the landing. She was halfway down the stairs when she nearly bowled over someone coming up. The two of them stopped and stared at one another: Tara with amazement, the other with amusement. “Mrs. Peel!” exclaimed Tara, surprise and relief mingling in her voice.

“The same,” replied Emma brightly. “I gather congratulations are in order?”
She glanced at Tara’s left hand, resting on the handrail, and the engagement ring adorning it. She also noticed that Tara’s mascara was beginning to run.

“Thank you.” Tara put her hand on Emma’s arm. “He . . . he still needs you,” she stammered, colouring.

Emma patted Tara’s hand. “I know that, but I mustn’t let him find out,” she smiled, before continuing up the stairs.

Steed had taken off his shoes and was just getting comfortable on the sofa when again there came a knock on the door. “Now what?” he growled, struggling to his feet and ambling to the door.

He yanked open the door to find Emma standing before him, holding a large hamper. “Truce?” she said meekly.

“Mrs. Peel.” She was the last person he expected to see. “I hadn’t realised we were at war; however, I think under the circumstances a truce might be premature.”

“In that case, will a brief cease-fire do?” she uttered, sotto voce. She was clad in a striking low-cut black velvet evening gown, its meagre bodice decorated with sparkling multi-coloured beadwork. Over this she wore a crushed velvet cape. The effect was stunning. “Well, am I to stand here all night with you gawping at me, or will you invite me in?”

“I beg your pardon.” He stood aside. “Do come in.”

“I ran into Tara on my way up,” she remarked in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, crossing the room and dumped the hamper on the sofa. She saw the society pages of the newspaper lying on the floor, and she also saw the row of glasses on the table.

Steed tore his eyes away from her and followed her gaze. “Before you ask, yes, I have seen the papers.” The irony of the situation was not lost on him.

“I lunched with Mother the other day, at the Savoy,” she continued, taking off her cape and handing it to him.


“Yes, it was rather. Mother’s treat, I might add. I had the salmon. Heavenly. The poor unsuspecting creature was no doubt plucked from a Highland rill that very morning.”

“Indubitably.” Mother probably had fillet of fenny snake. Steed really had no desire to hear any further details of their weird reunion at the Savoy. He wondered what Emma wanted with him.

She picked up one of the travel brochures from the table. “Planning a holiday?”

“Not exactly. At the moment, I haven’t a plan in the world. In fact, I’m not quite sure what I’m going to do with myself.”

“Oh?”

“I’m on leave of absence. Might even retire, just to spite Mother.”

“Never!”

“Try me.” He raised the glass of whisky he was still holding. “It’s the end of
the road for me. I’ve had my fun, even took a bit of pride in having mastered a few shady tricks of my trade,” he said, “But this rough magic I here abjure.” He drained the glass and hurled it into the fireplace.

Steed’s melodramatic gesture startled Emma. “What will you do with yourself, then? What brave new world beckons?” she asked, coming up to him.

“Who can say? Not that one, at any rate.” He nodded at the travel brochures. “I need to be alone for a while…”

She looked into his eyes and for the first time saw how spent he was. “I’m sorry I barged in on you like this.”

“You needn’t be.”

“I’m sorry about Tara.”

“You needn’t be,” he repeated. “I was never in love with her, after all.”

Steed’s seeming nonchalance didn’t deceive her, nor did she fail to grasp the implications of his last remark, but she gave no sign. “I came to thank you. For everything. And to apologise. For everything,” she said softly, contemplating the rug.

“There’s nothing to thank me, or apologise, for. I think I understand.” He regarded her without emotion.

“Yes, there is, and I’m not sure you do. That’s another reason for my coming here tonight.” Emma kept her eyes on the rug.

“There’s nothing more to be said.”

“Isn’t there?”

“As you told me recently, ‘Come let us kiss and part— Nay, I have done: you get no more of me—’”

“To part, as the French say, is to die a little,” she rejoined, her conscience pricking her for her response to Steed’s conciliatory plea several days ago in the churchyard. “I’ve had my fill of parting and death.” The music playing in the background caught her attention. “‘Der Rosenkavalier?’ she asked rhetorically. “An interesting choice.”

“I’ve always found the music so… seductive.”

She glanced at the bottle of champagne. “Can you spare me a glass, or is this an exclusive party?”

Steed put on his tails and fetched another flute.

Emma moved to the record cabinet and browsed in his collection. “I can’t find ‘The Merry Widow.’ Didn’t you have that once?”

“I gave it to you after our visit to Vienna,” he said, pouring her champagne.

Emma turned around. “You’ve not forgotten,” she murmured, taking the flute from his hand.

“Anyway, it’s ‘Fledermaus’ you want. That’s the traditional New Year’s fare, I believe.” He wandered back to the fireplace.

