

**THE
QUICK**

**AND THE
DEAD**

**A NOVEL OF
THE AVENGERS***

M. P. WARREN

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* "The Avengers" are the property of Jerry Weintraub.

PART ONE*Think it enough for me to have had thy love.*Donne, *Elegy XVII*

1.

In the midst of life we are in death . . .

Standing apart from the small group of people gathered at the gravesite, her head bowed less out of reverence than from a desire to not look at anything or anyone, she wriggled her numb toes, then shifted her feet before her heels sank another inch into the rain-soaked ground.

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother

. . .

The gritty sound of dirt hitting the coffin forced her to finally raise her head.

. . . we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes . . .

She was the last of the mourners. Clutching a small silver scoop filled with earth, she looked down at the coffin, shut her eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath before sprinkling the earth into the open grave. A simple, solemn gesture, she thought, letting her hand fall to her side, and so poignant in its irrevocability.

The Lord be with you . . .

Lost in her thoughts, she paid no heed to the rest of the service, only realising that it had ended when priest and mourners began to make their way back to the church. She did not follow them, but lingered at the gravesite, worrying the strap of her handbag and staring up at the puffs of white clouds dotting the brilliant blue sky. “Farewell,” she whispered after a time and, with a sharp intake of breath, turned and strode away.

Her pace slowed as she neared the church. The clutch of mourners stood at the entrance, speaking to the vicar and to one another in subdued voices. She looked at them. They all appeared to be members of the immediate family; not one colleague or friend of his was among them. Except for herself. “Curious . . .” she murmured.

“One of my many shortcomings, I must confess,” someone said in an agreeable contralto voice.

She turned. A tall, handsome, dark-haired woman had come up to her. “How do you do,” said the woman, extending her hand. “I’m Helena, John’s sister. You must be Mrs. Emma Peel.”

“That’s right,” said Emma, taking the proffered hand in hers. “How do you do, Your Grace.” Helena, youngest of Steed’s three sisters, was his favourite sibling.

Helena gave Emma’s hand a firm shake, and Emma herself a shrewd appraisal. “Please, call me ‘Helena.’ I only transform into The Duchess on occasions of state, and when we happen to bump into

Americans.” She paused, and raised an eyebrow. “For militant republicans, that lot certainly go for titles in a most undemocratic way, I’ve always thought.”

“Quite,” murmured Emma.

Helena slipped her arm through Emma’s. “John spoke of you often. He was very fond of you.”

“And I of him,” Emma quietly replied, struggling to maintain the impervious numbness of mind that had seen her through the day so far, and indeed through many other days since her husband’s return almost two years ago. She fidgeted with her handbag.

“I’m sorry we had to meet under such . . . unfortunate circumstances,” said Helena, leading Emma into the church. “I kept telling John to bring you down for a week-end—we’ve tons of room in that draughty old pile of ours, and several eccentric inhabitants—both human and animal—to amuse one . . .” She trailed off. “I’m so very sorry, my dear,” she murmured, after a brief silence.

“So am I.”

“Lovely church, this,” said Helena. “Generations of the family were christened, married, and buried from here. It’s also the family hall of fame. A fair number of Steeds are enshrined here for posterity.”

They moved slowly down the aisle, Emma pausing to glance at the plaques in the walls and underfoot. “Steed . . . John pointed this church out to me once, on a drive through these parts,” she said.

“He always liked this part of the country. He wanted to retire here.”

They sat down on a pew. “How did he die?” Emma finally asked.

“You mean you don’t know?”

“I got the funeral announcement in the post a couple of days ago. That’s all.”

“The solicitors didn’t get in touch with you?”

“No one did.”

“Shockin’,” exclaimed Helena, folding her arms across her chest. “Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle are one of the oldest, most respectable firms in Town. Why, they acted for our great-grandfather in a matter of great delicacy back in—Humph! I’ll certainly have a word with Mr. Snodgrass when I see him on Monday!” She sat in mute indignation for several moments before noticing Emma’s still-enquiring expression. “It happened a week ago. John was motoring in the south of France. He was driving along the sea cliffs, lost control of his car, and . . .” Leaving the sentence unfinished, she gazed sympathetically at Emma.

Emma looked away, her stomach knotting at the memory of the last trip she and Steed had taken together to France. They’d spent a couple of days in Paris, and then on a whim drove all the way to St. Tropez just for dinner and a moonlight stroll. That whim led to an idyllic week spent in a tiny village in the Vaucluse . . . Now she imagined all too vividly Steed’s car flying off the cliffs and plunging down, down onto the rocks below to a horrifying end.

“I’m told it happened very quickly,” Helena said, but without much conviction in her tone. A minute must have seemed a lifetime to Steed as he hurtled to his death. “An accident?”
“Yes.”

Emma looked up at Helena. “What was he doing in France?”

“He was on holiday. Funny time of year for one, but he said he needed to get away for a bit, clear out the cobwebs. Though he never actually said it in so many words, I sensed he was at what one might metaphorically describe as a crossroads, and was trying to decide which direction to take, as it were.”

Steed, indecisive? That doesn’t sound at all like him. “Did anyone actually see what happened when he—”

“There were no witnesses. The police were satisfied it was a misadventure. Why do you ask?”

Steed was an excellent driver. He knew those roads as well as he knew the roads here at home. For him to just lose control of his car is inconceivable . . . But there was no need to upset Helena with vague misgivings. “Force of habit,” replied Emma. “That, and my congenital scepticism—” She contrived a self-deprecating half-smile. “Forgive me. It was tactless of me.”

“Don’t apologise. Please. I still can’t quite believe it myself, either.” Helena rose. A wistful look came into her eyes. “Just this past Christmas he told me was looking to buy some property somewhere hereabouts. He made some noises about leaving his job, and London, for the quiet country life. Pity he never got the chance.” She cleared her throat and glanced at her watch. “The rest of the family’ll be wondering where I’ve got to. We’re having drinks and food at Langbourne. Our place. John was never one to make a fuss, but he wouldn’t have objected to a booze-up in his memory. Do say you’ll come.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I think I’d rather stay here by myself for a while,” Emma said, slowly getting to her feet.

“Then join us later. I’ll give you directions—”

“It’s most kind of you, but . . .” murmured Emma, glancing at Helena and glimpsing, for a moment, John Steed’s eyes in hers.

“I’m afraid I must go,” said Helena, taking Emma’s hands. “Are you sure you won’t—”

Emma shook her head. “I can’t,” she said, her voice husky.

With a gentle squeeze to Emma’s hands, Helena gave her a kiss on the cheek, then quickly walked out of the church.

2.

Emma took a circuitous route home in the hope that a long drive through the countryside would take her mind off Steed. A vain conceit, she thought bitterly; she would never stop thinking about him. They only had a couple of years together before her supposedly deceased husband turned up so thoughtlessly to reclaim her. Awkward business. Naturally, Steed took it in a very sporting way, but when she took her last leave of him his mask of unflappable urbanity had slipped, just for a moment but long enough to betray his real feelings. If only she had told him . . . *Well, you left it too bloody late, didn't you?* Emma pulled off the road onto the verge, blinking back tears, to dig a handkerchief out of her handbag and dab at her eyes.

Wondering what might have been is a fool's pastime. Steed is dead. She manoeuvred her car back onto the road. She found it hard to believe that Steed could lose control of a car to such an extent that he would fly off a cliff. He was a superbly disciplined driver and no stranger to the roads of southern France. She also found it hard to believe that he went on a junket to France just to make up his mind about his future.

Helena had mentioned something about Steed looking to buy property in the country and hinting about quitting his job. Steed, the carefree bachelor and man-about-town, pensioned off and living the placid life of a country squire? Emma couldn't help smiling at the mental image she conjured up of him, in hacking jacket and plus fours, downing pints at the village pub with a gaggle of rustics, bored to extinction.

If in fact Steed had gone to France on some assignment, then where was what's-'er-name, that buxom sidekick of his? Tara. What was *she* up to the day Steed died? *That lass isn't one to let the grass grow under her feet; sank her claws into Steed before I was even halfway down the bloody stairs,* thought Emma with a surge of irritation, suddenly annoyed with Steed no less than with Tara. Perhaps it was true, then; perhaps he did mean to chuck it all and live happily ever after in bucolic bliss with that . . . doxy. Ridiculous. Absurd.

You're the one who's ridiculous and absurd, Emma said to herself, ashamed of her petty jealousy. *Steed is dead. It's not so much jealousy as regret and self-pity on your part, isn't it?*

It was mid-afternoon by the time she got back to London. Weaving her way through a series of mean streets into Camden Town, she finally stopped the car in front of a shabby newsagent's. "Right," she said to her handbag as she rummaged about in it. "Let's see if Mother's at home, shall we?"

Climbing out of the car, she attracted a few gazes from a gaggle of loiterers across the road, who no doubt had never before beheld such a striking woman dressed in elegant mourning slumming in these precincts. Emma strolled into the newsagent's and cast a bored eye over the various periodicals on display before approaching the shopkeeper. "Good afternoon."

"Miss," growled the shopkeeper, a tall, gaunt man with a wiry brush of steel-grey hair crowning his head and at least three days' growth of beard sprouting on his heavily creased, weather-beaten face.

He wore a sleeveless vest, and sported an assortment of nautical tattoos on his arms.

“Balkan Sobranie Yenidjes and a box of Vestas, if you please.”

The man grunted in response and turned away.

Not the most scintillating conversationalist I've ever encountered, reflected Emma as she produced her purse from her handbag and picked over some coins.

“Anything else, Miss?” he asked, turning back to her and laying a small tin of cigarettes and a box of matches on the counter.

Emma very deliberately placed a gold sovereign face up on top of the cigarette tin, Queen Victoria's stamped likeness staring unamused at the shopkeeper.

“Have you anything smaller?” said the man. He picked up the coin and handed it back to Emma.

She returned the sovereign to her purse and counted out some silver. “Here's the exact amount,” she answered, handing the coins one by one to him.

“A tanner over,” he countered, handing sixpence back to her.

“Sorry. My mistake.” Emma took out one of the cigarettes. “How is Mother?”

The shopkeeper took a match out of the box and struck it. “Never better,” he said, lighting Emma's cigarette.

“Mother at home this afternoon?”

He shook his head. “Abroad. Barging down the Nile.” His thin lips twitched into a semi-grin.

“Ah.” She exhaled a thin wisp of smoke. “Pity.”

“I'll tell Mum you called. What name shall I give?”

“Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel. Good day.” Emma gathered up the cigarettes and matches and walked out to her car. The loiterers from across the road had come over to ogle the Lotus, but they skulked back to their patch of pavement as soon as Emma reappeared. She flung her cigarette in the gutter and got in the car. Mother never liked hanging about the office, preferring mobile headquarters, typically aboard some form of transport. “Abroad” meant the bastard was in one of those mobile command posts at the moment. The “Nile” he was “barging” down was the Grand Union Canal, where he could be found aboard a canal boat bearing a name with Egyptian connotations.

With a saucy wave at the loiterers, Emma drove off, heading in the direction of Primrose Hill.

She thought she knew exactly where Mother could be found, and she was right. It didn't take her long to spot the “Cleopatra” or the Amazon of a woman standing aft, arms folded across her chest and legs planted wide apart, like a kind of mod cigar-store Indian. “Hullo, Rhonda,” she said, stepping aboard. “You may announce me to Mother,” she said wryly. As far as anyone knew, Rhonda hadn't uttered a syllable in all the time she had been Mother's assistant.

Rhonda unfolded her arms and beckoned to Emma before ducking through a hatchway and disappearing below-decks. Emma followed, equally silently.

Descending the ladder into the boat's living quarters, Emma found Mother laying out a game of patience on a small table amidships. "This is most irregular, Mrs. Peel," he said irritably, without so much as glancing up at her.

She strode up to him and eyed the tableau of cards. "Indeed," she replied, removing the knave of clubs from the queen of spades and holding it out to him. "Black on red, and vice versa. Or do you make a habit of cheating at solitaire?"

Mother snatched the knave of clubs from her hand and stuffed it back in the pack. "You haven't come here to chat about Hoyle," he snapped. "What do you want?"

"I've been better, thank you. And how are *you*?" She regarded him coolly.

"Humph." He shifted in his wheelchair, and laid the pack of cards on the table. "Come to the point, Mrs. Peel."

"I want some answers."

"Officially, you have no standing—"

"Officially, Steed is dead," she shot back, her eyes flashing angrily. "He was buried not a couple of hours ago—or have you already dismissed that fact from your mind?"

"Of course I haven't!" He should have anticipated Mrs. Peel calling on him. After all, she and Steed had been colleagues at one time. He looked up at her. Her features were drawn, and the pallor of her face contrasted sharply with her severe black suit. It occurred to him that she must have come directly from the funeral. "Distressing business," he muttered. "I'm very sorry."

"It is," she replied. "And so am I."

"Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Emma icily. What she wanted was several drinks, preferably undiluted spirits, but not here, not with Mother. "What I want are answers. Or am I wasting my time?"

"Under the circumstances, I think I can bend the rules a bit," he said.

"I'll come to the point, then. Was Steed on assignment when he died?"

"No. He was on leave."

"Was that girl—" Emma coughed. "Was Miss King—"

"Miss King," Mother crossly interjected, "resigned last October. Went to Kathmandu or Shangri-La or some such godforsaken place to 'find herself', was the phrase I believe she used." He grunted. "All stuff and nonsense, if you ask me."

"The paths to enlightenment are many and varied," Emma dryly remarked. "How did Steed take it?"

He gave her a trenchant look. "Much better than Miss King's predecessor's departure."

Emma was not about to sail into those waters. "Was Steed's life in danger before he left for France?" she asked, changing tack and resuming her former course.

"In our trade, one's life is constantly in danger."

“Don’t skirt the issue,” she said, losing patience. “You know perfectly well what I mean.”

“I am aware of no specific threats directed against Steed.”

“Do you believe his death was an accident, then?”

“I am aware of no facts that would compel a different conclusion.”

Emma met Mother’s gaze and held it. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“There’s nothing more to say,” Mother replied, wheeling about and rolling away from Emma. “I lost a good man. I shall miss him.”

Mother’s words echoed mockingly in her ears as Emma slowly mounted the ladder to the weather deck.

3.

Emma reluctantly headed home, thinking over what Mother had said and concluding that he had told her all he would say about Steed's death. As far as he and his lot were concerned, Steed was not killed in the line of duty, and that was the end of that. Callous bastards. She wondered if they'd even bothered to send a wreath.

She pulled into the forecourt of one of the newer apartment blocks in Chelsea. Leaving her car in a spot near the main entrance, she strode into the lobby and boarded a lift that took her to the top floor.

Emerging from the lift, she walked slowly down the short corridor to her apartment, digging in her handbag for her key.

The apartment was small and spare, even austere, but it was functional and answered her basic needs. She had moved into it nearly a year and a half ago, after separating from her husband, but looked upon it as merely a place to spend the night, not as a proper home. The furniture was modern, utilitarian, and hired; nothing personal decorated the rooms. Only the few books to be found here and there gave away anything about its occupant. A small bookcase in the living room held a couple of volumes on contract bridge; several tomes on physics, chemistry, and mathematics; a paperback entitled *Meals in Minutes*; a well-worn leather-bound set of all of Jane Austen's novels; and an early edition of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*.

Emma crossed briskly to the desk in front of the window. The desk was bare, save for a lamp, a telephone, and a device for recording incoming calls. She pressed a button to rewind the recording device, noting that only one message had been left, then pressed the playback button. "Emma? I've been trying to chase you down since yesterday," the machine said peevishly, "can't think where you've got to."

She pursed her lips. What did her husband want now, for God's sake? "Just get on with it," she snapped at the machine.

"The estate agent's coming on Tuesday to view the house before putting it on the market—"

"About time, I should think," she said over her husband's voice.

"—and I need to know what I should do with that concrete-block sculpture thing of yours—"

"I know what *I'd* like you to do with it . . ." Emma pressed the 'stop' button, picked up the telephone, dialled a number and listened to a series of double rings on the other end. "Pick it up, damn you," she muttered, drumming her fingers on the desktop. Her impatience was rewarded shortly. "Peter? Emma. Your soon-to-be-former wife. I got your message . . . What? . . . Not that it's any of your concern but I've been to a funeral . . . A very dear friend's . . . I don't want to talk about it, Peter . . . Listen . . . Oh, *do* shut up and *listen*, for once. Do whatever you like with the block . . . Such as, take a mallet and chisel and pound away at it. It's very cathartic . . . All right, then try bunging a couple of sticks of dynamite in it . . . I am *not* being sarcastic, I am trying to be constructive . . . No, I don't care . . . Look, I don't need you plaguing me with tedious nonsense every time you feel like starting another row . . . What? . . . Oh, do as you bloody well please. You always have . . . Fine . . . I already told you, I don't give a damn, least of all about *you*, and least of all right now. Just tell *your* lawyers to ring *my* lawyers, and let *them* sort it out. That's what they're

paid for.” She slammed down the phone.

For some minutes afterward, Emma remained where she stood, bitter, angry, exhausted, regarding her surroundings with mounting depression. The thought of spending one more night here, especially *this* night, filled her with despair. She couldn’t go on living here—if indeed “living” was the word—without waking up some morning very soon only to find she’d gone completely round the bend. There was nothing keeping her in London. Knight Industries could manage very well without her, after all the hard work she had put in; and with Steed now gone—

A cottage somewhere, that’s what she wanted, some place sunny and airy and with a patch of garden where she could grow ranunculus and larkspur and rosemary and bushels of comforting, sweet-smelling English lavender that would always remind her of the many happy childhood summers spent in Sussex with her grandparents.

Such a cottage was not to be had at a moment’s notice, however. If it was gardens and comfort she wanted, and right away . . .

Emma strode into the bedroom, pulled down an overnight case lying atop the wardrobe, flung it open on the bed, and threw in a few essentials. When she had finished, she sat down on the bed and reached for the book lying on her bedside table.

The book, an early eighteenth-century edition of John Donne’s *Poems*, was handsomely bound in red morocco, its spine embossed with gilt lettering. Emma held it in her hands for several moments before opening it to the fly-leaf and reading the inscription: “To E., ‘that not impossible she, that shall command my heart and me.’ J.” She brushed her fingertips over the handwriting. His last gift to her. The book had belonged to him since his school days, and he enjoyed reading his favourites aloud to her from time to time. . . Her eyes were brimming as she shut the book and gently laid it in her case.

Emma took the case to the living room, dropping it next to the front door before crossing to the desk to disconnect the telephone from the recording machine. There was nothing left to do here. It was time for those comforting gardens, if only for a brief while. She collected her keys and handbag, picked up her case, and without so much as a backward glance walked out of the apartment, pulling the door shut firmly behind her.

When she reached the lobby, Emma stopped just long enough to pick up her post, which she hadn’t bothered to do for the past few days. Telephone bill, electricity bill, dressmaker’s bill, a billet-doux from the Inland Revenue, another missive from a firm of solicitors (*just how many pettifoggers does that bastard I’m divorcing need, for heaven’s sake?*), a picture postcard of some exotic place from her globetrotting cousin Dorothea. Nothing that couldn’t wait, she decided, stuffing the lot in her handbag on her way out of the lobby and to her car.

4.

“Hallo!” A head perfectly coiffed with a silver-blue nimbus of hair shimmered into view above the brick garden wall. “Beryl!”

The woman kneeling on the wooden plank next to the newly planted flowerbed, busily aerating the soil with a hand cultivator, paused, pursed her lips, and glanced up. “Over here, Edith, by the primroses,” she called out, tapping the cultivator against her gloved left palm to loosen a few clods before brushing the rest of the dirt away and laying the tool in the basket at her side. “The garden gate’s unlatched.” She got to her feet with a little grunt, taking off her gardening gloves and dropping them in the basket on top of the cultivator.

Of medium height and slender build, Beryl Knight appeared younger than her sixty years. Her rosy complexion, etched by only a few lines, might have belonged to a face a good ten years younger. Only her hair, pulled back and gathered into a knot, but now escaping in wispy, faded-bronze and grey tendrils from beneath the wide-brimmed straw hat perched slightly askew on her head, hinted at her age.

With a little sigh, she smoothed the bright floral-print cobbler’s smock covering her plaid shirt and crossed a narrow strip of lawn to the flagstone path leading to the gate. Edith, a stout woman a few years older than Beryl, was marching toward her. “I’ve not been led down the primrose path in donkey’s years,” Edith boomed, chuckling heartily at her witticism. “What do you say to popping round the Officers’ Mess for a glass of sherry, old girl?”

“I’d have to change out of my fatigues first,” murmured Beryl, spreading her hands and looking down at her well-worn moleskin trousers and muddy gardening wellies. “Thanks, Edith, but I really ought to finish up here—this last storm didn’t do my new plantings much good, I’m afraid.”

“Damn garden’s spit-polish perfect, Beryl,” said Edith. “As it should be, with all the work you put into it. I dare say it shan’t wither if you abandon post for an hour or so.”

Having taken full advantage of the sunny day, Beryl was in fact nearly finished with her horticultural chores, but this afternoon she wasn’t especially keen on gossiping with Brigadier Beauchamp-Rowe’s widow in her regimental museum of a house. She was ready to indulge in a long soak in the bath, and was about to make a polite noise declining Edith’s impromptu invitation when she heard a familiar voice call out.

“Hullo! Mum! Are you in the garden?”

Beryl’s face brightened. “Yes, here I am, darling!” she called out. “I wonder what brings Emma here today,” she said, turning back to Edith with a man-proposes-God-disposes smile. Now she needn’t manufacture an excuse. “Another time for the drink.”

“Of course, of course,” Edith said heartily. “I’ll just toddle along.” She executed an about-turn and almost bumped into Emma. “Sorry,” she grinned. “Beating too hasty a retreat, as usual.”

“Hullo, Beachie,” said Emma. As a two-year-old child, she could never manage to get her tongue around “Beauchamp-Rowe”, and her truncated version stuck as a fond nickname for both the late Brigadier and his wife. “How are you?”

“Fightin’ fit,” said Edith. “And you?”

“Rubbing along,” she replied with a forced smile.

Edith cast an inspecting officer's eye over Emma's suit. "On parade today, what?"

Emma's glance wavered for an instant. "One might say that, yes."

"Very smart turnout. Well done. Carry on. I shan't be a nuisance." With a smile and a wave, she marched back the way she had come.

"How providential, your stopping by," said Beryl to her daughter. "Edith's a champion lass, but I'm just not up to her brand of heartiness today."

"Nor am I," Emma sighed. "I'm not just stopping by, Mother. I'd like to stay for a few days. You don't mind, do you?"

She took a deep breath of air, savouring the comforting odours of cut grass, wet wood, and rich cultivated soil as she looked over the bright palette of green, yellow, crimson, mauve, and white of the various flowers she couldn't properly name blossoming all over the garden. A brilliant mass of daffodils bloomed at the foot of an old rowan tree in one corner, catching her eye as a puff of wind sent the stalks bobbing and fluttering. Her mother always had daffodils, in homage to Wordsworth's verse. Emma couldn't remember a single spring without them coming up in the garden.

They slowly crossed the lawn toward the house. "What an unnecessary question. You know you're always welcome, and can stay as long as you like." Beryl pulled off her boots and stepped into a pair of moccasins standing at the foot of the back stairs before leading the way into the house. "I haven't told you, I finally refurbished what originally was your bedroom. Painted the woodwork, hung new wallpaper, put a new rug down. Even bought a new double bed for it last week. You should be quite comfortable."

Emma silently followed her mother into the kitchen.

"I'll put the kettle on and make us some tea while you get sorted," said Beryl. "Do you want to take it in the sitting-room, or—"

"No, let's have it here in the kitchen. I want to look out at the garden." Emma dropped her handbag on the kitchen table. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm just going to fetch my things from the car."

She returned to find her mother standing in front of an open cupboard, thoughtfully regarding several colourful tea canisters. "China or India?" asked Beryl.

"India. Assam, if you've got some."

Beryl took down a gaily-decorated canister and turned to face Emma. "You do look very smart today," she said, "though a bit severe, as if you're going to a funeral."

"Returning from one, actually," said Emma quietly.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Beryl fussed with the tea things. "Anyone I know? Or I should say knew?"

"Knew of." Emma sat down at the kitchen table. "Steed."

"Oh, no." Beryl left the tea to steep and came up behind Emma. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, resting her hands on Emma's shoulders.

"I only found out on Tuesday."

Beryl kissed the top of Emma's head. "I *am* sorry. You were rather fond of him at one time, I remember."

"I couldn't believe he died. I still can't," was all she chose to say in reply, not knowing whether to laugh or cry at her mother's ingenuousness.

Feeling the knots in Emma's neck and shoulders, Beryl began to gently massage them. "Tell me, how do things stand between you and Peter?"

"Exactly as they have all along."

"Is there any chance of you two—"

"None," said Emma sharply, cutting off her mother. "I shan't make *that* mistake again."

Beryl moved to where she could see Emma's face. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked, with a searching look at her daughter.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"You loved him, once," said Beryl, bringing the tea tray to the table and setting out the teapot, cups and saucers, sugar, and milk before taking a seat to Emma's right.

"Whom?" said Emma absently, pouring out tea for them both.

"Your husband."

"I might've been infatuated with him, once. That's not the same thing." She looked out at the garden. "It wasn't *him* I loved," she added, more to herself than to her mother, with a barely perceptible emphasis on the masculine pronoun.

Beryl did perceive it, however, and perceived everything it implied. She had thought Emma's subdued reaction to Peter's return peculiar at the time, and their increasingly strained relationship baffling. Emma never mentioned anything about what might have contributed to the failure of her marriage, preferring to dismiss her mother's tactful queries with vague evasions.

"Drink some tea," Beryl sighed, getting up and crossing to the stove to check the contents of a pot that had been simmering away for the past couple of hours. She lifted the lid, pulling her head back as a deliciously aromatic cloud of steam escaped from the pot. "I made a stew," she said, stirring the pot with a large wooden spoon. "It's nearly ready. You look like you could do with some hot food."

Emma sat staring out at the garden, now bathed in the soft gold rays of the setting sun. The breeze had died down, and the usually raucous clamour of the birds suddenly ceased. All was still and silent, and for a brief moment all was peace.

"You've not heard a word I've said, have you?" Beryl came back to the table and looked down at her daughter with affection and sadness. When Emma didn't respond, Beryl sat down beside her. "How did it happen?" she asked in a soft voice.

Emma turned to her mother. "How did what happen?" she murmured, trying to remember what they had been talking about before she lost herself in the garden.

"Mr. Steed. What happened?"

"He was killed in a car accident," Emma said. "While on holiday in France. They say he lost control, ran off the road. Off a cliff, to be precise."

Beryl's heart constricted. "Darling, I'm so sorry—"

"I still cannot believe it. He was an excellent driver—"

“Unfortunately, accidents *do* happen.”

“They do, but . . .” Emma stared out the window. “Oh, what difference does it make?” she said after a while. “He’s dead, and I never once told him that I . . . how fond of him I was.”

Beryl reached for Emma’s hand. “I dare say he knew rather more than he let on.”

“But I’ll never know for certain, will I?”

Seeking distraction, Emma found her handbag and took out her post, looking at each piece of mail again. One envelope now caught her attention. “‘Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle, Solicitors?’” she said, holding it up and looking at the return address embossed on it. “What in heaven’s name has Peter got to do with them?”

“I’m sure I cannot guess.” Beryl returned to the stove to tend to the stew.

“He’s being so *tiresome* about the divorce.” Emma looked about for a knife with which to slit open the envelope. *I can pretend I’m slitting his throat.* Finding none handy, she impatiently tore the envelope’s end off. “Can’t wait to see what this is about,” she said sarcastically, extracting a folded sheet of elegant crème-coloured bond. Emma quickly scanned the letter, then rose from her chair. “Have a look at this,” she said, coming up to Beryl and holding it out to her.

“I’m not wearing my spectacles, dear. You’ll have to summarise it for me.”

“It’s nothing to do with Peter after all. It seems I’ve inherited some property . . . Blast these lawyers, they can’t come out and say anything in a straightforward manner, can they? . . . A house on several acres, apparently.”

“To whom do you owe this legacy?”

Emma skimmed the letter. “Let’s see here— Good heavens, can’t they just get to the point? — Aha, ‘devise’ . . . blah, blah, blah . . .” She raised her eyes. “You’ll never guess. Uncle Edmund. He died what, about two years ago, didn’t he?”

“Two years ago just this past Epiphany.” Beryl gave the stew an absent-minded stir. “Odd that you weren’t notified earlier.”

“Seems there were some procedural hurdles, according to these London lawyers. They held off letting me know until everything was concluded to the satisfaction of the New Zealand probate court.”

“Do you remember Edmund? He left England when you were very small.”

“I was five years old,” said Emma, in that tone of voice children often adopt when their parents exasperate them with an unconsciously patronizing question. “Of course I remember him. He sent me a gift every year, on my birthday, until I married. I still have that stuffed koala he sent me from Australia, when I turned ten.”

“Where is the property? In New Zealand?”

“It’s in England.” Emma scanned the letter again. “Near a village called St. Mary Meade. In Oxfordshire.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of it,” said Beryl, taking dishes from a cupboard, “but then that’s nowhere near the old family stamping grounds. Fancy that. I had no idea Edmund owned any property in England. He was a bit eccentric, you know, a ne’er-do-well, and was virtually penniless when he emigrated. Funny

sort of man. Did very well down there, though. Er, Emma, dear, could you fetch the cutlery?"

"St. Mary Meade," Emma repeated softly, laying the table. "I passed by it today. Steed was buried not far from there."

Beryl ladled out two bowls of stew and brought them to the table. "Why do you insist on calling him 'Steed', as though he were one's butler or chauffeur?" she asked, taking her place at table. "Surely he had a Christian name. Or was it something ghastly, like Aethelwulf, or Diggory?"

"His name was John. I called him 'Steed'. Most of the time."

"And he called you 'Mrs. Peel', did he?" asked Beryl with a wry smile.

"Most of the time. Pass the salt, please."

"'The Way of the World'."

Emma gave her mother a baffled look.

Beryl leaned back in her chair and raised her eyes to the ceiling, summoning the words. "Don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks'," she recited, "let us be very strange and well bred: let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well bred as if we were not married at all.'" She looked back at Emma. "I'm not completely blind and deaf, you know."

Emma toyed with her food, unable to meet her mother's eyes. "From whom, pray, did you steal that?" she asked, trying to sound blasé.

"William Congreve, dear. You should have paid more attention in your literature courses."

"What literature courses?"

"Quite," said Beryl. "Oh, do stop playing with your food."

Emma ate another forkful or two before she spoke. "Sorry, I . . . I'm not exactly myself . . ."

"I know."

"I couldn't bear another minute alone in that horrid little apartment." Emma put down her fork and looked up at her mother. "Especially now."

Beryl took Emma's hands in hers. "I understand completely, darling."

Emma smiled wanly. "Only this afternoon I was thinking I might like to live in the country. I rather fancy having a proper little garden of my own, perhaps a cat or dog I can look after."

"It seems Edmund's legacy couldn't have come at a better time," said Beryl, chasing her last bite of stew with lukewarm tea. "Though I must confess I can't quite picture you as a dedicated horticulturalist. But a kitten or a puppy, now—"

"Steed's sister told me he was thinking of retiring to the country . . ." Emma pushed aside her bowl, what was left of her appetite gone. "I'd like to finish some research I started a long time ago, write a couple of papers—" She got to her feet. "Come, I'll do the washing up," she offered, collecting the dishes and taking them to the sink.

"Anything more to do in here?" asked Beryl, when Emma had finished washing and drying.

"I don't think so."

"Then let's go through to the study. You can join me in a glass of port."

"I want something stronger," said Emma, as they walked into the snug room her father had loved so

much.

“What would you like?”

“Brandy. Neat. And when I’ve anaesthetised my brain, I’ll go to bed.” She sat down on the sofa in front of the fire. “My marriage to Peter was . . . difficult from the very beginning,” she said as Beryl crossed to the drinks cabinet. “After his return, it was impossible.”

Beryl took out two small tumblers and an unopened bottle of brandy from the cabinet and brought them to the table that stood in front of the sofa. She poured a generous double for Emma and a smaller drink for herself. “That didn’t entirely escape me,” she said very gently, sitting down and putting her arm around Emma’s shoulders.

“Going back to Peter was a mistake.” Emma swallowed a large quantity of brandy. “A mistake I shall regret for the rest of my life, because it meant parting from Steed. Leaving him, and saying farewell to him this afternoon, were the two most difficult things I have ever done.” Emma finished her drink and poured herself another.

“My dear girl,” murmured Beryl, stroking Emma’s hair.

“He loved me . . .”

“My darling—”

“John . . .” Emma began to weep.

What a pity she had never met Mr. John Steed, Beryl thought with profound sadness as she held Emma. He must have been a remarkable man indeed.

5.

The brief respite from the past week's driving rains ended just before dawn with a relentless drizzle that gave every indication of continuing for the rest of the day and most likely into the coming week. Emma slowly turned over on her side, still clutching the pillow she had clung to all night, and squinted through puffy eyes at the bedside clock. Half past eleven, as best she could tell. But what did the time matter? Her head throbbed miserably, and her tongue, swollen it seemed to twice its size, was stuck to the roof of her bone-dry mouth. A gallon of water would be nice right about now; but she couldn't even muster enough energy to fetch a glassful from the bathroom.

Holding the pillow to her breast, she lay on her back staring at the ceiling, her thoughts returning once more to Steed. She'd hoped that, after her divorce was final, she might get in touch with him, see him again, if only to ask his forgiveness, if indeed he could ever forgive her for— *Oh, what's the point in dwelling on what might have been?* She rolled over on her stomach and buried her face in the pillow.

She did not hear the soft knocking on the bedroom door. "Emma?" Beryl opened the door and entered the room. "Darling, it's just gone noon—" she said, coming up to the side of the bed where Emma lay. "My poor girl," sighed Beryl, setting the mug of tea in her hand on the bedside table. She sat down on the bed and gently stroked Emma's head.

Emma started and rolled over.

"I brought you a cup of weak tea—" Beryl reached for the mug.

"I don't want anything," Emma croaked.

Beryl kissed her on the forehead. "Drink the tea. All that brandy last night, you must be parched."

"I don't care."

"I do." Beryl held the mug out to her. "Now sit up and drink this."

"Please, just leave me alone." Emma rolled back onto her stomach. "A good part of me died yesterday—"

"Brandy'll do that to one," Beryl observed, setting the mug back down. "Right, then, my girl." She stood up and grasped Emma by the shoulders, turning her over. "Sit up."

"I'll recover from the *hangover*," said Emma.

"Come on, up you get." When Emma didn't budge, Beryl stripped the covers off her.

"Mother!"

"Up, up, up!"

"Mother—" Emma struggled into an upright position.

"Come along." Beryl pulled her out of bed and pushed her into the bathroom. "First, a bracing shower. Then, after you've dressed, come downstairs for tea and buttered scones."

"Mother, I—"

"No arguments."

"Mother, please, don't you understand—"

"I understand that you need to start making plans, not lie about all day and all night feeling sorry

for yourself.”

“Is it so wrong to grieve for someone one loved?”

“You’re still grieving for yourself, not Mr. Steed.”

“How can you—”

“Be that as it may, I dare say he would want you to get on with your life, not mourn him for the rest of it.”

“I’ll never forget him.”

Beryl put her arms around Emma. “Of course not. And some part of him will remain with you always.”

“Mum . . .”

“Go on and take your shower,” said Beryl, giving Emma a tender kiss. “I’ll leave you to it, shall I?”

“Just don’t fuss.”

“You’ll find me in the kitchen. Promise me you’ll be down in a bit?”

“Very well, I’ll come down.”

Half an hour later Emma appeared in the kitchen, bathed and dressed, but looking pale and drawn. Beryl had set out scones, butter, and a pot of tea for her on the kitchen table, and now invited her to sit down. “Would you like a cup of Bovril’s?” Beryl asked, as Emma was about to take a seat.

“Hmm?” Emma shut her eyes. There was absolutely, positively nothing worse than a brandy hangover, she decided, swallowing hard. With the exception, perhaps, of a rum hangover. Her gorge rose at the thought.

“That bad, eh?”

Emma moaned.

“I have just the thing for it,” said Beryl, crossing to one of the cupboards where she took out a glass. Next, she fetched several ingredients from the pantry, including an egg and Worcestershire sauce, and proceeded to mix them all together in the glass.

Emma watched her mother with morbid fascination.

“Old family remedy for the morning after,” said Beryl, beating the appalling concoction with a fork. “Looks revolting, I know, but if you hold your breath and gulp it down in one swallow—”

“‘National Anthem’,” Emma uttered in disbelief.

“I beg your pardon?” Beryl paused, and looked up at her.

“Auntie Esme’s ‘National Anthem’. . .”

“It’s your grandmother Knight’s cure. Who, pray, is Auntie Esme?” Beryl finished mixing the stuff and handed the glass to Emma. “Purveyor of Patent Potions for the Painfully Pixilated?”

“Steed’s Auntie Esme.” Emma closed her eyes, held her breath, and swallowed the mixture, then dashed to the table for some tea to wash it down. “She gave him the recipe. He said she called it ‘National Anthem’ because it got one on one’s feet.” Her hand shook as she set down her mug, and

tears pricked her eyes.

“Well, between Auntie Esme and Granny Knight, you should be right as rain in no time.”

“The one time he gave it to me, it certainly worked,” said Emma, gazing out the window at the garden. How sad it now looked, the soggy, mud-spattered flowers lying flat and drab against the jet-black soil. It was just such a wet, dreary Sunday morning, a few years ago that had greeted her and Steed when they finally awakened after a late night out at some party or ball. She’d had more than a few drinks during the course of the evening, but when they got back to his apartment she insisted on another cognac before retiring for the night. He’d scarcely had time to give her a kiss before she’d fallen asleep, only to wake up the next morning with a hangover of such heroic proportions that it drove thoughts of anything else completely from her mind. He was so good-natured about it all, treating her with solicitude and never once chiding her for stubbornly ignoring his cautions the night before. While he might have been occasionally irresponsible, often devious, and always a bit of a rogue, his love for her had been unselfish and direct. What time they had had together now seemed so short, flown by all too quickly. The words to a long-forgotten song suddenly burst into her head: *Where are your eyes that were so mild, when my heart you so beguiled? Oh Johnny, I hardly knew ye.*

She was still staring out the window when her mother came up to her. “Give it time, my love,” said Beryl, dabbing with a tissue at the tears rolling down Emma’s cheeks. “The pain never goes away entirely, but it does eventually become tolerable. I still miss your father very much, you know, even after all these years.”

“Yes, I know that,” Emma whispered, hugging her mother.

“Come, sit down and eat something with your tea to soak up all that wretched brandy.” Beryl led her back to the table, where Emma sank onto one of the chairs. “I think I’ll have some tea, too.” She poured herself a mug, warmed up Emma’s, and then picked up a scone. Reluctantly, Emma followed suit, if only to please her mother. “Have you given any thought at all to what you want to do, at least in the foreseeable future?” asked Beryl.

“Well, there’s always the firm,” said Emma, nibbling half-heartedly at her scone.

“I think you should take some time off. Heaven knows you threw yourself into the business with a vengeance, after you and Peter split up.”

“The distraction it afforded me was a salvation.”

“The firm is doing very nicely, thanks to your indefatigable efforts. You don’t need to go back; it practically runs itself now. You yourself told me. As have others.”

“I need distraction all the more now.”

“Then finish that research you were telling me about, write those articles you’ve been wanting to write. And don’t forget about the property Uncle Edmund left you. For all you know about it, the house alone may turn out to be a full-time job, if it’s to be made habitable.”

“I suppose I’d better ring the lawyers first thing tomorrow morning, find out just what I’ve been lumbered with.”

“Look on the bright side, it can’t be any worse than that wretched apartment of yours.”

“Unless it’s missing its roof and all the windows,” Emma said, finally breaking into a smile. “But you’re right, that would be preferable to spending even one more night in that soulless apartment.”

“You can always stay here until—”

“Let’s see what the lawyers tell me, and what the house looks like. If I decide I want to live in it, I might just take you up on your offer while it’s being renovated.”

Beryl patted Emma’s hand. “There you are, you see, you have some plans now. As do I.”

“Oh?”

“There’s no gardening to be done in this filthy weather, so I thought I’d bake a couple of pies. Edith gave me some lovely peach preserves at Christmas. Will you give me a hand making the crusts?”

Emma sighed. “What I know about baking would fit in a thimble, with room to spare.”

“Then it’s high time you learned, my girl.”

6.

Mr. Tupman—more precisely, Mr. Tupman Minor, who at sixty-seven wasn't really very minor at all, but certainly nowhere near as ancient as his great-grandfather, old Mr. Tupman of Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle, who died at the age of ninety-six in nineteen-ought-two—asked his secretary to put through Mrs. Peel's call immediately. He doodled on his blotter while waiting for the extension to ring. When it did, he sat up very straight in his ample leather chair and picked up the handset.

"Good morning, Mrs. Peel. Josiah Tupman speaking . . . Yes, indeed, I am he. You received our letter, then, I take it . . . Excellent . . . There are a few formalities to attend to, some papers to be signed . . . When can I see you?" Mr. Tupman looked up at the clock on the mantelshelf. "As a matter of fact, I am free for the remainder of the morning," he said. "Would it be convenient for you to come at, oh, say half past ten? The rain will have let up appreciably by then, if the meteorological prognostications of the Bee Bee Cee are to be given any credence . . . Excellent! I look forward to meeting you, Mrs. Peel. Good bye."

Mr. Tupman put down the phone and began sorting through the papers lying in tidy piles all over his vast mahogany desk. "Lawless!" he called loudly into the intercom on the desk, "would you kindly step in here, please? I cannot locate the deed . . ."

At twenty minutes past ten Emma walked into the small but pleasingly appointed waiting room of Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle, and nearly collided with Helena.

"Mrs. Peel!" exclaimed Helena. "Hullo!"

"Good morning, Your Grace," replied Emma, shaking Helena's proffered hand. "Do call me Emma."

"Very well—but only if you remember to call me Helena," she smiled. "How are you?"

"Rubbing along. And you?"

"Ditto. Still can't quite believe it . . ."

"Neither can I, the more I think about it."

Helena noticed Emma's pallor, all the more pronounced thanks to her dark-grey business suit, and the puffiness of her eyes. "My dear," she murmured, taking her hands in hers. "Here about your legacy?"

Emma cocked her head. "Yes, but how did you know—?"

"Old Snodgrass read the will to us, of course—"

"He did?"

"Yes. It's the form, I think."

"Why would he read you Uncle Edmund's will?"

Now it was Helena's turn to look confused. "Uncle Edmund?"

"My mother's late brother."

"What's he got to do with my late brother?"

"Nothing, as far as I know."

“Ah.”

A frown creased Helena’s brow. “Then— Er, what legacy are you here about, exactly, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“Some property I’ve inherited.”

“You mean the old bus John left you in his will.”

“I mean the old house Uncle Edmund left me in *his* will.”

The two women stared at each other, and Helena began to laugh. “Let’s try again. You go first.”

“My Uncle Edmund left me a house and some land somewhere in Oxfordshire, in the vicinity of a village called St. Mary Meade. Mr. Tupman wrote to me, informing me of my inheritance. I’ve an appointment with him at half past ten.”

“John left you that old Bentley of his. God knows what my brother was thinking, but it’s yours now. That’s what I was driving at—as it were.” Helena coughed discreetly. “St. Mary Meade, you say? Then we shall be neighbours.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed. Langbourne—the ducal digs—ain’t a half-hour’s drive from there.” Helena chuckled. “You’ll cut quite the figure, tootling about the local hamlets in that jalopy of John’s, and give the yeomanry summat to flap their gums about.” She glanced at her watch. “I’m here to see Snodgrass at half past ten,” she said, was about to take her leave when she paused, and took Emma’s hand in both of hers. “Afterwards, I’m going to John’s apartment. I’m in charge of its contents. . .” She hesitated, then said softly, “Emma, my dear, if there’s anything of John’s you’d like to have—That is, you’re welcome to come with me—”

Emma was not at all sure she could return to Steed’s apartment without bursting into tears the moment she stepped across the threshold. On the other hand, Helena’s invitation afforded her the only opportunity she would ever have to look around for any clues to Steed’s activities before his death. There *had* to be something more to it than the accident everyone seemed content to believe killed him. She might not be able to bring Steed back, but if his death was no accident, she would bring to book whoever was responsible for it. She owed Steed that, at the very least.

“I’d like to very much, Helena,” she murmured. “Thank you.” She was not about to reveal her real purpose in accepting the invitation, preferring to let Helena think she was coming along for purely sentimental reasons.

“I shan’t be too long with Snodgrass. I’ll wait for you out here,” said Helena, with another glance at her watch. “And now we’d better cut along. Mustn’t keep the pettifoggers waiting.”

Mr. Tupman rose from his chair, graciously inclining his head, as Emma was shown in to his office. “Mrs. Peel,” he said, walking round the desk to shake her hand. “Josiah Tupman, at your service.”

“Mr. Tupman.”

“May I offer you sherry and biscuits, Mrs. Peel?” he asked. “Please, do sit down.” He indicated

one of a pair of comfortable-looking leather wing chairs facing his desk. The walls of the spacious office were lined with shelves and bookcases crammed with legal treatises, law reports, and bundles of documents. The room smelled, not unpleasantly, of a *potpourri* of odours: paper, ink, leather, and furniture polish.

“Er, if it’s not too much trouble, I’d prefer a cup of tea,” Emma replied, swallowing hard. The thought of anything remotely alcoholic was more than she could stomach at the moment. She took her seat in the armchair.

“No trouble at all, no trouble at all,” clucked Mr. Tupman, rounding his desk where he pressed a switch on the intercom and spoke deliberately into it. “Tea, Lawless.” He resumed his seat and reached for a stack of documents tied together with a red silk ribbon.

“I haven’t personally viewed the property,” he said, untying the ribbon and leafing through the papers, “but I understand from the local estate agent that the house is sound. Roof doesn’t leak, and the drains seem to be in order.” He removed some papers from the stack before him and placed them in a tidy pile to his right. “The grounds and garden have been kept up, and I gather the house is quite pleasantly situated.” He looked up from the papers at Emma and smiled. “A lovely part of the country, if I may say so.”

“Yes, it is,” said Emma. Steed had thought so, too. At least she would be near him.

At that moment a young man strutted into the room, one-handedly holding a tea tray at shoulder level. “Where would you like this lot, then, Mr. Tupman?” he asked, in distinctly East End accents. Lanky, long-haired, flamboyantly moustached, with a gaudy *faux* diamond stud in his left earlobe, and wearing a garish shirt-and-tie combination with his mauve-coloured, double-breasted, wide-lapelled, and flared-trouser-leg suit that screamed Carnaby Street from every dart and seam, the young man gave Emma a quick once-over and a bold grin as he awaited his instructions.

Mr. Tupman sighed. “On the table next to Mrs. Peel, Lawless.”

“Right you are, sir.” Lawless set the tray down noisily. “Shall I be Mum and pour?”

Mr. Tupman looked up from his documents with a pained expression. “That would be desirable, yes. And ask Mrs. Peel if she takes milk and sugar with her tea, or if she prefers lemon—”

“Just some milk, thank you, Mr. Lawless,” said Emma, wondering how this exquisitely-named character ever strayed into these venerable precincts.

“Darjeeling with a splash o’ cow juice it is,” Lawless affirmed, obliging. “ere you are,” he said, handing Emma a china cup and saucer. “Would you care for a biccie to go wif it, luv?”

“No, thank you, just tea.”

“That’ll be all, Lawless,” said Mr. Tupman.

“Right you are, sir. I’ll make meself scarce.” With another grin, Lawless turned and headed for the door, his Cuban-heeled boots clop-clopping on the hardwood floor just beyond the island of rug on which Mr. Tupman’s desk and the wing chairs were arranged.

Mr. Tupman removed his bifocals and blotted his face with a linen handkerchief.

“Quite a colourful fellow,” said Emma, taking a sip of her tea.

“Would you believe that he’s a Rugby man?” asked Mr. Tupman, with a myopic stare at her. Emma’s eyebrows arched. “With that tailor, and those vowels?”

“His father is a Q.C. Wants the lad to go into the law. But young Lawless has other ideas at the moment. He plays something called a bass guitar in some noisy modern rock and roll combo. Hence the affected accent, and the, er, what-ye-call-it, ‘fab gear’.” Mr. Tupman shook his head. “He’s got a good head on his shoulders, but he forgets where he is most of the time. Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle are hardly a go-go club, and our clients are *never* addressed as ‘luv’ by *anybody*. We live in trying times,” he concluded with a sigh, hooking his spectacles over his ears and moving a pile of papers toward Emma.

“I’m afraid there’s rather a lot of these I must go over with you and ask you to sign, Mrs. Peel. Once we do that, I can take care of all the requisite legal formalities attendant upon effectuating the transfer of title to the property described in the deed—that’s the first document atop the stack in front of you—into your name. I understand that you are married?”

“Technically. I have been legally separated from my husband for nearly a year, and am divorcing him.”

“I see. In that case, you will doubtless wish to take title in your name alone.” Mr. Tupman then proceeded to explain to Emma the legal effect of each document she was being asked to read and sign.

An hour later, Emma emerged from Tupman’s office shaking her cramped right hand—*just how many damned papers did I sign my full legal name to?*—and walked out to reception, where she found Helena, reclining elegantly on one of the settees, flipping through a back issue of *Country Life*. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting long,” Emma said, dropping the set of keys clutched in her hand into her handbag.

Helena tossed the magazine on a side table and got to her feet. “You must be joking, my dear. Snodgrass is probably the most long-winded, boring old fart of a lawyer one would ever have the bad luck to encounter this side of Hell. I only escaped about five minutes ago.”

“Tupman’s a close second, then. We must’ve reviewed every legal document from the Magna Carta to the Geneva Conventions. And I signed God knows how many more. I feel like the Recording Angel.”

Helena responded with a deep chuckle. “At least you’ll be spared a lengthy interview with Snodgrass. He’s taking care of John’s bequest to you of the Bentley, so you should be minimally inconvenienced in that regard. Though I dare say he’ll make a State Occasion of handing the keys over. In any event, you are forewarned.”

“And thus forearmed.”

“Precisely.” Helena took Emma’s arm. “Are you still up for it—coming with me to John’s apartment, that is?” she asked gently.

“Yes. I’d like to see it, one last time.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t a car. I came up by train—”

“I’ve got my car,” said Emma, “and, needless to say, I know the way.”

Helena drew Emma closer to her. “Let’s go and get it over with, shall we?”

As they slowly ascended to Steed's apartment, Emma recalled with painful clarity her last descent down these very stairs after exchanging farewells with Steed. Helena unlocked the front door and entered, Emma deliberately yielding the way to her.

Helena turned to Emma. "I'll leave you to it, then," she said kindly. "If you need me, you'll find me in the kitchen."

A flood of memories rushed at Emma as she stood in the middle of the living room. Except for the picture over the fireplace—the "Charge of the Light Brigade" having been replaced by a less overtly martial scene—nothing had changed. She slowly walked about the room. There were the old military prints hanging on the walls; the antique weapons displayed here and there; the crystal decanters of whisky and brandy on the tray atop the drinks cabinet; the small cherrywood humidior containing his favourite cigars; the tuba behind the Chesterfield, sprouting a bouquet of silk flowers from its bell; the familiar knickknacks scattered along the mantel shelf, including the pair of diminutive bronze cannons and the porcelain figurine of a Hussar.

Oh, Johnny, I hardly knew ye. She crossed to his desk, forcing herself to think, to be dispassionate and methodical. She picked up the diary lying next to the telephone and leafed through it. Nothing. Cautious man. Never one to leave obvious clues to his activities. There was nothing else on the desktop except the usual blotter, letter opener, pen-and-ink stand. She searched through the desk drawers, again finding nothing of interest. Perhaps he did simply go on a junket to France for the sole purpose of thinking about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life . . . There was nothing to be discovered in the living room. The next logical place to look was the bedroom.

Emma hesitantly ascended the spiral staircase. Halfway up she nearly turned back, but in the end convinced herself that she had to go on, if for no other reason than for his sake. She walked into the bedroom and looked about. Nothing had changed here, either. She was about to cross to the dresser when the elegant silver frame standing on his bedside table caught her eye. *Here's something new* . . . She walked over to it and picked it up. It held a black-and-white portrait of the two of them, taken in France a few months before her husband's return. Steed had worn his dark-blue suit, the suit she particularly fancied, and she remembered that the carnation he had selected that morning for his boutonniere was snow-white. The memory of his offhand remark, when he got the proofs back, that they looked for all the world like a pair of painfully self-conscious provincial newlyweds in their Sunday best posing for *le portrait officiel*, brought a bittersweet smile to her lips. Emma ran her finger over his likeness. *Oh, Johnny* . . . This would be the memento she would take.

Still clutching the photograph, Emma opened the doors to Steed's wardrobe, and was astonished to find that it was practically empty. All it held was one old suit; a couple of shirts beginning to fray at the cuffs; one ancient pullover; and one pair of well-worn boots. And where were his bowlers and umbrellas?

She crossed to the dresser. Like the wardrobe, it, too, had been emptied of nearly all its contents.

Emma walked back to the bed and sat down, laying the photograph beside her. *Why would he take all of his clothes with him if he were only going on a brief trip? I wonder . . .* She dropped down to the floor. *He always kept his revolver under his side of the bed . . .*

Emma felt around for the heavy wooden box and quickly found it. Empty. Though a very good marksman, Steed rarely carried firearms, and only resorted to them in extreme cases. *He wouldn't have taken it along on a holiday, and he wouldn't have taken it on a job unless he were expecting trouble. Serious trouble.* She was shoving the box back under the bed when, with a dull clunk, it met with another object.

Carefully, Emma felt about for the object, and came upon something porcelain and round. *What in heaven's name is a bowl doing here?* She slowly withdrew it. It wasn't exactly a bowl, as it had a handle. *Funny sort of ewer . . .* In it were several envelopes. Emma took them out and began examining them. *Bill from the tailor, bill from the vintner, bill from the Gas Board . . .* She paused, staring at the porcelain object from which she had withdrawn Steed's post. *Incorrigible man. Putting tea in the thyme canister, flowers in the tuba . . . What else but a chamber pot for the bills . . .*

The last envelope was most curious. It was of inferior quality, bearing a French postage stamp hand-cancelled with greasy black ink. There was no postmark. It was addressed simply to "3, Stable Mews, London, England."

Inside was a single sheet of cheap notepaper on which were scrawled two short sentences in crude block letters. "The northern slopes of the vineyards are threatened by smut'," the note read; "Look to your cellars for a reliable vintage'." Not surprisingly, the note was unsigned and undated.

Emma reread the words. *It's obviously a code of some sort. So his junket to France was not merely a sentimental journey. I was right. I knew . . . I know Steed.* She stuffed the other envelopes back in the pot, but pocketed the note. *No need to mention this to Helena, it'll only distress her . . . I must go to France . . .*

Chamber pot in one hand, she picked up the framed photograph and returned downstairs.

Helena was in the kitchen taking inventory when Emma walked in. "Look what I found under the bed." She held up the pot.

Helena's eyes started from her head. "A china jordan? I know my little brother had his foibles, but . . . There *is* a functioning toilet upstairs. Isn't there?"

"There is." Emma smiled. "He never used this object for its intended purpose, I can assure you. He kept his bills in it."

"Bills?"

"If you haven't already done so, you will soon discover he had a similarly absurd storage system in the kitchen."

"Eh?"

"He never put anything in its proper place," said Emma. "If you look in the canister up there labelled 'flour' you'll find the salt. The flour, of course, is—"

"—in the thingy marked 'salt'. That is so like him."

"I'll leave this . . . vessel on his desk," Emma said. "These bills may not have been paid, and doubtless Messrs. Snodgrass, Winkle and Tupman will want to make enquiries."

“Thanks. I’ll let them know. About the bills, that is. Not the pot.”

“As for a memento, I thought I’d take this photograph,” said Emma, removing it from the frame and holding it up.

“Take the frame, too—”

“I’m afraid I’m not yet brave enough to display it,” Emma replied, setting down the frame on a countertop.

“Is that all, my dear? Isn’t there anything else—”

“This is all I want or need,” she said softly. *Pity I didn’t have the sense to grasp that at the time . . .*

“Well, you’ll also have his Bentley,” said Helena. “He loved the old girl, but I suspect that had more to do with you than with anything else. You know he found her just before he met you.”

“Ran into me, you mean. *She* was always a temperamental wench.”

“Aren’t we all?” Helena interjected with a droll smile.

“Still, she was faithful to the very end.” *Unlike me.*

“Yes, she was, wasn’t she?” said Helena, her gaze unnervingly keen and perceptive, just like Steed’s. “You know, John prized you for your uncompromising loyalty. Among many other things.”

Too uncompromising, and utterly misplaced, or I never would have left him to return to that wretch I was foolish enough to marry. Emma glanced at her wristwatch. “It’s nearly one o’clock—”

“Is it? In that case, we ought to think about lunch—”

“Some other time, I’m afraid. I promised Mr. Tupman I’d drive down to St. Mary Meade this afternoon and look over the house I’ve inherited. Tupman wants me to confirm that the property is in as good repair as the estate agent claims it is, before all the documents are finalised.” She grasped Helena’s hands. “Do forgive me. You don’t mind, I hope—”

“Nothing to forgive, my dear. Of course I don’t mind. It was difficult enough for you, coming here—”

“Can I give you a lift somewhere?”

“No, I’m staying on for a couple of days. Give myself plenty of time to get everything sorted.” She smiled warmly. “There’s bound to be an off-license and an Indian take-away within walking distance, so not to worry, I shan’t starve.” She accompanied Emma to the door. “Promise me you’ll call on us at Langbourne when you’ve settled into your house.”

“I will. Good-bye, Helena. And thanks.”

7.

By the time Emma returned from St. Mary Meade and let herself into her mother's house it was early evening. "Mother?" she called out, pulling off her rain-dampened coat and tossing it on the coat rack. "I'm back!"

"Be with you in a moment, darling," Beryl's voice floated down from upstairs. "I seem to have mislaid my reading glasses again."

With a wry smile, Emma crossed to the small table by the foot of the stairs and picked up the spectacle case lying half-hidden beneath a carelessly folded tabloid next to the telephone. "Here they are!"

"Thank goodness," said Beryl, trotting down the stairs. "I couldn't think where I'd left them. Where were they?"

"Beside the telephone," said Emma, handing the case to her mother. She held up the tabloid. "Underneath this vulgar periodical. I had no idea your literary tastes ran to scandal sheets, Mamma. Did you buy this on impulse, or do you—God forbid—subscribe?"

"Neither, dear. Mrs. Catchpole obviously left it behind."

"Today is Monday. Mrs. Catchpole cleans for you on Wednesdays."

"That's right—"

Emma glanced at the tabloid's front page. "This is last Wednesday's issue."

"Is it?" Beryl took out her spectacles and put them on to look at the paper. "Why, so it is. I must be sure to return it to her when she comes in this week."

"I see it's a little the worse for wear. Having a nice quiet read, were you, when I rang you earlier?"

"As a matter of fact I was," Beryl airily replied. "I can tell you all about the latest manufactured Royal Scandal, who in the world of the Performing Arts is sleeping with whom this week, and what unnatural wonders are displayed on Page Three."

Emma pulled a face.

"You mustn't be so parochial," said Beryl. "You really *should* broaden your horizons, expand your knowledge of the world."

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I intend to do. Er, must we stand about here? I could do with something to drink—"

"I was just thinking of having a brandy and soda myself—"

"Mother—" Emma groaned. "A cup of tea is what I had in mind."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Sorry."

They walked down the corridor to the kitchen. "There's Chinese take-away left over from dinner, if you're hungry—"

"Thanks, I had a bite to eat in St. Mary Meade, before I left. Good thing, too. The M40 was at a complete standstill by the time I reached Gerrard's Cross. That's why I'm so late getting home."

“Well, sit yourself down while I make us some tea,” said Beryl, putting on the kettle. “Oo Long suit you?”

“Eminently.”

“Now, then, tell me about the house Edmund left you.”

“Early nineteenth century, two storeys, with a dormer-windowed attic and a finished cellar. It’s situated on a small rise more or less in the middle of the property, which measures several acres and includes a small wooded area and a stream. There are a couple of outbuildings behind the house—sheds, really—and the old stables, now serving as a garage.

“The last owner, I am told, was an elderly woman who lived in the house for some forty years before removing to warmer climes. Apparently that bitter winter a few years ago was the last straw, and the old dear upped sticks and fled to . . . Ibiza, was it they said?”

“What was Edmund thinking, saddling you with a large, draughty old house like that? Probably riddled with woodworm, or death-watch beetle, or something equally repulsive.”

“It’s nothing like that at all,” Emma said with a reassuring smile. “It’s spacious, but manageable: four bedrooms, bathroom, and toilet upstairs; sitting room, drawing room, dining room, small toilet, and kitchen downstairs. Even though the house has working fireplaces, about ten years ago central steam heating was put in, and it’s in excellent working order.” She chuckled. “I expect the house will stand for another hundred and fifty years, at least.”

“Is the roof sound?”

“It doesn’t leak—yet—but it’s quite old, so I’m going to have a new one put on.”

“Apart from the roof, does it need much work?”

“The woman who owned it took good care of the house, but it’s begging for restoration on the one hand, and modernisation on the other. Starting with the kitchen.”

“How bad can the kitchen be? I mean, it’s not as though you do much cooking—”

“I shan’t do *any* cooking on the antediluvian Aga that’s currently in there,” said Emma dryly. “I might do, however, if I have modern appliances, and well-designed countertops and cupboards, to work with. D’you know, that kitchen is fitted with an *icebox*? I reckon the last time it saw renovation was in the early nineteen twenties.

“And you should see the toilets—ancient overhead-tank-with-pull-chain contraptions. No doubt in their time they were considered a considerable step up from the brick outhouse—which by the way still stands back of the house. For purely, er, ornamental purposes, I hasten to add. Though I suppose in a pinch, if the drains back up . . .”

“Pray they do not. Particularly in winter.”

“Indeed . . . I’m also thinking of turning the drawing room into a study. It’s a lovely, cosy, sunny room. It’s even got its own little hedged-in rock garden. And of course throughout the house there’s stripping and varnishing to be done—unfortunately, a good deal of the original woodwork was painted over, probably several times, and I want to restore it to its original appearance. The hardwood floors need refinishing; and that *ghastly* Edwardian wallpaper in the big bedroom simply *must* go—”

“I am delighted that you have begun making plans for your new house,” said Beryl, a wide smile creasing her face. She brought the tea tray to the table and sat down before pouring. “Here you are,” she said, setting a large mug colourfully decorated with wildflowers in front of her daughter. “Sounds to me like you’ll have your hands full for the next several months. I expect you’ll want to decide on appliances and fixtures first, then on paints and drapes and things, and then find a reputable builder in the area to do the work.”

“Quite right. I don’t want to rush the job. While I do want to make some improvements to the house, I want to maintain its late-Georgian character. It will take months of work, to be sure, but it will be well worth the time and money.” Emma looked down at her mug, and blew on the tea. “It’s just the sort of house Steed would’ve chosen,” she said softly, “and spared no expense in restoring.”

“No doubt he would be very pleased with your plans,” Beryl said, trying to keep her tone as light as her heart was heavy. *A great pity indeed that I never met you, Mr. Steed.* “When do you propose to start?”

“After I return from France.”

“You’re going to France?”

“Yes.”

Beryl waited for some explanation from Emma, but got none. “Something to do with Mr. Steed?” she prompted.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Emma did not tell her mother about her visit to Steed’s apartment and what she found there. “I think he went to France on . . . business, and might have been deliberately killed.” Emma looked up from her mug at her mother. “I must find out. I *must*.”

“Then again, his death might have been nothing more sinister than an accident,” Beryl gently reminded her.

“Yes, well, that’s just what I mean to find out, isn’t it?”

“When are you leaving?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Emma sighed, and sipped her tea. “I’ll leave tomorrow.”

“But that leaves you hardly any time to get ready—”

“Do you still have those few clothes I left with you after I . . . went back to my husband?”

“You mean those avant-garde boiler suits of yours?”

Emma smiled. “My jumpsuits, yes.”

“Upstairs, in the attic. Hanging in your old wardrobe. As it happens, I aired all your things out again just last week—”

“You’re a darling.”

“You’ll be wanting them back, then?”

“Only a couple of the jumpsuits.”

“Well, I dare say the French won’t mind,” Beryl said dubiously, never ceasing to marvel at her

daughter's taste in fashion. "I don't imagine you'll be needing your negligees—"

"As I have no intention of sleeping with anybody, I shouldn't think so," Emma replied with commendable restraint. "Save for the jumpsuits, I have everything I need already with me. I could use a larger suitcase, though."

"You'll find the suitcases in the attic as well. Take your pick."

"Thanks."

"I'll leave you to it, then. You'll want to pack, and then go to bed, if you're to get an early start tomorrow."

"You *are* a darling, Mum." Emma regarded Beryl with deep affection, grateful for her mother's sense in knowing where the line between parental concern and officious meddling was drawn.

"Promise me you'll try and get some rest tonight," said Beryl, getting to her feet. "You'll need a level head in the coming days." She gave Emma a warm hug. "I think I'll go upstairs and climb into bed myself, and read for a while. Where did you say you left Mrs. Catchpole's newspaper?"

8.

Other than the fact that it was on the Côte d'Azur, roughly halfway between Cannes and St. Tropez, the hamlet of St. Cyr could boast of nothing remarkable enough to lure the connoisseurs and jet-setters from its more renowned neighbours. "Not even a two-star restaurant," Emma said aloud, thumbing the pages of the *Guide Michelin* she'd picked up at the airport. Having driven all round the town in under twenty minutes, she pulled her hired Citroën into a "no parking" zone in one of the side streets to consult the *Guide*. "Definitely *not* the sort of place I'd expect Steed to choose for a *holiday* . . ."

The one hotel she had spotted on the main boulevard was also not the sort of place Steed would have chosen to stay in. *Too modern; obviously built in the vain hope of enticing those recalcitrant tourists . . .* Tossing the *Guide* on the passenger seat, Emma put the car in gear and pulled away from the kerb, not wanting to unnecessarily attract the attention of the local gendarmerie, especially as she might be needing their assistance. As she drove up the street, she noticed an old but immaculately-kept three-storey house that seemed out of place in this now predominantly commercial precinct. Slowing down for a better look, Emma saw that the house was in fact a hostelry, with a small restaurant and bar on the premises, and a car park in the courtyard behind.

She turned into the drive and pulled to a halt underneath the porte cochère. "Hotel Excelsior" was engraved on a brass shield affixed to one of the walls next to the sturdy brass-handled oak doors leading into the lobby, and emblazoned in black-edged gilt lettering on the doors' etched glass panels. *Now this is just the sort of place Steed would've fancied . . .*

Emma glanced in the rear-view mirror and ran her fingers through her hair before getting out of the car and striding into the lobby.

The man behind the reception desk looked up when he heard heels click-clacking across the brilliantly-polished parquet floor. "*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*" he smiled affably as Emma came up to the desk. "*Pardon, Madame,*" he corrected himself, as she removed her gloves and revealed the wedding ring on her left hand. He did not, however, fail to notice immediately that she was dressed in an elegantly understated tailored charcoal-grey suit that left no doubt that its wearer was in mourning. "*En quoi puis-je vous servir?*"

"*Bonjour. Et, j'ai une question. Pouvez-vous me dire—*" Emma paused, a self-effacing smile on her lips. "No, of course not, you have no idea who I am . . . Ah, *je m'appelle Steed. Mme. John Steed. Je suis la veuve—*" The fact that she spoke French passably well was a card she would play close to the vest, for the time being. *Might not be prudent to show my entire hand to everybody just yet.*

The man behind the desk gave Emma a soulful look. "My sincere condolences on Madame's tragic loss."

"Thank you." Emma reached into her handbag and produced a small embroidered handkerchief, and daintily dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "*Merci.*"

"Please, speak English if you prefer."

"Do forgive me, I'm afraid my schoolgirl French just isn't up to snuff—"

“Perfectly understandable,” the man said. “Now, how may I assist Madame?”

“Mr. Steed may have stayed at this hotel the night before he died. He . . . he telephoned me the day before, from Nice, you see—”

The man slapped his forehead. “But of course! M. Steed—the English gentleman with the beautiful old Rolls Royce—”

“Just so.”

“Forgive me, Madame, for my incredible stupidity.”

“That’s quite all right,” murmured Emma. “The last time I spoke with Mr. . . . my husband . . . he said he was on his way to St. Cyr, and mentioned the Hotel Excelsior.” She twisted the wedding ring round and round her finger. “I thought . . . I wanted to see the last place he . . .”

“*Naturellement, Madame,*” the man said softly, pitying *le pauvre garçon* who left such a pretty young widow behind. “I understand.”

“Can you tell me if he stayed here?”

“I believe he did. But I was off duty the entire week . . . If Madame will please excuse me for a moment, I will check our records. They are in the small office there, just behind me . . .”

Emma took the opportunity afforded by the receptionist’s disappearance to have a quick look round. To her left, tucked in an alcove between the reception desk and the staircase, was a small lift. A sign at the foot of the stairs informed the patrons that the hotel restaurant was to be found on the mezzanine level. To her right was the entrance to a dimly-lit cavern, called simply “La Grotte,” that was the hotel bar. She walked over for a better look. A large part of the dark oak-panelled room was taken up by a long, curved, shiny bar, the glass shelves behind it displaying an impressive selection of beers, liqueurs and spirits whose reflections shimmered tantalisingly in the spotless etched-glass mirror backing the entire rear wall of the bar. Several small tables and chairs took up the rest of the floor space. The odour of countless Gauloises and Gitanes lingered in the air, mingled with the smell of wood and brass polish, and just a hint of ammonia. There was no one about at the moment, not even the barman, but from somewhere came the soft, soothing sounds of music. *Perfect spot for a nightcap, or a tête-à-tête . . .*

“Madame Steed?” called the receptionist, emerging from the office. He held a card in his hands.

“Yes?” Emma slowly turned around and returned to the desk.

“Would Madame like a glass of wine, perhaps, or—?” the man asked, with a solicitous expression on his face.

“No, thank you very much. It’s been a long journey . . .”

“I have checked our records, and M. Steed *did* stay here the one night.” He paused, then asked, “Does Madame desire to stay with us as well, after her voyage?”

“What room was he in?”

“*Pardon, Madame?*”

“Mr. Steed. What room did he stay in?”

The man glanced at the card he was holding. “Number 35, third floor.”

“Is that room available?”

The man frowned. "I do not know. The police, how do you say, cordoned it off, during the inquiries into Monsieur's demise. Since that time, the room has not been let to anyone."

"Well, as Monsieur was not found murdered in his bed upstairs, I doubt the police will object if you let me have his room."

The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Madame has made a very good point," he said, "with which I agree. However—" With a shrug of the shoulders, he spread his hands. "Who am I to say? Only *le chef*—the manager of this venerable establishment—has the authority to grant Madame's request."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"I will gladly telephone him, *immédiatement*, Madame, on your behalf." The man reached for the house phone, dialled a few numbers, waited, and then launched into rapid-fire French that Emma could barely keep up with. All she caught was something about "*la pauvre, la jolie jeune veuve, Mme. Steed*," who was "*monstrueusement distraite*," and desired to know "*toute suite*" if she was permitted to stay in "*numéro trente-cinq, au troisième étage*," as it was the room where her late "*bien-aimé mari, le pauvre M. Steed*" spent his "*dernière nuit*" on God's Earth.

"Well?" said Emma, after he had rung off.

"All is arranged," said the receptionist. "Madame shall have the room. I will summon the bellboy to fetch your *bagage*."

"Mine's the black Citroën just outside. Only the one suitcase, in the boot. Can someone park the car for me?"

"*Mais bien sûr, Madame*," bowed the receptionist, ringing a bell on the desk.

A bellboy materialised a few moments later. And boy he was—*sixteen if he's a day*, thought Emma, smiling at the lad as he came up to her and doffed his pillbox.

"*Didier, un mot*," said the receptionist, rounding the desk and coming up to the bellboy. "A word in the shell-like, old darling," he murmured in French, taking the bellboy aside and out of Emma's earshot. "That is the Widow Steed. You know, whose husband had the accident—"

"Say no more, guv," replied the bellboy in a whisper. "Kid glove drill, this."

"Just don't try to extort an unseemly tip from her, eh, sunshine?" the receptionist dryly cautioned the boy.

"I'll see 'er right, have no fear." Didier grinned. "Good-lookin' bird, i'n't she?"

"Madame Steed to you, boyo. And if you even *think* of trying something on—"

"I *never* take advantage of widows or orphans, guv, and you ought ter know that by now," said the bellboy, setting his pillbox at a jauntier angle. He turned on his heels and marched back up to Emma. "*À votre service, Madame*," he said. "And I do speak the English," he added with a saucy grin.

"Excellent. You can fetch my bag from the boot of that Citroën outside, there, and bring it up to my room. Number 35."

Didier marched off, and Emma took the lift upstairs.

A stout middle-aged man greeted Emma as she stepped out of the lift on the third floor. "Mme.

Steed,” he said gravely, “Jean-Luc Sammartini, hotel manager, *à votre service*.” He made a small bow.

“How do you do?” she said.

“My condolences, Madame,” he said, escorting her down the corridor to No. 35.

“Thank you, Monsieur.”

“If there is anything Madame requires, I will be honoured to see to it personally.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

M. Sammartini produced a key, unlocked the door to No. 35, and opened it. “Is Madame sure she wishes to stay—”

Emma entered the airless room and took a quick look around. “Has this room been made up?” she asked the manager. “Since my husband stayed in it?”

“No, Madame. We left everything untouched, as the police told us.”

“Of course.” *That’s interesting. The bed hasn’t been slept in.*

“A maid has been sent for to prepare the room for you.”

Didier now appeared in the doorway, carrying Emma’s suitcase. “*Voilà, Madame, votre bagage.*”

“Just leave it over there somewhere, thank you,” said Emma with a wave of her hand. She walked about the room, casually peered out the windows, and managed to glance into the small bathroom. *None of the towels have been touched.*

The manager pulled impatiently at his moustache. “If Madame does not require me, I shall go and find that maid. My apologies, Madame, she should have arrived by now.”

“It’s quite all right—”

“If Madame will excuse me . . .” The manager gave one last tug to his moustache and stalked down the corridor.

“I place your bag beside the *garde robe*, Madame,” said Didier. “Ah, here is Marie to do the room.”

“We’ll leave you to it, Marie,” said Emma, walking out of the room with Didier on her heels. “What’s your name?” she asked the bellboy.

“Didier Godard, Madame. Have I displeased Madame in some way?”

“Not in the least,” she replied with a kindly smile at the boy. At the lift, she paused, reaching into her handbag and pulling out some notes that she held out to him. “*Merci, Didier.*”

“*Non, non, Madame,*” said Didier, holding up his hands. “Thank you, but I cannot.”

“Why ever not?” Emma looked at the money. “Did I hand you the French equivalent of a hundred pounds, or something?”

An embarrassed smile appeared on Didier’s boyish face. “Not *that* much, Madame, though Madame is most generous. But it is not necessary. M. Steed, he, too, had only the one bag, and when I brought it to the room, he gave me a very large *pourboire*.” Didier looked down at the floor, his eyes growing moist. “More than sufficient to include your bag, Madame.”

“But I insist—”

Didier straightened to attention, then bowed. “*Merci, Madame Steed,*” he said softly, declining her

offer with a raised hand. After bowing once more, he executed a smart about-turn and dashed down the stairs.

Steed, on holiday and travelling with only one bag? Emma descended to the ground floor in the lift. Impossible. His suits alone required . . . And there were hardly any clothes in his apartment . . .

“Mme. Steed?” called out the reception desk clerk.

“Hmm?”

“If Madame would now care for some refreshment, the barman has returned and the bar is open,” said the clerk.

“Oh. Thank you.” She smiled. “I think I will have something after all.” *While my room’s being made up . . .*

Emma ordered a *pastis* at the bar and took it to one of the tables in a corner of the room. She sat down, closing her eyes and feeling very tired. *I must think . . .*

A young couple strolled into the bar, animatedly chatting in Italian. After getting their drinks, they retired to the corner opposite Emma, leaning in toward each other and continuing their conversation in more muted tones. Emma opened her eyes and watched them discreetly. *Obviously in love, and obviously newly married*, she thought, not without a touch of envy mingled with bitterness and regret.

She looked away, struggling to focus her sluggish mind and formulate some kind of plan, but couldn’t concentrate long enough to arrive at any cohesive thoughts.

A few more people filtered into the room, among them a middle-aged man in uniform. “*Comment allez-vous, Pierre?*” he said jovially, taking off his kepi and placing it under his arm as he walked up to the bar. “The usual, please,” he said, casually leaning against the bar.

“*Ça va, M. le Commissaire, ça va,*” Pierre the barman replied, mixing a Campari and soda and placing it in front of the man. “Lovely afternoon, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is, especially after all that rain we’ve had lately.” The man sipped his Campari, discreetly taking note of the other patrons as Pierre served them. “The woman in the corner, over there—” the man said, when the barman returned with an ashtray in one hand and a bar cloth in the other. “—*Ah, merci.*” He opened the cigarette case he had been toying with and took out a cigarette. “Care for a smoke?” He held the case out to Pierre.

“*Merci,*” said the barman, taking a cigarette. “She is the widow,” he murmured, lighting the man’s cigarette, then his own, “of the English gentleman who died last week.”

“A sad business,” the man sighed, pocketing the cigarette case and collecting his drink. “Very sad. I should express my sympathy to her.”

Pierre nodded, casually wiping the bar and slowly moving off in the other direction.

The man crossed the room to Emma’s table. “Madame? Permit me to introduce myself,” he said to Emma in English. “Georges Chabrier, Superintendent of Police. May I join you?”

She looked up at the uniformed man. *Do I have any choice?* “Yes, of course,” she said to him.

The Superintendent set his drink down on the table and dropped his kepi on a chair before

taking a seat across from Emma. “You are Mme. Steed, widow of M. John Steed, the gentleman who was killed in the automobile accident several days ago?”

“Yes.”

“Please accept my condolences, Madame.”

“Thank you.”

“Your husband was in France on business when he died?”

“Yes.”

“What *was* his business?”

“Imports,” said Emma. *Why all these questions? Surely you checked on Steed’s background after the accident . . .*

“Importation of what, exactly?”

“Wines,” she replied. “From France, Germany and Italy.”

“Did he travel much?”

“When it was necessary.”

“And always in that antique Rolls-Royce?”

“When necessary. To impress a potential supplier. John had a very exclusive trade.”

“And whom was he trying to impress here, in St. Cyr?”

That’s what I’d like to find out. “I have no idea. My husband never discussed such details with me.”

The superintendent smoked thoughtfully. “Tell me, Madame, if you are the widow of M. Steed, why does your passport identify you as ‘Emma Peel?’” He took out his cigarette case, opened it, and held it out to her. “Do have a cigarette, Madame. It will steady the nerves.”

“My nerves don’t need steadying,” said Emma.

“Then why is your hand shaking so much that I can barely light the cigarette for you?”

“I buried my husband less than a week ago, and you ask me that?” she said coldly.

“I also asked you another question, to which you have not yet given a reply, Mme. Steed. Or should I say Mme. Peel?”

“I was ‘Peel’ before I married John. My passport is perfectly in order, Monsieur—”

“You did not obtain a new one upon your marriage to M. Steed?”

Out of the corner of her eye Emma glimpsed the Italian couple leaving the bar. “We were only married for three weeks when he—” She turned away, feigning distress and covering her face with her hand.

“Only three weeks?” The superintendent raised an eyebrow. “And he did not take you with him to France?”

“Not this time,” said Emma, her distress no longer feigned as she thought about the last time she and Steed were in France together, in this very region. “I . . . I couldn’t get away. I have my own firm to run, you see . . .”

“Yet you come here now—”

“Of course I came!” Emma exclaimed. “He *died* here, for God’s sake! I had to come, to see . . . to say goodbye, if nothing else.” She found her handkerchief and began blotting her tear-filled eyes.

“Madame, calm yourself!” murmured the superintendent. “Pierre!” he called to the barman. “*Un armagnac pour Madame, s’il vous plait!*”

“I was perfectly calm until you started asking me all these *absurd* questions,” Emma angrily protested, regaining her composure and fixing Superintendent Chabrier with a cold, if watery, eye. “May I have another cigarette? Mine has now burnt down to the filter.”

“But of course, Madame,” he said, in a soothing tone, holding out his cigarette case to her once more. “With your permission—” He reached across the table and held his lighter to her cigarette.

Emma took a slow drag on her cigarette and waited for the policeman to speak.

“I am in the business of asking questions, Mme. Steed,” said Chabrier, himself lighting another cigarette and exhaling a cloud of pungent blue-grey smoke. “—*Merci beaucoup, Pierre,*” he smiled, as the barman set a snifter of Armagnac in front of Emma and a second Campari and soda in front of the superintendent before beating a swift retreat to his redoubt behind the bar. “I had to be sure, you see, that you were indeed M. Steed’s wife,” he said to Emma, taking a sip of his fresh drink. “After all, we do not want overly-inquisitive impostors coming here asking impertinent questions.”