“Come now, don’t tell me you’re going to spend this evening feeling sorry for
yourself; it's not like you.” Emma set her glass down, came up behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, then turned him around to face her. “Look at you, so dashing in your Number One Mess Dress—” She began tying his bow tie. “It’s almost the new year! We’ve got to ring it in with verve, with éclat!”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not really up to any festivities tonight.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see about that, now, won’t we?” Emma dusted him off. “There. It’s almost the witching hour, but I know of a party or two in the neighbourhood we could still crash.” She looked down at his feet. “Hadn’t you better put on your shoes?”

“I’m in no mood for any parties. To be perfectly honest, I’m finding this a bit difficult. On top of that, I’m very tired, and thoroughly useless—”

“Never that,” she interrupted. “All right, we’ll spend the evening at home.” She straightened his tie.

“It was good of you to stop by—”

“Right. I’ll take off my shoes. My feet are simply screaming for liberation.”

“Mrs. Peel—”

“That’s better,” she sighed, kicking off first one shoe and then the other as she walked back to the records. “Let’s put this one on.” Before he could stop her, she switched off the tape and put on a record. “We ought to put these back on ice,” she said, taking two bottles of champagne out of the hamper.

Steed followed her into the kitchen, where she stooped in front of the refrigerator and laid down the bottles. “Veuve Clicquot,” he said.

Emma straightened up and smoothed her gown. “What was it you said, ‘le bon vieux temps’— ‘the good old days, when we were so unhappy’? As I recall, you exhibited a considerable degree of partiality to the Widow Clicquot that New Year’s in Vienna. As well as to a certain other widow, I think.” She padded back into the living room. The silence that had settled between them was broken a few moments later by the opening strains of ‘Begin the Beguine.’ “Such a haunting song. We never did finish our dance at the ball.” Swaying in time with the music, Emma took one of his hands in hers, resting her other hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll sit this one out, if you don’t mind,” he said, not moving.

Emma let go of him and went back to the kitchen. “In that case, I might as well open another jug of the old grape juice,” she said, retrieving one of the champagne bottles.

Steed stood in the doorway, twirling his empty champagne glass. “Why did you come here tonight?”