“What ‘impostors?’” she asked. Her eyes narrowed. “And what ‘impertinent questions’, exactly?”

Superintendent Chabrier sighed. “*Les journalistes*, the ones who write the sensational stories, Mme. Steed, and pretending to be someone they are not: a friend, a sister, a wife . . . St. Cyr is a very quiet little town, with nothing to commend it to the glitterati or to the yellow press. We prefer to keep it that way. We do not need some bored scribbler coming here and turning an unfortunate accident into something . . . sinister, just to sell a few cheap newspapers.”

“Why should any anyone do that?” Emma shot back. “Unless of course John’s death *wasn’t* an accident, and you are covering up that fact.”

“It *was* an accident,” the superintendent patiently replied. “But that does not stop certain unscrupulous reporters from writing the thrilling fiction, instead of the dull facts.” He spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. “It happens all the time, and for no other reason save money. Lies and slander always sell, *chère Madame*. Nobody is entertained by the truth.” He smiled. “Aren’t you at least going to taste your Armagnac, Mrs. Steed? It is very good—better, I think, than most *cognacs*.”

“I’m tired, and I want to rest. My room should be ready by now—”

“You will rest more comfortably if you have that drink,” he said softly.

“I want to see where John . . . where the accident happened.”

“I see you still do not believe it *was* an accident. *Eh, bien*. I will take you to the place where it happened.” He took another drag on his cigarette. “If that is what you want.”

“That is exactly what I want.”

Superintendent Chabrier met Emma’s eyes. “Madame, difficult as it may be for you to accept the facts, they are these: It was raining very hard the morning M. Steed left this hotel. The visibility on

the road was extremely poor. There was loose gravel on the road—washed down by the rains—where your husband lost control and . . . That old Rolls Royce was difficult to drive under the ideal circumstances, never mind in inclement weather and on a defective road surface. We investigated the accident thoroughly. There was no reason to suspect anything other than an accident. Nobody who travelled that road that morning—in either direction—noticed anything peculiar or unusual. In fact, there was no one seen on the road who might have been in the vicinity of M. Steed at the time the incident occurred. I assure you, Madame—”

“I just want to see for myself,” Emma said in a subdued voice, taking a generous swig of the Armagnac.

“I understand.” Chabrier got to his feet. “If you would like to meet me at the Prefecture de Police at, shall we say, eleven o’clock tomorrow morning, I shall take you to the place where it happened.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Very good. Until tomorrow, then, Mme. Steed.” Superintendent Chabrier made a small bow, turned, and walked out of the bar.

Emma stared after him, and once he was out of sight she downed the remainder of the Armagnac in one swallow, got up, and made her way back to her room for a bath and the longed-for nap.

The superintendent ascended the stairs to the mezzanine, where he installed himself in one of the telephone kiosks by the restaurant doors. He dropped a couple of coins in the telephone. “Chabrier here,” he said into the receiver as soon as his call was answered. “I thought you should know that a lady calling herself Mme. Steed is staying at the Excelsior,” he said in a low voice. “I didn’t think so . . . Well, if she wants us to believe she is Mme. Steed, what is the harm? . . . *Exactement* . . . She’s meeting me at eleven tomorrow, to see where it happened . . . *Bien*.” Ringing off, he rose slowly and, with a great sigh, descended the stairs to the lobby and walked out into the street. *I wonder if you appreciated, M. Steed, the depth of Madame’s loyalty to you . . .*

9.

The alarm clock bleated shrilly for nearly a full minute before Emma finally woke up, unrefreshed and still plagued by the nagging headache she had gone to bed with.

“Oh, belt up,” she muttered, reaching for the alarm and, after a couple of tries, shutting it off. She fell back on her pillows and closed her eyes, willing the throbbing of her head to stop. Her efforts didn’t work, of course, and only served to increase her frustration, particularly as her inquiries the night before had yielded nothing.

She had gone to every bistro, bar, and club in the centre of town and discovered nothing. Not knowing what Steed’s purpose in coming to St. Cyr was, and what guise he might have adopted to suit that purpose, compounded her difficulties. Did he act the part of the bluff, open Englishman enjoying a holiday on the Continent? Or did he deliberately keep a low profile to avoid calling attention to himself? Not that it much mattered. None of the waiters and bartenders she had spoken to recalled seeing anyone fitting Steed’s description, or any “English gentleman” for that matter, and if they did, they certainly weren’t saying.

Perhaps Steed hadn’t gone into town. Perhaps he had driven somewhere. But where? He could have driven *anywhere*. And not necessarily in that museum piece of a Rolls Royce of his. Anybody who saw that car would be unlikely to forget it. He could have hired a car. That might be worth following up. Steed hadn’t spent the night in his room at the Hotel Excelsior; that much was clear. But it was equally clear that trying to guess Steed’s movements that night—without a single clue to guide her—was an exercise in futility.

She dragged herself out of bed. *Nine o’clock. Two hours until I’m to meet Chabrier. Just enough time to make myself presentable and get a decent infusion of caffeine.* She stretched, groaning as the pounding in her head intensified, and crept off to the bathroom.

The police prefecture, like every other place of any consequence in St. Cyr, was within easy walking distance of the Excelsior. After a quick breakfast of croissants and coffee in the hotel restaurant, Emma set off on foot for her meeting with Chabrier.

She encountered few pedestrians and fewer vehicles on her way, having deliberately chosen an indirect and less travelled route to the police station. Nevertheless, the feeling came over her, as it had the night before, that she was being watched. From time to time she stopped, ostensibly to gaze into a shop window but in fact scanning the reflections in the glass for any sign of being under observation, but detected nothing out of the ordinary. Nobody stopped, whenever she did, to window-shop or browse the odd open-air stall; no one ducked hurriedly into any open doorways; no cars or scooters slowed as they went past her. *I mustn’t allow my imagination to run away with me*, she told herself, knowing that she must remain objective and detached in her investigation. *If Steed’s death was in fact an accident, who could have any possible interest in spying on me?* She glanced at her watch, and, brushing aside all thoughts of spies and surveillance, strode quickly down the street so as to be in time for her appointment.

Precisely on the stroke of eleven Emma walked into the police headquarters and identified

herself to the duty sergeant behind the desk. "M. le Commissaire is expecting me."

The sergeant nodded, then picked up his telephone and dialled. "*Mme. Steed est arrivée, M. le Commissaire.*" He put down the telephone. "M. le Commissaire will be down immediately, Madame," he said to Emma. "If you would care to sit down—" he gestured at some chairs standing against the wall opposite the desk.

"That won't be necessary," said Chabrier, rattling down the stairs. "Mme. Steed and I are going for a drive." He crossed the small vestibule to Emma and shook her hand. "*Bonjour, Madame. Alors, you still wish to see where it happened?*"

"I wouldn't have come if I didn't."

They walked out to the street, to a dark saloon standing at the kerb. "You seem tired, Madame. It could not have been a very restful night for you, at the Excelsior," he murmured, opening the door for her.

"I've got a headache, that's all," she replied, getting into the car and wondering if he was hinting at her nocturnal prowling through the town.

Chabrier quickly navigated his way through St. Cyr and to the road leading westward from the town. Neither spoke.

"Were you in charge of investigating my husband's accident?" asked Emma, once they were a few kilometres outside St. Cyr.

"Yes."

She had made up her mind earlier in the morning that she would not mince words with the superintendent, but would come straight to the point. "Did you not find it odd that the bed in my husband's hotel room was not slept in? That none of the towels in the bathroom had been used?"

"We observed that, yes—"

"In fact, it appeared that my husband did not spend a single minute in that room."

"Quite so."

She turned to Chabrier. "Well?"

"Madame, there are any number of possible explanations—"

"Try one."

The superintendent sighed. "Did you know your husband well, before you married him?"

"Very well. For several years."

"Before he came here, how did he seem to you?"

"What do you mean, how did he seem to me? He seemed perfectly normal."

"You did not quarrel?"

"Certainly not."

"Forgive me, Madame, I do not wish to distress you any more than you already are. Allow me to be blunt. Is there anything you are aware of, in your husband's business affairs, or in his personal life, that could have led him to—"

"You think he killed himself?" exclaimed Emma, shuddering at the very idea. *No, not Steed.*

Surely not. The Steed I knew would never . . .

“I cannot say for certain, Madame. I did not know the man. However, a man contemplating suicide might well drive around all night long thinking about it, return to the hotel for his things—perhaps not sure he would go through with it after all—and then, while driving along these cliffs, and in a moment of despair . . . It does not take but a moment, as you will see for yourself, to make the terrible and irrevocable decision.”

“I can’t believe it of him,” said Emma, more to herself than to Chabrier. *I don’t want to believe it.*

“M. Steed did not appear to have any business in St. Cyr. In fact, he stated on the hotel registration form that the purpose of his visit was *tourisme*. Our little town is very charming, of course, but only to the natives. It does not have much to recommend it to the *connoisseurs* and *bons vivants*. Did M. Steed have friends in this vicinity?”

“No, not that he ever mentioned.”

“Not that he ever mentioned . . . But he visited France in the past, did he not, at various times?”

“Yes. And with me, on several occasions.”

“He was in France during the war at some point, *non?*”

“I’m sure your investigation—thorough as it was—would have yielded the answer to that question,” said Emma dryly.

“Once again you must forgive my bluntness, Madame, but I will not insult your intelligence with anything less.” Chabrier coughed slightly. “If a gentleman wished to spend the night discreetly with someone not his wife . . .”

Emma did not reply. Chabrier had a point. An all-too-obvious point. And Steed was certainly free to do as he pleased . . .

“Madame—”

“You’re quite right,” said Emma. “If it wasn’t suicide or skulduggery that kept him away from the hotel, the simplest and most obvious explanation is a mistress.” *At least to you Frenchmen. An English copper would have taken a little longer to arrive at so decadently Continental a theory, his first guess being that the bloke simply got drunk and slept it off at the side of the road somewhere.*

A few kilometres further along the road, Chabrier pulled over to the right-hand shoulder and stopped. “Here is where it happened, Madame. But before you get out of the car, let me assure you that we have no reason to suspect foul play in your husband’s death. As you will see, the road here is very treacherous, and as I explained to you before, the weather was very bad, there was debris on the roadway, and that old car was difficult to handle under such conditions, even for an expert driver.”

“Tell me, did you ever find his mistress?” Emma asked coolly, crossing the road with Chabrier to the cliff’s edge.

“*Non, Madame*, and we never will, unless she comes forward, which is highly unlikely.”

“What if this mysterious mistress had something to do with his death?”

Chabrier threw up his hands. “Madame, we found no evidence in M. Steed’s room to suggest anything was amiss when he fetched his *bagage* and left. No blood on the walls or in the drains, no

muddy shoeprints on the windowsills, no odour of bitter almonds in the air, no corpses of venomous snakes or spiders under the bed.

M. Steed did not hire a car—we checked; nor was he taken anywhere by taxi—we checked. He did not go far—he must have walked or perhaps bicycled, because we know the Rolls Royce did not leave the hotel car park between M. Steed’s arrival and his departure the following morning. No one in any of the bars or cafes remembers seeing him. *Probablement, non, évidemment*, he went to see someone at their place of residence, ate dinner at home with that person, spent the night there, and returned to the hotel early the next morning to collect his belongings and his car and proceed to wherever it was he was headed next.

“Nor was there any suspicious evidence, of any kind, here at the site of the accident. We interviewed the drivers who regularly travel this road, in both directions, at the time M. Steed was driving that morning, and not one of them noticed anything or anyone unusual. No fleeing vehicles, no mysterious motorcyclists, *rien*.” He pointed at the roadway. “*Regardez la chaussée, Madame*. Just look at it. And it has been what, a week? See over there?” He pointed at the embankment paralleling the road along the right shoulder. “Yesterday was the first clear day we have had in three weeks. For the past two of those three weeks, it rained constantly and heavily. The rain washed a good deal of that mud and rock onto the road, which made for very little traction . . .”

Reluctantly, Emma had to agree that Chabrier was probably right in his evaluation of the evidence and his conclusion that Steed’s death was not murder. “All right,” she said wearily. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Chabrier led her carefully to the edge of the cliff, and she forced herself to look down. It was a sheer, dizzying drop of a few hundred feet, with ugly, jagged rocks just visible beneath the foamy swirling water at the cliff’s base. A few feet above the high tide line, a narrow shelf of rock jutted out, bearing fresh scorch marks that could only have been left by an intense petrol fire. Immediately below, among the rocks and sparkling in the sunlight, lay tiny shards of glass and small bits of metal, the last remnants of the wrecked Rolls.

Emma turned away, feeling sick. Her headache now returned with a vengeance, and she thought her head would split. “Take me back to the hotel, please,” she uttered to Chabrier.

The superintendent offered her his arm, and slowly walked her back to the car. “There is a small flask of cognac in the glove box,” he said, gently handing her into the passenger seat. “Perhaps a sip or two would revive Madame?”

“No, thank you, I’ll be all right in a minute,” Emma replied, shutting her eyes and taking several deep breaths.

Chabrier got behind the wheel, rolled down his window, and patiently waited for Emma to recover before starting the engine and heading back to St. Cyr.

10.

After Chabrier dropped her off at the hotel, Emma went straight to the bar, ordered a brandy, and took it back to the same table she had occupied the day before. This early in the afternoon, there were no other patrons to distract her, and she could not stop herself from picturing the awful spectacle of Steed's car careening off the road and onto the rocks below, then exploding in an infernal ball of fire. Chabrier was completely off the mark in suggesting Steed's death might have been suicide. *Steed would never . . . And in such a grisly manner . . . It doesn't bear thinking about . . .* She gulped more brandy, hoping to quell the unbidden, ugly thoughts now rushing at her.

From behind the bar, Pierre watched Emma as he polished up the beer pulls. *Poor girl . . . Why did she have to come here? She knew how her husband died. What possible comfort can it be to her to actually see where it happened?* He threw aside his cloth, poured another brandy, and brought it to her.

Emma looked up. "I didn't order—" She glanced about nervously, but there was no one else in the room.

"On the house, Madame," said Pierre. "You look like you need another one of these." He then reached into his shirt pocket and brought out a packet of Gitanes. "You also look like you could do with a smoke." He opened the packet and offered it to her.

She managed to fish out a cigarette. "Thanks," she murmured, dismayed at how much her hand shook.

"Not at all, Madame," said Pierre, producing some matches and giving her a light. "Please, keep them," he smiled, leaving the Gitanes and the matchbox on the table before returning to his duties behind the bar.

Emma had a couple more cigarettes before finishing her drink and getting up to leave. Thanking Pierre again on her way out, she walked into the lobby, paused, then crossed resolutely to the reception desk. *Steed's death was an accident, nothing more, and that's the end of that. There's no need for me to stay on here.*

"*Mme. Steed! Bonjour!*" The same receptionist from the previous afternoon manned the desk, and now came up to her, smiling.

Emma contrived a pleasant social smile in return. "*Bonjour.* I'd like my room key, please. Oh, and I'd also like to settle my bill."

"You are leaving us, Madame?"

"First thing in the morning. My business here is concluded."

"Of course, Madame. I comprehend." He turned to the pigeonholes on the wall behind him. "Your key, Madame," he said, turning back to Emma and handing it to her, "and this came for you." He held out a long white envelope.

Emma turned the envelope over in her hand. It was an ordinary, commonplace envelope, the kind sold in shops all over France, and was simply addressed to "Mrs. John Steed." Obviously it was hand-delivered. She turned away, opening the envelope and taking out a folded sheet of equally unremarkable paper. What was out of the ordinary, however, was that the message it contained had

been created by cutting and pasting words out of newspapers. “Derelict factory, 10 km east route from St. Cyr, midnight tonight,” it read.

Quickly folding up the sheet of paper, she turned once more to the receptionist. “Silly me,” she said with an embarrassed little smile, “this quite escaped my mind. I still have one small matter to attend to before I depart . . .”

“You will not be leaving tomorrow morning after all?”

“Doesn’t look like it. I’ll settle the bill later.”

“Certainly. Whenever is convenient for Madame.”

“Er, do you happen to know when this letter arrived?”

“I cannot say precisely. The maid found it under the door when she came to clean your room, and brought it to the desk immediately, in case you were still in the hotel.”

“I see.” *Somebody delivered it after I left to meet Chabrier . . .* “It’s not important,” she added, seeing the anxious look on the receptionist’s face, “I was just curious. I have ample time to keep the appointment.”

“Very good, Madame,” said the receptionist, relieved that the hotel staff had not made a *faux pas* with respect to Mme. Steed’s missive.

Emma took the lift to the third floor. Once again, she walked the corridors and took note of where the stairs and fire exits were located, only this time she was also scouting out the least conspicuous means of egress from the building. When she had found it, she made her way quickly back to her room and let herself in.

A brief search revealed nothing suspicious, and it did not appear to Emma that anyone other than the maid had been in the room during her absence. Overcome by fatigue, she undressed and got into bed, and lay there wondering who had sent her the strange note. *It’s too obvious—it must be a trap. But why? Why would anybody want to lure me to some abandoned building in the middle of the night? I pose no threat to anyone. I don’t know anything more than the police, or anyone else for that matter. Unless Steed’s death was murder . . .*

Her last thoughts, before she drifted off into a fitful sleep, were of Steed and of cool, fragrant spring nights in a certain little village somewhere in the Luberon . . .

11.

Emma jolted awake and sat up in bed, raking back her hair and rubbing the back of her damp neck. *It was a dream, only a dream . . .* Unrestored, and with the bitter aftertaste of her dream still on her dry tongue, she got out of bed and padded into the bathroom, where she spent the next fifteen minutes under the warm, soothing jets of the shower.

She dressed quickly, choosing the understated dark-blue trouser suit for now. She would take a drive east along the main east-west route out of St. Cyr, find out where that abandoned factory was, then stop somewhere for a leisurely dinner, and afterwards return to the Excelsior to wait out the time until her midnight rendezvous . . .

A few minutes after eleven o'clock, Emma changed into her black catsuit, the one she'd always donned for what Steed used to flippantly refer to as their "Combined Night Ops." She opened the door of her room and cautiously peered out into the corridor. No one stirred. Not that there were many people in the hotel, this early in the season, to be stirring about. No signs of any late-night maid service, either.

She slipped out of her room and down the corridor to the out-of-the-way exit she had reconnoitred earlier. A few minutes later, she was in the dimly lit alleyway behind the hotel.

Emma crouched in the shadows of the high wall that ran the length of the hotel property, and peered up and down the alley. Apart from a couple of cats scrounging titbits from the overflowing dustbins nearby, there wasn't a soul in sight.

The alley debouched into a dark little side street lined with small shops that had all lowered their shutters for the night several hours earlier. Keeping to the more shadowy side of the alley, Emma sprinted the few hundred yards to the alley's end and paused to take a look behind her. One of the alley cats leapt atop some precariously stacked empty crates, causing them to topple over with a clatter and send the poor moggy flying with a piercing screech into a pile of rubbish-filled plastic bin liners. But no one bothered to come out to see what all the racket was, or shoo the cats away. No one seemed to be following her.

Pressed up against the building at the alley's end, Emma looked around the corner into the street. Just as she had anticipated, it was deserted, save for a few parked cars here and there. She walked briskly up the street, occasionally throwing a glance behind her. Earlier in the evening, upon returning from her excursions, she deliberately left her car in this inconspicuous street, rather than the hotel car park, so as not to draw attention to her midnight outing. As far as the hotel staff were concerned, she had returned to the hotel after a most satisfactory dinner at a restaurant recommended by the reception clerk, and had retired to her room for the night after concluding her evening with a couple of cigarettes and a snifter of Rémy Martin in the hotel bar.

This street, Emma knew, would take her to the ring road, which in turn would bring her to the primary east-west route out of town. Noiselessly she let herself into her car, slid behind the wheel, and opened the glove box to take out the torch she had bought that afternoon. She flicked it on and off to

assure herself it was working properly, laid it on the seat beside her, started the engine, and drove slowly up the empty street.

She reached the ring road without incident, checking her mirrors constantly to see if she were being followed, but there was very little traffic this late at night, and no one tailed her for more than a few minutes before turning off. As she reached the main route and turned east, Emma glanced at the odometer, noting the mileage, for the road was poorly illuminated and she might not be able to make out the landmarks she had observed, on her drive that afternoon, when she neared the abandoned factory.

What little traffic there was, was all headed westbound. Not a single pair of headlamps appeared in her mirrors over the course of the next nine-and-a-half kilometres, and she spotted no one behind her driving without lights. Emma slowed down, keeping an eye on the odometer; the turn-off to the factory should be coming up quickly. Several hundred feet further along, and there it was, ten kilometres exactly from the intersection of the east-west route with St. Cyr's ring road.

Switching off her headlamps, Emma swung the Citroën into the factory road and drove northwards. The surface of the road was in terrible condition, full of cracks and potholes and loose stone. She was glad she had scouted the way earlier, when she could see the road and the dangers it presented to the unwary driver. The going was slow and bumpy; any speed above a snail's pace could easily lead to a blown-out tyre or a punctured oil pan.

Some bone-shaking minutes later, Emma finally reached more or less level ground and the factory's forecourt. By day, the derelict building had looked merely seedy and sad, its knocked-out windowpanes like sightless eyes and its rough, weather-beaten brick façade like the coarsened face of a lifelong alcoholic. By night, however, it took on a more ominous appearance, and now loomed black and huge and menacing against the starlit sky. *Oh, do stop being so absurdly fanciful*, Emma said sternly to herself, a thrill of anxiety tingling her spine.

She drove the length of the building, past its boarded-up main entrance, and turned the corner, knowing from her afternoon reconnoitre that the only means of entry not barricaded by splintered and decaying wood beams was through a small door about two-thirds of the way along this side wall.

Emma continued to the back of the factory, where she stopped the car and switched off the engine. She looked at her watch. *A good fifteen minutes until the witching hour . . .* Picking up the torch, she eased out from behind the wheel, pocketed her keys, and stole round the corner to the side door.

The planks and two-by-fours that had once been nailed across the doorway had been clumsily ripped off, most likely by the same individuals who had painstakingly knocked out all of the factory's windows, and lay in a rotting pile a few feet away. The door had obviously been forced open with a heavy crowbar at some point, its locks destroyed in the process, and it now swung open at a cautious prod from Emma.

She let herself in, softly pushing the creaky door to behind her, and stopped to listen before switching on her torch. She heard a rustling, scuttling sound nearby, and shuddered. *Argh! Rats!*

Somewhere in the distance water dripped steadily, probably from a broken pipe or leaky tap,

onto what sounded like a metallic surface. Behind her, the door creaked a little with every puff of wind that chanced to hit it. Otherwise, the cavernous building was silent as a tomb.

Another shudder went through her. *Fine time to think of tombs . . .* She switched on her torch and took a look round.

The factory's interior walls and partitions had been knocked down for the most part, though here and there some crumbling sections of lath and plaster remained. The floor was coated with plaster dust and littered with rocks (no doubt the missiles hurled by the local vandals at the windowpanes), shards of glass, rusty screws and nails, and pieces of decaying wood. What had been manufactured here was difficult to say, for the factory had been gutted of all its machinery and equipment. Only a few broken-down fixtures remained: against the wall opposite the windows stood a long steel trough on buckled legs, and next to it a long countertop littered with broken glass coils and retorts; decomposing rubber hoses; and thin, heat-seared squares of asbestos. A few corroded metal drums stood in a gagging, rancid pool of viscous fluid that had oozed into several smashed wood palettes lying nearby.

Chemical or perhaps pharmaceutical plant? . . . Emma took another look round for signs of other drums leaking God-knows-what all over the floor, but to her relief found none. *Last thing I need is an acid bath . . .*

Having satisfied herself that the side door was the only means of entry into the factory, Emma decided she had better find a suitable place to conceal herself.

The wooden crates piled higgledy-piggledy in front of the broken windows were the logical choice, as they afforded the most cover. Emma cautiously picked her way through the debris toward the crates and shone her light on them and the surrounding floor. *No noxious liquids seeping out from anywhere . . .* She saw a small crowbar lying on the floor, and picked it up. *Very handy . . .* She moved behind the crates and squatted, the windows at her back. *From here, I should be able to hear anyone approaching the building.* She peered out from behind the crates and pointed her torch straight ahead. *Side door dead ahead. Now all I have to do is stay out of sight and wait for my anonymous correspondent to show up.*

Minutes dragged by, the ticking of Emma's watch sounding in her ears almost as loudly as the throb of her quickened heartbeat. She didn't want to risk switching the torch on again, however briefly, to check the time. She shifted uncomfortably, and leaned against the wall.

Argh! She jerked forward, vigorously brushing a cobweb from her face with the back of her hand and nearly dropping her torch in the process. The sensation of octaves of little hairy spider legs inching their way down her neck very nearly made her jump out of her skin.

Suddenly she heard the side door give a mournful groan, then slam shut.

Her heart in her mouth, Emma chanced a quick peek in the direction of the door. Without the aid of the torch she could make out very little in the darkness and shadows. Still, she was certain no one had come in. *It's only the wind . . . It's only the wind . . .*

Several moments later, the incessant drip-drip of the faulty faucet abruptly ceased.

What the hell was I thinking, coming here alone, without you to back me up? Since I left you, I've completely lost whatever sense and edge I once had . . . What was I thinking?

Emma strained her ears and every fibre of her body, but several more moments went by in utter silence. Until . . .

What was that? She stiffened. *Something, someone, just beneath the windows . . .* Emma held her breath, striving to listen. *Damn this pulsing in my ears . . .*

She made out a faint, gritty sort of noise, as of soft footfalls on sand-strewn pavement.

Now, as suddenly as it had stopped, the sound of water dripping resumed.

How many of them are there? Her grip tightened on torch and crowbar.

A few seconds later, she heard the tinkle of shattering glass, followed by a soft thud. *That came from the other side of the floor, not from the doorway . . .* Still in a crouch, Emma slowly turned to her left and inched forward, then cautiously peered out from behind the crates, looking for the shape of a human figure or figures in the shadows. Nothing.

Setting her torch down, she placed her hand on the floor to steady herself as she shifted position to ease the cramp in her legs. *Bugger . . . Better stand up while you still can . . .*

Something damp and furry brushed against her hand. With a yelp, Emma tried to push it away, and in doing so lost her balance and sat down hard on her backside.

With an unearthly screech, “it” flew up on top of the crates and rocketed out the broken windows.

When the cat (for that is what “it” was) initiated its acrobatic vault to the outside world, it set the rickety pile of crates teetering dangerously. *Hell . . .* Emma scabbled about for her torch, then leapt to her feet.

My mysterious letter-writer, if he’s lurking about, will have heard that wretched cat . . . She raised the crowbar to shoulder height and, keeping a wary eye on the wobbly crates, tiptoed back to where she had originally positioned herself.

How long she stooped there, between the crates and the windows, listening and watching and waiting, she did not know. All she knew was that it seemed like ages. Her muscles ached from unrelieved tension, and now a dull throb began to rise from the base of her skull.

Emma lowered the crowbar, no longer able to keep her numb arm steady. *Should’ve sat in the bloody car instead of squatting half the bloody night in this bloody rat hole . . . Bloody rats . . .* The only sounds she’d heard after the cat vanished was their vile scuffling. She shuddered.

Just as she began giving serious thought to abandoning her vigil and returning to the hotel she heard a noise. This one was definitely not made by any rodents, but it made her tremble. What she heard was the unmistakable sound of someone cocking an automatic pistol.

Emma tightened her grip on the crowbar and, ignoring the ache, raised her arm up again. *Where are you? Wait a minute . . . You can’t possibly be over there, by the door . . . That sound came from an entirely different direction—*

No sooner did Emma realise what that meant than she felt a strong blow to her arm from behind. The crowbar fell to the cement floor with an ear-shattering clang. *Shit.* She spun about, quickly shifting the torch to her right hand, gripping it at one end and wielding it like a truncheon.

A beam of brilliant white light shot out of the darkness directly into her eyes. *Shit!* Blindly, she lunged forward, chopping at the air with her hands. The edge of her left hand painfully met with something cold and hard. With renewed energy, she lashed out with a kick, then another, and yet another . . .

A hard, low tackle sent her flying headfirst over her assailant. She landed flat on her face, gasping for breath, all the air having been knocked out of her when her attacker's head connected with her just under her breastbone.

He's got a gun, but he didn't use it . . . Emma got back on her feet, fighting for air and still unable to see anything other than a psychedelic kaleidoscope of spots before her eyes. She turned in the direction of her attacker and once more lunged forward.

All it took was one swift push, between her shoulder blades, to slam her up against the crates.

"Don't move," a voice behind her said softly. She felt what could only be the automatic pistol pressing into the small of her back.

Emma reacted swiftly and instinctively, pushing herself off the crates with all her strength and spinning about, aiming a kick at the man.

"I told you not to move," she heard him say, as the crates creaked and swayed wildly.

Emma glanced up at the crates, the spots in her eyes now forming a less vivid pattern, and could see just enough to know what was coming. *Oh, shit. . .*

She felt his vicelike grip on her arm, jerking her away just as the uppermost crate tumbled down. Then she felt his icy fingers on her neck, and then . . . oblivion.

12.

Emma had no idea how long she had been unconscious when she finally came to. It was still pitch dark, and she found herself sitting in what felt like a wobbly old wooden swivel chair, bound to it by chains that also wrapped round her arms, waist, and ankles. The chains smelled strongly of rust. Emma leaned backwards, trying to loosen her hands and feet, and very nearly ended up on her back when the dilapidated chair shot forward on its wheels while at the same time continuing to recline far beyond its originally intended limits.

Emma uttered a short expletive in French. *I can't see; I'll never be able to work myself free of these bloody chains; I can't even move, unless I want to risk breaking my neck.* She uttered another short expletive, this one unmistakably Anglo-Saxon in origin. Nobody was going to come looking for her any time soon; nobody knew she was here, and wouldn't discover her missing until morning. *Marvellous.* There was nothing to do but wait for her captor to return.

She didn't have long to wait. She saw the beam of an electric torch bobbing in the distance before she heard the crunch of heavy boots on the factory floor. She felt all her muscles go taut as she waited for his approach.

He drew near, pointing the torch ceilingwards. She saw that he was a tall, well-nourished middle-aged man with a tired face.

"What do you want with me?" she barked at him in French.

She could also see that she was in what must at one time have been an office partitioned off from the factory itself. The glass in the partitions was long gone, and the only objects still standing in the room were a rickety table, a three-legged metal stool, a badly-dented file cabinet, and a desk missing half its top and all its drawers.

"I want to know who you are," the man replied in heavily French-accented English. He had brought with him a kerosene lamp that he now set down in the centre of the table. Holding the torch under his arm, he found a box of matches in his coat pocket and proceeded to light the lamp. "*J'aime mieux ça,*" he said, switching off the torch. He pulled the stool toward him with his foot and sat down.

"Was it you who left me that message at the hotel?"

The man nodded.

"In that case, you know bloody well who I am," she snapped.

"You are not who you claim to be," he said mildly.

"No?"

"Madame, I am an old friend of Steed's—"

"You mean you *killed* him—"

The man looked at her sympathetically. "Steed was killed in an automobile accident, Madame. That you know."

"No, that I *don't* know. Moreover, if that were true, why all this cloak-and-dagger nonsense? Why leave me that absurd note and drag me all the way out here in the dead of night, then render me

senseless and truss me up like this? What could you possibly want with me if Steed's death was truly accidental?"

"When a strange woman turns up one week after Steed's death, holding herself out as his widow, I am naturally curious, because I know that John Steed did not have a wife."

"Just who the hell are you?"

"As I said, an old friend of Steed's."

"Then what stopped you from simply calling on me at my hotel? Or do you actually enjoy fifth-rate spy melodrama?"

"I do not enjoy it at all. But it is best we are not seen together."

"Best for *you*—"

"Best for everyone." He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. "Why did you come here, Mrs. Peel?"

Emma glared contemptuously at the man. "Since you seem to know so much about me, surely you can guess."

He sighed. "You are right, I probably can." He sat up straight again, and put his hand into his coat pocket.

"So you're going to shoot me *now*, are you?"

"*Non, Madame*, I am not going to shoot you," he said, taking out a set of keys. "I am going to remove your shackles—but only if you promise no more of the martial arts, eh? I am too old for such vigorous exercise."

"What if I don't promise any such thing? Will you shoot me *then*?"

"Mme. Peel, I have no desire to shoot you." He got to his feet with a grunt. "*Bien*. Since you insist on being so *obstinée* . . ."

"Hey, you can't leave me here like this!" Emma exclaimed as the man picked up the torch and turned to go.

"I can, and I will. For the moment. But soon I will return, I promise you." So saying, he disappeared into the darkness.

Now that she could see, thanks to the kerosene lamp, Emma looked about for something she might be able use to defend herself. *How* she intended to do so, assuming she found anything remotely answering her needs, was a separate problem. *First things first* . . . But there was nothing save tiny bits of broken glass, splintered wood, and a good deal of rubble littering the floor. She was ready to give it up when she noticed, in the corner to her right, what looked like a couple of long screws or bolts lying among the other debris.

Very slowly Emma turned toward the corner and, gripping the floor with her toes, inched carefully and deliberately forward. In spite of her caution, however, her chair began to rock and sway crazily, which in turn caused it to roll. As the chair's wheels were out of alignment, Emma found herself sliding sideways, away from where she had intended to go. Her efforts to stop the chair's progress only made matters worse, and resulted—predictably and inevitably—in her lying on her back in the flipped-

over chair, staring up into the darkness above, utterly discouraged and feeling quite sorry for herself.

Presently she heard her captor's footsteps approaching.

"*Pour l'amour de Dieu,*" he sighed, looking down at her. "Mrs. Peel, what am I to do with you, *hein?*"

"Try setting me upright," she said dryly.

"*Pas encore.* Let me examine you first." He had a wicker basket slung over his left arm, which he now deposited underneath the table.

"Just you go ahead and try it!"

The man squatted beside Emma. "I was a medic in the war. Now, look at the light." He passed the beam of his torch across her face several times in rapid succession, then more slowly, all the while looking into her eyes. "Did you wound yourself?"

"Only my pride."

He chuckled. "You did not hit the back of your head?"

"No."

"I do not think you have the concussion." Gently, he righted her chair. "Listen to me this time, and do not move, or you will fall again and there is no guarantee you will be as fortunate the next time," he said, taking out his keys again, and proceeded to unlock the padlocks holding her chains.

Emma quickly shook off her restraints, but when she made a move to get up the man held up his hand. "*Non, non, non,*" he said softly, then held his hand out to her. "*Le siège,* Mme. Peel, the chair, it is unstable—"

"The Siege Perilous, indeed," she muttered, reluctantly grasping the man's hand and allowing him to help her to her feet. She walked about, rubbing her arms, her circulation soon returning to her numb extremities.

Meanwhile, the man had stuck a makeshift shim under the short leg of the table and cleaned off the tabletop. "I have brought something for us to drink," he said to Emma, picking up the basket and setting on the table. From it he took out a bottle of wine and two goblets. "If you will hold these, Madame, I will uncork the wine."

Emma stared at him. "You're joking."

"I am not. I only have the two hands—"

"I could smash those glasses and—"

"—and then we would both have to drink from *la bouteille*, which is no way to enjoy wine if one cares at all about the aesthetics of drinking. Here." He held the goblets out to her. "You will not break them and deprive us of this delightful vintage's bouquet. Steed would not have put his trust in you if you were capable of such a barbarous act of *vandalisme.*"

"Just who are you?" she asked the man once more, but less contentiously this time.

"My name is Georges Delacroix," he replied, pulling the cork from the bottle and pouring wine into the goblets. "Please, sit down on the stool." Setting down the wine bottle, he stepped out of the

room and returned a few moments later dragging a wooden box. “There. Now we can both sit.” He moved the box opposite Emma, with the table between them. “I met Steed during the war.”

“You were with the Resistance?”

Delacroix nodded. “After the war, we both pursued shall we say similar professional interests, and did business together on several occasions. But we always considered each other more than mere colleagues. We were friends.

“A few years ago, I moved to the south of France—my wife got tired of the city, I always wanted a little vineyard of my own—” He spread his hands. “And so here I am. My house is not very far from here.”

“You could have told me all this over a *pastis* in the Excelsior bar,” said Emma, her anger returning.

“No, I could not. I had to verify your true identity, which I undertook to do as soon as I was informed that Steed’s non-existent widow was in town, carrying a passport with the name ‘Emma Peel’, and making enquiries into his accident. I discovered that a ‘Mrs. Emma Peel’ had worked with Steed in the past. Then I had to verify that you were in fact ‘Emma Peel’ and not an impostor.

“I resorted to that absurd note, as you called it, because I knew you would think it a ruse, I knew it would pique your curiosity, I knew you would not disclose it to anyone, and I knew it would bring you here tonight. You are clever and resourceful—you must be, to have worked with Steed.”

“So clever and resourceful that I let you knock me out and chain me to a death-trap of a chair,” said Emma coldly.

“I did not expect—”

“What *did* you expect? That I’d show up for this rendezvous in a frilly party frock toting a couple of bottles of bubbly and sweetly cooing into the darkness, ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are?’”

“*Pas du tout.*” Delacroix chuckled. “That should have been *my* line.” He swirled the wine in his glass. “I did not expect such a vigorous confrontation with you—”

“Bear that in mind the next time you send an anonymous message made up from words cut out of newspapers.”

“I also did not expect it would take so long to confirm who you were. I had to subdue you in order to take your fingerprints. If you were indeed ‘Emma Peel’, *bien*. If not, well, then I had you where you could do no more mischief.”

She regarded him icily. “*You* sent Steed that anonymous message about the vineyards and the vintages . . . Another ruse, Delacroix? What was your motive for enticing Steed to these parts?”

“You still do not believe me,” sighed Delacroix. “Surely Steed must have told you about our little joke.”

“The last time I spoke to Steed was nearly two years ago,” she said. “Or is that the one detail about me you somehow missed?”

“Mme. Peel, what I know about you comes from official sources. I know that you have not

worked with him in approximately two years, yes—”

He doesn't know the rest of it . . . “Why did Steed come here?”

“Why do you want to know?” Delacroix countered softly.

Emma didn't answer immediately, and sipped her wine. “I'm having a hard time believing his death was an accident,” she finally replied.

“Why?”

“Because I knew him very well, Delacroix. He'd driven in these parts before, he was an excellent driver . . .” She met his eyes. “If someone did kill him, I mean to avenge his death.”

Delacroix spread his hands. “*Alors*, Madame, it *was* an accident. You have spoken to the police, to Chabrier, *non?* You have been to the location of the accident, *non?*”

“You know all about that, then? Of course you do, it's your business, isn't it?”

“I know that the police did a thorough investigation—”

“—and are completely satisfied it wasn't murder. Yes, I heard all that, too.” She held her glass out to Delacroix. “You still haven't explained your note to Steed.”

Delacroix filled her glass. “As I said, it was a little joke we shared,” he said, splashing more wine in his own glass before setting down the bottle. “Whenever either of us wanted to get in touch, he would send the other a silly ‘anonymous’ message in what looked like secret code. It didn't matter what the message said—the meaning was always ‘give me a ring, it's been too long’. I hadn't seen John in several years, certainly not since moving here, and so I sent him that message. I did not know until he telephoned that he had already made plans for a holiday in France, and would be driving all the way to the southern coast.”

“Seem a lot of bother, your little messages. Why not simply pick up the phone if you wanted a chat?”

“Telephone calls are not always convenient,” said Delacroix. “For one reason or another.” He sipped some wine. “Anyway, it was more amusing our way.”

That's just the excuse Steed would have given me. “Did you see Steed before . . . before the—”

“Right after Steed arrived in St. Cyr, he came to my house. Vivienne—my wife—prepared a wonderful meal, we ate, we talked about old times, and then John and I stayed up drinking brandy and telling each other many lies.

“I'm ashamed to admit that we got very drunk. Vivienne quite understandably forbade us both from driving back to the hotel, and insisted John spend the night *chez nous*. He was in no condition to refuse, but by dawn the next day he was up, anxious to be on his way.” Delacroix took another sip of wine. “The weather was very bad. I urged him to ring the hotel, stay another day with us, but he declined, and I took him back to St. Cyr. He must have left shortly afterwards, and . . . You know the rest.”

Emma regarded Delacroix sceptically. “Steed *never* got drunk,” she said.

Delacroix toyed with his wineglass. “He did that night.”

“And why was he in such a rush to leave in the morning? He was ostensibly on holiday. More

to the point, he would have been suffering from one hell of a hangover.” *As I can imagine only too well . . .*

“I cannot say why he got drunk, Madame, or why he was anxious to go. But I’m afraid you are right, the next morning, *il a mal aux cheveux*.”

“Yet you left him, in that state, knowing he’d be driving, and in such foul weather?”

“Mme. Peel, Steed was a grown man. No one could not stop him from doing what he wanted.”

“How did he seem, the night before the accident?”

Delacroix furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“His mood. What was it like?”

“Expansive, as usual, good-humoured . . . Though his conversation did become more sombre as the evening wore on. Perhaps because we reminisced so much, and drank so much. We were all young during the war, and despite its horrors, so much happier in some ways. Youth is hope, youth is optimism, youth is belief in one’s own immortality. *Ah, les bons vieux temps* . . . Gradually, imperceptibly, age robs us of our fearlessness, of our militant *joie de vivre*, until all that remains is impotent nostalgia.”

“That’s all very well, but did Steed say anything specifically—”

“He seemed . . . how would you say . . . ‘adrift’ in the sea of our conversation. He was malcontent, and spoke of missed opportunities, mistakes he had made . . . I remember telling him that it was time we broke with the past, forgot certain things, and moved on, so that we would not one day find ourselves so mired in *la nostalgie* that we no longer possessed the desire to go on living. To live in the past, to the exclusion of the present and the future, is death.”

The blood drained from Emma’s face. “Just what did he tell you?”

“He never told me precisely what was troubling him. He spoke of quitting the job, and of new beginnings, but there was an undercurrent of *melancolie* I had never seen in him before. It seemed to me there was something he did not want to let go of. I suspected it was an *affaire de cœur*, an affair long over but one that still haunted him in his vulnerable moments.” Delacroix shook his head sadly. “He *did* have a lot of brandy that night.

“Finally, when we were both thoroughly drunk, I got him to concede that I might be right, that it might be time for him to lay the past to rest. I remember he laughed, raising his glass to me, and telling me that he had one last thing to do before plunging into that new life he’d spoken of. But what he meant, I cannot say, as he never elaborated. We were too inebriated by then—”

Emma’s heart sank. “You still think his death was an accident?”

“Yes, I do. It *was*, dear Madame, as I said—”

“You’ve never considered that it could have been . . . intentional?”

“*Intentional?*” echoed Delacroix, completely taken aback. “As in . . . *le suicide?*”

“*Précisément.*”

He gave Emma a long, searching look. *Mon Dieu . . . L’affaire passionnelle . . . La femme inoubliable— c’est vous! . . . Dieu vous bénisse, chère Madame . . .* “*Non!*” he exclaimed. “*Jamais!* John was not capable of that! Suicide is the coward’s last resort, and John was anything but a coward! *Non, Madame!* John died in a stupid, unfortunate accident, never by his own hand! You must believe that!”

Don't you think I want to? . . . What was that 'one last thing' you had to do, John? . . . Dear God . . . Emma closed her eyes. "What am I to do now?" she murmured, to herself and not to Delacroix.

He took her hand. "Mme. Peel, your mere presence in St. Cyr might be misinterpreted by certain people. Very simply, you have placed yourself in danger for no other reason that your former association with Steed."

"It doesn't matter . . ."

"Go home, Madame. There is nothing you can do for Steed except remember him and pray for his soul. Go home."

Emma left St. Cyr early the following morning. She drove to the place where Steed had died, got out of her car, and walked to the edge of the cliff, where she sat down and stared out at the horizon.

It was a beautiful day, the air cool and fresh, the sky clear and brilliant as only the Mediterranean sky can be, and the blue sea with only a few whitecaps here and there where the breeze caressed it. Her thoughts returned to that other spring a few years ago, when they had spent a blissful week in a little village nestled in the hillsides not very far from here. She drew her legs up, wrapping her arms about them, and rested her chin on her knees. *A spring day just like this one, so bright, so exuberant, so full of new life everywhere, and just the two of us, lying underneath an apple tree on an old wool blanket, looking for faces in the puffy white clouds sailing overhead . . . Oh, Johnny, I hardly knew ye . . .*

She shut her eyes, willing all the pent-up tension and emotion and anxiety in her to go. *Let go . . . just let it go . . .*

"Good-bye, my darling," she whispered, "fare thee well."

Emma covered her face with her hands and began to sob. At last, she was able to weep for him.

PART TWO

*Temper, O fair love, love's impetuous rage;
Be my true mistress still . . .
Donne, Elegy XVII*

13.

The long-case clock at the top of the stairs uttered a long, low purr then sounded a single muted chime. Emma slouched in her bed, struggling to hold up the book she was reading. Her eyelids had grown heavier and heavier in the last quarter of an hour, and she realised she could not make sense of the paragraph she had just reread for the third time. At the sound of the clock striking she started, letting go of the book, and sat up. The book slid off her lap onto the floor with a peremptory thud that in the stillness of the night seemed as loud as the report of a gun.

Her sharp intake of breath was followed by a sigh of relief mixed with impatience. She blinked a few times to dispel her grogginess, and glanced at the alarm clock on the bedside table. *Twelve o'clock and all is well*, she thought crossly, chiding herself for selecting a thriller for her bedtime reading and for being so ridiculously jumpy. She had never been the nervous, fanciful type who feared being alone at night in a dark, empty house. Not as a rule, anyway.

Emma swung her legs over the side of the bed, feeling the rug with her toes for her slippers. *A soothing brandy, that's what I need, and then back to bed for a good night's sleep*. She found her slippers, slid her feet into them with a yawn, tripped over her book with a muttered imprecation, and shuffled out of the room.

She had one foot on the top stair when she thought she heard a sound coming from below. She paused, listening intently, but all she heard was the rhythmic tick-tock of the clock directly behind her. Emma slowly descended the staircase, stopping on the first landing to listen again. Was it her overwrought imagination, fuelled by a combination of sensational fiction and stormy weather? Most probably. It *was* an old house, and she hadn't lived in it long enough to grow attuned to all its idiosyncrasies. Timbers creaked, drains gurgled. And as everyone knew, nighttime magnified innocent noises tenfold and swathed them in sinister guises. Setting her jaw, she stealthily descended the second flight of the dog-leg staircase and paused on the bottom step to listen once again.

It rained heavily all evening, and the sound I heard was probably water dripping from the eaves . . . But then the sound would surely repeat at regular intervals . . . Emma looked to her right, at the double doors to the study, one of which was partly open; then to her left, in the direction of the sitting room doors, which were firmly shut. She was certain she had secured all the ground floor windows as well as the front and back doors before retiring for the night. Remaining motionless on the stairs, she listened. Nothing. And then she heard another sound, a sort of click, followed by a creak, coming from her right, from the study. She shifted her eyes to the open study door, holding her breath. Yes, there it was, another

sound, this time the sound of . . . Of what, exactly? Of someone moving very slowly but assuredly across the room, someone unafraid of meeting with an obstacle in the darkness.

Emma stepped out of her slippers, praying the tread underfoot wouldn't emit a sharp creak the moment she took her weight off it. It didn't, and she crept silently, like a cat, toward the doorway.

With bated breath, she peered into the study. Though the room lay in shadow and darkness, she could see the French doors were not quite shut, the heavy curtains having been drawn apart. The storm had passed, for the moon now shone pale light into the small rockery beyond the French doors. Emma saw the figure of a man stooping in front of the fireplace, trying to fan some life into the glowing coals that were all that remained of that evening's fire. The man, who gave the impression of being tall and muscular, wore a peaked cap pulled down over his brow and a short, heavy coat. On the floor next to him lay what looked like a large duffel bag, obviously containing something. *Swag from burgled houses in the neighbourhood?*

For a burglar he was certainly behaving oddly, Emma thought, gauging the distance between herself and the hearth and estimating it to be about twelve feet. The intruder tossed the last few bits of coal remaining in the scuttle on the grate, then stood upright, blowing on his hands before reaching for the poker. Emma tensed, expecting him to turn and start toward the doors, but all he did was stab at the dying fire in another attempt to coax some heat out of it.

Whatever it was he was up to, she would soon put a stop to it. Breaking into people's houses in the dead of night, if only to warm oneself in front of the hearth, was nonetheless a crime and she was not in the least bit amused.

There was no furniture between the doorway and the burglar to obstruct Emma. She calculated that she could easily cover the distance in a couple of bounds and disable him before he could react properly. If only he weren't holding that damned poker. *Come on, you, put the bloody thing down!*

As if in obedience to her unspoken command, the man gave the coals one last stir and then replaced the poker carefully with the other tools.

At least he's tidy; I'll give him that. Emma seized the opportunity to act. She took a deep breath, mentally rehearsing each move she needed to make, and when she was satisfied she could confidently hit her marks, leapt into the study and hurled herself at the man.

She had been correct in her calculations. Three strides and two seconds later, she was on him. He barely managed to turn his head in her direction when he felt an iron grip on his left arm, followed by a sharp pain as the arm was twisted and forced behind his back. The man stumbled against an armchair, losing his balance and falling heavily to the floor where he lay sprawled face-down, groaning.

Emma patted him down for weapons and finding none, pinned him with a foot to the back of his neck. Exerting pressure lest he entertain any thoughts of resistance or flight, she reached for the lamp that stood nearby. "Oh, no you don't!" she said, pressing down harder on the man's neck when he tried to move. "I want to have a look at you." She switched on the light without taking her foot from his neck. "No tricks, or I'll crush your throat. Now up you get. Slowly." She gradually decreased the pressure of her foot, watching him warily.

He was wearing a seaman's cap and pea coat, and he looked quite wet. *What on earth is this sailor doing so far inland, never mind breaking into my house?* "Are you getting up or not?" she snapped, giving the man a prod in the ribs with her toe.

He let out a grunt as he tried to turn on his side. She caught a glimpse of his face, but what little she could see of it was obscured by thick whiskers.

"I said, are you getting up?" Emma repeated sharply, giving the man another, more forceful, jab with her foot.

"Gi' us a hand, woman," he groaned.

Oho, a Glaswegian, by the sound of you. Emma grabbed him by his coat collar and jerked him into a semi-upright position. With a hoarse "Och!" he finally got somewhat unsteadily to his feet, turning away from her angry stare.

"Look at me!" barked Emma, grasping his sore left arm.

"Och, for pity's sake!" He pushed her hand off.

Emma glared at the man's stooped back as he rubbed his arm. "How dare you barge in here in the middle of the night?" she demanded furiously. "What do you want?"

"A wee dram and a warm bed, hen," came the low, raspy reply.

"Right. I'm ringing the police." She backed up to the desk and groped for the telephone that stood on it.

"That's hardly necessary, m'dear," murmured the man in public-school English, finally turning around.

Emma paused, cocking her head and staring at the bearded face of her intruder. *An old Etonian a common sailor? What is the world coming to?*

The man crossed the room to a corner table that held a tray with three decanters of spirits, a siphon, and several tumblers. He pulled the stopper from one of the decanters and sniffed it before pouring two short measures of whisky and limping back to Emma. He held out one of the tumblers to her, his hand trembling slightly, but she ignored the proffered drink.

"Will ye no' drink wi' me, missus?" he asked, in pure Glasgow tones that nobody in his right mind could mistake for a public-school drawl. "Suit yersel'," he growled, raising the glass he held in his right hand. "Slainte!" He drained the whisky in one gulp.

Emma continued to stare at his bewhiskered face, an uneasy feeling coming over her, as though she were seeing a ghost.

Grinning, the man raised the second tumbler to his lips. "Some hae meat and canna eat . . . Sin to waste guid whisky." He gave Emma a wink before taking a sip.

Emma shut her eyes and opened them again. *The Ghost and Mrs. Peel. That bottle of claret I brought up from the cellar and drank with supper. Must have been completely off. That's it. Or perhaps the spectre is a bit of undigested beef, an underdone potato. What ought one to do in a situation like this? Well, if Hamlet and Scrooge can chat with ghosts, why shouldn't I? Stuff and nonsense! I don't believe in ghosts.* "Just who do you think you are?" she hissed. "Who the devil are you?"

“A ghostie, come tae haunt ye,” he said, tossing down the rest of the second whisky. His tired eyes, brightened no doubt by the drink, began to twinkle.

That was the second time the man had seemingly read her thoughts. Emma watched the apparition help himself to another splash of whisky. “Guid for the spirits, if ye ken wha’ I mean,” he remarked with a chuckle, raising his glass to her.

Whoever or whatever you are, you’re through sodding me about. “Right, you,” she said icily. “I’ve asked you once, and I shan’t ask you again: who are you and what do you want?”

The man drank some more before answering. “I told ye, dear. A wee dram and a warm bed.”

Emma strode up to him. “I’ve had just about enough for one night,” she snapped, snatching his glass from him. “Now I *will* ring the police.” She wheeled about and marched back to the desk, where she picked up the telephone, turned it around, and slammed it back down on the desktop. She was lifting the handset when he spoke.

“Always did have that stubborn streak in you, Mrs. Peel.”

That familiar, soothing, and unmistakably English baritone could only belong to . . . Emma looked up from the telephone into the man’s face. “It can’t be . . .” she whispered. “Steed?” Seeing she was still holding his drink, she helped herself to a swallow. “It can’t be . . .”

“As large as life and twice as natural.” He gently pried his drink from her fingers. “Albeit wet, cold, and somewhat the worse for wear.”

“Steed,” she repeated, in stunned disbelief.

“Your servant,” he answered with a small bow.

“Steed.” Emma exhaled, the tension in her body suddenly released.

“None other.”

“Steed—” she uttered, and then for the first time in her life fainted.

He managed to catch her, and gently set her down on the floor. “Mrs. Peel,” he murmured, patting her hands. “Mrs. Peel?”

Seeing him alive would naturally come as a shock to her, but he never expected her to swoon. He glanced about, looking for something he might use to revive her. A large floral arrangement caught his eye, but the plants were dried so of course there wouldn’t be any water in the vase holding them. The siphon? Hardly a subtle means of bringing round an unconscious, highly-strung woman who had just beheld Lazarus. Steed stroked her hair out of her face and smiled. Only one thing to do. He bent down. “Emma,” he whispered, and kissed her.

“Ugh!” Emma’s eyelids fluttered.

“There was a time when you wouldn’t have minded,” he said, rising to fetch her another glass of whisky.

She passed a hand over her face. “Being mauled by a hedgehog?”

“Oh, dear,” he sighed, bringing the whisky to her. “I forgot, I *am* marvellous hairy about the face. Here, have a drink.” He squatted down beside her.

Emma sat up and ran her fingers through her hair, scowling. She threw him an icy glare before

getting to her feet.

Steed stood up, holding the glass out to her. "Feeling yourself again?"

"Of all the—" she sputtered, still glaring at him. "How *dare* you—"

"You're yourself again," he interrupted with what he hoped was a disarming smile. "And I'm very glad to see you, too."

Emma, however, was not to be so easily placated. "You led everyone to believe you were dead—"

"That *was* the general idea—"

"—and you've kept up this . . . this grotesque charade for months—"

"I can explain—"

"How could you do this to me? How *could* you?"

Steed struggled to unbutton his pea coat. "I didn't play dead just to annoy you. I'll tell you the story, if you'll give me a—"

"You couldn't trust me with the truth!"

"Everyone had to believe I was dead. Especially you."

"Oh, I believed it, all right! You haven't the *faintest* idea, have you? But now that you no longer have to play dead, you just break in here, in the middle of the night—"

"I had no other options—"

"—and then proceed to sod me about with that fake Scots accent—"

"I couldn't very well ring you from the village phone box with a cheery 'Mrs. Peel, you're needed, now could I?'"

"You devious, heartless—"

"If you're going to catalogue all my shortcomings, we'll be here 'til dawn," broke in Steed. He finally managed to remove his coat, but not without difficulty, as his hands were shaking.

"And what makes you so sure I'm all alone in this house? How do you know my lover isn't upstairs in my bed, you arrogant, insufferable—"

Steed fixed his eyes on Emma, a smile forming on his lips.

"What are you grinning at?" she fumed.

"Your nightdress. If you had a lover in your bed, I doubt you'd be wearing it. That. Furthermore, I would expect any lover of yours to get his arse out of bed and accompany you downstairs to confront an intruder."

Emma put her hand up to her neck, and only then remembered she was wearing her old flannel nightgown trimmed with a little blue bow at the throat and sporting a faded pattern of tiny yellow kittens.

"Very fetching," said Steed. "I must confess I've never imagined you in anything . . . quite like that."

"It's the end of November. I'm cold."

"You certainly are. I mean, it is indeed. I'm freezing. You know, I could do with a hot bath—"

“—and that warm bed you mentioned earlier?”

“That *would* be nice—”

They stood about a foot apart, facing each other.

Emma seethed with outrage. “Have you any idea— No, of course you don’t, you’ve never had any thought for anyone but yourself, have you? You bastard!” The slap she gave him made Steed’s head reel. He remained motionless, not even raising his hand to his smarting face. She threw him a final withering look and stormed out of the study.

“Mrs. Peel!” he called out, striding after her. “Emma . . .” He lingered in the doorway, finally permitting himself to massage his cheek. No other woman had ever slapped him quite so hard. “Damnation,” he muttered, slowly walking back to the fireplace, wondering if she had greeted her husband upon his return from the dead with similar enthusiasm.

Emma paced the kitchen, nursing a mug of tea and her anger at Steed. The infernal cheek of that man, letting her think he was dead all these months, only to break into her house in the dead of night, presume she was all alone, frighten her half out of her wits, and then behave as though everything were perfectly normal . . . *Bloody man! Just like my goddamn’ husband, swanning in from some bloody hellhole of a jungle, taking up with me again as if— No, that’s not fair. Whatever else Steed might be, he is nothing at all like Peter, damn his eyes. Still, Steed has a great deal to answer for, the unfeeling bastard . . .*

She shivered, her well-worn nightgown no match for the chill pervading the house. Abandoning her now-tepid tea, she marched out of the kitchen and into the entrance hall to check the thermostat. She had set it to a lower temperature before retiring for the night, but certainly not *that* low. Emma frowned at the gauge.

In the study, Steed banked what was left of the coals in the fireplace and shut the French doors. After collecting his pea coat and sea bag, he took one last look round the room, switched off the lamp, and made his way to the doors.

Emma stood scowling at the thermostat and fiddling with it to no avail. “Well, sod you for a lark, then!” she snarled, just as Steed emerged from the study.

“That was uncalled for, Mrs. Peel. You’ve already made your point.”

She wheeled about. “I was cursing the thermostat,” she said in clipped tones.

“Oh?” Steed’s hand went up to his cheek.

“Now look here—”

Steed held up his hand. “Not another word. I suppose I deserved it.” He walked past her to the front door. “Good-bye, Mrs. Peel.”

Emma trailed after him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Out the door.”

“Don’t be daft! It’s the middle of the night, it’s freezing outside, your clothes are wet— You’ll catch your death.”

“I’m already dead. In any case, I seem to have run out of options.”

“For heaven’s sake, I never said you couldn’t stay!”

He paused, his hand on the doorknob, and turned around. "Not in so many words—"

"I wouldn't send a dog out on a night like this."

"Perhaps not a dog; a Steed, on the other hand—"

"Oh, shut up. Look at you, you're shivering. You need to get out of those clothes immediately and—"

Steed couldn't help a wry little grin. "What, right here and now?"

"Spare my maiden blushes . . ." Emma grabbed him by the arm and propelled him toward the staircase. "*Bloody* man . . . Up the stairs and into the bathroom with you. *Now*."

"But—"

"But' nothing." She prodded him up the stairs. "Have you a shaving kit in that sea bag of yours? Because if you haven't, my father's cutthroat razor is somewhere in the kitchen, and I'll be only too glad to—"

"—slit my throat?" suggested Steed, the little grin still playing on his face. "Sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. Peel, but I *do* happen to have a safety razor with me."

"Good. Then you can get rid of those ghastly whiskers."

"Why? A great number of women find them madly attractive."

"Not this one." Emma brought him to a halt in front of the bathroom door.

Steed leaned against the doorframe. "You find me more attractive clean-shaven?"

"I find you less repulsive clean-shaven," Emma replied, flinging open the door and pushing him in the bathroom. "Clean towels in that cupboard over there; bar of soap's next to the washbasin. Now strip off and get under the shower, then get yourself to bed. Bedroom's through that door," she indicated, before turning to go.

"So there isn't anyone . . . with you?"

"I'd hardly offer you my bed for the night if there were," she said in a very frosty tone.

Steed removed his pea coat and tossed it over the side of the bathtub. "*Your* bed?"

"It happens to be the only bed in the house."

"Ah."

"And, at the moment, my bedroom's the only warm room in the house."

He began unbuttoning his waistcoat. "You're too good to me."

"Too good by half." Emma was at the door. "Now get under that hot shower before you turn blue. Good night."

"Good night? Aren't you coming to—"

Emma coloured. "Certainly not!"

"If you're not going to . . . share the bed, where will you sleep?"

"That's *my* problem."

"You'll freeze." He gave her a sly glance. "I don't mind sharing, you know."

"*Good night, Steed!*" *Impossible man* . . .

Emma stopped by her bedroom to throw on a pair of socks, a cardigan, and a dressing gown

before returning downstairs. Maybe if she played with the thermostat some more it would kick the boiler on again. Her optimism was short-lived, however, and she gave up after a few minutes, deciding that the study might be made habitable for the night if she could get the fire going again.

The study was only a degree or two warmer than the rest of the house, and Emma was dismayed to discover that the fire was nearly out. “Bugger,” she muttered. Steed had already tossed what was left of the coal in the scuttle on the grate. She could of course fetch more coal from the cellar, but it would take too long to get a blaze going that would give off any kind of appreciable warmth. She would just have to pile as many blankets and quilts as she could find on the sofa, and burrow under them if she was to get warm and stay that way. She shivered, hugging herself, and wondered if she shouldn’t get dressed before attempting to spend the night in the study. But first she’d have some more tea, warm herself from the inside. Emma wandered back to the kitchen.

She sipped her tea, relieved to feel the numbness in her fingers slowly ebbing. As soon as she finished her mug, she’d fetch the spare bedding. Where was it? In one of the unpacked boxes in the attic, presumably . . . *What the hell did I do with the spare blankets and pillows and things?* She drank the rest of her tea, shoved her mug aside with a yawn, and only then realised that she had no spare bedding: she had no spare beds to put it on.

Well, that’s just bloody marvellous, isn’t it? Emma walked out of the kitchen rubbing her arms. *All very well for some, snug a-bed under a down-filled duvet in a room with a fire . . .*

It was very late, and she was very cold and very tired. She mounted the stairs. *Delicacy be damned. I want my bed, and the devil take whoever’s in it.*

Emma slipped into the bedroom, grateful for its comparative warmth. She crossed to the fireplace and gave the fire a quick stir with the poker before taking off her dressing gown, cardigan, and socks. As her eyes grew accustomed to the feeble light, she could make out Steed’s form under the bedcovers.

He did not stir when she slipped between the sheets. She touched him cautiously. No reaction. *Dead to the world . . . Oh, how can I think such a thing, he’s not dead, he’s very much alive . . .* She edged closer to him for warmth and lay very still, listening to his deep, even breathing.

He muttered something and turned over on his side toward her, but did not awaken.

She looked into his clean-shaven face, and could now make out his features, drawn, exhausted, and tense even in sleep. She reached for him, hesitated, then touched his cheek, breathing in the odours of cologne mingling with those of soap and shampoo, along with his own faintly musky and pleasant scent, once so familiar to her, and once so beloved. *Oh, Johnny . . .*

She lay awake for some time, her mind galloping, as the mind often does in the small hours of the night, until she finally gave up trying to rein it in and fell, exhausted, into a deep, dreamless sleep.

14.

Steed, freshly showered and shaved but still a bit droopy round the eyes, had just come downstairs to forage in the pantry when the kitchen door flew open with a gust of wind and Emma burst in carrying a large sack of groceries. “Good morning—or what’s left of it,” he said brightly, walking out of the pantry into the kitchen. “Sorry, did I startle you?”

Emma plopped the sack on the kitchen table. “I thought I’d find you still in bed,” she replied, taking a couple of packages from the sack and laying them on the table.

“So did I.” He smiled wryly. “But I got cold.”

“I arranged for a repairman to come look at the boiler,” said Emma. “He’ll be here late this afternoon.”

“What a pity.”

“At least he’s coming *today*—”

“I was rather hoping we’d have to muddle along for another day or two.” Steed reached into the sack.

“If you want to make yourself useful,” Emma said, pushing him aside, “you can fetch the other bag from the car.”

“And you used to accuse *me* of being grumpy in the morning.”

“You were.”

“How would you know? You never numbered among the world’s early risers.”

“That changed after I left you. As you can see.”

“You didn’t exactly leave me,” he gently corrected her, “you returned to your husband.”

“A distinction without a difference from your perspective, I should think.”

“Ah, but you’re wrong there—”

“It’s academic.” She took some tins to the pantry. “Look, are you going to—”

“You must’ve got up with the chickens this morning.”

“As there was no food to speak of in the house, I had to get to the shops first thing. I also had to get hold of the boiler repairman before he disappeared on some job or other. The roads are a mess after all the rain, which means it took twice as long as usual to get anywhere.” Emma took out the last few tins and packages from the sack. “Especially in that bloody fossil of a car,” she added under her breath.

“Always the practical lass,” Steed sighed. “Still, you *could* have whispered a word in my ear before deserting our bed, at least given me a chance to try to persuade you to tarry a while . . .”

Emma had hoped Steed wouldn’t know she’d been in bed with him. He was still sleeping as soundly in the morning, when she slipped away, as he had been when she first got in beside him. Obviously, though, he *did* know, and worse yet, was teasing her about it, damn his infernal cheek.

“Before this goes any further,” she said primly, “you should understand that I only shared the bed—*my* bed—with you last night because I would have frozen otherwise.”

“Was that the only reason?”

Unsure of the answer herself, Emma did not look at him or reply, but busied herself with putting away the last of the groceries. “Are you going to fetch the rest of the stuff from that blasted car or do I have to do it myself?”

“To hear is to obey,” he said, on his way out the door. A few minutes later he returned with the rest of the shopping, a wistful expression on his face. “You drove the Bentley!”

“I didn’t exactly have any choice, did I?” Emma started sorting through the sacks Steed had brought in.

“What happened to that Lotus you were so fond of?”

“Wrecked in a crash.”

Steed looked at her with concern. “You weren’t hurt—”

She glanced at him curiously. *Doesn’t he know?* “No, I wasn’t. Well, now that you’ve returned, you can have your old relic back. It’s high time I got a proper car.”

He arched an eyebrow. “She may be old, but she’s hardly a ‘relic,’” he said. “She can be a bit crotchety first thing of a chilly morning, but once you get her warmed up she purrs like a kitten. All you need is perseverance, and a gentle touch.”

“That antique ought to be relegated to a scrap yard.”

“As I have long maintained, a lady’s performance is not measured by her years.” He came up to her and rested his hands on her waist. “I shan’t love you the less when *you* dwindle into a dowager,” he said, brushing her neck with his lips.

Emma slipped out of his hold. “You’re impossible, you know that? Try to be useful instead, and put this in the fridge.” She pointed to some cheeses and a container of clotted cream.

Steed mutely did as he was told.

When he had put everything away, she finally broke the silence. “Have you had breakfast?”

“Eh?” Steed took a moment to register her question. “Er, no. But now that you mention it— What would you say to an omelette?”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, sinking into one of the chairs and massaging her temples with her fingertips.

Steed drew up a chair and sat down beside her. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, come off it, Steed,” she said in some exasperation, looking over at him. “In the space of ten hours, you have come back from the grave, drunk my whisky, and shared my bed, all the while behaving as if nothing has changed—”

“Surely that’s old hat to you,” he murmured. “Your husband, as I recall, was resurrected quite unexpectedly—”

“—with unfortunate consequences for all concerned—”

“Is my resurrection just as unfortunate?” he asked her, searching her face.

“That’s not what I meant. Damn it all, Steed, even my *sang froid* has its limits. If you think this is easy for me, just because—”

“My dear—”

“Being gored by the horns of the moral dilemma presented by my husband’s return was painful enough—”

Steed straightened and leaned back in his chair. “You’re not— That is, you and he aren’t still—”

Emma gave him another curious look. “You *must* know he’s no longer in the picture, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“True, as a rule I don’t dally with women who have husbands lurking about. I’d rather die in bed peacefully, of natural causes.”

“It’s not a joking matter, Steed.”

“No. It isn’t.” Steed took her hands in his. “Actually, I did hear you were divorcing him. In fact, it was right after you’d separated from him that I—” He paused. “I made up my mind to see you, husband or no husband. I’d’ve come sooner, only— When I finally did get here, last night, I was fairly dropping from cold and exhaustion and I didn’t have the opportunity to explain anything to you.” He raised her hands to his lips. “Let this be my first act of contrition, Emma,” he said, kissing first one hand then the other. “Can you forgive me?”

It was a few moments before she answered. “I don’t know.”

He stood up, still gripping her hands, and pulled her to her feet. “I was premature in asking your forgiveness,” he said. “The only thing I am entitled to ask of you is that you hear me out, and if afterwards you still cannot forgive me, you won’t have to bother with a tiresome divorce to get rid of me. I’ll go quietly, I promise you, and never trouble you again.”

There was that curious look again in Emma’s eyes. “Fair enough,” she said slowly. “But, just so there are no further misunderstandings, I think you ought to know—”

Steed gazed into the soft brown depths of her eyes and felt his knees weaken. “There’s . . . someone else.”

“I wouldn’t have slept with you last night if there were,” she coolly replied.

“You didn’t. Not in the generally accepted sense of the expression.”

“*Nevertheless—*”

He coughed. “I think I’d better eat something before I crumple into an inert heap at your feet,” he said.

“Seems you already have done.”

“Quite,” he said, relaxing his grip on her hands. “But not at your feet . . .”

“I think I’d better feed you before you do any more crumpling,” said Emma.

“That’s all right, I can feed myself.”

“Steed—”

He crossed to the kitchen drawers, found the tea towels, and tucked one under his belt. “I fancy an omelette.” He took orange juice and bacon out of the refrigerator, then hunted up an onion and a can of mushrooms in the pantry. “If you could give me a whisk and a bowl and a couple of skillet—”

He soon had the food cooking, enough for them both, for, as he he’d guessed, once Emma

smelled the onion and mushrooms sautéing in butter, she decided she was a little hungry after all.

“I’ve laid the table and brewed the coffee,” she said, dropping a couple of slices of bread into the toaster.

Steed hovered over his skillets. “Breakfast’ll be ready in a couple of minutes. Or should I say lunch?”

“Let’s compromise and call it brunch. Oh dear, I think I’ve singed the toast.”

They sat down at the table opposite each other and ate in silence, primarily because Steed was very hungry and so absorbed in his food that Emma thought it best to leave him in peace to enjoy what was probably his first hot meal in several days. *He really is a dab hand in the kitchen*, she thought nostalgically, enjoying every bite of the delicious omelette. “That was very good, Steed,” she said when they had finished and were sipping coffee. “Thank you.”

“Trouble with you is, you’ve always taken me for granted. I’m not *entirely* useless, my dear.”

“I never thought you were,” said Emma. She did not, however, dispute the first part of Steed’s statement, for she had to admit he was right. Getting into bed with him last night was only one of many instances that came to mind. She felt a sharp pang of guilt.

He smiled. “Bet you didn’t know I’m also an expert at changing nappies,” he said, helping himself to the last slice of toast.

Emma stirred a teaspoonful of sugar into her coffee. “I didn’t know you had children.”

“I don’t. As far as I know. My expertise derives exclusively from tending to my siblings’ whelps.” He pulled the sugar bowl toward him. “Now you know why I never married,” he added with a laugh.

“You never married because you enjoy the carefree bachelor’s life,” she countered, pouring cream into her cup.

Steed slowly stirred his coffee. “The charm of that life, such as it is, has waned considerably in recent years.”

“Not to mention one’s stamina,” murmured Emma, taking a cautious sip of coffee.

“Touché.” He pulled a cigarette case and lighter from his pocket. “Probably just as well, under the circumstances.”

Emma’s cheeks reddened. “I was only teasing, Steed. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Mind if I smoke?”

“Hmm? No. No, of course not.” She watched him take a cigarette from the case and light it. “When did you take up smoking cigarettes?”

“Went back to ’em after we . . . ah . . .” He exhaled a dense cloud of smoke. “Tell me, have you ever met a sailor who didn’t smoke? It’s part of my guise as a merchant seaman.” He put the lighter atop the cigarette case and shoved both toward Emma. “Would you like one?”

She fetched an ashtray, resumed her seat, and helped herself to a cigarette.

“I owe you an explanation,” Steed said presently, “and I’ll give it you, but first—” He toyed with his cigarette, watching the thin stream of smoke snaking from its glowing tip. “This isn’t easy for

me, either—” He took another drag on the cigarette, drumming his fingers on the tabletop and looking everywhere but at Emma.

“After your husband turned up . . . and all the rest of it,” he eventually began, “I . . . I started losing my concentration, and as a consequence found myself assigned to any number of dull, routine tasks that offered me no distraction from my personal life, which soon was in shambles. I was off my feed; I was drinking too much; I was having increasingly frequent bouts of insomnia; I found myself teary-eyed at the slightest reminder of—”

He shifted uneasily in his seat. “Fortunately, I had enough sense left to realise I had to do something before I ended up sitting on my bum ruining my liver all day and crying myself to sleep every night,” he said, pausing for another deep drag. “Right about this time last year, I took a leave of absence from my job, and gave serious thought to packing it in altogether. I even went so far as to start hunting about for a house in the country. In this very area, as it happens.”

“While you were sinking into the depths of despair and depravity, where was that well-endowed doxy of yours, what’s-’er-name?”

Steed took one last drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out. “Tara. She tried her best to pull me out of the Slough of Despond, but—”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment,” broke in Emma dryly. “Single-minded girl. I was hardly out the door before she took my place. Did your notion of retiring to the country have anything to do with her, by any chance?”

“Nothing whatsoever.” He got to his feet and crossed to the counter, where he wrestled two slices of bread from the loaf and dropped them into the toaster. “Have you anything in that pantry besides orange marmalade?”

Emma fetched a jar of quince preserves and set it down rather forcefully on the table. “Here’s something a bit more . . . tart,” she said, resuming her seat.

Steed brought the toast back to the table, sat down, spread some of the quince preserve on a slice, and then said evenly, “Nobody could ever take your place, Emma. Tara wasn’t five minutes behind you out that door.”

“Oh . . . pffft!”

He shifted sideways in his chair and stared off into the distance. A full minute must have ticked by before he looked back at Emma. “I sent Tara packing,” he said, his voice tight, “and then I got drunk. So bloody drunk I barely managed to haul myself upstairs to bed. No sooner did I crawl into it than I smelled traces of your perfume, still lingering on the pillows. And I . . . I began to . . . ah . . .” He glanced away, clearing his throat. “Sorry,” he uttered, shoving aside his untouched toast and reaching for his cigarette case. “I can’t think about that day without crying,” he confessed, lighting a cigarette before pushing himself back from the table. “You of all people know that I never get drunk and never indulge in public displays of emotion,” he said through a cloud of smoke.

“I wouldn’t describe Tara as the public, exactly,” said Emma sardonically.

Steed leapt to his feet. “You walk out of my life, and you think I just say ‘oh, well’ and casually

bed whoever is next available? Maybe you think I was just casually bedding *you!*” He hurled his cigarette into the sink. “Just what sort of man do you take me for?”

Emma lowered her eyes and sat in silence. She had gone too far. The fact that she was still taking him entirely for granted was bad enough; worse yet was the fact that she had struck some very raw nerves with her cynical needling; and worst of all, she had caused him pain, then and now. *Unforgivable*. “The kind of man who doesn’t deserve half the grief he’s been handed,” she meekly replied, feeling very small indeed.

“Look at me,” he commanded, standing directly in front of her. “Look at me,” he repeated, only less sternly, putting his hand under her chin and lifting her head. “Do you want to end this here and now, once and for all?”

Emma shook her head. “I told you I’d hear you out . . .”

“Very well.” Steed collected his lighter and cigarette case and put them in his pocket. “I would just like to point out that Tara resigned and went abroad over a year ago, long before I ever decided to retire to the country.”

With another, sharper jab from her conscience, Emma remembered her conversation with Mother the day of Steed’s funeral, and Mother’s testy reply to her query about Tara’s whereabouts. “Steed, I—” She rose and faced him. “John . . .” she said very softly, placing her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes welled. *Shit. I’m going to cry.*

“There, now, there’s no need for that.” After some hesitation, he took her in his arms. “It’s all the fault of that . . . husband of yours,” he said, gently stroking her hair. “Don’t cry. You’ll only set me off.” He held her only long enough to feel the tension in her body start to ebb before releasing her.

“Why don’t we go where it’s warmer and more comfortable?” said Emma, wiping a stray tear from her cheek.

“I’m open to suggestions.” Steed’s eyes flickered upward for an instant.

“The *study* should be habitable by now,” Emma blandly replied. “I thought to lay a fire in there first thing this morning.”

“At times, Mrs. Peel, you are *too* pragmatic,” he said with a sigh, following her out of the kitchen.

15.

“There, that’s better,” said Emma, fanning the fire into a cheerful blaze. She stood in front of it for several moments, rubbing her arms, before crossing to the drinks table. “Do sit down, Steed,” she said, pouring two short whiskies.

“A bit early for those, don’t you think?”

“I think we can both do with something a bit stronger than coffee.” She returned to the fireside, where he had pulled up an armchair, and held a tumbler out to him. “Are you warm enough?” she asked, sceptically eyeing his lightweight wool trousers and roll neck shirt.

He savoured the smoky Islay malt on his tongue before replying. “I’ll be all right.”

Emma drew up the second armchair to the other side of the fireplace and curled up in it. She rolled her tumbler between her palms, all the while watching Steed, who had fallen silent and, it seemed to her, strangely distant. “Steed.” He did not respond. “John.” Still no reaction from him. “Johnsy-Wonsy—” she murmured, stretching a leg out and giving him a good prod with her foot.

Steed jolted to attention, nearly spilling his drink. “What was that for?”

“You were miles away,” she said, taking a small sip of whisky. “Where’s that explanation you promised me?”

“What did you just call me?”

“Go on, then, I’m all ears.”

“Did I hear you say ‘*Johnsy-Wonsy*’?”

Emma swirled the whisky in her glass. “‘appen I did.”

He heard her laugh for the first time.

“You once swore a solemn oath *never* to call me any silly, cloying—”

“Did I?” She gave him a disingenuous smile.

“You did.”

“Extraordinary situations require extraordinary measures. Got your attention, didn’t it?”

“That kick in the shin got my attention.”

“It was more of a prod than a kick.”

“It was more of a kick than a prod. That’s one slap and two kicks in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Steed—”

“You terrify me, Mrs. Peel. I shudder to think what might come next.”

“No aggravated battery, I promise you. Now, how about that explanation?”

“Where was I?”

“You were about to tell me what made you consider quitting your job.”

“Ah, yes.” Steed found his cigarettes and lit one up. “*You* did.”

“*Me*?”

“I made up my mind to hand in my resignation and . . . see you again . . . As I said, I knew you

were divorcing . . . him . . .”

“You didn’t need to resign in order to call on me.”

“What, and have you believe I was employing yet another devious, selfish ruse to get you involved in some skulduggery or other? That was the *last* thing I wanted. I wanted a proper chance with you, which could only be possible if I were no longer tied to my damned job.”

“All the time we were together you were tied to the job.”

“And look what that didn’t lead to. If I hadn’t been, I might have got up the nerve to ask you—” Steed tossed down the rest of his drink. “Well, here you are, divorced, and here I am—but I haven’t resigned, and on top of that I’m in a tight spot.” He got up to pour himself another whisky. “So much for new beginnings,” he said, resuming his seat by the fire.

“Don’t you think resignation might be *de trop*, as you’re officially dead?”

Steed grunted.

“Look on the bright side. You can’t be tied to a job you no longer officially have.”

“That doesn’t improve my odds with you, given my other problem.”

“By the way, I meant to tell you this earlier, but we seem to have got off the subject. I’m not divorced—”

Steed sat bolt upright. “I thought you said he was no longer in the picture.”

“That’s right. He isn’t.”

Steed frowned.

“There’s more than one way to skin a cat, Steed,” Emma said dryly.

“Good heavens, you haven’t gone and killed the, er—?”

“No, I didn’t kill the bastard, though I confess there were times I entertained the idea. No, I am a widow. Once again.”

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be. I’m not.” She picked up her glass and drained what was left of her whisky.