Emma didn’t answer. “Aaah!” she exclaimed as the cork popped. “Here you go!” She splashed some champagne in his glass. “Let’s get gloriously drunk and see what happens.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You know what happens. I thought you’d learnt your lesson at the charity ball.”
“I did indeed. I ended up in your bed that night.”
“I wouldn’t quite put it that way. Moreover, as far as I’m concerned that sort of nonsense is just not on when one is drunk.”
“I quite agree. Except with your choice of the word ‘nonsense’.” Emma set down the bottle and stretched her hands out to him. “Come hither.”
“You still haven’t answered my question,” he said, in the same measured voice. “What brought you here?”
“I already told you, I came to apologise. For being so wrong about ... things. And about you. Mainly about you. When I watched him shoot you . . .” Her voice faltered.
“Everything turned out all right in the end.”
“Did it? Your departure was most precipitous.”
“I didn’t think you—”
“That I needed you, I know,” she broke in. She traced a pattern on the floor with her toe. Steed started to say something, but she interrupted him again. “We’ve been at cross purposes ever since Peter died. Which is entirely my fault.” She picked up her glass and took a few sips of champagne. “You didn’t even say anything, you just left.”
“What was there to say?” He left his glass on the counter and leaned against the door frame.
“A great deal, I think. At any rate on my part. At the very least you might have said goodbye.” Emma tossed down the rest of her drink.
Steed cleared his throat. “Steady on, there!”
Emma refilled her glass. “I always saw myself as independent, clear-headed—”
“Unsentimental—”
“That, too, yes. Until I married Peter. I was devoted to him. And when I lost him I was devastated. I never again wanted to endure that kind of torment. So I promised myself that I would never again commit myself to anyone as I had to him.”
“That hadn’t entirely escaped me,” Steed said drily.
“Having so resolved, I decided I needed some diversion. Shortly thereafter, I met you.”
“I trust I was sufficiently diverting.”
“The unpredictability of our association, the spontaneity, answered my immediate needs,” she said, fortifying herself with another draught of champagne. “Our alliance had its other advantages, as well.”
“Such as?”
“Such as, someone in your trade didn’t need to be bothered with superfluous emotional demands that would spoil an otherwise perfectly satisfactory relationship.”
“Is this an axiom, or merely a hypothesis?” he asked, with some asperity.
“I didn’t think you wanted it any other way.”
“That was one hell of an assumption on your part. You know, I can’t recall you
ever asking me what I wanted.”
   “I didn’t think I wanted it any other way.” She set down her glass.
   “Just so.” Steed shoved his hands in his pockets. “That much was obvious to me.”
   “Things didn’t quite work out that way, though.”
   “Really? I never suspected.”
   “I thought I’d be perfectly content in a neutral, uncommitted sort of way.”
   “I thought you were. I also thought I always demonstrated the utmost respect
for your sensibilities.”
   “You did. As well as loyalty. And affection.” Emma picked up her glass and
stared at it. “I simply wouldn’t let you any nearer. I was afraid if I did, and anything
were to happen to you—”
   Steed snorted. “And yet you took up again with your husband when he
returned from the dead. How did you feel every time he climbed into a cockpit?” he
demanded with a bitter laugh. “Or had you insulated yourself from him as well?”
   “I suppose I had,” she conceded in a barely audible voice. “Touché.”
   “You had no right to use me like that! And no right to think I was immune to
ordinary human feelings.”
   “I never thought that about you—”
   “Didn’t you? You thought only of yourself. You made it clear what you did,
and did not, want. You drew the line the very first night we met!”
   “Steed, please—”
   “I made the mistake of overstepping that line, but I never told you because I
knew if I did you’d leave. And I wasn’t prepared to allow that to happen. To a
starving man, half a loaf is better than none at all.” Another bitter laugh burst from
him. “Not that it made any difference in the end. You left anyway.”
   “Oh, Steed! Don’t think I have no regrets. God knows I have. I have done
for a long time.” She looked into his face, her eyes filling with tears. “I never meant
to take you for granted, or bring you so much grief. When I watched Braine shoot
you . . . When I saw you lying there, apparently dead, the pain I felt made me realise
just how selfish and utterly bloody arrogant I’ve been all along. It’s too late to ask
Peter’s forgiveness. I only hope it’s not too late to beg yours.”
   Steed took his hands out of his pockets. “I’m the one who should apologise,”
he muttered. “I didn’t mean what I said. It was petty, and it was spiteful.” He found
his glass and refilled it. “I have no regrets.”
   “Liar.” She tried to smile.
   “I also promised myself never to reproach you. It appears I am forced to
concede on both counts.” He raised his glass to his lips and took a long, slow sip of
champagne. “I was very fond of you, you know,” he eventually said.
   “Yes, I do.” She poured herself some more champagne, spilling a few drops.
“It only took me a few weeks with Peter to understand that, among other things.”
Emma watched the foam soar up to the rim of her glass and froth over. “Peter, I suspect, understood right away; in any case he recognised my feelings for you a damn sight sooner than I did.” Emma passed her hand over her eyes. “Whichever way you look at it, I made a right bugger’s muddle of it all.” She lowered her head. “I am so very sorry.” She waited for him to speak, but he stood mute. “If you don’t say something, Steed, I’m going to burst into tears.”

“You mustn’t do that, you know what that could lead to,” Steed said with reserve, handing her his handkerchief. “Still, I’m in two minds about giving you this.”

“Pax?” she suggested with a feeble smile, fluttering the handkerchief slowly.
He regarded her impassively, shaking his head. “I might be persuaded into that cease-fire you proposed earlier, though.”

“No, only unconditional surrender,” she countered, her eyes brimming.
“I’m not sure either of us is quite prepared for that,” he said, but his aloofness was rapidly melting.

“Speak for yourself. I’m prepared to accept any terms you might dictate.” She picked at a tiny particle of lint on his lapel. “It might be the end of the road for you, but I still have a few more miles to travel.”

“And then what?”

“That remains to be seen.” She picked up her glass, and touched his with it.
“Journeys end in lovers meeting,” he said softly, about to take a sip of champagne when Emma walked out of the kitchen. He followed after her. “Mrs. Peel?”

She paused at the foot of the stairs and turned just as he came up to her.
“There are so many things I want to say to you, Steed.”

“You don’t need to,” he gently replied. “You’ve already said a great deal.”

She brushed some stray hairs off his forehead. “I suppose I could start with three pithy and not altogether inapt words.”

The clock in the living room began to whirr, its mechanism gearing up to chime in the new year. “Ah, yes,” he said, gazing thoughtfully at her, “of course. Happy New Year.” Three other short words occurred to him, words that he’d never got up the nerve to say to her in all the time he’d known her, not even on that wretched day a few centuries ago when Emma said farewell to him on practically this very spot.

She held his gaze, reading the hesitation mixed with self-reproach in his expression. He gradually noticed the familiar, irrepressible twinkle return to her eyes as she broke into a full smile, and placed the palm of her hand on his chest. “That, too, of course—Happy New Year, my darling,” she murmured. “But what I meant to say—”

Steed’s reticence was rapidly giving way to a more daring frame of mind. “Emma—”
Emma tugged at the ends of his tie, undoing it as she drew him nearer. “What I meant to say,” she repeated, tenderly kissing his cheek, “was, Steed--you're needed.”