She started to rise, but Steed took her glass from her. “That remark was uncharacteristically cold of you,” he said, pouring her another drink and bringing it back to her. “While you might have had your reasons for not wanting to stay in the marriage, surely he doesn’t deserve—”

“He got exactly what he deserved,” Emma bitterly cut in, and took a generous swallow of whiskey. “Don’t look so shocked, you don’t know the half of it.” She paused for another swallow.

“Look, I don’t need to—”

She cut him off again. “Well, I’m going to tell you anyway. Peter, you see, was always fond of fast planes, fast cars—and, it turned out, of fast women. Only I didn’t tumble to the latter until much later . . . Well, that’s neither here nor there.” She sipped some more whisky, then leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. “We’d been separated for quite some time when one day he came round to borrow the Lotus—gave me some story about his car not running, or being at the garage, or something like that. It was a Friday, I remember. The weather was particularly foul, and I had serious misgivings about letting him have my car for the weekend. He always drove too bloody fast . . . In

short, he pranged the Lotus and died of his injuries the following day.” Her hand shook as she set down her glass. “His latest whore was in the car with him. Silly bitch was killed instantly.” Emma glanced at Steed. “I could do with one of your fags right about now.”

He took a cigarette out of his case, lit it, and held it out to her. He then lit up another for himself, taking a couple of sharp drags before he spoke. “I know one shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but it’s just as well for him he *is* dead, otherwise I’d wring his fucking neck myself.” He got up and crossed to the French doors where he stood smoking furiously and staring out into the garden. “That shit was unworthy of you.”

“On the contrary, darling, *I* was unworthy of *him*,” said Emma with a scornful laugh. “*He* thought I was—how shall I put it?—somewhat shop-worn by the time I was restored to him.”

Steed spun around. “How you can say that and laugh—” he exclaimed, striding back to her.

“Widow or wife, I’m second-hand goods either way,” she said. “Nice touch of irony, wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I wouldn’t, because it’s not true,” he said, perching on the armrest of her chair and hurling his cigarette into the fireplace.

“It is, as far as my late, unlamented husband was concerned.”

“Your husband be damned! *I* certainly never thought that!”

Emma looked up at him, her expression softening. “I know.”

Steed shifted on his perch, anxious to steer the conversation in a different direction. “You didn’t say when he died,” he said in a more restrained tone of voice. “It must have been recently. Believe me, I had *no* idea—”

“It was barely three weeks after your funeral. He always *did* have lousy timing.”

“I’m so sorry, my dear, it all must have been extraordinarily hard on you—”

“Burying *you* was a damn sight harder than burying *him*,” she said quietly.

He bent down and kissed the top of her head. “Fancy, you’re *still* wearing that perfume. . . .”

“I never wore it for *him*.” She looked for an ashtray and, finding none handy, threw her cigarette end on the fire. “You can’t be comfortable sitting like this. We could move to the sofa, though of course it won’t be as warm as sitting here by the fireplace—”

“Not necessarily. ” He bent down and kissed her again, this time on the mouth. “My dear Emma. I’ve so very much wanted to do that again, and for the longest time,” he said, kissing her once more.

“Careful,” she said, gently nudging him off the armrest, “or I might conclude that *you* take *me* for granted.”

He sighed. “You haven’t forgiven me yet.”

“You haven’t done your penance yet.”

He resumed his chair by the fire. “Where’s my whisky?”

“Here. But don’t gulp it down all at once, because I shan’t let you have any more.”

“I shan’t want any more. I don’t want to fall asleep on you again.”

“Just so. We’ll have some wine later, with dinner. I got a lovely roast—”

He brightened at the prospect of dining with her. “Champagne for the aperitif, I think,” he said, “and a good claret to accompany the meat.” He pushed himself up from his chair. “I’ll just nip down to the cellar, put a couple of bottles of the ’twenty-eight on ice, and bring the claret in here to soften up a bit by the fire.” He vanished before Emma could utter a syllable.

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Ten minutes later Steed reappeared with two bottles of claret.

“How did you know what’s in my cellar?” Emma asked him.

“I had a quick scout round this morning, while you were out,” he casually replied, setting down the bottles on the floor near the fireplace.

“The cellar being the first place you explored, naturally,” she said with a little smile. “I should have known.”

He sat down in his armchair, and stretched his legs out to the fire. “Before I resume my narrative,” he said, “is there anything else you’ve not told me that I should know?”

“I don’t think so,” said Emma, drawing her chair closer to him.

“Very well. Now, then, you may remember that my family originally hails from these parts,” he began. “The church where I am lying in eternal rest, along with some two centuries of assorted Steeds and their kin, isn’t far from here, and my sister Helena’s close by, as well. The ducal seat, Langbourne, is in this county. I’ve spent many a holiday over the years with my sister and her clan, and last Christmas I decided I’d go out to pasture somewhere close by. I needed time to think things through, so I thought I’d take a leisurely trip through France, motor down from Calais to Cap Ferrat. I also needed to . . . get up the nerve to ask you if you . . . to, er, let me see you again.”

“You didn’t need my permission—”

“So, off to France I would go.” He sipped his drink. “Thank goodness I mothballed the Bentley after you left, and instead took the old Rolls I inherited from Auntie Lavinia. I’d have mourned the old girl for the rest of my life if she’d been the one to go over that cliff.”

Emma smiled. “You mean Auntie Lavinia or the Bentley?”

“Why, the Bentley, of course.”

“You certainly *are* loyal to your old loves,” she laughed.

“To both of them,” he said, with a fond glance at her. “Anyway, early in the new year a property hereabouts that I’d had my eye on went on the market. I was about to make an offer on it when I received a curious letter from an old friend of mine in the south of France.”

“Is your friend by any chance a man calling himself Georges Delacroix?”

Steed’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. “How’d you know?”

“I’m psychic.” Emma got up and walked to the desk. “The key to my mystic powers lies in here,” she said, pulling open a drawer and taking out Delacroix’s letter to Steed. She returned with it to her chair, and handed Steed both the envelope and the note before sitting down.

“Where did you get this?”

“I found it in your apartment,” she said, “after your death.”

“You searched my apartment?”

“Not exactly. Helena asked me to come. She thought I might want something of yours, as a memento.”

“And you chose that letter?”

“How do you know I didn’t choose something else?”

“You’re right, I don’t. But tell me, how did you find out who sent it?”

Emma gave Steed a highly edited account of her sojourn in France, telling him only that Delacroix met with her, and very deliberately omitting the fact that she had been posing as Steed’s wife. “Your friend told me nothing, other than you two got together and had a couple of drinks the day before you died.”

“He never mentioned . . . Just as well, I suppose . . .” Steed murmured, with an anxious look at Emma. He took Delacroix’s note out of the envelope and read it aloud.

“I know what it says, Steed, I must’ve read it a dozen times.” Emma tapped her fingers on the armrest. “Your friend said it was some sort of joke between you two.

“It’s no joke. He told you that to throw you off.”

“Then what does it mean?”

“We used to transmit radio messages consisting of short, innocuous phrases that actually meant something entirely different. The Gerries intercepted these transmissions and of course recognized them as code, but never got anywhere with them.”

“What does it mean?” Emma impatiently repeated.

“The first sentence signals extreme danger to a mission. The second sentence instructs the recipient to contact Control before proceeding with the mission. Georges, who was my Control on our last mission, trusted I’d remember the old code and interpret his message correctly.”

“I must say I’m impressed. After all these years—”

“Some things one cannot forget,” Steed quietly replied, taking another sip of whisky before returning to his narrative. “I made it to the south of France without incident and in very good time, arriving in Delacroix’s neck of the woods early in the afternoon. I booked into the Excelsior, and after registering and handing over my bag to the porter, I contacted Georges, who met me a short time later. We went for a walk along the cliffs just outside of town, where we could talk freely. It was a cold, windy afternoon, and we were the only two pedestrians there. Georges asked me if I knew anything about the murders—or assassinations, as he put it—of two men, a Belgian and a Spaniard, that had taken place several months apart the year before—”

“I vaguely remember seeing something in the press about those murders,” interjected Emma. “Both men were prominent in their respective businesses, weren’t they? Both were shot to death for no apparent reason—”

“—and as far as anybody knew, they had nothing whatsoever in common. As you say, there seemed to be no reason for killing them. There was of course the usual speculation in the press about rogue communist factions sending a message to the corrupt capitalist bourgeois establishment, or the underworld targeting legitimate business, or terrorists wreaking random havoc, that sort of rubbish.”

“What was the common factor, then?”

“Both men had been Resistance fighters during the war. According to Georges, that one fact

was not known to the press or to the investigating authorities. The men had changed their names as well as certain details about their activities during the war—”

“Were they Nazi collaborators?”

“Nothing of the sort. They were both loyal, respected citizens. Whatever their motives may have been for keeping their wartime activities to themselves, I’m certain they were private motives. Perhaps they had relatives who were collaborators, who knows. It’s unimportant. The point is, if nobody knew what the common factor in these two murders was, nobody could steer an investigation in the right direction. As far as the authorities were concerned, there were no useful clues left behind by the killer—”

“Ballistics?”

“In each instance, the assassin used a different, very high-powered rifle, undoubtedly custom-made and one-of-a-kind.”

“But of course. In hindsight, the murders had the hallmarks of a professional job.” She paused, frowning. “But what does all this—”

“—have to do with me? I asked Georges the very same thing. He told me he recalled a mission in early 1944 that had been prosecuted by a three-man team that included a Belgian and a Spaniard—”

“—and you.” Emma’s eyes met Steed’s. “You were the third man.”

He grunted in assent.

“What’s the connection between that mission and—”

“I don’t know.”

“Not even a guess?”

“No.”

“All right, what was the mission?”

“A collaborator had infiltrated one of the cells in our sector. Our job was to confirm his identity and—” Steed lit a cigarette.

“—dispatch him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“So it cannot be the collaborator who’s after you, unless— He didn’t manage to survive, did he?”

“No.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” he said, and took a long drag on the cigarette. “I am.”

“You—”

“—killed him myself, yes.” Steed swallowed the last of his whiskey.

“I see,” she said softly, glimpsing the icy hardness in his eyes before he could avert them.

“Georges was sure he was on to something, and feared that I was in grave danger. That’s why

he sent me that message. He also wanted me to confirm the identities of the two dead men.”

“Were they in fact the same men who were on that mission with you in ’forty-four?”

“Yes. Georges showed me photos, both recent ones and ones taken shortly after the war. They were the same men.” He got up to fill his glass with soda water. “Georges’s worst fears were very nearly confirmed,” he said, sitting down again, “and you and I might never have had this conversation.”

Emma paled.

“Georges and I were walking along the cliffs when I lost my footing and my balance. Lucky for me, because at that very moment a bullet meant for my head ripped through my left shoulder. I’m not sure what happened next, as I hit my head when I fell and lost consciousness. Georges heard the report of the rifle, but whoever shot me was of course too far away and too well hidden to be seen.

“The sky was cloudy, and it was already dusk. From where he was hiding when he shot me, the assassin would not have seen any detail, and in any event he wouldn’t have hung about once he saw me fall. Georges kept me still and stanching my bleeding, and as soon as it was dark he got me back to his house.”

“Wouldn’t you have been missed at your hotel?” Emma asked.

“Sooner or later, yes, and the staff would of course have informed the police. I could lie low at Georges’s for as long as necessary, but the fact that my corpse wouldn’t be found meant it wouldn’t take long for my would-be assassin—and whoever hired him—to learn the attempt had failed. My only hope of getting to the bottom of this business—and avoiding a bullet through my skull, at least for a while—was to make everybody believe I *was* dead. Since there was no body with its head conveniently shot off to be had on short notice, I had to disappear without a trace in some other utterly convincing fashion. The question was how. I didn’t have the kind of time it normally takes to stage such a disappearing act. Fortunately, as sometimes happens, a solution presented itself, purely serendipitously, the very next day.

“A thief, posing as me—or, more precisely, as the occupant of my hotel room—stole my luggage and my car early the next morning—”

“What, just like that? Didn’t the staff—”

“Remember, I had registered in the afternoon. A new shift was on duty when my impostor decamped, staff who hadn’t seen me. Moreover, I’d drawn no attention to myself upon my arrival. I didn’t dawdle about after registering. I wandered into the hotel bar—a conveniently dark little grotto—pretending to be looking for the loo, and slipped out the back way.” He gave her a long look, then smiled. “Sometimes, you see, it pays to be a little unorthodox.”

“You never walk in the door when you can climb through the window.”

“An eccentricity that saved your life on at least one occasion that I can recall,” Steed remarked. “I need not repeat the details of how the thief and my car met their end, as you already know that part of it. Nobody questioned that it was I who died in the crash. When Georges learnt what had happened, we both concluded it was the perfect solution to my little problem. There wasn’t much left of the thief for an autopsy—not that the local police were likely to bother even if there had been. Why should they? The ‘English gentleman’ was unfamiliar with the local roads, the weather was inclement,

Monsieur lost control of that ostentatious car of his, and *pouf!* shot off the cliffs. Nobody questioned the accident, and the matter was quickly closed.

“I stayed with Georges and his wife, who were the only two people who knew the truth and would keep it to themselves. I spent a few weeks recovering from my wounds, lost a bit of excess weight, grew a heavy beard, and polished up my rusty French. By the time I was ready to assume my new identity I was unrecognisable. Even you didn’t know me.

“As soon as I was fit, I left. The thief who stole my car had to be known by somebody. Eventually, he’d be missed. Somebody might remember where he was last seen and tumble to the fact that he was the chap who nicked my Roller and died in that car wreck, and that ‘John Steed’ was in fact still alive.

“I headed for Marseille, where I hoped to learn something by melting into the local demimonde and its excellent network of spies and informants. Meanwhile, Georges initiated careful inquiries of his sources and contacts.

“To make a long and otherwise tedious story short, a couple of weeks ago certain information reached me that convinced me the man behind all this business is now here in England. And none too soon, as I was growing concerned that my cover might’ve been compromised. I made my way to the coast of Brittany, where I stowed away on a vessel bound for the south of England.”

“Compromised how?”

“I don’t know, it wasn’t anything specific, just a gut feeling, a sixth sense. As soon as something doesn’t feel right, it usually isn’t. In any event, I wasn’t going to learn anything more in France. I had to get back to England. Above all, I had to see you.

“I’m going to come out in the open, let him know I am here and very much alive. He’ll lose the element of surprise, while I will have taken the offensive.” He took out another cigarette and lit up. “I didn’t want to involve you in this, but I *had* to see you. Damn it all, I can’t undo the past, but I also can’t—”

“—do this without me.” Emma rose and came up to him.

“Of course I can. That’s *not* the reason I came to you,” he said, looking into her eyes. “I came because . . . I’d’ve come a damn’ sight sooner but for what happened in France . . . I came, Emma, because I can’t bear the thought of a future in which you play no part.”

She bent down and kissed his forehead. “You smoke too much,” she said, taking his cigarette from his fingers and throwing it in the fireplace.

“No, *I burn, cruel you . . .*” he said, drawing her to him and into an embrace.

17.

“*Impossible* rogue . . . Unhand me, sirrah!” Emma said presently to Steed.

“Save your tender words for a more beguiling hour and venue,” he murmured, gradually letting go of her.

The long-case clock began chiming the hour.

“Will you look at the time!” She pushed him aside. “I need to think about dinner! And the boiler repairman’s coming—” She yawned. “Goodness, what’s come over me?”

“I imagine you didn’t sleep very well last night,” said Steed. “Why don’t you lie down on the sofa for a bit? *I’ll* see to dinner.” Emma started to protest, but he insisted. “If there’s one thing you’ve never faulted me for, it’s my culinary skill.”

“That’s not the only thing,” said Emma, through another yawn.

“Have a nap, my dear,” he said, crossing to the desk. “I won’t have you dozing off on me tonight. During dinner.” He picked up a well-worn wool blanket thrown over the back of the desk chair. “Is this yours, or the cat’s?” he asked, eyeing the shabby blanket with some suspicion as he ambled back to Emma.

“Mine,” said Emma, plumping a couple of throw pillows before settling herself on the sofa. “The duvet on the bed belongs to the cat.”

“But of course. Silly of me to ask.” Steed carefully arranged the blanket over Emma and then attended to the fire. “I’ll wake you when the repairman arrives,” he said, giving her cheek a stroke with the back of his fingers.

It was nearly five o’clock when Steed tiptoed back into the study. “Mrs. Peel,” he said softly, bending over her. She was still fast asleep. “Emma?” He kissed her.

“Mmm.” She smiled, snuggling under her blanket.

“The repairman approacheth; he is nigh.”

“Oh. There you are,” she uttered, muzzy with sleep. She sat up, and ran a hand through her hair. “How long have I been—?”

“About two hours.”

“Dear me.” Emma blinked a few times, struggling to dispel the fog. “I suppose I’d better deal with the repairman.” She rose stiffly, rubbing the small of her back. She noticed that Steed had changed clothes and was now wearing dinner dress. “You’ve quite a wardrobe in that sea bag of yours, considering that your one and only suitcase was stolen. Or do you have a steamer trunk squirreled away somewhere?”

“Er, well, not exactly—”

Emma folded her arms. “What, exactly, aren’t you telling me?”

“Oh, only that I went upstairs and had a catnap,” he replied carelessly, “before I prepared the food. And then changed. And then came to wake you.”

“Steed—”

"I think I hear someone at the front door." He held one of the study doors open for her. "You see to him, and I'll see to our repast."

"Steed—"

"I'm just off to the kitchen, Mrs. Peel," he called over his shoulder, scuttling off.

"*Impossible* man," she muttered, walking out into the entry. She opened the front door. "Good afternoon," she said to the stocky, freckled red-haired man in a boiler suit standing before her. "You're here about the furnace?"

"If you are—" began the little man, glancing down at the clipboard he held in his hands then back up at Emma, "—Mrs. Emma Peel, then I am, indeed," he cheerfully concluded.

Emma smiled. "I am she. Do come in."

The fellow doffed his cap, wiping his boots carefully on the doormat before stepping inside. "F.X. Feeny at your sorvice, ma'am." Emma was about to say something when he held up his hand. "You'll be t'inkin' you know what the 'F.X.' stands for, but you'll be wrong. It stands for 'Flavius Xenophon'. Father Fitzpatrick, bless his casuistical heart—'twas himself who baptised me—wasn't too t'rilled, but me sainted mother was that fond of classical history and historians, God bless and rest her soul."

Emma couldn't suppress a grin. "Actually, I was about to tell you the thermostat seems to be the problem, but you are of course correct, I did assume you were called after St. Francis Xavier."

"A common assumption, and a natural one," said Mr. Feeny sententiously.

"If you don't mind my asking, what do people call you?"

"Angus."

Emma raised her eyebrows.

"That's the Gaelic for Aeneas, y'know."

"Quite." Further enquiry was unlikely to lead to enlightenment. "I think I'll stick to 'Mr. Feeny', if that's all right," she murmured.

"Whichever you prefer is fine with me. Now, then, you say your t'ermostat seems to be causin' you some trouble?"

"*My* thermostat's fine, thank you," Emma said, just as Steed materialized in the foyer. She cleared her throat and said, "It's the boiler thermostat. I can't seem to get it to work."

Steed, affecting an utterly witless expression, peered at Feeny. "Evenin', evening'," he rumbled, then turned to Emma. "What's the drill?"

Emma flashed Steed a cloying smile. "Mr. Feeny is here about the heat, darling. I can cope. Don't be a nuisance. Toddle off, there's a dear."

"Jolly good. Feeny, eh?" Steed peered at the man again. "Not *the* Sar'nt Major Feeny, formerly of the Irish Guards?"

"Alas, I never served, Your Worship," Feeny said. "It's the flat feet I have."

"Oh, *bad* luck!"

"There are worse afflictions in this world, sor, as the one-legged man said to the hunchback,"

replied Feeny, “if you’ll pardon me sayin’ so and no disrespect intended.”

“Quite. Quite. Ha ha!”

“Darling.” Emma gave Steed another saccharine smile. “I’ll give you a shout when I’m ready for my cocktail. In the meantime, go and potter about with your model soldiers or something.”

“Right-ho, old girl!” With a wink at Feeny, Steed dutifully marched off toward the back of the house.

“So,” said Feeny, his eagle eye spotting the thermostat on the wall, “would this be the troublesome little bugger?” He marched up to the device and fixed it with a stare of expert professional appraisal.

“It would indeed. I must’ve fiddled with it for ten minutes last night—”

“A delicate mechanism, Mrs. Peel, requirin’ a delicate touch, if you’ll pardon me sayin’ so and no disrespect intended.” He produced a magnifying glass from one of the many pockets in his boiler suit and proceeded to scrutinize the thermostat with great concentration, pausing only occasionally to adjust the dial with very deliberate care. “Right,” he said after a spell. “Now, I’ll be wantin’ to look at the boiler itself, next. If you please, missus.”

“I’ll take you to it.”

The door to the cellar stairs was in the kitchen passage. Steed poked his head out from behind the kitchen door just as Emma and Feeny appeared. “What ho! Any luck?” he cried out to them in a hearty parade-ground baritone.

“It’s early days yet, Johnny,” said Emma, with an indulgent look at him. “We’re going down for a look at the boiler. Meanwhile, don’t touch anything on the Aga, my love. You might incinerate something.”

“Aga off-limits. Right-ho.” Steed pulled his head back and shut the kitchen door.

Once in the cellar, Feeny undertook a meticulous inspection of the boiler. “Aha. Hmm. I see. Yes. Just as I t’ought.”

“What is it?” asked Emma, a note of concern creeping into her voice.

“Why, it’s a Culpepper, isn’t it? Culpepper of Birmingham. A forst-class manufacturin’ establishment, in my humble opinion, and purveyors of forst-class boilers since 1889. A Culpepper is one of the foinest pieces of engineerin’ you will ever find in the whole wide world. Nothin’ ever goes wrong with a Culpepper.”

“That is most reassuring. But is there something wrong with *this* one?”

“Were you not payin’ attention, missus? Nothing *ever* goes wrong with a Culpepper.”

“The point is, *our* Culpepper is not heating our house.”

“Sure, and it isn’t, at that,” agreed Feeny, scribbling a few notes on his work order. “Let’s go back for another squint at that bugger of a t’ermostat.”

Emma dutifully led Feeny back up the cellar stairs, up the kitchen passage, and out into the entry. Steed was sitting on the stairs. “What brings you here, darling?” she asked him.

“Though I might be missin’ a skirmish or two. Decided I’d better do a recce. See for meself

what's what, don't you know?"

Feeny, meanwhile, had resumed his inspection of the thermostat controls. "Aha. Here's the problem." He shook his head. "A crime, puttin' this shite Jones t'ermostat on a Culpepper," he said. "If you'll pardon me sayin' so and no disrespect intended."

Emma brightened. Perhaps they were finally getting somewhere. "Can you describe what the problem is, in layman's terms?" she politely asked him.

"It's broke, missus. Plain and simple, the bugger's broke."

Emma rolled her eyes; Steed got to his feet and walked aimlessly about, chuckling. "I surmised as much—" she began, in some exasperation.

"You see this wire here, and this wee contact—"

"Thank you, Mr. Feeny, you really needn't bother with the technical details," Emma hastily interjected. "I trust your judgment. Just tell me, can you fix it?"

Feeny sighed, shaking his head. "Alas, no."

"You can't repair it?" Emma looked at Steed, who had ambled up to her. "He can't repair it," she said to him, then looked at back Feeny. "Mr. Feeny, we've had no heat for twenty-four hours—"

"It needs replacin'," said Feeny, making more notes on his clipboard.

"You might have said so to begin with," she uttered under her breath.

"But I'll have to order the new one. We don't have the one you're needin' in stock at the moment."

"You have no thermostats in stock?"

"Were you not payin' attention, dear lady? This is a *Culpepper* we're dealin' with—"

"Yes, I know that, but surely one thermostat is much like another—"

"My dear Mrs. Peel," sighed Feeny, "you wouldn't be after puttin' a Volkswagen motor in a Rolls Royce, now would you? Of course not. Likewise, you don't put just *any* t'ermostat on a Culpepper! The only t'ermostat worthy of a Culpepper is a MacGillivray. Foinest t'ermostat ever made. Nothin' ever goes wrong with a MacGillivray."

"And how long will it take to get the, er, MacGillivray?"

"Oh, a day or two—"

"We've had no heat for twenty-four hours, and we're freezing! Is there nothing you can do?" begged Emma. "You told me the boiler itself is all right—"

"Nothing ever goes wrong with a Culpepper—"

"Just so." Emma turned to Steed. "We have a Culpepper, darling."

"Good show," grunted Steed, patting Emma on the back as he might a favourite polo pony.

"But even a Culpepper," broke in Feeny, "cannot properly do its duty without a workin' t'ermostat."

Steed nodded slowly, putting his arm round Emma's waist. "Rather like me old Bentley without a starter, eh, what?"

"Your Honour has hit the nail right on the head!" joyously exclaimed Feeny. He turned to

Emma. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Peel, but all I can do is get a new MacGillivray, and install it as soon as I get me hands on it.”

“But what do we do in the meantime?” she pouted.

Steed harrumphed. “I’ve bivouacked in worse conditions, m’dear. I’ll think of somethin’.”

“Sure and Mr. Peel can keep yourself warm and snug in the meantime,” said Feeny to Emma, “if you’ll pardon me sayin’ so and no disrespect intended.”

“Can do, can do,” Steed heartily concurred, giving Emma a squeeze. “But I say, Feeny old boy, doesn’t this, what’s-it-called, Culpepper thingy have a whatchamacallit, a manual override? Somethin’ we could crank ’er into life with for a couple of hours, here and there?”

Mr. Feeny, his brows knit in serious thought, scratched the back of his neck. “Well, now that Your Honour mentions it—” He looked dubiously at the daftly-grinning Steed and shook his head. “I dunno, it’s not as simple as a t’ermostat—”

Emma impatiently shook Steed off and addressed Feeny. “If Mr. . . . my husband knows anything at all, he knows his machinery. So if there’s some way to get that boiler . . . boiling, I beg you to show him how.”

“Sortainly.” With another doubtful glance at Steed, Feeny started for the kitchen passage. “If you’ll come with me, then, Mr. Peel—” *Christ, I’ll be explainin’ it to you until the Second Comin’, sure as I’m born and no disrespect intended to that darlin’ woman you’re married to, you lucky English bastard.*

Much to Mr. Feeny’s surprise, however, Mrs. Peel’s fool of a husband *did* grasp engineering and machinery, and had no trouble understanding how to manually light off the boiler. “Mind you don’t leave it on for more than a few hours at a time, so it doesn’t get too warm,” Feeny cautioned Steed.

“Right-ho. Best shut ’er off after lights out, what?”

“I t’ink so, sor.”

“Right-ho. Good show, Feeny. Memsahib’ll be most awfully pleased.” Steed winked at the repairman. “And when the wife’s happy, I’m happy, don’t you know. Ha ha!”

They returned to the entry, where Mr. Feeny took one final look at the thermostat and jotted down one last note. “I’ll phone in the order first t’ing tomorrow, and if Paddy O’Meara’s got a MacGillivray, I can come first t’ing day after tomorrow to do the work. Is eight o’clock of the mornin’ too early?”

“Make it elevenish,” murmured Steed, sidling up to Emma and giving her another pat on the back.

Feeny gave Steed a salute. “Yes, sor. Good night, sor.” He turned to Emma and shook her hand. *Fine figure of a woman and sadly wasted on that eedjut of a husband, and yet the way she’s always lookin’ at the silly auld sod . . .* “Good night, Mrs. Peel.” He left the house with a jaunty step, humming a cheery tune and musing on the impenetrable mysteries of love.

No sooner did Emma close the door behind Mr. Feeny than she and Steed both burst into peals of laughter. “I’m quite relieved to know your t’ermostat’s not broke, Mrs. Peel,” chuckled Steed.

“It’s my furnace that needs stoking,” Emma replied, hugging herself for warmth.

“Perhaps we can do something about that later.”

“I’m going upstairs—”

“What, this instant?”

“—and getting under a hot shower. *That* should do the trick.” She started up the staircase. “How soon will dinner be ready—assuming you haven’t burnt it?”

“I most certainly have not burnt it.” Steed took out his watch. “About thirty more minutes for the meat, I reckon. Champagne’s already on ice—”

“I shan’t be long.” She took a few steps, then paused, turning round. “Don’t you think you’re overdressed for a simple meal at a kitchen table?”

“I wanted to make an occasion of our first dinner together since— in a very long time,” he replied, obviously deflated by her remark. “Didn’t matter to me if it was gruel served on a board and trestles—”

Chastened by his reaction, and inwardly cursing herself for her insensitivity, she descended the stairs and came up to Steed. “I shan’t be long,” she repeated, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Uncork the champagne and pour yourself a glass. I’ll join you shortly.”

“If you want me, I’ll be in the study,” he said, as she dashed up the stairs.

Emma wasted no time, and in a short while she returned, elegantly dressed in a simple midnight-blue silk frock set off by the single strand of pearls round her neck, and matching pearl earrings. “I’m ready for that drink,” she said to Steed, who stood warming himself in front of the fireplace, sipping champagne and smoking a cigarette.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. “You look stunning,” he breathed, dropping his cigarette into the fire behind him.

“You’re quite pretty yourself,” she said, coming up to him and pirouetting. “I take it you approve of my ensemble? A suitable complement to your mess dress, I think.”

“Utterly bewitching,” he murmured, gently guiding her to one of the armchairs near the fire. “Allow me to pour you a glass of champagne.”

Emma looked about. The furniture had been moved out of the way, and a small table covered with a white linen tablecloth now stood a few feet from the fireplace. The cutlery carefully laid on opposite sides of the table was silver, as were the two candlesticks and the rings around the two white linen serviettes. The crystal wine goblets on the table sparkled with reflected firelight. The only splash of colour on the table was the bright red of the candles. The light in the room was pleasingly subdued, and a jazz quartet played softly on the record player. “It’s lovely,” she said, with a wave of her hand.

He handed her a glass of champagne. “How is it?” he asked her, after she had taken a sip.

“Ambrosia,” purred Emma, taking another sip.

“You don’t think it a bit yeasty?”

She smiled. “It’s perfect, Steed. Stop fussing and relax. Sit down.”

“I’ll only have to get up again in a few minutes to return to the kitchen.” He drank some more champagne. “You’re right, it *is* very good, at that.”

Emma stood up and set her glass on the mantelpiece. “Please don’t think all this means nothing to me,” she said, laying her hand on his arm. “Nothing could be further from the truth. I— I wasn’t thinking when I spoke earlier.”

“Least said, soonest mended.”

“Do let’s pretend, at least for tonight, that nothing has changed and all is right with the world.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, raising his glass to her.

18.

In contrast with its setting, dinner was anything but fancy: roast beef, boiled potatoes in their jackets, cauliflower. “I’m afraid it was the best I could do with what was on hand,” he said, bringing their food in from the kitchen and setting the plates on the table. *For such a capable and intelligent person*, he couldn’t help thinking as he uncorked the claret, *she really hasn’t a clue about cookery*. Satisfied that the wine was drinkable, he filled their goblets before taking his seat opposite her.

“Sometimes, less is more,” she replied, tasting the meat. “This is absolutely wonderful—”

And it was. They ate unhurriedly, enjoying the food and wine, the candlelight, the music Steed thoughtfully selected. Emma gave him cogent accounts of the current political and cultural scene in London, schooling him so well that he felt he had never left the country; he, in turn, described to her in broad strokes where he had been and what he had seen, with particular emphasis on amusing anecdotes about the picturesque locales he’d passed through.

“So you see,” he concluded, reaching for the wine bottle, “life wasn’t always as grim as one might imagine.” He recharged their glasses. “Shall we finish this excellent claret, my dear?”

Emma twirled her glass by its stem, trying not to dwell on the less-than-pleasant episodes of the past couple of years of her life. “Trust you to make the best out of a bad situation,” she said, with forced gaiety. “If you had to lie doggo anywhere, France couldn’t have been a better place.” She finished her last few morsels of food. “You’ve always enjoyed France. Even during the war, I dare say.”

Steed pushed aside his empty plate and picked up his wineglass. “Least of all during the war; and afterwards, only when *you* accompanied me.” He sipped his wine, never taking his eyes off her.

His thoughts turned to the week they’d spent in Provence that spring a few years ago, a couple of months before Emma’s husband so inconveniently reappeared. They had stayed at a charming old farmhouse owned by an equally charming (if not quite so old) woman who gave them her best guest room and the privacy they craved. They spent the days taking long rambles under brilliant blue skies, revelling in the colours and smells of the burgeoning countryside, exploring the local villages and towns, and rediscovering the simple pleasures of rustic cuisine as they lazed in verdant meadows lunching on the local bread and cheese and *vin ordinaire*; and the nights making love with a new-found tenderness and joy surpassing any they had known before. But he had failed to tell her that he was in love with her. By the time he’d got up the courage to do so, it was too late. *That damned husband of hers, turning up and throwing a bloody great spanner in the works . . .* Steed still loved Emma, he always would, but he feared that whatever feelings she might once have had for him had waned to the point where she could now only regard him with the sentimental affection generally reserved for favourite former lovers and fondly-remembered pets.

“You’re miles away again,” he heard her say. “My enchantments, such as they were, appear to have worn off.”

“Hardly . . .” *How beautiful she is, especially framed by candlelight.*

“What are you thinking about?”

“Provence,” he said. “The Vaucluse.” *How utterly desirable she is.*

“John . . .” She reached for his hand, but the table was just wide enough so that only their fingertips met. “I never did tell you, at the time—”

“Neither did I. But that’s all in the past.” He rose, and held his hand out to her. “Shall we sit by the fire?”

She caught his hand, expecting him to draw her to him, but he only pressed her fingertips lightly before letting go of her hand and leading her to one of the armchairs.

“May I pour you a cognac, Mrs. Peel?”

She nodded, sitting down. *Why so staid and formal all of a sudden?*

He crossed to the drinks table and poured two drinks.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” he said, coming back to the fire and handing her a snifter.

“Let me guess, you ran off with a shepherdess from the Pyrenees,” she smiled, hoping to thaw him a little, “and now you’re a married man.”

“I can assure you I am not,” he said quite seriously. “Not yet.”

Emma cocked her head. “Steed? What is it you’re trying to tell me?”

“I’m getting to that,” he replied distractedly, setting down his snifter and patting his pockets. “But first, I would like to ask you—”

She watched him with interest.

Steed glanced at the fire, and knelt in front of the hearth next to Emma’s chair. “My dear—”

“Yes?”

“Could you hand me the poker? The fire needs a bit of a prod.”

“Of course,” she said, passing the poker to him. *So do you, it seems . . .*

He poked at the coals, then laid the poker aside. Still kneeling, he resumed patting his pockets. “I could’ve sworn I put it— Aha, here it is. My dear Emma, will you—”

She leaned toward him. “Will I what, my dear John?”

“—join me in a post-prandial smoke?” He produced his cigarette case, opened it, and held it out to her.

Emma stared at the case, then at Steed, and then erupted into laughter. It took her a few moments to extract a cigarette.

He lit it for her before taking the other armchair. “Was it something I said?” he asked with a befuddled look, lighting his own cigarette.

“It’s what you *didn’t* say,” she replied, with another hearty laugh.

Steed had no idea what she meant. He reckoned the champagne and the wine must have gone to her head as soon as she sat down by the fire. “Can I get you anything?”

“That’s entirely up to you.”

He still wore a bemused expression. *What on earth are you . . . ?* “Sorry, I’m not sure I—”

“Never mind. I’m just feeling a bit giddy, that’s all.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t be smoking that cigarette—”

“I’m all right. Really.”

Steed looked at her. *We are obviously at cross-purposes. What did she think I was—* His mouth went dry. *Good Lord . . .* He hastily swallowed some cognac. “Tell me you weren’t thinking what I think you were thinking,” he muttered, his face burning.

“I can’t,” said Emma lightly, “because you’ve always had an uncanny knack for reading my thoughts.”

Steed ran his hand over his hair. “My dear Em— er, Mrs. Peel,” he stammered. “I . . . I don’t quite know what to say—”

“I expect you will, when the time comes. So, what was it you were so anxious to tell me?”

Steed drank some more cognac and smoked, collecting himself before answering. “About a house. The one I bought.”

His house? Property transactions, in her experience, were dry-as-dust affairs. Hardly a scintillating topic of conversation, particularly after an intimate dinner *à deux*.

He saw the surprise in her eyes turn to disappointment and then to mild impatience. “It’s not as bizarre a conversational gambit as you seem to think. Indulge me.”

“Very well.”

“D’you remember my taking you for a drive in these parts a few years ago—”

“When you first showed me the church where you’re now interred?”

“That’s right. And do you remember a certain house you pointed out to me, in the distance, during the walk we took?”

“We saw a fair number of houses on that walk—”

“You took a particular fancy to that one, and we amused ourselves by trying to guess what sort of person its occupant might be, what the rooms were like, how it might be furnished, that sort of thing—”

“The one I said ought to have an old-fashioned four-poster in the bedroom?”

“Yes. Like the one you have upstairs, perhaps?” He smiled, and took another sip of his cognac.

“Exactly . . . You know, now that you mention it, that bed was the single piece of furniture that came with this house . . .”

“I bought the house.”

“Hmm?”

“I bought it. The house you fancied.”

“Well, if it’s any warmer than this one, maybe we can stay there—”

“Trust me, it’s no warmer or colder—”

“How would *you* know?”

“Because we’re in it.”

“We’re in *my* house—”

“Quite.”

“—which means it cannot be *your* house—”

“That, of course, is entirely up to you,” he said, taking a desultory drag on his cigarette. “However, your house and the house I bought are one and the same.”

“I inherited this house from an uncle—”

“Mmm—”

“—who died nearly three years ago and left it me in his will. In fact, the probate of Uncle’s estate was concluded right about the time you were buried.”

“Who were your uncle Edmund’s solicitors?”

“Peruke and Snood, or something. I don’t know, I can’t remember,” she said testily, then paused, trying to recall when she got the letter informing her of her inheritance. *The day of Steed’s funeral, wasn’t it? I’d picked up the post at my apartment before going to stay with Mum . . .* “Hey, how do you know it was my uncle Edmund— Wait a minute, the solicitors were—” She glared at him. “—*your* solicitors. Stop playing games, Steed, and tell me *exactly* what this is all about.”

“Oh, but it’s more fun when we play—”

“Always a game to you, isn’t it? Always the devious route instead of the direct—”

“Never use a door when a window will do,” he reminded her with a smile.

Emma, however, was not smiling. “You were *never* capable of being completely forthright with me, and you never will be, you *incorrigible*—”

“Don’t spoil this evening, Emma, I beg you—”

“*I’m* not spoiling anything,” she shot back, furious with him for patronizing her.

Steed set down his drink and got to his feet. “If you weren’t so unforgiving, Mrs. Peel, you wouldn’t be so judgmental,” he coldly replied, crossing to the table. *Damned woman, with her damned pride and prejudices . . .*

“You think me unforgiving, then?” she demanded, equally coldly.

“You certainly can be.”

“And I suppose you think you’re not.”

Steed put the plates and cutlery on a tray. “I don’t know what you’re implying, nor do I care to. I’m in no mood for a row,” he said, picking up the tray. “I can’t even begin to understand what it was I said to set you off like this.” He walked out of the study.

Emma wasn’t about to let it go at that, and confronted Steed when he returned. “You’ve never forgiven me for going back to Peter.”

Steed doused the candles still sputtering on the table before turning to her. “That is utterly *absurd*,” he angrily rejoined. “Do you think I’d be here if that were true? Haven’t you heard a single word of what I’ve been saying to you?” He found his half-empty glass and topped it off with some more cognac. “What’s there to forgive, for God’s sake? The man was your *husband*—”

“The man was a *sod*,” she said, pacing back and forth.

Striving to regain his equanimity, Steed took a generous swallow of cognac before setting his

glass down again and lighting another cigarette. "I don't know what happened between you two, it's none of my business, but I *do* know that you could never marry a man you didn't love, and you could never love a man who was a blackguard."

"Then I made one hell of a mistake, didn't I?" she hotly retorted.

"Believe it or not, whatever other selfish feelings I may have had when you left, I never wished you anything but joy. I'm sorry your marriage brought you none." He found his drink and held it out to her. "Drink some of this. And do sit down, I find it difficult to talk to you when you're so . . . energetic."

"*Two* mistakes." Emma dropped into one of the armchairs.

"What are you talking about?"

"When I left you, I was . . . ambivalent, to say the least," she said. "Peter and I were complete strangers to one another by then. In the intervening years I came to understand that I didn't . . . couldn't . . . love him. But I didn't have the guts to admit it, to myself or to him. It didn't take long, though, for me to see what a colossal mistake I'd made. Again." She was still holding Steed's cognac in her hand, and now drank the rest of it down. "Perhaps he wasn't entirely unjustified in his behaviour."

"How can you say such a thing?" exclaimed Steed. "You were his *wife*. He had no right— Oh, why even talk about it? It's *finished*—"

"Some demons one can never exorcise, however much one might want to."

"Not by oneself, no."

"Perhaps it's finished for us as well."

"Well, if that's what you think . . ." Steed watched the smoke curling up from his cigarette. "Then you should add 'foolish optimist' to my catalogue of sins," he said dryly.

"Not so foolish an optimist, though, as to seek me out when you found out I'd left my husband."

"That would have been opportunism, Mrs. Peel, not optimism."

"Rubbish! I needed you—"

"And what could I have offered you? A steady diet of murderous masterminds and miching mallecho, all washed down with excessive amounts of whisky?"

"Now who's being absurd?" she demanded angrily. "You know bloody well you had more than that to offer!"

"Be honest, Emma, you would never . . . marry a man like me—"

"Not a man *like* you, no—"

"Well, there you are, then. I rest my case." He stubbed out his cigarette.

"Marriage isn't the issue—"

"Obviously not."

"I said I would never marry anyone *like* you," Emma pointed out. "That is not the same thing as saying I would never marry *you*."

"What difference does it make? The distinction is, as you might say, academic." He stood up.

“In any event, by the time you gave Peel the push, I was in one hell of a state. You certainly didn’t need *that*—”

“*That* would have been a hell of a lot easier to cope with than believing you were dead!” Emma rose from her chair and grabbed Steed by the arm. “Do you think it was easy for me, living with *that*, never mind with the idea that your death was neither accident nor murder?”

Steed froze. “What?”

“How could you, John, how *could* you?” she said, sinking back down into her chair and bursting into tears.

He stood before her. “If it was neither accident nor murder, that leaves only one other possibility,” he said sombrely. “You thought I killed myself?”

Emma nodded.

“Do you seriously believe I could ever play such a cruel and spiteful trick on you?” he asked her in the same quiet tone of voice. “Having to fool you into thinking I was dead was difficult enough; but to allow you to believe I committed suicide? That would have been downright evil.” He turned away. “How can you, Mrs. Peel? How *can* you?”

Steed crossed the room to the drinks table, where he poured another cognac, and helped himself to a generous swallow. He made no attempt to comfort her.

“Here,” he said, walking up to her when she finally calmed down, and offered her his handkerchief, and then his drink.

Emma did not take either, and merely looked at him, tears still spilling from her eyes. “That’s what they kept suggesting,” she sobbed. “What was I supposed to think?”

“*Who* kept suggesting it?”

“Chabrier—the police superintendent. Then your friend—”

“It was meant to be a bloody *accident*, for God’s sake,” he snapped, taking another swallow of the cognac. “What the police might have told you I had no control over, but Delacroix—” Steed’s jaw was working. “I told you, I knew *nothing* of his encounter with you, much less what notions he filled your head with!”

“John—”

“I can understand your susceptibility all these months to the outrageous suggestions planted by those two, but what I cannot fathom is how you— after all I have said to you tonight— how you could even *think* me capable—” Steed thrust the snifter of cognac at her. “Take this, damn it, before I yield to temptation and hurl it in the fire.”

She meekly took the cognac from him.

“You know, the one attribute of yours that I always prized above all the others was your uncompromising fidelity,” he said bitterly. “Any man would love you for that alone. And *that* is why there was absolutely *nothing* for me to ‘forgive’ you for when you returned to your husband. You not only stubbornly, indeed perversely, refuse to grasp that, but what is even more galling is that you also believe me capable of an act of vicious revenge—”

Oh, Johnny . . . Her eyes overflowing with tears again, Emma turned her gaze to the fire, whose blue-and-orange tongues now darted and licked at the grate. “Can you forgive me?”

“I don’t know.” He took back his snifter from her and poured himself another drink. “Let’s forget about it, all right? It’s late, and we’re both tired. I’ll just have this last one before I tidy up in here, if you don’t mind.”

“Come sit over here with me,” she said, “and finish telling me about your house.”

“*Your* house. Not now. Some other time, perhaps . . .”

“Please? While I finish my drink?”

Steed moved in front of the fire, but did not sit down. “There’s little to tell. I knew you were divorcing your husband; I knew you were living in that dreary little apartment in Chelsea; and I knew you had once taken a fancy to this house. It didn’t look to me like you were ever going to move out of that apartment any time soon . . .

“If ever I needed a bolt-hole, it had to be someplace occupied by a person I trusted with my life. To ensure that the ownership of the property could never be traced to me, I arranged for its purchase through intermediaries, and came up with the Uncle Edmund ruse. I have read your dossier, Mrs. Peel, on more than one occasion as you know, and I’ve known about Edmund for a long time.

“The purchase was consummated shortly before my trip to France. I had no difficulty in persuading my solicitor to agree to send you a letter informing you that you had inherited the property from Edmund. There was nothing illegal in that, and when I explained to Mr. Tupman my reasons, the old boy—something of a ladies’ man in his day, and quite the romantic, I am told—condescended to accommodate my wishes.” Steed took a sip of cognac. “And that is how you came to be owner in fee simple absolute of this dwelling and all lands appurtenant thereto.”

Steed walked back to the table and began clearing it.

“Leave it,” said Emma softly, rising and walking up to him. “It *is* getting late, and I’d like to go to bed.”

“Then by all means, do,” said Steed, moving the candlesticks aside.

“And you?”

He folded the tablecloth. “I’ll sort something out.”

Emma stopped his hands. “John—”

“House is nice and warm now, thanks to the ingenuity of the good Mr. Feeny. Should be reasonably comfortable tonight.”

“There aren’t any blankets or pillows—”

“You needn’t worry about it. I said I’ll manage.”

“You proud, *impossible* man,” she said, slipping her arms underneath his coat and about his waist. “Come to bed.”

19.

Steed . . . I must find Steed and tell him . . . Overwhelmed by a sense of urgency, Emma fought her way out of the tangled bedding and got to her feet. The room lay in darkness, cold and still as the grave, the silence broken only by the ticking of a clock. Steed . . . I must tell him . . . She tried to run to the door, but her leaden feet made any progress greater than a few exasperating inches impossible. The ticking of the clock grew louder and louder in her ears, mocking her at every step. With immense effort, Emma planted one foot in front of the other until finally, after a seeming eternity, she succeeded in reaching the door.

She wrenched the door open, and found herself in the middle of a deserted street. The run-down shops on either side were shut, and no lights shone from any of the windows above them. From time to time a gust of icy wind would scatter sheets of discarded newspapers and blow them up the gutters. But there was no one to be seen or heard, not one pedestrian or vehicle, not even a stray cat rummaging in a dustbin, not even a single bird.

Emma looked down to see a dirty, tattered winding-sheet wrapped about her ankles. Please, God, don't let it be too late . . . Kicking and tugging at the filthy cloth, she succeeded in ripping it away piece by piece. I must find him . . . tell him . . . She looked up and down the shabby street. It stretched endlessly, without intersection, in either direction. For God's sake, do something! She started in the direction she had originally faced. Her feet were still very heavy, if not as leaden as before, and she soon found that the way she had chosen led gradually uphill, slowing her even more.

She toiled up the road. Suddenly, she heard a deafening rattle and clatter of hooves behind her. Emma turned to see a black catafalque drawn by six black horses thunder past then disappear at the crest of the hill.

She scrambled after the catafalque, stumbling and falling every couple of yards only to struggle to her feet once more and press onward, a profound feeling of grief coming over her. Weeping and gasping for air, unable to get back on her feet after falling yet again, she crawled the rest of the way on her hands and knees.

The hard, broken pavement beneath her gave way to damp grass. Emma collapsed, face down, and lay where she fell just long enough to summon what was left of her strength to turn on her side, only to see a freshly-dug grave gaping several feet from her. Stuck in the mound of dirt beside it was a crude sign with the name 'John Steed' scrawled on it. Oh, God, no . . . She forced herself to creep to the edge of the grave and look down. Oh, God . . . John . . . A dark wooden coffin very much like the one borne by the catafalque had been lowered into the grave; but the silver plaque affixed to the lid was engraved 'Peter Peel'.

She got to her feet. John . . . Stumbling through the churchyard, she tried calling out to him, but her voice would only come out in a feeble rasp. Please, God . . . He'll never hear me . . . I must make him hear me, I must tell him . . .

She was halfway to the church when she heard someone calling her name. Slowly she turned around, and saw the silhouette of a man standing among some trees a short distance from the open grave. John? John? She ran toward him. The man strode briskly out of the shadows to meet her.

Emma realised that the man wasn't Steed at all. "You!" she gasped, recoiling from his grasp.

"Yes. Your husband," he said with a triumphant laugh, gripping her about the waist. "Come back, Emma."

"Steed!" she cried, struggling to free herself from Peel's vicelike hold.

"You can't have him, Emma," he said coldly, "he's dead."

Oh, God, no . . . "Let me go . . ." she implored, pushing him from her.

Peel chuckled sardonically. "You'll have to kill me first, dear heart."

It was just before dawn when Emma's stifled cries roused Steed. He couldn't see anything in the stygian darkness, but he could hear her muffled sobs and feel her pushing on his arm, still resting athwart her belly.

"Emma," he whispered, slowly lifting his arm, "wake up."

She muttered urgently but unintelligibly in reply.

"Emma." He could now just make out her form. "Emma, wake up." Gently he brushed her hair from her face.

"Steed . . . Oh, God . . ." Emma awakened with a jolt and sat upright. "Steed!" she cried, struggling to make out her surroundings.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said softly.

She fell back on her pillows. "Hell . . ."

"That disappointing, is it?"

"Oh, shush." She raised herself up again, reached for the lamp on her bedside table and switched it on. He could see that her back and arms were gooseflesh. She sank back down and passed the back of her hand over her eyes, struggling to banish the last traces of her nightmare from her mind, before turning her head toward him. "I didn't mean—"

"Are you sure?" he asked her, shifting over to his side, facing her, and pulling the covers up over her shoulders.

She looked into his eyes. "My demons are altogether too real at times."

"You'll learn to live with them, in time. Most of us do."

"And you? Have you learnt to coexist with yours?"

"Not all of them," he admitted with a sigh. "I thought I'd finally got the upper hand, when—"

"—when I pulled the rug out from under you—"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but I'd be a liar if I told you these past couple of years were no different from any of the others. I didn't sleep very well, either." He propped himself up on one elbow and glanced up at Emma's alarm clock. "Goodness, look at the time."

"What's it matter?" she said, pressing closer to him.

Steed rolled over, swung his legs out from under the covers, and sat on the edge of the bed, bracing himself for the shock of bare feet meeting cold floor.

"John?" Emma wriggled up to him. "You don't think last night was just a whim on my part—"

"I hope not."

"Don't go, darling—"

"I just want to turn the famous Culpepper back on. I don't fancy morning ablutions in Arctic temperatures any more than you do." He stood up and wrapped himself in a blanket that lay bunched near the foot of the bed.

"Oh. Yes. The boiler . . ." Emma managed a smile. "You look like an Indian chief in that," she said to him.

He picked up a pillow that had somehow ended up on the floor during the night and tossed it at her. “That is because I, like the noble Indian, require only the bare necessities of life,” he archly replied, walking out the door.

Emma sat up again, running a hand through her hair, and surveyed the jumble of sheets and blankets. She smiled a satisfied little smile. *Dearie me . . .* She straightened them as best she could before easing herself out of bed to scoop their clothes up from the floor and revive the fire. Shivering, she unceremoniously tossed the clothes over a chair, dashed to the fireplace to throw a few more coals on the grate and give them a quick stir, and dived back into bed.

She was still shivering under the covers when Steed, now clad in a handsome silk dressing gown instead of the blanket, reappeared carrying several articles of clothing, which he carefully disposed in the wardrobe before rejoining Emma. “I think today promises to be even colder than yesterday,” he said, edging closer to her. “I’d give the boiler a couple of hours at least before venturing out of this bed. — Good God, woman, you’re cold—”

“You didn’t seem to think so last night.”

“You weren’t warming your icy toes on my legs last night,” he chuckled, kissing her shoulder.

“John—”

“Hmm?”

“Where did that dressing gown and those other things come from?”

“The cellar.”

“—Hey! Your feet are cold as ice, too! Stop it!— The cellar?”

“Yes. There’s a hidden door at one end of it, leading to a small room. — Would make a very nice little wine cellar, by the way.— Before I traipsed off to France I stowed my best suits and things in there, in case of an emergency.”

“Including evening wear and dressing gowns? My, you think of everything, don’t you.”

“Best to be prepared, I always say.”

“A regular boy scout, you are.”

“One never knows what role one may be called upon to play. And speaking of role-playing, I take it you are not known hereabouts as the Widow Peel?”

“I’m just ‘Mrs. Peel’ to the locals. I imagine they all assume I’m fashionably divorced, like all jaded Londoners who flee to the country.”

He rubbed his chin. “Whatever they might have been assuming, your neighbours will now be certain in their knowledge that you in fact have a husband, that he is an ass, and that he is living under the same roof with you.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Lord . . . Feeny!” She started to laugh. ““*Sure and Mr. Peel can keep yourself warm and snug in the meantime*,” she said, imitating the Irishman’s brogue quite creditably.

“I don’t mind that part,” he murmured, “though I must confess I don’t exactly relish pretending to be ‘Mr. Peel’. Still, it might be best if we, ah—”

“—let sleeping dogs lie?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You know,” said Emma, stroking his forearm, “I’m quite taken with your idiot half-pay officer interpretation of the role. There’s something sublimely inspired about it.”

“That’s how I picture the character.”

“In general, or in particular?”

“I don’t mean a husband *per se*, just *that* one,” he said, giving her a long, thoughtful look. “But not to worry, I doubt I’ll run into anybody from the village any time soon and embarrass you further. I’ve got to go to London . . .”

“When?”

“The sooner the better.” He glanced at the clock again.

“What, or who, is in London?”

“A certain tobacconist—”

“Fags at the local newsagent’s not good enough for you?”

“I need to see him about some custom-made cigarettes—”

Emma let out a sigh of exasperation. “Of course, you certainly mustn’t postpone such an important matter, not even by one day—”

“I haven’t told you about the cigarettes yet, have I?”

“I thought we might have another day all to ourselves,” she sulked, not listening to him.

“The cigarettes are a clue, my dear—”

“Ah, well, that explains *everything*—”

“—and they *can* wait one more day,” he said, taking her in his arms. “I shan’t go anywhere without your blessings.”

“What else haven’t you told me about, other than the cigarettes?” she asked him more calmly, annoyed with herself for taking him for granted yet again. “I mean as far as any clues go?”

“The cigarettes are my only clue.”

“Well, then, tell me about them.”

“Later. There’s something far more important I want to tell you right now.”

“There is?”

“Yes.” He kissed her forehead, then her temple, then her cheek. “Something I wish I had told you long, long ago.”

“What might that be?” she murmured languidly in between his kisses, which were increasing in frequency and fervour.

“How very much I love you . . .”

20.

Emma was still lying in Steed's arms when she awoke. "John," she said in a low voice. "Mmm." His arms tightened about her.

"Darling—"

"Hmm?" He opened his eyes. "Morning," he sighed, kissing the nape of her neck.

"I'm hungry."

"Insatiable vixen," he murmured, caressing her.

"—for breakfast," she drawled. "You know, orange juice, coffee, toast—"

"—honey . . ."

She playfully slapped his hand. "Naughty . . ."

"*For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,*" he said, trying to turn her to face him.

"For God's sake, hold your hands—at least for now—and let me get something to eat," she laughed. "I mean, we're not exactly . . . newlyweds—"

"*'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd,*" he said, nuzzling her shoulder.

"Hamlet was talking about death, my love, not—"

"*When I died last, and, dear, I die As often as from thee I go, Though it be but an hour ago—*"

"Then you can wait another hour. I want food."

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "*O, wilt thou therefore rise from me?*"

Emma arched her back and stretched her limbs, catlike. "Conceited man . . ."

"All right, all right," he said, smiling at her pun. "I'll have a bath while you're snacking downstairs. At the very least, though, you *could* say 'good morning' to me—"

She turned to him. "Good morning," she said, giving him a kiss. "Now go, or we'll end up here for the rest of the day."

"I could think of a worse fate."

"Steed."

He threw back the covers. "*I go, I go, see how I go!*" he said, getting out of bed. He pulled on his dressing gown and vanished into the bathroom.

Emma was sitting up in bed when the bathroom door opened. "You might want this," she heard him say as his dressing gown flew out onto the bed, "unless of course you mean to breakfast *au naturel.*"

In the kitchen, Emma stood at the sink, gazing out the window at nothing in particular as she half-heartedly nibbled on a stale scone and a bit of cheddar cheese. "Ugh," she grimaced, dropping the scone in the dustbin. "*Merde . . .*" Still holding the bit of cheese, she rummaged about in the fridge and came upon a few cold boiled potatoes left over from last night's dinner. *Better than rock-hard scones . . .* She helped herself to the smallest potato and bit into it. She'd just have to wait for Steed, who no doubt was as hungry as she was and would throw something tasty together in short order.

She went back upstairs and stopped at the bathroom door, firmly rapping on it.

“Come in,” came Steed’s cheery voice.

She opened the door only to be met with clouds of steam heavy with the scent of lavender. “Pardon me. This must be the seraglio,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“I accidentally knocked some of your bath salts into the water as I was climbing in,” Steed sheepishly confessed. He was lying in the tub, up to his neck in aromatic froth.

“Where’s my rubber ducky?”

“In here somewhere.” He scooped up a handful of foam and blew it at her. “Marvellous, these old tubs. You were right not to replace it. I say, you wouldn’t happen to have any wee boats I could amuse myself with? I could deploy an entire fleet . . .”

“Don’t you think you’re too old for that sort of thing?” Emma grinned, untying the sash of the dressing gown.

Steed’s left eyebrow crept up a fraction of an inch as the dressing gown fell to the floor.

“I’m afraid the ships have all sailed,” she said, stepping into the tub. “You’ll have to make do with the face that launched them. Only next time, *you* get the tap end.”

“What would you like for break— er, lunch?” asked Steed as they descended the stairs.

“It’ll have to be another one of your omelettes,” Emma said, drawing her arm through his as they walked down the kitchen passage. “I’m afraid I’m still not very imaginative when I do my shopping, despite having a brand-new kitchen in which to practise the culinary arts.”

In the kitchen, Steed found his tea towel from the previous day still lying on the counter and tucked it into his trousers. “If you could see to the coffee—”

Emma busied herself grinding coffee beans while he assembled the ingredients for the omelette.

“Bacon again, or bangers?” he asked her, squatting in front of the open fridge.

“Bangers.”

“I should have made mashed potatoes out of these last night,” he muttered, taking out the remaining boiled potatoes along with the sausage.

“What on earth for?” She put the coffee on, then put a couple of slices of bread into the toaster.

“To make tattie scones. I don’t think you’ve ever tasted mine. They are a treat, if I do say so myself.”

Smiling, Emma watched as he began to prepare the food. “We’ll have to buy more eggs,” she said, handing him the last four.

“However reluctantly, I’ll have to leave the shopping to you, I’m afraid.” He deftly broke the eggs into a bowl. “Dead men have no money.”

“Well, you’ll just have to be a *kept* dead man, then,” she whispered wickedly in his ear. The smile on her face, however, quickly waned. “All joking aside, you *don’t* have any money. Or anything to call your own, for that matter.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” he said softly, beating the eggs.

Emma patted him on the rump.

“In any event, it’s not as dire a problem as you might think. I left specific instructions with my

solicitors . . .” Satisfied that he had beaten the eggs to just the right consistency, Steed set them aside and turned his hand to the potatoes. “If I could press you into service as my *sous chef*—”

Emma put an onion on the cutting board, sliced off a quarter, and proceeded to peel and chop it. “You would stick me with this job,” she sniffled a little while later, her eyes smarting and her nose beginning to run. “This onion’s positively radioactive.”

Steed wiped his hands on his tea towel, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and blotted her face. “In all the years I’ve known you, this is the fourth time I’ve brought you to tears,” he sighed, “and in the space of less than two days.”

“Impious rogue.” Emma blinked, tears running down her cheeks. She took the handkerchief from his hand and pressed it to her eyes.

He carried the cutting board to the stove and scraped the chopped onion into a buttered skillet. “I’ll try to make it up to you somehow.”

Emma had more or less recovered from the onion’s toxic effects when the faint ring-ring of the telephone sounded in the distance. “Now who could—”

“The redoubtable Mr. Feeny, I reckon,” interjected Steed, now tending to the bangers sputtering and squeaking in a second skillet.

“Of course, who else? How could I have forgotten?”

“I’ve a theory,” he replied, checking on the potatoes sautéing in yet a third skillet.

“Have you indeed?”

“I have. I think you’re in love.”

“I think I’d better get that phone.”

When Emma returned, Steed was already arranging the food on two plates. “What’s the verdict?” he asked her, bringing the plates to the table.

“’Twas indeed Feeny, who rang to say, in at least five hundred words punctuated by several beggin’ your pardons and no disrespect intendeds, that the new t’ermostat has been procured and can be installed forst t’ing tomorrow mornin’.” “That soon? I don’t know if I should rejoice or weep . . .”

“Oh, Steed.” She began to laugh. One end of his tea towel had crept out of his waistband and now drooped, dog-eared, over his left pocket.

“Care to tell me what you find so funny?” He poured the coffee.

“That towel you’re wearing. You look so . . . domestic.”

He looked down. “You might’ve told me I still had this gaudy napery tucked in me britches,” he growled, pulling out the towel and tossing it on one of the countertops before taking his seat at the table. “Shockin’ bad manners.”

“You looked so fetching I hadn’t the heart.”

He glanced at Emma who, in between bites of food, had been watching him thoughtfully. “I imagine I looked rather silly—”

“Not in the least.” She regarded him with undisguised affection.

“Eggs are a tad bland, don’t you think?” he said, tasting his food.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

He picked up the saltshaker. “You might want to put some salt—” He looked up to see her absently pushing her food about with her fork as she continued to gaze at him. “Er, hadn’t you better eat before it all congeals into a cold, nasty lump?”

“Hmm?”

He reached across the table for her hand. “Emma—”

“Sorry. I was . . . thinking.”

“What about?”

“That theory of yours.”

Steed’s brow furrowed. “What theory?”

“You know, the one you proposed when Feeny rang.”

His glance wavered. “Oh, that theory.”

“Yes, that one. Might be something to it.”

“Think so?”

“I wouldn’t have said so if I didn’t,” she murmured, the tenderness in her eyes enough to begin melting his doubts on the subject. “Now, let’s eat, and afterwards we’ll take our coffees through to the study.”

“I ought to start making some plans,” said Steed, sitting down in one of the armchairs. He lit a cigarette. “And I need to get my hands on my money.”

“Won’t that take time?” Emma pulled up the other armchair directly across from him and sat down, her knees brushing his.

“It shouldn’t. Practically everything I owned is now in trust. My sister Helena is the sole trustee and by the terms of the trust she cannot do anything with the assets until a year and a day from the date of my death.” He flicked the ash off his cigarette into the ashtray Emma had handed him, and took another sip of coffee. “As for the contents of my apartment, they’ll all be tucked safely away in some corner of that huge old house of hers.”

“And the apartment itself?”

“The lease went to my favourite nephew, Helena’s younger son. He’s an officer, and his regiment’s headquartered in London. Bright young chap. He’ll go far.” Steed smiled.

“Young Johnny cuts quite a dashing figure, too, I might add.”

“The proverbial apple doesn’t fall far from the proverbial tree,” said Emma, also smiling. “I think the first thing you should do is communicate the fact of your reincarnation to Helena. The problem is how to do so without giving Her Grace the shock of her life.”

“Don’t worry about Helena, she’s unshockable. Gerry—Gervase—he’s the Duke—on the other hand . . .” Steed chuckled, shaking his head. “Chalk and cheese, those two, and still as agog with each another as the day they were married, thirty years ago,” he said, with a meaningful glance at Emma.

“That brings me next to the matter of the mysterious handmade cigarettes and the London

tobacconist.”

“Ah, yes. You remember my telling you that the investigations of the murdered Spaniard and Belgian were never linked up, let alone coordinated, because nobody knew there was any connection between the two victims.”

“I do.”

He paused for another sip of coffee. “Georges managed to lay his hands on the two investigation files. After studying them, he came across a minute detail that the two cases shared. Among other things found and duly catalogued at each crime scene were a few cigarette ends. Georges snagged a couple that were collected from each of the two crime scenes, and compared them. They were identical, a fact confirmed by a French tobacconist, who also offered the opinion that the cigarettes were custom-made in this country.”

“The two victims were wealthy men, just the sort of people who would smoke an imported custom-made cigarette.”

“What are the odds they’d both be smoking identical custom-made cigarettes?”

“Well, perhaps—”

“In any case, neither man smoked.”

“All right, they ordered in the fags as treats for their friends and acquaintances. And at least one of the guests was less than considerate in his disposal of the ends.”

“Once again, the odds of them ordering exactly the same specially-made cigarettes are extremely slim. And consider this: at both crime scenes, the cigarette ends were found at or near where the assassin most likely lay in wait for his victims. Guests, however eccentric they might be, don’t usually go off several hundred yards from a house to smoke. Nor do they normally hide in the bushes if they do so. It’s also unlikely they would hide in the very same bushes every time they nipped out for a quick one.”

After briefly considering the facts, she nodded in assent.

“Once we learn who made the cigarettes, and for whom, we’ll find the person who is behind the murders.”

“Who even now may be preparing to murder you,” Emma said. “Do you think he knows you’re alive? That you’re here?”

“Not yet. But if my suspicions about my cover having been compromised are correct, word’s bound to reach him soon, and he won’t waste any time in looking for me. All the more reason for me to let him know without delay I’m alive, and draw him into the open.” Steed leaned forward and looked into Emma’s eyes. “And I certainly can’t risk any more danger to you than I’ve already dropped you in.”

“Do you want me to go to London, to this tobacconist chap—?”

“You’re not going anywhere out of my sight,” he replied, crushing out his cigarette and getting to his feet. “Damn it all . . . I’m sorry all this had to happen—”

“I’m not. If it hadn’t, I’d still be all alone in my bed.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” She rose from her chair. “Heigh ho, for better, for worse, eh?” she grinned.

“Mostly for worse, it seems. However, as we’re not married—”

“Ah, but we are. De facto, if not de jure. You’re my beloved nitwit of a husband, Remember?”

“With emphasis on the word ‘nitwit.’”

“That’s not the word I’d emphasise,” she replied, with a kiss to the tip of his nose.

“Finish your coffee, and let’s think about what we should do first.”

“I’ve an idea or two . . .”

“Save them for later, darling.” Emma dropped back into her chair. “Once Helena knows you’re alive, she’ll rattle your solicitors’ cage, and they will set about restoring your property to you.”

Steed resumed his seat. “Why don’t you give her a ring, then?”

“Me give her a ring? She’s your sister.”

“Women know how to do these things better.”

“What things?”

“You know, breaking news gently.”

“You could break gently into her house in the middle of the night,” she said dryly.

“Emma—”

“All right, what do you suggest?”

Steed looked at his watch. “We can go to London, and be back before nightfall,” he said, finishing his lukewarm coffee before getting to his feet again. “I want to know where those cigarettes came from. I don’t fancy setting myself up as a target without first knowing what direction the shots’ll be fired from.”

21.

Behind the wheel of the Bentley once again, with a radiant Emma beside him, Steed had no trouble putting aside all thoughts of diabolical masterminds and enjoying the drive. Every now and then he glanced at Emma, who, though buffeted about by the wind, nevertheless seemed content enough.

She spent the better part of the journey lost in memories of other drives they had taken together in the Bentley: the day trips to the seaside, the picnics in the country, the impromptu jaunts to quaint pubs and inns still to be found in the villages and hamlets surrounding London. She shouldn't have given Steed such an earful about the old bus. She *was* an elegant old dowager, even if a nuisance to drive, and he *was* very fond of her. *Admit it, you're just as fond of this car as he is, and for the very same reasons.*

"We're nearly there," said Steed, negotiating a narrow street in Mayfair.

"Hmm?"

He looked at her. "You've hardly said one word to me since we left."

"Sorry. Got lost in my thoughts."

"Nice ones, I hope?"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

They left the Bentley in a parking garage and walked to the tobacconist, Steed jauntily swinging his umbrella and stopping occasionally to point something out in a shop window to Emma.

"You have the cigarettes with you?" she asked, suddenly afraid he'd forgotten them in his haste to leave for London.

He patted his coat. "Right here in my pocket. I say, have a look at these exquisite cloisonné vases over here . . ."

They rounded the corner and strolled casually down the street toward Cavendish and Burleigh, Purveyors of Fine Tobaccos and Smokers' Necessities (Est. 1853), By Appointment to various Majesties, Emperors, Royal Highnesses, and the like, as evidenced by various emblems and insignia emblazoned on the shop windows. "Does His Imperial Russian Majesty smoke cigarettes, do you think," Emma said to Steed, staring at the gold Imperial double-headed eagle, "or does he strike you as more of a pipe sort of man?"

"Cigarettes," murmured Steed. "The Tsarina's the pipe smoker."

Even a non-smoker—if he were honest—would find the aromas inside the shop pleasant and evocative of an earlier, more sedate era. The wall behind the counter was lined with shelves holding clear glass canisters of assorted pipe tobaccos and finely cut cigarette blends for those who still preferred rolling their own; and an impressive array of manufactured cigarettes, in boxes of all different colours and sizes, from all parts of the globe. Emma slowly walked past the glass cases filled with pipes, holders, lighters, cases, cigar cutters, and other smokers' paraphernalia, examining the wares with the same fascination she'd felt as a little girl accompanying her grandfather to his tobacconist. Steed, meanwhile, sauntered up to the counter and caught the eye of the shop assistant.

“Good afternoon, sir,” said the assistant, a short, plump young man. “May I be of help?”

“You may indeed,” smiled Steed, leaning casually against the counter. “Is Mr. Johnson about?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Good.”

“Are you sure I cannot assist you?” The fat little man looked somewhat put out.

Crooking his index finger and wagging it, Steed summoned the assistant nearer. “A small matter of some delicacy,” he murmured, “in which I am in need of Mr. Johnson’s *particular* expertise. Please tell him Mr. Steed from the Ministry would like a word.”

“Ah.” The assistant nodded sagely, his eyes narrowing. “Right away, Mr. Steed.” He disappeared through a velvet-curtained doorway in the back wall.

A few minutes later an elderly man emerged from behind the curtain and hobbled up to Steed. “Mr. Steed!” he exclaimed in a reedy voice. “But I heard you were, ah—”

“The reports of my demise were greatly exaggerated,” said Steed, reaching into his inside breast pocket and producing a small manila envelope, “not to say grossly premature.”

“I am extremely relieved to see that,” said the old man, laying a leather *porte cigars* on the counter in front of Steed. “Here is a small token of my relief,” he smiled, “containing your favourite perfectos.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Mr. Johnson. Thank you.”

“Not at all, dear boy, not at all. Now, then, how may I be of help this time?”

Steed handed the little envelope to Mr. Johnson. “There are a couple of cigarette ends in there,” he said. “I wonder if you could have a look at them, tell me what they are, where they come from.”

“Be glad to,” said Mr. Johnson, looking inside the envelope. He glanced up at Steed, his eyes sparkling. “Ever since I was a lad, I was intrigued by the idea that Sherlock Holmes had written a monograph on tobacco ash. I was determined to turn fiction into reality, and devoted the past fifty years to the study of tobacco in all forms. You will be pleased to learn that my treatise on the subject will be published next summer.”

“Well done, Mr. Johnson. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Mr. Steed, thank you. But I’m rambling on, as old men are wont to. Do forgive me. You need information *now*, not next summer.”

“Well, I am a bit pressed for time—” said Steed, with an apologetic grin.

Mr. Johnson peered over the rims of his spectacles at Emma, who was studying a collection of intricately carved meerschaum pipes on display nearby. “Quite so,” he said, “quite so.” He turned his attention back to the envelope, and carefully emptied its contents onto a sheet of tissue paper. He then took a large lens and a pair of tweezers from his coat pocket, and commenced his examination of the cigarette ends. First he sniffed them, then he picked out the remnants of tobacco, and then he applied the lens to the resulting mess. “A blend of brown Virginia and Bashi Bagli, with a *soupeçon* of Cyprian Latakia—I cannot say in what proportions, exactly—pity you don’t have an unsmoked cigarette, which would of course tell me more—”

“I’m not so much interested in the blend as in the manufacture,” politely interjected Steed.

“Ah, well, that’s easy,” replied Mr. Johnson, laying down the lens, and looking up. “The cigarettes are identical, of course, and custom made by a man up Oxfordshire way. He has his own unique cigarette papers, you see, and one can just see his hallmark—the two gold bands here, with a silver band with red piping in between—” He indicated with the tweezers.

“Oxfordshire, you say,” Steed said. He glanced at Emma, who had sidled up beside him.

“Won’t take but a moment to confirm,” said Mr. Johnson, vanishing behind the curtain.

“Our mastermind might be on to you sooner than you think,” said Emma, with a worried look at Steed, “if he’s buying his cigarettes from a tobacconist in Oxfordshire.”

“That thought *did* cross my mind.”

Mr. Johnson reappeared at that moment, bearing a sheet of paper. “Good afternoon, madam,” he said to Emma, before turning to Steed and handing him the paper. “Chap called Trelawney. Excellent tobacconist, though a touch surly in manner, in my estimation. That’s the address there.”

“Mr. Johnson, I cannot thank you enough,” said Steed. “Needless to say, our little interview—”

Mr. Johnson touched the side of his nose with an arthritic finger. “—never transpired. You may rely, as always, on my discretion, Mr. Steed.”

Steed inclined his head. “Good day, Mr. Johnson.”

“Good day, sir, madam.” Mr. Johnson crumpled the tissue paper with the eviscerated cigarette ends into a tight ball and disappeared behind the curtain with it.

“What shall we do now?” asked Emma once they were back in the street.

“I’m afraid we’ll be cutting it fine if we try to catch Trelawney today,” he said, looking at his watch.

Emma shivered. “It’s grown colder, it seems. Or is it just me?”

“I think you’re right, it has.” He glanced up at the sky. “Looks like another cold front moving in. It’ll be *very* chilly tonight.”

“The house’ll be freezing by the time we get back.”

“Fortunately, Feeny’ll be along in the morning to replace your, er, the Culpepper’s thermostat.” He linked arms with her. “What do you say we have a bite to eat somewhere?”

“Have you any place in particular in mind?”

“Remember the night we were driving back from the Peaks—”

“—and found that old coaching inn, where we enjoyed the most delicious baron of beef, and a very memorable claret—”

“Among other things . . .”

Emma drew him closer. “You’re on!”

They returned to the car park without further delay. Steed handed Emma into the Bentley, making sure she was well insulated against the chilly air with an extra lap rug before he took the wheel. “Comfortable?” he asked, turning to her.

“Positively luxurious,” she purred.

At the exit, the attendant waited patiently for him to pay. Steed patted his pockets, frowned,

turned to the man with a self-deprecating smile, then turned to Emma and whispered, “I forgot, I’ve no money.”

“I’ve got your billfold, darling, remember?” Emma cooed, flashing a smile at the attendant as she dug in her handbag. She pulled some notes out and handed them to Steed, who then turned them over to the attendant.

“Cheers, guv!” the attendant said, with a broad, cheeky wink at Emma as he opened the barrier. “G’night!”

22.

“Well, that scotches any plans I had to take you to dinner,” growled Steed, merging into the traffic choking Park Lane.

Emma turned to him. “But I’m hungry.”

“So am I, but I haven’t a farthing to my name.”

“That’s not a problem, I’ve a few quid.”

“I can’t allow you—”

“Just you try to stop me. Really, Steed, you mustn’t be so mediaeval in your sensibilities.”

He said nothing, and concentrated on navigating the busy roads.

“John—” Emma laid her hand on his arm.

“I really have dropped you in it this time, haven’t I,” he said, grinding the gears as he thrust the gear lever forward.

“Not for the first time,” she said with a smile. “Cheer up. When have I ever refused to help you?”

“This time, you’ve no choice in the matter.”

She looked at him. “Don’t be silly, darling, we’ve been through this sort of thing countless times before—”

“In the past, you always knew what the stakes were and you entered the fray with eyes open and by your own choice. While I may have been thoroughly shameless in trying to manipulate you into helping me, I always left the final decision to you.”

“Exactly. And nothing has changed—”

“I *was* being utterly selfish in leaving you the house,” he said, pulling to the side of the road and stopping the car.

“Not at all, you acted from a . . . practical motive. You still trusted me enough to—”

“My trust in you has never diminished. It never will.” He stared off into the distance, unable to look Emma in the eye. “But this is the first time I’ve ever put you in a position that leaves you no options. An unforgivable act on my part.”

“The only mistake you’ve made is falling in love with me.”

He turned to her. “You think that a mistake, then?” he asked softly, his eyes glistening.

“For someone in your profession it is. But I can live with it if you can.”

“Hang my profession! I would never ask you to live with it.”

“That’s *not* what I meant,” she murmured, pulling him to her and kissing him. “Now how about we get back on the road and find that inn? I’m absolutely famished.”

By the time they reached the inn the sun had set, and already it was a good deal colder than the previous night. Emma pulled her coat more tightly about her as soon as Steed handed her out of the car.

“We might have to leave the boiler on all night tonight,” she said through chattering teeth as

they hurried to the inn.

“Maybe . . . We’ll see . . .”

The inn was not crowded, and they were seated in a quiet corner away from the other diners. As soon as they had ordered their meal, Emma discreetly opened her purse and took out all the banknotes she had. “Reach under the table,” she whispered to Steed after glancing about to make sure no one was watching.

Steed’s eyebrows arched. “I beg your pardon?” he said, taking out his cigarette case.

“Give me your hand, under the table.”

He deliberately dropped the cigarette case and bent down to retrieve it, only to find Emma touching his knee.

“My dear Mrs. Peel,” he whispered, “shouldn’t we wait until after dinner?”

“Shhh!” She pushed the banknotes into his hand. “Here’s the dosh. Take it.”

Steed slipped the notes in his coat pocket and picked up the case. “Cigarette, darling?” he murmured, casually opening the case with one hand and holding it out to her, just as the waiter returned with their drinks.

“Yes, thank you, darling.”

The officious waiter produced a lighter and lit their cigarettes before flitting off to attend to another couple across the room.

“What was that in aid of?” Steed asked as soon as the waiter was out of earshot.

“What was what in aid of?”

“The charade with the money. What did you do, pinch it from the till on the way in?”

Emma took a sip of her brandy and soda. “I was sparing your mediaeval sensibilities, is all,” she replied with an impish grin. “You’d as soon die as let a woman pay for dinner.”

“I admit to being old-fashioned on that score,” he said, expelling a stream of smoke through his nostrils, “though of course you *are* paying, and I’m being a hypocrite.”

“What’s mine is thine—be it bed, board, or cold hard cash.”

“How can I ever repay you?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Steed reached across the table for her hand. “I do so love you.”

“I knew you’d think of something,” she said softly, raising her glass to him.

They were still gazing into one another’s eyes when the waiter arrived with the food, and the sommelier with the wine. Steed indulged the latter by playing his well-rehearsed role of connoisseur with rather broader strokes than usual, much to Emma’s artfully hidden amusement.

Once they were left in peace by the staff, they began to eat, savouring their food in silence for several minutes before resuming conversation.

“Your *pièce de résistance* tonight was the business with the cork,” said Emma, taking a sip of the outstanding burgundy Steed had selected to accompany the beef. “The Drama Critics’ Award for you this year, definitely.”

“You didn’t think my performance just a touch over the top?”

“Your performances never are, my darling. Mmm, this meal is simply divine.”

“Shall I recharge your glass?”

They ate unhurriedly but with gusto, chatting amiably all the while, until they were left with only the last of the wine in their glasses.

“Tomorrow, I’d like to pay a call on that tobacconist chap, Trelawney, was it?” said Steed, lighting a cigarette after the waiter had brought their coffees. He drummed his fingers on the cigarette case. “I wonder if the man we’re after is local.”

“I think I ought to be the one to interview the tobacconist,” said Emma, stirring cream into her coffee.

“I can do that—”

“Of course you can, but I still think I ought to.”

“Why?”

“Mr. Johnson said the man was unpleasant.”

“All the more reason for me to deal with him.”

“*Au contraire, mon cher*. Here is a situation clearly crying for feminine wiles.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue, darling. Trust me.” She picked up Steed’s cigarette case and turned it over in her hand. “May I borrow this?”

“What’s mine is thine,” he smiled. “But—”

“I was considering,” she said, still turning the case over in her hand, “how to go about flushing our quarry.”

“Have you an idea?”

“Yes.” She set the cigarette case down between them and looked up at Steed with a sultry expression. “*He shall come to me.*”

He raised an eyebrow. “What exactly have you in mind?”

“Baiting the trap.” She tapped Steed’s engraved initials on the lid of the case with her forefinger.

“Now wait just a minute—”

Seeing his shocked expression, Emma burst into laughter. “Don’t fret, I’m not going to seduce him.”

“I should think not!” said Steed with a horrified look. “What *are* you planning?”

“You’ll see.”

“Mrs. Peel—”

“Something perfectly harmless and innocent, Mr. Steed, but nonetheless effective. As I said, you’ll see. Now, then, shall we pay the bill and go home?”

They left the dining room and were abreast of the reception desk when Steed stopped and asked Emma, “What time is Feeny coming tomorrow morning?”

“Elevenish, I think we decided.”

“Good. That gives us plenty of time.”

“For what?”

“To get back to the house to admit him.”

“Well, I should hope so. It’s not a long drive from here.”

“I thought we might stay the night here. The house’ll be freezing, and even if we were to leave the boiler on all night—”

“I wish you’d thought of it before we left for London. I’d’ve brought a toothbrush.”

“It will doubtless come as a shock to you to learn that I *did* think of it.” Steed took her by the arm and led her to the desk where a young woman stood, elbows on the desktop and chin in her hands, looking at a magazine. “I live by the Scouts’ motto, remember?” he grinned.

As they approached, the girl looked up from her illustrated periodical, a grimace meant to be a smile contorting her plain, overly made-up dumpling of a face. “May I help you?” she asked in a tone of voice that made the inquiry sound more like a dare than an offer of assistance.

“We’d like a room for the night,” said Steed, giving the desk clerk a much more winning smile in return. “Have you one available?”

“We should do. We’re not all that busy at the moment.”

“Splendid!” He gave Emma an adoring glance before turning back to the young woman. “I say, Number 3 wouldn’t by any chance be available, would it?” he murmured, his arm now round Emma’s waist.

The girl glanced at a sheet of paper. “It would. Just the one night, is it?” She turned the guest register round.

“That’s right.”

“Very well, if you would—”

Steed turned to Emma. “My dear, would you take care of the formalities while I fetch our things?”

“Certainly, darling.” She began to fill in a form the clerk pushed in front of her.

Steed returned a few minutes later carrying a large valise. Emma completed the form, handed it back to the girl and signed the register, “Mr. and Mrs. John Peel.”

The girl looked at the card, then at the register. *If he’s John Peel, she’s Barbara bloody Allen.* It was none of her business of course if people wanted to spend a naughty night at the inn, but the least they could do was come up with more credible pseudonyms. At least these two brought some luggage with them . . . She glanced with grudging approval at Steed, who was hovering at Emma’s elbow. *Not bad looking for a bloke old enough to be me dad,* she had to admit, and turned to give Emma the once-over. *Girlfriend’s not half bad; prettier than most of the snooty tarts passing through here.*

“We’d like to settle the bill now, if that’s convenient,” said Emma, taking her chequebook out of her handbag. “What time is breakfast served, by the way?”

The clerk had pegged Emma as the married one of the pair, and struggled to imagine what the husband was like. *Twice her age, paunchy, bald, with bags of money—but with no Sex Appeal whatsoever.* . .

Emma's remarks, however, forced her to temporarily suspend her speculations. "Certainly, madam," she said, as Emma started writing out the cheque. The girl quoted the price of the room before adding, "Breakfast is served from half past six until ten."

Emma handed her cheque to the girl. "Here you are."

The clerk stared at it.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no, not at all," stammered the clerk. *Her name really is Peel* . . . She looked up. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"You might give us the room key," said Emma crisply.

"Oh, yes, of course, Mrs. Peel." She turned to the pigeonholes on the wall behind her. "No. 3," she said unnecessarily in handing over the key, as it had an enormous tag attached to it with the number prominently displayed on both sides. "Good evening, Mrs. Peel, Mr. Peel."

"Good evening." Emma turned to Steed. "Shall we drop our things off in the room, darling, and then come down for a nightcap?"

"Right-ho." Steed picked up the valise and followed Emma to the staircase.

"Mr. and Mrs. John Peel, eh?" he said with a grin, as they let themselves into their room.

"Well, as my name was on the cheque—"

Steed dropped the valise on the bed. "Poor girl had us sussed as a pair of paramours until she saw that cheque of yours."

"I'm almost sorry I disappointed her, under the circumstances," said Emma with a wry glance at Steed. "Anyway, how could you tell?"

"I was watching her. I recognised that look of Moral Indignation in her eye—"

"Ah, there speaks the voice of experience. Or was it that she simply recognised you as a repeat customer?"

"The only other time I was here I had an assignation with *you*," Steed pointed out, opening up the valise and rooting about in it.

"And you've plotted ever since to lure me back, to this very room, for another tryst. I offer this valise as Exhibit One for the Crown."

"I merely thought that, as the house was bound to be virtually uninhabitable by this evening, you'd appreciate spending the night somewhere warm."

"*Very* thoughtful of you, darling," she said, patting him on the back.

He straightened up, holding a red-leather-bound book in his hand. "I even brought your bedtime reading," he said.

"Where'd you find that?"

"In your bedside table."

"Fumbling in my drawers, were you?"

"I *never* fumble." He let the book fall open. Between the pages lay the photograph of the two of them that Emma had taken from his apartment. "Don't I look the po-faced old pillock in this picture,"

he remarked, picking it up and eyeing it critically. “You, on the other hand, look as lovely as you do in life.”

“You look nothing of the sort,” said Emma, taking the photograph from him.

Before shutting the book, Steed glanced at the text. “*I wonder, by my troth,*” he recited softly, “*what thou and I did, till we loved.*”

She continued to gaze at the photograph. “I don’t know,” she eventually replied in a husky voice, the images staring back up at her now swimming before her eyes. “I was never happier than that week we spent together . . .” She looked up at Steed and held the photograph out to him.

He replaced the photograph and laid the book on the bed.

“My darling,” she said, embracing him and pressing her cheek to his. “I’ve yet to tell you—Damn it all, I’m going to cry.”

“You don’t have to tell me, I can see that. I seem to have this unfortunate effect on you with alarming frequency of late. Most distressing.”

“Rubbish,” sniffled Emma, lifting her head from his shoulder. “Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to say—”

“Have a good cry, you’ll feel better,” he said, drawing her more firmly into his arms. “I’ll hold you, and make comforting noises from time to time.”

“I’ll only ruin your suit.”

“I don’t care,” he replied, “as long as you let me kiss you every now and again—”

“John, darling,” said Emma through her tears, “I . . . You must know I . . . how very fond of you I am—”

“I *am* relieved to hear to say that. I must confess I had my doubts—”

“You *impossible*—”

“Your humble servant,” he said, and kissed her.

“—*irresistible*—”

“Would you like to go downstairs now for that nightcap?”

Emma said nothing as she removed his tiepin.

“Or, if you prefer, I can ring the desk and have something brought to our room.”

She took off his tie.

Steed coughed discreetly. “I take it you would rather—”

She unbuttoned his collar. “I couldn’t bear it if anything were to happen to you—”

“Nothing will, my love, I promise.”

“Ask them to send up an ice bucket, a bottle of their best champagne, and two of their best cut-crystal flutes,” she said, punctuating each phrase with a soft kiss to his lips, “but before you do, can you unfasten my frock? I want to slip into something more comfortable, as they say in the American films.”

23.

Struggling to keep her windblown hair out of her eyes and mouth as they sped home the next morning, Emma turned to Steed and said loudly, “Much more of this and I shall be weather-beaten to a pulp.”

“But it’s a beautiful morning, my dear. The sun is shining, the air is crisp—”

“Not air. Wind. And the wind chill is below freezing.”

“It’s put colour in your cheeks.”

“That’s frostbite.”

“Nonsense. You’re glowing.”

“That,” said Emma, giving his bowler a playful thump, “has nothing to do with the elements. I don’t suppose we could put the top up?” *I really must do something about getting another car before winter sets in.*

“On a glorious day like this? That would defeat the purpose.”

“What purpose? Cryogenically freezing me for posterity?”

“Hardly. I much prefer you in your warm and animated state.”

“I shan’t remain animated for long. My face has gone completely numb.”

“Poor lamb,” Steed said with exaggerated solicitude, decelerating and changing down a gear. “Is that better?”

“Much,” Emma replied, now able to stand the collar of her coat up around her ears and keep it there. She looked at her watch. “There’s no rush. We’ll be home before Feeny’s due to arrive.”

“I’m anxious to pay a call on that tobacconist.”

“We can’t very well do so before Feeny shows up.”

“I also want to change.”

“Why? You look very smart in your navy pinstripe.”

“Something a little less Town and a bit more Country is called for.”

Emma grinned. “Tweed plus-fours, Norfolk jacket, and deerstalker?”

“Too pedestrian and unimaginative,” said Steed. “I was thinking more along the lines of button waistcoat, buckskin breeches, short boots, and a beaver hat.”

“I’ll look for my bonnet and reticule,” she laughed. “Shall we drive in the barouche, my lord, or the landau?”

“With your delicate constitution, m’dear, the landau, I think.”

Before very long they reached the outskirts of St. Mary Meade.

“Is there a garage nearby?” asked Steed, squinting at the Bentley’s gauges. “The old girl’s thirsty.”

“Moody’s. Take a left just past that cottage, go a mile or so up the road, and it’ll be on your right, across the green from the pub. You can’t miss it—there’s a huge oak tree in front.”

The village was very neat, if architecturally unremarkable, and boasted an upscale wine merchant’s in addition to the usual shops in the high street. The village green lay at the top of the high

street, with the whitewashed and picket-fenced Cat and Fiddle on its northwest edge and Moody's Motors, with the gigantic oak in the centre of its forecourt, directly opposite. Steed pulled up alongside the two old-fashioned petrol pumps standing like sentries in front of the open garage bays and switched off the engine. One of the two bays was occupied by a car, from beneath which extended a pair of legs clad in grease-smudged white coveralls and heavy boots. The peaceful country atmosphere was suddenly pierced by a series of short, shrieking bursts from a pneumatic drill.

Emma stepped out of the Bentley. "I'll just stretch my legs," she said to Steed, in between the bursts.

Steed tooted the horn a couple of times before climbing out of the car.

The legs beneath the car wiggled and kicked, and a few moments later were followed by the body to which they were attached. A muscular man with short brown hair and two days' growth of stubble on his cheeks got to his feet. "Sorry, I'm all on my own," he called out, pulling earplugs out of his ears. "Didn't 'ear you drive up. Ah, I'd know that motor anywhere. Good morning, Mrs. Peel; sir." He started to extend his grease-blackened hand to her, but on second thought withdrew it.

"Good morning, Mr. Moody," said Emma. "Where's your factotum, Walter?"

"Young lad's come down with mumps, can you believe it?" said Moody, wiping his hands on a dirty rag.

"Oh, dear."

"Can't be helped. So, what can I do for you today?" Moody glanced at Steed, then back at Emma, his brow furrowing, as if he were trying to remember something.

Steed was about to answer when Emma gave a subtle little kick to his ankle.

Moody's countenance suddenly lit up. "You're *Mr. Peel*," he said, beaming at Steed. "We didn't know . . . until Mr. Feeny mentioned you t'other night, casual like, over a pint—"

"Just got back from India, don't you know," said Steed, effortlessly slipping back into character as Mrs. Peel's dim-witted spouse. He put his arm around Emma. "Didn't tell the chaps about me, eh?" he said to her, giving her a hearty squeeze that left her breathless. He winked broadly at Moody.

"No one asked, my love," Emma sweetly replied once she could speak. "Anyway, your return is a lovely surprise. For everyone."

"Ha ha!"

"Talk to Mr. Moody about your Bentley, darling. Petrol, you said it needed. And its oil should be checked, don't you think?"

"Right-ho."

"You can let go of me, John dear. I want to walk about a bit after our long drive."

"Very well, carry on," he said, releasing her. "Off you go, then, old girl. Mind you don't stray off-post, what!"

"Shall I top 'er up?" said Moody, ambling to one of the pumps.

"Eh?" said Steed, staring at Moody with an utterly fatuous look in his unblinking eyes. "Who?" Emma scuttled off, laughing.

“Your motor, sir.”

“Ah.” Steed cleared his throat and scratched his cheek. “Quite.” He moved to the front of the car and began fiddling with the bonnet straps. “I’ll just have a peek at the old nerve centre, what? Keep out of your way, and all that.”

As she strolled behind the garage, Emma discovered a three-walled shed just large enough to accommodate the impeccable white XK 150 coupe crouching in its shadows. “A Jaguar indeed,” she murmured, coming up to take a closer look at the car. Despite the fact that the car was nearly ten years old, it looked as pristine as the day it rolled off the factory line. She ran her hand over the highly polished wood steering wheel and the supple leather of the driver’s seat. “I think you’ve just pounced,” she said to the car with a grin.

Steed, chatting and acting the bluff silly ass, hung over Moody as the latter inspected the Bentley’s engine. The patient mechanic let ‘Mr. Peel’ natter on, for Moody discovered that the blighter actually did know something about motorcars. Had Moody been acquainted with the term, he no doubt would have diagnosed Mrs. Peel’s partner as an *idiot savant*.

“Darling, I’m in love,” Emma intoned, sidling up to Steed and giving him a loud smack of a kiss on the cheek.

“That’s jolly reassuring,” he rumbled, patting her bottom while Moody’s head was still stuck under the bonnet. “I’m frightfully keen on you, too, y’know.”

“I wasn’t speaking of you, Johnnykins.” Emma turned to Moody, who had pulled his head out of the engine compartment and now stood looking at her with a somewhat embarrassed look. “Mr. Moody, that snow-white feline out back in the shed, is she yours?”

Moody caught the mischievous twinkle in Emma’s eyes. “Aye, she is,” he replied with a canny smile, wiping his hands on a dirty rag he pulled from one of the pockets in his overalls. “She’s a little beauty, i’n’t she?”

“Is she for sale?”

“Didn’t know you wanted a pet, m’dear,” Steed rumbled, tinkering with something under the Bentley’s bonnet. “Gone off the idea of kiddies, have you?”

“You misunderstood me, my dear,” said Emma, never taking her eyes off Moody and giving him the most charming smile she had in her arsenal. “I said ‘kitties’ when we had that discussion.”

Steed grunted something in reply, yanking a wire off the distributor cap and now regarding it with awe.

“For sale?” Moody was staring into Emma’s liquid eyes and rapidly melting. “Reckon I might sell ’er. To *you*, Mrs. P.”

“Tell me about her.”

“She belonged to Major Gough, late of the Queen’s Own Light Rifles. And late of this world, may God rest ’is soul. Babied ’er as if she was ’is child, ’e did. Only took ’er out on weekends, for a little spin in the countryside. Gave ’er a gentle bath once a week Fridays, rain or shine. Even built ’er ’er own little shelter, ’e did.”

"In short, she was well loved and well-cared-for," Emma said solemnly.

"She were that, and no doubt about it."

"How did you acquire her?"

"Auction. Poor Major had no one to leave 'er to."

"Poor thing. Is she forgiving, or is she, er . . . if you'll excuse the expression . . . moody?"

"As forgivin' as a kitten," grinned the mechanic.

"Well-behaved and responsive, would you say?"

"Aye, and more. She's a mind of 'er own, to be sure, but with a sensitive hand guidin' 'er, she's pure joy."

"How much?"

Moody scratched his head. "Well, for *you*, Mrs. P.—" He paused, engaged in some mental calculations, and then gave her his price.

Steed erupted into a fit of coughing. "*That* much?" he sputtered.

Emma put her hands to his face. "But darling," she pouted, "you *always* tell me money is no object." She emphasized her point with a sloppy kiss to his lips.

"But darling, it's just a *cat*," he protested.

"But darling, I *want* it." Emma kissed him again, more seductively. "Anyway it's not a cat, it's a Jaguar."

"Keepin' jaguars is illegal. Ain't it?"

"Don't be silly, Johnsy, or I'll be *very* cross and banish you to the sofa."

"Can't have that," growled Steed, trying his best to look beaten into submission.

"Why don't you have a look at 'er, sir, before you decide?" said Moody, giving Emma a sidelong glance.

"Oh, very well." Steed offered Emma his arm. "Never say I don't indulge you, m'dear," he said gruffly to her.

"*Never.*" She kissed his cheek. "You *darling* man."

The three of them trooped round the garage to the shed. "There she is," said Moody, pointing. "Now, then, Mr. Peel, as a gen'leman who knows 'is motorcars, what do you think? Go on, sir, have a closer look at 'er."

"I say . . ." Steed disentangled himself from Emma and bounded up to the car. "I say!"

"I think we have a sale," Emma said to Moody with a broad grin, giving him her hand.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mrs. P., but I don't think you'll be wanting to shake these 'ands of mine," said Moody with a bashful smile, "not in the state they're in at the moment."

"Very well, let's not, but say we did," she replied, still grinning. "Will you take a cheque, or do you prefer—"

"Your cheque will be fine, Mrs. P. I just hope Mr. Peel's not too put out—"

"Don't you worry about him. He'll do anything for me."

Or risk banishment to the parlour settee . . . Aye, wouldn't we all . . . "I think you'll enjoy 'er," Moody

said aloud. “Only has about ten thousand on ’er, so she’s just about broke in.”

“When shall I come by to collect her?”

Moody scratched his head, thinking. “I reckon a couple of hours. That’ll give me plenty of time to check ’er over one more time.”

“Perfect. Shall we go back to your office? I’ll make you out my cheque now. Oh, and be sure to add in the cost of the petrol for the Bentley, and whatever else my husband wanted.” Emma turned, and called out to Steed, “Johnny my pet, we’re just going.”

Stuffing his hands in his pockets and affecting a look of chagrin not unlike that of a child suddenly deprived of his favourite new toy, Steed reluctantly ambled back to Emma. “So soon?”

“We’ll be back for the car in a couple of hours. I promise you can play with it all afternoon if you like.”

“Well, in that case . . .” he said, brightening at the prospect. “Right-ho. Fall back and regroup before the final charge, what?”

“Something like that, darling.” She took him by the arm. “Now come along, I want to pay Mr. Moody.”

24.

Steed and Emma arrived at the house fifteen minutes ahead of Mr. Feeny, who turned up promptly at the appointed hour and wasted no time setting to work to replace the thermostat. “Your Culpepper’ll be good as new with this MacGillivray t’ermostat I’ll be puttin’ in,” he said to Emma, opening his tool chest and selecting his implements with as much deliberation as a surgeon undertaking a novel and especially delicate brain operation. “You’ll warm up a treat in no time, once I’ve done me job, Mrs. Peel—”

“Or I’ve done mine, eh, what?” boomed Steed, rattling down the stairs.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Your Worship, and no disrespect intended,” said Feeny, suddenly taking an extraordinarily focused interest in the old thermostat.

“Like this kit better, Emma old thing? Tweeds, brogues, motorin’ cap—”

“You’ve *never* failed inspection, Johnny,” breathed Emma, casting an infatuated glance at him. “Would you like a spot of lunch, my love?”

“Time to tie on the old nosebag already?” He checked his watch.

“Yes, darling.”

“Bit early . . .”

“We’ve some errands to run today, remember? I thought we’d best eat before we go out on patrol.”

“Good thinkin’,” Steed grunted, “good thinkin’. Army marches on its belly, what?”

“Just so, dearest.”

Steed winked at Feeny. “Couldn’t ask for a better *aide de camp* than the memsahib,” he said heartily. “Dunno what I’d do without the old girl, by Jove.”

“We’ll leave you to it then, Mr. Feeny,” smiled Emma. “Take your time. If we leave before you’re finished, I’m sure you’ll remember to lock up when you go.”

“Sortainly, Mrs. Peel, sortainly, tight as a dhrum, and you’ll never know I’ve been here. Er, except for the Culpepper workin’ properly, that is.”

“Of course. Thank you, Mr. Feeny. You are a godsend. Johnny, darling, toddle off to the kitchen and put the kettle on, there’s a dear. I’ll just pop upstairs and change.”

Feeny was still hard at work when Steed and Emma left the house. Dressed in a ski jumper and ski pants, leather boots, and a fur jacket with matching hat and muff, Emma presented a striking contrast to Steed’s tweedy, rural appearance.

“I thought the idea was to mimic the squirearchy, not the jet-setters,” he said to her as he climbed behind the wheel of the Bentley.

“That may have been *your* idea. *My* idea is to be as conspicuously out-of-place as possible.”

He started the engine. “You still haven’t told me exactly what you’re—”

She gave him a few reassuring pats on the shoulder. “Trust me.”

“Haven’t I always?” Steed nosed the Bentley slowly down the bumpy drive that debouched at

the end of Emma's property into the road to St. Mary Meade. "I say, when was the last time you took the old girl in for a thorough check-up?" he asked, fighting with the gear lever as he pumped the clutch. "She's slipping between first and second . . ."

"Er, well, actually, I haven't," Emma confessed, studiously avoiding Steed's horrified stare while trying to make herself smaller by sliding down in her seat.

"Then it's just as well we're going to Mr. Moody's," muttered Steed, finally succeeding in engaging second gear.

"Sorry," she said, hoping she put enough contrition into her tone of voice.

"You know how fond of her I am. If I'd known you'd neglect her like this . . ."

He fawns over this blasted car as if she were a spoilt mistress. "Honestly, Steed, the fuss you're making . . ."

He was struggling again with the gears. "You'll pay for it."

She sat up. "I *beg* your pardon!"

"Repair work is always dearer than routine maintenance. I'm afraid you'll have to pay the garage bill. Unless of course I can get my hands on my bank account before the job's done." He glanced at her and was startled by her indignant expression. "What did you think I meant?"

Emma slid back down in her seat. "Nothing. I . . . I didn't hear you properly . . ."

Steed gave her a penetrating look. "It's those demons of yours again, rearing their ugly heads," he said gently. "Whatever else I may be, I'm not . . . *him*."

"No. No, you most certainly are not."

They both retreated into silence for the next several miles, Emma preoccupied with her thoughts and Steed with the suddenly temperamental Bentley. It was not until Moody's garage came into view that Steed turned to Emma and said, "Your carriage awaits, milady."

"Hmm?" Emma straightened up in her seat.

Steed eased the Bentley into the garage's open bay. "Aye, that wee, sleekit, and anything but timorous beastie right over there," he said, nodding at the adjacent bay.

He vaulted out of his seat and rounded the bonnet to hand Emma out.

Arm in arm, they walked over to the Jaguar. "I'm going to enjoy driving this," said Emma.

"A real beauty, she is," came Mr. Moody's voice from somewhere at the back of the garage. The mechanic emerged a moment later, wiping his hands on his grimy rag.

"Quite right." Steed gazed adoringly at Emma. "You are that, and more, m'dear."

"I think Mr. Moody means the car, love."

"Ah." Steed slipped his arm out of Emma's and loped up to the Jaguar. "Damn' handsome piece of machinery," he grunted, walking round the car and examining every inch of it with a connoisseur's eye.

"She's all yours, Mrs. Peel," smiled Mr. Moody. "Everything is in fine working order, I'll guarantee you that." He dug in his pocket. "Here are the keys."

"Darling," Emma called out to Steed, "didn't you want to talk to Mr. Moody about the Bentley?"

“Eh? Oh. Right.” Steed wandered back to where Emma and Moody were standing. “All right if I leave the old girl with you, Moody? She’s runnin’ a bit rough. Gear box is dickey, too.”

“Be glad to look ’er over, Mr. Peel,” said Moody.

“Jolly good.” Steed coughed. “Dunno when she was last checked. I take it from the wife you’ve never worked on her. It. The Bentley.”

“I’ll give ’er—the Bentley—a thorough going-over, then.” Moody glanced at the grinning Emma, his eyes twinkling.

“Good show.”

“When would you like ’er back?”

“No rush. Take your time.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll telephone when she’s ready.”

“Jolly good.”

Emma grabbed Steed by the arm and pulled him toward the Jaguar. “We really must be going,” she said sweetly, “and I’m sure Mr. Moody has lots to do.”

“Right-ho, old thing. Cheerio, Moody!”

“Good-bye, Mr. Moody. Come along, John darling. No, dear, *this* way. *I’m* driving.”

25.

“What’s the best way to get to Trelawney’s?” shouted Emma above the roar of the Jaguar as she sped along the road out of the village.

“About twenty-five miles an hour slower!” Steed shouted back, hanging on to his cap and grimacing as Emma took a sharp curve at a hair-raising rate of speed.

She threw back her head and laughed. “Coward!” she said, changing down as she approached another curve, then accelerating and changing up.

“If I must die, I’d rather die in bed beside you.”

Emma took her foot off the accelerator, and let the car come to a stop on the verge. “Much more of these Baroque puns on ‘death’ and ‘dying’ and I’ll—”

“And you’ll what?”

“I’ll slow down,” she said, putting the car in gear and getting back on the road. “I’d rather die in bed, too. Though I’m not sure,” she added, with an impish glance at him, “about necessarily being *beside* you.”

“Mrs. Peel . . .” Steed made rather a fuss of fishing about for the motoring atlas and studying the maps. “I think you’ll want to take the next road branching east,” he said. “Junction should be coming up in a mile or so.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Emma, giving him a brisk salute.

Twenty minutes later they were cruising past Trelawney’s shop. “There it is, on the left,” said Steed. “What now?”

“I’ll drop you off further up the road, then double back and park just over there,” she said, indicating. “Give me about five minutes, then follow. Browse the shop window before coming in. Pretend not to know me. Just pay attention to what I say, then play it by ear.”

“Right.”

Emma pulled over a few hundred feet up the road, in front of a women’s clothier. “Five minutes,” she reminded Steed as he climbed out of the car, “and then off you go.”

“Be careful.”

“I will be.”

“Where shall I meet you, if we get separated?”

She engaged the clutch and thrust the gear lever forward. “In front of the shop here. I rather fancy that item displayed in the window. *Very* sexy.” With a smile and a wave, she roared off.

After a quick glance at his watch, Steed turned to take a look at the alluring article that had caught Emma’s eye. “Good God,” he said, his eyes wide with stunned fascination. Of monstrous proportions, heavily quilted, embellished with huge rhinestone buttons down the front and trimmed at the cuffs and hem with what looked like cat hair dyed a particularly hideous shade of pink, here was a female garment wholly foreign to Steed’s experience. Why any self-respecting woman would want to wear a circus tent, and such a repulsive one at that . . . Shaking his head, he glanced once more at his

watch and started for the tobacconist's.

Mr. Trelawney was hunched over the counter, carefully inserting a flint into a cigarette lighter, when Emma breezed into the shop. "Mr. Trelawney?" she said breathlessly, coming up to him.

Trelawney jerked upright, dropping the flint in the process.

"I'm awfully sorry, did I startle you?" Emma said, resting her elbows on the counter. "Mr. Trelawney?"

"Now I've gone and lost the flint," he muttered, peering through his half-spectacles at the countertop. "Yes, I'm Trelawney."

She glimpsed a tiny speck several inches away and picked it up with thumb and forefinger. "Might this be it?" she asked, dropping the flint into Trelawney's upturned palm.

"Cheers." He quickly dropped it into the tiny hole in the lighter's cartridge, replaced and tightened the spring-loaded screw that held it in place, reinserted the cartridge into its casing, and then gave the friction wheel a flick of his thumb. A bright flame erupted from the wick housing. Satisfied, Trelawney snapped shut the lighter. "Simple and dependable, even in a Force Three gale," he observed, giving the lighter a bit of a polish on his shirtsleeve. "Or so the Yanks claim. Can I interest you in one?"

"Actually, I came to see you about some cigarettes."

Trelawney jerked his thumb at the shelves behind him. "Got all sorts. American, Egyptian, French—" He folded his arms across his chest.

Emma smiled, batting her eyelashes. "I'm interested in a custom-made cigarette," she said, leaning forward. "A specific custom-made cigarette."

"I can make up any blend of tobaccos you want," said Trelawney. "For a price, of course."

"I know. That's why I'm here. Only *you* make the cigarette I crave."

The tobacconist frowned. *She's either a nutter, or she's having me on.*

The shop bell tinkled and Steed sauntered in, hand stuffed in pockets, whistling under his breath. "Afternoon," he said cheerfully to Trelawney and Emma, taking off his cap. "Don't mind me, shopkeeper, I want to have a look round while you're assisting the young lady." Steed crossed to a glass case a few feet from where Emma stood, and feigned great interest in the pipes displayed in it.

"Help yourself," said the tobacconist, turning his attention once more to Emma, who beckoned him nearer. "You look like a man of discretion," she murmured, taking out Steed's cigarette case and laying it on the counter. "I decided to go skiing in Chamonix this past spring, instead of St. Moritz as I usually do, but none of my friends were there and it was just too, too boring, so I went back to Geneva where I got on a train bound for somewhere or other in— Was it somewhere in the Luberon? Or was it the Camargue? I can't remember. It doesn't matter. Anyway—"

"That's all very nice, but what's that—"

"—got to do with you, you're wondering? Well, I'm just coming to that. I met this simply *divine* man on the train, you see. We got to chatting, as one does on trains, had a couple of drinks, dinner . . . Anyway, I ran out of cigarettes, and he was kind enough to give me several of his." Emma stroked the

cigarette case with her forefinger. “In this case. They were too divine for words, I must say. But before I remembered to return his case to him, he’d got off the train somewhere, I don’t know where.” She pursed her lips. “Such an awful bore, trying to find him,” she sighed, “but he is simply *too* divine not to . . .”

Trelawney glanced at Steed, who had moved in a bit closer and was now ogling Emma with open interest. “Be with you in a moment, sir,” said the tobacconist, a clear note of exasperation in his voice. He turned back to Emma. “How exactly can I help you, madam?” he asked her brusquely.

“Well, you see, I still had one cigarette left when I discovered he was no longer on the train, so after I smoked it I saved the end. I could tell they were custom-made cigarettes, and I thought if I could find the maker I might be able to find—”

“—your divine friend. I see. But madam, have you any idea how many tobacconists make custom-made cigarettes, never mind in this country alone?”

“Yes, of course I realize that, that’s why I first took the fag end to a *very* tony establishment in Paris, who informed me the cigarette it came from was not of continental manufacture. As soon as I got back to London, I showed it to *my* tobacconist, who was fairly certain *you* were the maker.” She opened the cigarette case. “See? He showed me those darling little bands just below the filter, and said the blend appeared to contain brown Virginia with a dash of bash—, bash-something-or-other, and Cyprian, ah, whatsits. Or something along those lines.”

“Bashi bagli, and Cyprian Latakia,” said Trelawney, taking a closer look at the cigarette end. “Yes, I made this cigarette.

Emma clapped her hands. “How *too* divine!”

“I regret, however, that I cannot divulge—”

Emma now turned, pretending to notice Steed for the first time, and slowly looked him up and down. “Hul-*lo*,” she breathed, with a little lick to her lips. “Have we met?”

“I think so,” murmured Steed, sidling up to her. “That cigarette case,” he said, nodding at the counter. “It wouldn’t happen to have an engraved inscription inside the lid, would it?”

“It might,” said Emma coyly.

“To J, last of the knights in shining armour. E?”

Her eyes, she hoped, telegraphed bovine incredulity. “How did you—”

“Night train, Geneva to the south of France—”

Emma’s eyes widened even more. “It’s *you!* Jimmy—”

“Johnny.”

“Yes, of course. *Johnny*. Darling!” She clapped her hands again, laughing gaily. “Oh, but this is simply too, *too* divine!” Turning once more to Trelawney, she exclaimed, “*This* is that divine man I was telling you about!” She glanced back at Steed. “I didn’t recognize you out of your ski gear, darling. What *divine* luck, bumping into you at your tobacconist’s!”

“This gentleman is not one of my customers,” sourly interjected Trelawney.

“Not yet,” said Steed. “Seems the lady and I are here on the same mission.” He leaned against

the counter and regarded Emma through languid, half-lidded eyes.

Comprehension slowly dawning over her features, Emma said, "The fags weren't *yours*."

"Chap in the dining car gave 'em to me, so I stuck 'em in my case and—" He grinned, and gave her a wink. "Well, the rest, as they say, is history." He picked up the cigarette case, shutting it with a snap and pocketing it. "What luck indeed, running into you like this. I'm awfully fond of this case. It was given to me by a *very* dear friend."

"It seems you've found what you were looking for," Trelawney said to Emma. "Now unless there's something—"

"The chappie who gave me the smokes, he doesn't by chance live in the neighbourhood, does he?" Steed asked Trelawney. "It was awfully decent of him, and I wouldn't mind thanking him personally." Here Steed quickly shifted his glance to Emma then back to the tobacconist, and gave the latter a wink. "If you follow my meanin'."

"My customer list is strictly confidential—"

Steed groaned. "Oh, be a sport! Anyway, I'd like a few dozen of those cigarettes—which I know you won't sell me without the fellow's OK."

"I'm sorry, but—"

Mr. Trelawney was interrupted by a loutish young man who emerged from the stockroom. "I'm off to make my delivery, gaffer. That Manderley lot—"

"Not *now*, Figgis!" Trelawney snapped. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"All right, all right, no need to get shirty with me," growled the lout. "Remember, you said I could knock off early if I delivered—"

"I know what I told you. Wait in the back. I'll be along shortly."

The lout skulked back to the stockroom, muttering.

"Last night I dreamt I was in Manderley again," said Steed, to no one in particular.

"I've heard about the road to Mandalay," chimed in Emma, then paused, her brow creased by laboured ideation. "But I'm not sure what that means, exactly."

Trelawney peered suspiciously at Steed. "What about Manderley?"

"That's the name of the house Lawrence Olivier lived in with his wicked wife Rebecca, before Joan Fontaine came into the picture, as it were," Steed patiently explained. "It burnt down at the end. The house, that is, not the picture. Or have you seen the film? If not, I really oughtn't to give away so much of the plot."

Trelawney's patience was at an end. "Look," he said, anxious to get rid of these two fools, "I don't imagine my client would begrudge you a couple dozen of those cigarettes you've taken such a fancy to. And I'll be happy to convey your thanks to him for his generosity."

"Splendid!"

Trelawney disappeared into the stockroom and reappeared shortly with a tin of cigarettes, which he deposited on the counter. "That'll be—"

"*I'm* buying," said Emma, producing some cash from the depths of the muff she was holding.

She threw Steed a sultry look. "It's the *least* I can do, after the drinks and dinner you bought me on that *divine* rail journey."

"My pleasure, m'dear. Really, you needn't—"

"Tush! I *don't* want to hear another word about it. How much did you say I owe you, Mr. Trelawney?"

"Thank you," said the tobacconist dryly, once Emma finished counting out the last few shillings and pence to make exact change. "Now if you'll excuse me—" He followed Steed and Emma to the door.

"Need a lift?" Emma sweetly asked Steed.

"Depends where you're going."

"Back to London."

"Fancy that! So am I. Came down here this mornin' by train, don't you know?"

"Where d'you live?"

"Piccadilly."

"That's *too* divine! I'm just next door, in Mayfair!"

The strolled out into the high street, babbling animatedly. Trelawney shut the door firmly behind them and remembered to turn the shop sign round to read "Closed" before he stalked off to the stockroom.

Steed and Emma climbed into the Jaguar and she was about to pull away from the kerb when he said, "Don't you want to go back for that . . . whatever it was . . . you fancied in the shop up the road?"

She pretended to ponder the question. "D'you think I should?"

"If you do, it'll mean you've thrown me out on my ear."

"Well . . . Never mind, then." She drove off, in the opposite direction.

"I've never beheld anything so grotesque in my life. What exactly *was* that thing?"

"A passion killer," said Emma with a grin.

"That's putting it mildly."

"I imagine it's something one lounges about one's house in."

Steed shuddered. "Not *my* house."

"Where to now?" she asked, as they were leaving the town centre.

"Take the A road, just up ahead," he replied. "Did you notice how jumpy Trelawney got when his assistant mentioned Manderley?"

"I certainly did."

He picked up the tin from Trelawney's, opened it, and extracted a cigarette. "Same as our fag ends, all right," he said. "And, I'll wager, the same as the cigarettes being delivered to Manderley. I've a shrewd guess—"

"—that Manderley is the lair of the fiendish mastermind who wants you dead."

He nodded.

"So where are we going?"

“I think it’s time I haunted Helena.”

“Quite. But what about—”

“There is a house near Langbourne called ‘Manderley’.”

“I thought you said Manderley burnt down,” grinned Emma.

“If you’d seen the film,” said Steed, “you would know *that* Manderley was in Cornwall. Different house entirely.”

“Ah.”

“Every year on the first Saturday in December, Helena holds a holiday party for the neighbours, and I want to be sure she’s invited *this* Manderley’s occupant. Let’s see, today is— That gives us three days until the festivities, plenty of time for Trelawney to tell our man about you, me, my cigarette case, and all the rest of it. If that doesn’t flush our quarry out—”

“I take it we’re going to crash this party?”

“That won’t be necessary. We’ll be invited, and Helena’ll insist we stay for the weekend. You’ll enjoy yourself. It’s always lots of fun.”

26.

“Slouch down and pull your cap over your eyes,” Emma said to Steed as she turned into the imposing stone gateway to Langbourne, the late-Elizabethan pile that was home to Steed’s sister and brother-in-law. To one side of the gateway, surrounded by a stand of copper beeches, stood the porter’s lodge. Two heavy iron gates barred the entrance to the drive that wound through the park to the house. Emma drew up to the gates and gave two staccato toots on the horn.

Presently an elderly man emerged from the lodge with a sprightly step—remarkably sprightly, in view of the fact he was so bow-legged—and approached the car. “Afternoon, Miss,” he said to Emma, doffing his cap. “Pardon, Madame,” he corrected himself, spotting the gentleman (who the old-fashioned gatekeeper immediately concluded was the lady’s husband) slumped in the passenger seat, face completely covered by his cap, snoring softly.

“Good afternoon,” Emma replied with a brilliant smile. “The Duchess is not expecting us . . . me, but I have some, ah, remarkable information concerning Her Grace’s . . . late brother, and—”

With a loud snort, Steed slid further down in his seat, folding his arms across his chest, and resumed snoring, only more audibly now.

“I’ll ring the house right away, madam,” said the porter. “What name shall I give?”

“Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel.”

The old man scurried back to the lodge, only to re-emerge a few minutes later. “Her Grace is expecting you, Mrs. Peel,” he said, once more doffing his cap, before pulling open the heavy gates to let her pass.

Emma, driving slowly to the house, turned to Steed. “I’ll go and speak to your sister first—”

“When do I materialise?”

“When you’re summoned. Until then, stay put.”

They reached the last curve in the drive, and as Emma drove out of it Langbourne suddenly and magnificently came into view.

“Charming country cottage, two up, two down, all mod. con.’s,” Emma dryly remarked, entering the huge gravelled forecourt. “How people can actually live in these mausoleums, in today’s day and age—”

“The family live in the east wing. The mausoleum itself is shut up, except in the summer months, when it is open to sightseers.”

“I don’t know that I could put up with charabancs full of gormless oicks tramping through my best parlour,” she said, stopping a short distance from the entrance to the house and getting out of the car. “Can you slouch down a bit more?” She pushed down on the crown of Steed’s head. “That’s better. Right, then, I’ll see you in a while.”

Emma trotted up to the entrance and rang the bell. A few moments later, the massive oak door lugubriously creaked open to reveal an even more lugubrious and creaky-looking man impeccably dressed in traditional butler’s livery. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Peel,” he murmured, stepping aside to

admit her. "The duchess will receive you in the drawing room. This way, if you please." He led Emma through the hall to a door at the far end. Clearing his throat, he knocked softly, twice, and paused.

"Come in," came Helena's unmistakable voice from the other side of the door.

The butler opened the door. "Mrs. Peel, Your Grace," he solemnly pronounced, showing Emma in.

Helena stood with her back to the fireplace, luxuriating in its radiating warmth. She was still feeling achy after having spent the entire morning toiling in the greenhouse. "Thank you, Robinson."

With a small bow, the butler silently withdrew.

"My dear," said the duchess, striding up to Emma with arms outstretched.

Emma warmly grasped the duchess's hands. "Helena," she said with a smile. "I apologise for stopping by like this, without an invitation—"

"Nonsense! You are always welcome. Anyway, it's about time you popped round to say hello. I thought you had a house hereabouts."

"I do. But I only moved in about a month ago, and . . . well, I haven't been very social since . . . since John's funeral."

"No, of course not," said Helena, putting her arm around Emma's shoulders and leading her to the settee by the fire. "His death hit you very hard, I know."

"I was very fond of him. I still am."

Helena looked thoughtfully at Emma. "But I thought— You've not remarried—?"

Emma shook her head.

"Forgive me," said Helena, "but either Jarvis got his wires crossed when he telephoned Robinson from the lodge or I got it all muddled. Tell me, what exactly brings you here today?"

"I need to talk to you about John."

"That much I seem to have got right, at least," mused Helena, knitting her brows, "but I could have sworn Robinson told me that Jarvis told *him* that 'Mrs. Peel and her husband' were at the gates . . ."

"Peel' is the name I gave Jarvis, all right."

"Of course. That's the only name I know you by," continued a bemused Helena. "Er, but you were accompanied here—"

"—only by some old baggage," interjected Emma with a crooked smile. "My erstwhile husband is, unhappily for him but not so unhappily for others, now thoroughly and permanently deceased."

"Dear me. I had no idea . . . Sorry . . . I'm afraid I *have* rather dropped a brick, or three." Helena sighed. "I suppose that now makes me at least six bricks shy of a hod."

"Hardly. And speaking of decedents—" Emma's smile broadened. "There's something you should know about John. And me."

"Don't tell me you two had a natural child who is now come to claim his rightful place in Clan Steed," Helena said, with a feigned look of shock and dismay.

"Nothing quite so banal, I assure you."

"You were secretly married."

“Alas, no. Might have solved the irksome problem of Mr. Peel, though, if we had been.”

“All right, I give up. What about John?”

“I love him.”

Helena laid her hand on Emma’s arm. “We *all* cherish his memory,” she said gently, “but life goes on. You must carry on—”

“Oh, but I *am*. Carrying on. With John, that is.”

“My dear—”

“He wasn’t killed in that accident last spring; in fact, he’s very much alive and here. With me.”

Poor woman’s gone completely off her trolley. “Stay for dinner,” Helena said in a soft, soothing voice. *Needs keeping an eye on before she does herself real harm.* “In fact, stay the night. As I said, you’re always welcome, Emma my dear.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Emma rose.

“I’ll have someone fetch your luggage, then, shall I?” said Helena, also rising.

“I didn’t bring any with me.”

“I thought you said—”

“I said ‘baggage’.” Emma crossed to the door.

“‘Luggage’, ‘baggage’ . . . same thing, surely—”

“Not exactly,” said Emma. “You’ll see. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Helena was pacing in front of the fire, shaking her head and making little fretful clucking noises, when the drawing room door slowly swung open.

“I’m *not* potty, Helena,” said Emma, walking into the drawing room. “See for yourself.”

Helena looked up. “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” she exclaimed.

“I am thy brother’s spirit,” said Steed, entering the room. He strode up to his sister and warmly embraced and kissed her. “Darling Nell.”

“Baggage indeed . . .”

“Eh?” Steed glanced at his sister in puzzlement.

“There was panic in the parlour and bowling in the hall, There was crying in the cow-shed and shrieking in the stall, When the Toad – came – home!” chanted Helena, sinking down on the settee and taking Steed with her. “I feel faint.”

“I’ll summon Robinson, ask him to fetch some smelling salts,” Steed said, reaching for the bell pull hanging to one side of the fireplace.

“Smelling salts?” snorted Helena. “*Smelling salts?* One cannot drink *smelling salts!* I need a large whisky! Neat!”

Emma had come up behind Steed and now leant over to him. “Where can I find some whisky?” she whispered, seizing the opportunity to leave him alone with his sister for a time.

“Try the library,” Steed murmured in her ear.

Emma managed to find the library and the spirits. She took her time, however, and did not return to the drawing room immediately.

She was carefully balancing a small tray with a double whisky for Helena and two more modest portions for Steed and herself when she paused at the drawing room door. In her earlier haste, she had left it ajar.

“When are you going to grow up, Toad?” she heard Helena say.

Toad?

“Not as long as you keep calling me that,” was Steed’s sarcastic reply. “For God’s sake, Nell, Emma should be back at any moment—”

“Oho, so you’ve never told her—”

“Certainly not! And don’t *you* dare! I don’t want *her* treating me like a child.”

“Then stop behaving like one. Especially with her.”

“Just what do you mean by that?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean, Toady.”

“Helena—”

“Don’t you think it’s high time you stopped sodding her about? Emma is very fond you, you blind, benighted newt—”

“You think me *indifferent* to her?”

“Don’t be absurd, darling. It’s plain to anyone with two functioning eyes in his head that you adore her. You always have. But you never did anything about it.”

“How exactly am I ‘sodding her about?’” he demanded.

“By taking her for granted.”

“Bollocks! *Emma* doesn’t think I take her for granted!”

“Don’t be so sanguine, darling.”

“What do you—”

“You take a great deal for granted. This latest escapade of yours, for instance. Even Tom Sawyer had the good taste not to drag out his demise for months on end. Poor Emma. How must *she* feel? Tell me, when are you finally going to make an honest woman of her?”

“Honest woman? By Jove, Nellie, you *do* have Victorian notions! We are living in the second half of the twentieth century! Emma is *thoroughly* emancipated, and does as *she* pleases—”

“No doubt she is, and does. Nevertheless it pleases *you* even more to take your pleasures, but not your responsibilities. You *are* still a child, Toad—a self-centred, self-indulgent child, afraid of growing up. You’re afraid she might say ‘no’ if you ask her for her hand, afraid of a *woman* exercising the independence, power and control that rightfully and exclusively belong to *men*.”

Steed’s eyes flashed with anger. “That’s not true!” he thundered.

“Isn’t it?” said Helena after a brief pause.

“Not all of it,” he conceded in subdued tones, suddenly feeling as small and vulnerable as he did in his boyhood whenever Helena got the better of him. “I *am* afraid of losing her again, Nellie. I *am* afraid she’ll say no. On top of that, I’m up to my arse in trouble. I might even be killed. D’you think I wanted to play dead? I had no choice—”

Helena knew better than to press him for details. “So what else is new?” she said, “as Ecclesiastes should have put it in the first place. Hasn’t it always been thus with you?”

“Don’t you see it’s not *me* I’m concerned about, it’s *Emma*. Her marriage was a disaster . . . that bastard who called himself her husband broke every marriage vow he made to her . . . And now *I’ve* gone and dropped her into yet another mess that she doesn’t need or deserve—”

“Darling, she loves you—”

“Oh? And what can you possibly know about it?”

“She told me.”

“How nice. Well, she has never told *me*—”

“John, surely you *must* know—”

All I know is, she’s fond enough of me, and tolerates me as a lover.”

“John—”

“I can live with that, but were she to reject me as a husband that would end *everything*. And I certainly could not endure *that*.”

“My dear boy,” said Helena. “Come here. Oh, Toady, I’m sorry I’ve upset you—”

Emma remained motionless before the door, having no desire to intrude upon the scene in the drawing room.

“May I open the door for you, madam?” Robinson glided up behind her.

“Oh! Robinson! I’m afraid you gave me rather a turn. Er, would you take the drinks in, please? I . . . I need a moment or two . . .”

“Certainly, madam,” said Robinson, gently taking the tray from Emma’s hands. “Pardon me, but is madam not well?”

“Just a bit . . . tired.” Emma forced a smile. “I suffer from occasional bouts of insomnia. Makes me a bit *distraine* at times.”

“Quite understandable. May I recommend a cup of peppermint tea at bedtime? Very soothing, and reputed to promote restful sleep.”

“Thank you. I’ll have to try that,” said Emma. “Um, Robinson—”

“Madame?”

“I should warn you, you’re about to see a ghost in there.”

“A what, madam?”

“A spectre. Don’t let him unnerve you.”

Never would have pegged her as eccentric. Proof once more that appearances are usually deceiving. “Thank you, madam, for your timely warning,” he murmured. “I shall not bat an eye.”

Robinson rapped discreetly on the drawing room door. “The drinks, Your Grace,” he announced, easing through the door before the duchess had time to acknowledge him.

“Thank you, Robinson,” said Helena, hurriedly approaching the butler.

Robinson was about to speak when he espied Steed. “The saints preserve us,” he gasped, very nearly losing his grip on the tray. *Mrs. Peel was not being fanciful at all.* “Young Mister John?” he managed

to say.

“Calm yourself, Robinson, for it is indeed my wayward little brother whom you behold,” said Helena, carefully taking the tray from the butler and setting it down on a table. “You look like you could use one of these drinks.”

“With Your Grace’s permission, I shall repair to my pantry and partake of a mild restorative.”

“Of course, Robinson.” Helena helped herself to the largest drink on the tray. “By the way, we seem to have mislaid Mrs. Peel . . .”

“I believe the young lady is just coming, Your Grace.”

“Sorry,” said Emma, walking into the room, “I felt a touch . . . light-headed . . . Thank goodness for your intercession, Robinson.”

“Thank goodness for *yours*, madam,” he said *sotto voce*, with a grateful look at her as he left the room.

Emma picked up the two remaining glasses from the tray and crossed to Steed, who stood in front of one of the windows with his back to everyone.

“I’ve brought you a drink, too, darling,” she said in a soft voice, holding out one of the glasses.

“Thanks,” he muttered, taking the glass from her hand without looking at her and downing the whisky in two gulps.

27.

“Just before your shockin’ reappearance, John dear,” said Helena, putting a fairly large dent in her drink before resuming her seat on the settee, “I asked Emma to stay to tea and spend the night. Naturally, now that you are here, the invitation extends to you.”

Steed finally turned away from the window and crossed to the fireplace. “I’m afraid I must decline,” he said. “I’ve too much to do. Of course, if Emma wishes to stay—”

“Don’t be a prat, darling. I dare say Emma would rather spend her time with you than with your dotty relations.”

Emma took a sip of whisky before joining Helena and Steed by the fire. “We *could* just stay for tea,” she said to Steed.

“I don’t wish to seem ungrateful, but I really *do* have pressing business—”

“I understand completely,” smiled Helena, reaching for the bell pull. “But you both *are* coming to the party on Friday and staying for the weekend.” She looked sternly at Steed. “You *have* told Emma about the annual holiday bash, haven’t you?”

“He has, actually,” said Emma. “I look forward to it.”

“Excellent! You know we have a theme every year. No, I can see you don’t. Obviously John omitted telling you that. Men never remember the important details. This year it’s The Hollywood Thirties. We all get dressed in keeping with the theme, and have loads of fun.” Helena erupted into a hearty laugh. “You should have been here the year we did Augustan Rome. My little brother here got squiffy and rode old Jasper—a senile roan gelding living out his remaining days with us at that time—right up the front steps and into the hall. How old were you, John? Twenty-one? Twenty-two?”

“Something like that,” growled Steed.

“I must say he looked very dashing in his Praetorian Guard costume,” said Helena. “Even as he fell off Jasper.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t anything in period to wear to this year’s party,” said Emma, “and it’s probably too late to find a costumier—”

“Not to worry, my dear, we’ve scads of frocks and things that belonged to our assorted female ancestors. We’ll come up with a suitable ensemble for you. It’ll be *loads* of fun!”

“Isn’t there an estate nearby called ‘Manderley?’” broke in Steed, who had been paying scant attention to the conversation.

“That’s right, dear. The property abuts the northern boundary of Langbourne’s park. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering if anybody was living there now. I seem to remember you telling me last Christmas that the house was unoccupied.”

“It was. But some time in late April or early May of this year, a new tenant moved in.”

“What’s his name?”

Helena frowned in concentration. “Mr. Caruso, I believe. No, that was the singer. Let me see.

Caruso, Crusoe . . . Corso, was it? Yes, that's it. Mr. Corso."

"And he is invited to your party?"

"Of course, darling. Everybody hereabouts is, you know that." She cast a shrewd glance at Steed. "Why such interest in *him*?"

"No particular reason," Steed matter-of-factly replied. "What with the house having been untenanted for quite a while, I was just curious to know who your neighbour was, that's all."

"You'll meet him on Friday evening. He phoned this afternoon to accept the invitation. Apologized for not responding sooner. Said he'd been away on business, and only just got back. Seemed a very amiable fellow, polite and well-spoken."

"Capital! Such a blessing to have decent neighbours, what?" said Steed, sounding remarkably like his personation of Emma's idiot husband.

Helena was about to remark on her brother's sudden shift into enthusiastic asininity when there was a faint double knock on the door. "Come in, Robinson," she called.

The aged butler shuffled into the drawing room. "Please forgive my tardy response to Your Grace's summons," he said, bowing. "I'm afraid I was overcome earlier by the sight of Young Mr. John."

"That's quite understandable, Robinson," Helena said with a smile. "I merely wished to inform you that my brother and Mrs. Peel will not be taking tea with us after all."

"Very good, Your Grace. Will His Grace also be absent?"

"He vowed before he left this morning that he'd be back in plenty of time. I think we can count on his presence."

"I will alert Cook."

"Excellent. Now, then, Robinson, can you hunt up a fresh bottle of whisky for us? A single malt. I think we could all do with another dram or two."

"I will attend to it at once, Your Grace. And may I say, Mr. John, what a joy it is to see you again, hale and hearty."

"Thank you, Robinson. I'm exceedin' glad to be back from the Underworld."

Robinson bowed deeply before walking slowly and with great dignity out of the room.

Steed stood fidgeting in front of the fire, worrying a few mental bones before speaking. "If you don't mind, I would like to ring Snodgrass before the day is out—"

"Certainly, dear. Use the phone in the library. You shan't be disturbed there."

"Thanks. I don't expect I'll be very long."

Helena laughed. "Not if I know old Snodgrass."

On his way out the door Steed nearly collided with Robinson, who was returning to the drawing room bearing an unopened bottle of Laphroaig, a jug of branch water, and fresh glasses on a silver tray. "Young Mr. John, boisterous as ever," said Robinson, not without affection, shaking his head. He rapped twice on the door, as was his custom, and waited patiently for the duchess to respond.

"Methinks I hear the skirl of the pipes," Helena said to Emma. "Come in, Robinson, come in,"

she called out, “ere we perish o’ thirst!”

“*The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine,*” murmured the butler, lowering the tray on the table in front of the settee.

“Where’s that from, Robinson?”

“Islay, Your Grace,” the butler replied, opening the bottle, “where truly divine single malt whiskies are distilled.”

“I meant the quotation.”

“Ah. Ben Jonson, Your Grace. From his poem entitled *To Celia*. Shall I pour the whisky?”

“No, thank you, we’re not quite finished with the blended swill yet.”

“Is there anything else—”

“Why don’t you have a bit of a rest, Robinson? Mrs. Peel and I will manage somehow.”

“Very good, Your Grace, thank you.” Robinson executed a neat little bow and retreated from the drawing room.

Helena took another sip of her drink. “Robinson’s served this household for over fifty years. His father, you know, was butler to my husband’s grandfather. This house is intimidating enough as it is, but especially so at this time of year, what with the annual bash, and all the children and grandchildren descending upon us for Christmas and New Year’s. And my brother’s reappearance was no doubt quite a shock for the old dear.” Helena smiled. “He was always rather partial to Young Mister John.”

“Just before I returned from the library,” said Emma, “I couldn’t help overhearing you address John as ‘Toad’. He never told me he had a childhood nickname.”

“I’m not surprised,” Helena drawled, wondering just what Emma had overheard of her conversation with her brother. “He’s a bit tetchy about it.”

“How did he come to be—”

“One of our favourite books as children was *The Wind in the Willows*, and we girls took turns reading it aloud to Johnny when he was a little boy. You will recall that Mr. Toad of Toad Hall is one of the characters in the story. You will also recall that Toad had a mania for motorcars.”

“Steed and his cars,” murmured Emma. “Of course.”

“There’s a *little* more to it,” said Helena. “When Johnny was about seven or eight, our Uncle Jack went off to the Punjab—at least I think it was the Punjab, but now that I think of it I’m not quite sure, not that it matters, really—and left his old 1923 Alvis two-seater with Father. It was about the time that John’s fascination with the horseless carriage dawned, and the Alvis was the very first object of his automotive affections. He spent hours crawling all over and under the old banger, studying every nut, bolt and rivet. One day he finally succeeded in starting the engine, and of course promptly climbed behind the wheel. He didn’t get terribly far, however, as he was not yet possessed of the driving skills he was to acquire with maturity, and ended up stuck in the muddy, reed-choked shallows of the old duck pond.”

“Oh, dear,” chuckled Emma, imagining the scene.

“Remember the lines?”

*The motor-car went Poop-poop-poop,
As it raced along the road.
Who was it steered it into a pond?
Ingenious Mr. Toad!*

Needless to say, it didn't take us girls long to christen him 'Toad' after that."

Emma burst into laughter. "*The Toad so free and careless and debonair . . .* No wonder he never breathed a word to me about it."

"I say, I think you could do with another drop of whisky," said Helena, realizing that Emma had finished her drink and pouring out a couple of fingers of the Laphroaig into one of the fresh glasses. "I hate to drink alone."

"Thank you." Emma was still laughing at the mental picture she'd formed of Steed's initiation into the mysteries of motoring. "He wasn't hurt, was he?"

"No, nor was the car. Papa gave John a very stern talking-to and sent him to bed without dessert that evening. Later, for his birthday, Papa and Mamma gave John a lovely illustrated book all about motorcars."

"You must have some photographs of him as a boy," said Emma. "I'd like to see them, some time."

"He's never shown you any?"

"Not of himself. He did show me a few of the family, mainly of you, as you're his favourite sister."

That clod of a brother of mine . . . "Well, I shall have to put *that* right," said Helena, bringing her glass to her lips before getting to her feet.

"You mustn't go to any trouble—"

"No trouble at all. The albums are all conveniently stuck away in the library." Helena strode purposefully out of the room.

She returned in short order, bearing a small album. "Our eldest sister, Julia, came up with the happy notion of putting together an album for each one of us, documenting the different stages of our lives. Here's the one she made up for John." Helena sat down beside Emma and opened the album. "Here he is as a mewling infant," she said. "Though of course babies all look the same—like wizened old men, only on a smaller scale. Gives one some idea what they'll be like in their dotage."

Having telephoned Snodgrass and Mother, in that order, and having finally finished with both, Steed returned to the drawing room, but before entering, he carefully opened the door a crack and shamelessly eavesdropped.

"We really were heartless," Helena was saying to Emma as they looked at a picture of little John in a sailor suit. "He was only two then, and I'm afraid we girls thought of him rather as a live doll, to be dressed up as we pleased."

“Poor thing, he looks thoroughly disgusted,” said Emma, studying the photograph of Steed scowling at the camera lens in obvious displeasure.

“He was. Not surprising he later joined the Army,” said Helena, sipping her whisky. “Here’s a photo of him in the Alvis—after *l’affaire du bassin* had died down.”

Emma smiled, gently tracing the old black-and-white photograph with her forefinger. “What a sweet child he was . . .”

“Ha! That sweet child was not above manipulating us girls whenever he could.”

“Nothing’s changed, I see,” said Emma, turning to another page. “What’s this, young Master John at Eton?”

“Yes. Already he has the proud stance and jaundiced eye of the Arrogant Young Buck about to be let loose on Society. Pity about the war. Forced him to grow up rather too quickly.”

Emma smiled. “In some ways.”

“Quite. Now *that* one was taken shortly after he was commissioned.”

“Very smart—”

“Who’s smart?” Steed asked, striding into the room.

“You are,” said Emma. “In your uniform.”

“Eh?”

“We’re looking at snapshots,” said Helena.

Steed came up behind the settee and glanced over Emma’s shoulder. “Where’d you find this?”

“It’s your photo album,” said Helena. “Don’t you remember, Julia made one up for each of us, some years ago—”

“Now that you mention it . . . I’d completely forgotten about it.”

“I’m surprised you never showed it to Emma.”

“Strange as it may sound, we seemed to find other things to do besides sit in front of the fire and stare at faded old tintypes,” Steed dryly replied, rounding the settee and posting himself in front of the fireplace.

Emma flipped to another page. “Now *that’s* a *very* smart kit indeed,” she said, turning to Helena. “Who’s he masquerading as, Lord Byron? Heathcliff?”

“I’ll give you a hint,” said Helena. “That was the year of our Jane Austen theme.”

“Of course. Fitzwilliam Darcy, pride and prejudice written all over his haughty features.” Emma grinned, glancing up at Steed.

“Let’s see, when was that?” Helena bit her lip, thinking hard. “John?”

“I remember I had the devil of a time with that cravat,” muttered Steed, preoccupied with other matters.

“*That* you *would* remember, wouldn’t you,” said Helena, still searching her memory. She turned back to Emma. “The year before Sputnik, it was. After Sputnik, we went all sort of futuristic and outer-spacey with out party themes for a couple of years.”

Steed shook off the thoughts racing through his head and turned to his sister. “I say, Nellie,

d'you have that rosewood-and-mother-of-pearl-inlay chest of mine, the one with all my cravat pins and things? I kept it in the bedroom in my apartment—”

“The one Uncle Jack brought back from Shanghai for Mater, in 'twenty-nine?”

“That's the one.”

“Upstairs in my bedroom, on my dressing-table. You know I haven't even touched it since . . . since bringing it here.”

“If you don't mind, there's a particular tie pin and some sleeve-links I want—”

“Of course I don't mind, it's your chest and your stuff. You know where my bedroom is.”

Steed bounded up the stairs to the bedroom. The Chinese chest was deposed in the centre of Helena's dressing table like some ancient totem, cleared on all sides of the usual detritus of women's dressing tables and occupying in solemn majesty what might be described as pride of place.

He opened the chest. There were his regimental sleeve-links; the gold pocket-watch that belonged to his grandfather; the *fin-de-siècle* tie pin Emma had surprised him with in Vienna; several faded and frayed miniature medals. He rooted about until he came upon a tiny plain wooden box lying at the bottom, beneath a jumble of military cap badges, corps devices, a number of pips, and several crowns. He carefully took out the little box and opened it, staring fondly at the object it held. *Nellie's right. Do your duty, and leave the rest to heaven.* He shut the box and replaced it in the chest. “Wish me luck, Grandmamma,” he whispered, stuffing the chest under his arm as he walked out of the bedroom.

“Find it all right, dear?” Helena said to Steed when he returned to the drawing room.

“Indeed I did,” Steed replied with a little smile. “Now, much as I hate to break up this hen party, Nellie my love, Emma and I really must be going. It'll be dark before long—”

“—and you have better things to do than sit idly looking at family photos, I know,” said Helena, with a sly smile of her own at Steed. She rose from the settee. “We'll see each other in a couple of days anyway. Emma, take the album with you. If you don't, that unsentimental dolt of a brother of mine certainly won't, and someday his children will resent him for it.”

“I wouldn't call him entirely unsentimental,” murmured Emma, closing the album and rising. “Thank you, Helena—”

“Oh, pshaw! You're practically one of the family.” Helena walked out into the hall with Emma, Steed bringing up the rear. “I'll see you out. No sense troubling dear old Robinson. *À bientôt*, darlings! See you Friday!”

28.

“What’s the rush? I don’t see why we couldn’t stay to tea. We’ve only cold roast beef at home,” Emma complained to Steed as they walked to the car.

“We really *must* go to the shops tomorrow. In the meantime, there’s nothing wrong with roast beef sandwiches accompanied by some of that eminently drinkable claret from your cellar.” He opened the passenger door, but did not get in.

“Hey—”

“You don’t mind if I drive, do you?”

“And if I do?”

“I dare say you’ll forgive me later,” he smiled, and tried to give her a kiss, but she stepped aside.

“Don’t you start taking your rights for granted.” Emma folded her arms. “I still don’t understand what is so pressing—”

“I have never confused privilege with right,” he said, her sudden petulance rankling him. “Nor do I take anything, or anyone, for granted, least of all you. I merely wanted to drive over to Manderley before it got dark, have a look at the place. However, as I now seem to displease you so much—”

“Don’t patronise me, Steed—”

“Who’s patronising whom?” he said, rather sharply, stepping round to the back of the car. “Open the boot, please.”

Emma unlocked it for him and raised the lid.

Steed put the wooden chest inside. “There, it’s all yours now.” She barely had time to drop the album next to the chest before he slammed the boot shut and started back to the house.

“Did you forget something?” she called after him, ashamed of herself for having rebuked him so unkindly. “John?”

“I’ll see you on Friday,” he said.

She caught him up. “I’m not going home without you,” she said, grasping his arm and stopping him. “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“I can’t take you for granted if we’re not under the same roof.”

“John . . .” She held the car keys out to him.

Steed regarded her sternly for several moments before taking the keys from her and striding back to the car. He climbed behind the wheel and started the engine, waiting just long enough for her to hop in before he thrust the car into gear and roared off in a cloud of dust and gravel to the mouth of the drive that would take them back to the public road.

Manderley was a squat, ugly late eighteenth-century house built with sandstone dug from a local quarry. It had not weathered well, and over the years had acquired a dingy grey overlay that completely dulled the original soft-gold colour of the stone. Dark streaks ran down the sides of the house where the rain gutters had failed in their duty, and from the edges of all the windowsills. The grounds were in need of attention, but it appeared that the current inhabitant had already begun to effect certain repairs

and restoration, for there were a couple of builders' lorries parked in front of the house, and a tall ladder stood propped next to the porticoed front entrance.

The grounds were of modest proportions, and bordered on three sides by public roads, making the house readily visible to passing motorists. Steed got a good look at the front and sides of it; the back faced Langbourne's park. He fixed in his mind Manderley's layout in relation to Langbourne and noted its position relative to several prominent landmarks. Satisfied that he had seen all he needed to of the house and grounds, he spent the next half-hour or so systematically exploring the surrounding area until he decided that he had done enough. It would soon be dusk. He turned the car in the direction of St. Mary Meade.

At the northeast boundary of Langbourne they passed a wooden gate meant to keep trespassers from an old, weed-choked track leading inland onto the property. The worm-eaten gate, barely hanging on its one remaining hinge, would doubtless crumble to dust at the single prod of a child's finger. "They should do something about that gate," Steed growled, more to himself than to Emma, slowing down.

Emma followed his gaze. "Where does the track lead?"

"An old quarry . . . Most dangerous place for miles around . . . Somebody could get hurt . . ."

They did not speak again, Steed absorbed in what he'd learnt from his reconnaissance patrol and Emma in her thoughts, which for the most part centred on him. She turned her eyes on him from time to time, recognising the signs, once so familiar to her, signalling his complete mental and physical focus on a mission. The signs of stress, however, were more subtle, and thus more difficult to detect, for he generally kept them well hidden and under control. Like his emotions. Emma looked over at him again, tenderness mingling with growing self-reproach. *No, not like his emotions. Didn't he tell you he loves you, you stupid cow?*

By the time they got home, it was dark and cold. The skies were still clear, however, and Steed hoped the dry weather would hold through the weekend. He drove to the back of the house and pulled up in front of the kitchen door. Emma was already swinging her legs out of the car as he came round to hand her out.

After they had let themselves into the kitchen, Emma was the first to speak. "I'll get started on the sandwiches as soon as I change out of these clothes."

"I'm not particularly hungry—"

"I'm sorry I was so beastly to you," she said. "I don't want to quarrel—"

"Neither do I."

"John—"

"Your demons are getting the better of you again, my dear," he said. "I was about to suggest we have some wine first. All right?"

Emma bit her lip. *What wretched errors hath my heart committed . . . And is still committing . . .* "Darling—"

"I take it you've no objection?"

“There’s something I want to say to you—”

“Can’t it wait? I’m thirsty.”

“I suppose it *can* keep a while longer,” she sighed, walking out into the kitchen passage. *After all this time, what’s another hour . . .*

He followed her out to the entry. “By the way, d’you by any chance happen to have the Ordnance survey map for this area?”

“Bookcase behind the desk in the study,” said Emma, mounting the stairs. “I’ll be down again shortly.”

Having brought a couple of bottles of wine up from the cellar, Steed got the fire going before turning his attention to the bookcase. He found the map he wanted in short order and spread it out on the desk, where he could more easily examine it.

“You want more light,” said Emma, walking into the room a while later. She crossed to the standing lamp and moved it closer to the desk.

“You didn’t take long,” said Steed, adjusting the lamp. “Ah, yes, that’s much better.” He looked up at her. She was dressed comfortably in a pair of leggings and an oversized knit wool jumper, and her freshly washed, freckled face bore no traces of makeup. “Much better,” he repeated, gazing into those expressive brown eyes of hers that, to his mind, looked all the more beautiful without any cosmetic enhancements whatsoever.

“The entire house is warm and snug now,” said Emma, “and showering no longer the monkey-freezing experience it was this morning.”

“I am delighted; nay, over the moon. Shall I pour you a glass of wine?”

“Not just yet,” she replied, walking back to the doors. “I think I’d better make those sandwiches before I get too cosy imbibing by the fire.”

“Very well.” He turned his attention once more to the map.

When Emma returned with a plate of sandwiches, Steed was still hunched over the desk. She set the plate on the sofa table before joining him. “That’s Langbourne, isn’t it?” she said, picking up a pair of dividers and indicating with them.

“Right.”

“Which means Manderley is . . . right here.”

“Right.”

“What makes you so sure—”

“—that my nemesis dwells at Manderley? Another one of my patented gut feelings. That, and the facts: the cigarettes, Trelawney, Mr. Corso hastily accepting Helena’s invitation only *after* our visit to his tobacconist . . . I’ll wager Trelawney was on the phone to him the moment we stepped out of the shop.” Steed straightened up with a grunt, rubbing the small of his back. “Shall we have some of that wine now?” he said, moving stiffly toward the sofa. “I could use a glass, if only for medicinal purposes.”

“Sit down by the fire. I’ll pour.”

“And then bring me my pipe and slippers?”

Emma came up behind him. “Anything you want,” she murmured, and began to massage his shoulders.

“Anything? —Ouch.”

“Anything. —Sorry. You’ve a tight knot just here—”

“Ouch! A little lower and a bit to the left would be nice. That’s it, yes. Perfect.”

“Did you get hold of Mother on the phone this afternoon?” she asked, vigorously kneading his back.

“Yes. —Och, not so hard, please.”

“What was his reaction to your renaissance?”

“Ructions. And he concluded by saying I shan’t get paid a farthing for the time I was officially dead.”

“Heartless skinflint.” Emma concluded her massage. “There. That’s all for now.”

He turned around. “But I was just starting to enjoy it!”

She poured two glasses of wine and handed him one. “You’ll enjoy this even more. *À ta santé.*”

“*À la tienne,*” he replied, touching his glass to hers.

Emma took a sip, swirling the wine in her mouth and savouring it before swallowing. “Mellow, elegant, mature,” she pronounced, “but not without a hint of rakish exuberance in subtle counterbalance. Very smooth round the edges, and travels exceptionally well. A rare, charming vintage that will seduce all but the most deadened palates.”

“Ha ha! Very clever, my dear, but I wouldn’t rate this claret quite as highly as that.”

“I wasn’t describing the plonk.”

He ambled back to the desk for another look at the map. “I *was* right, it *is* there,” he muttered, peering at some detail in the lower left quadrant.

Emma set her glass down on the very spot he was examining.

He looked up at her. “Sorry. Er, you say you weren’t describing the wine?”

She shook her head.

Steed continued staring at her for a few seconds before his eyebrows arched and his lips formed a small “o”. “I think I’ll have one of those sandwiches,” he said, walking back to the sofa table.

He picked one up and was about to take a bite when Emma plucked it from his fingers. “You can’t very well kiss me if you’re eating.”

“You’re right, I can’t,” he replied, taking back his sandwich. “Food renders me quite harmless, inert even.” Before he could sink his teeth into it, however, Emma managed to snatch it away again.

“Must I do *everything* for you?” After replacing the sandwich on the plate, she put her hands to his cheeks and kissed him warmly on the lips. “That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?”

Steed’s hands found their way to her waist. “Let me try,” he murmured, his lips meeting hers. “You’re right, it isn’t,” he said presently. “However, I think we’d better eat these sandwiches—”

“Just when I was starting to enjoy myself . . .”

“Half of all pleasure lies in the anticipation thereof,” said Steed. “Can I have my sandwich

now?”

Pulling a face, Emma gave him a gentle push in the chest. “Sententious brute, speak for yourself.” She found her wineglass and took a sandwich before dropping into one of the armchairs by the fire. “Why the recce today, and your absorption in the topography of Langbourne and Manderley?” she managed to ask around a bite of roast beef.

“Last time I was at Langbourne was a year ago Christmas,” said Steed, picking up his sandwich and sitting down opposite Emma. “The duke and I took a ride one day and thoroughly explored the park. I wanted to check my memory of the geography against the map. I wanted to be sure of Manderley’s general layout and orientation. And I wanted to know what to expect.”

“What do you mean, ‘what to expect?’”

Steed swallowed a mouthful before replying. “These are awfully good. What’d you do, put chutney on ’em, or something?”

“Or something. Darling—”

“Mr. Corso—our diabolical mastermind—won’t be so rash as to try anything at Helena’s party, so it’s up to me to draw him out in the open where he can make his move.”

“What exactly are you planning?”

He sipped his wine, then reached for another sandwich. “I think I’ll invite him to go riding on Sunday.”

“Look here, can’t Mother do something—”

“Such as?”

“I don’t like it, John. This Corso, if in fact he *is* our mastermind, assassinated two men, and—”

“No doubt he used someone else to do that, and so far his hands are unsullied. No doubt the assassin’s been dispatched by now, and no doubt by one of Corso’s other minions. I think Corso wants me for himself.”

“How do you know that? How d’you know someone isn’t out there right now, watching—”

“I’d’ve been dead by now if that were the case.” Steed got up to fetch the wine bottle. “Of the three of us on that mission, I was the only one literally with blood on my hands,” he said, resuming his seat and recharging their glasses.

“So you think *revenge* might be the motive?”

“It might.”

“But *who*—? I mean, what’s Corso got to do with something that happened twenty years ago? And why wait twenty years?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer your questions, even though I’m certain Corso’s our man. I’m going to force his hand, make him go after me.”

“But you don’t know who you’re up against,” she protested, “or what he’s capable of.”

“There’s no need for you to get in a state—”

“I am *not* getting in a state!” she said, in a rather louder voice than usual.

Steed leaned forward, placing his hand on her knee. “Relax! We’ve got a few days before

Corso's in a position to make his move. He's going to want to feel me out first, at the party on Friday. I'm in no immediate danger."

"No, just briefly postponed danger."

"You'll be keeping an eye on me throughout."

"Who's going to watch your back if you persuade Corso to ride with you on Sunday?"

"You, of course."

"*Me?* You know I'm not very good at anything remotely equestrian."

"Good enough. We can even fit you out with a Western saddle. They're said to be as comfortable as that chair you're now sitting in, and as difficult to fall out of."

"Swell," she muttered. "Where do you think you're going to find a Western saddle, and in three days?"

"Helena's got one. Our Uncle Jack—he of the Chinese Chest—once spent some time in Canada working as a cowboy. Shipped his saddle home before he took off for South America." Steed helped himself to another sandwich. "Pity he never sent home a gaucho's saddle, while he was about it . . ."

"One of these days you'll have to tell me more about this Uncle Jack of yours," Emma said, getting to her feet. "Which remind me, we forgot to take the chest and the photo album out of the boot."

"Leave 'em for now. They're all right where they are—"

"I'll only be a minute," she said, leaving the room.

Sated with the sandwiches, Steed was enjoying another glass of wine when Emma came back with the chest and the album.

"It might be better if we sit on the sofa," she said, setting the chest down on the floor next to the hearth. "That way you can tell me about the photographs."

"You want to look at them *now?*"

"Why not?"

"They're just old faded snapshots, of little interest, I should think, to anyone save the curator of the Natural History Museum's dinosaur exhibit."

"I have a confession to make."

Steed raised an eyebrow.

"I'm the curator of that exhibit."

"Oh, well, in that case . . ." Chuckling, he got up from his chair and moved to the sofa.

Emma sat down beside him. Steed picked up the album and began flipping through it.

One page caught her eye. "Hold on, I missed that one earlier," she said, staying him with a hand to his arm.

"Which, this one?" He flipped back a page, to a montage of smaller photographs, including one of a bride and a tall, uniformed groom posing formally in the doors of a Norman church. In the foreground stood a double line of officers, swords drawn and held aloft point to point to form an archway. Emma couldn't quite make out the couple's faces.

“You always told me you’ve never been married,” she said in a hushed voice, her eyes fixed on the photograph.

“That’s because I never was,” he laughed, glancing at her. “That’s not me. Those aren’t even my regimentals—I wasn’t in uniform yet, when this was taken.”

“Then who—”

“That is my second cousin Arabella.”

“Oh.”

Steed leaned into the back of the sofa with a nostalgic sigh. “Arabella was my very first passion, but she, alas, spared nary a thought for me. As you see, she married that handsome young second lieutenant, Charlie. Or Major General Sir Charles Lytton, as he is now known.”

Emma cast a wry glance in his direction.

He laughed. “I was only fourteen years old when I fell in lust with her. She and Charlie got married just before the war, by which time I was aflame with desire for the nubile daughter of the town doctor. Not that anything came of that, either. And then the war came, and . . .” He straightened up. “It wasn’t until I met you that I fell in love for the first time in my life.”

She continued to stare at the photograph.

“It’s time to turn the page, don’t you think?” he said, giving her a gentle nudge.

“As it were,” she murmured, raising her head. She took the album from his hands, shut it, and replaced it on the sofa table.

“Don’t you want me to tell you about any of the other snapshots?”

“*‘The time has come,’ the Walrus said, ‘to talk of many things’;*” Emma replied, “*‘Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—Of cabbages—and kings—And why the sea is boiling hot—And whether pigs have wings’*.” She turned toward him. “Twice now I have had to face the prospect of a life without you,” she said quietly. “Leaving you to go back to the man I married was very painful. But he *was* my husband, for better or for worse, and I felt duty-bound to honour our vows.”

“I know that, Emma—”

“After separating from him, I at least had the hope that, after the divorce, you and I might see each other again. But after I learnt you’d been killed . . . That was unbearable.”

“My dear—”

“I’m not merely fond of you, John, and I don’t just tolerate you—”

Steed’s back stiffened. “What makes you say—”

“I overheard your conversation with Helena. I heard what you said to her.”

He got up from the sofa and strode over to the fireplace. “Well, then you must’ve overheard how she was winding me up! I was annoyed, I may have said some things—”

“Nevertheless, you still doubt me.”

“No, Emma. It’s just that—” He fished about in his pockets for his cigarette case.

“It’s just that what?”

“It’s just that you told my sister you love me, but you’ve never once told *me*.”

Emma rose. "Of course I have!" she protested, coming up to him.

"No, you haven't. Not once have you ever actually said to me—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, John. Surely . . . surely you know—"

He lit a cigarette. "Why can't you bring yourself to say those words to me?"

Emma crossed to the drinks table where she poured herself a short brandy and soda. "Perhaps because those particular words no longer roll so readily off the tongue," she replied, having a sip of her drink before returning to Steed's side. "Sorry, I should have asked you if you wanted a drink . . ."

"That's all right, I don't," he said slowly, dropping his cigarette into the fire and stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"The only man I ever said them to . . . well, the less said about *him* . . ." A sudden tightness gripped her throat. "What is it they say? Once burnt, twice careful?"

"Just so . . ." *What an arrogant, thick-headed ass I've been . . .* "Emma, darling, I'm sorry—"

"No, John, *I'm* the one who's sorry." She set her glass on the mantelshelf. "They're *my* demons, not yours. You deserve better than that."

"They're mine now, as well," he said, embracing her. "You deserve better than to fight them alone."

"John . . . My John . . ." Emma kissed him. "*I* can't bear the thought of a future in which *you* play no part," she said, tenderly kissing him again. "That's one way, I suppose, of saying I love you."

"Yes," he said, holding her more closely to him, gently stroking and kissing her head, "it is, my love. It is."

29.

“I think I hear a car,” said Steed, sitting up and listening intently.

Emma voiced a sigh and flopped over onto her stomach. “What’s the time?” she rasped in the hoarse, low voice of the just-awakened.

“Ten past nine.” He got out of bed and pulled on his dressing gown. “In the morning.”

“Mmmff.” Emma rolled over on her back and yawned, bringing welcome tears to her sleep-sticky eyelids. She sat up, blinked several times and finally got her eyes to focus on Steed, who now stood in front of the window peeking through the curtains. “Did you say a car?”

“I did.” He watched a little red car jostle and jolt up the drive toward the house. “Somebody’s coming to see you.”

“Botheration! I’m not expecting anybody.”

The little car reached the house and stopped.

“If we ignore them, they’ll go away,” Emma muttered. “Come back to bed.”

“I think I’d better go downstairs,” said Steed, watching as a woman emerged from the car. “Some old trout from the village, I imagine, extorting contributions to charity.”

“I gave at the office.”

“It *is* the holiday season. I’ll get rid of her politely. After all, we don’t want to upset the natives, do we?”

“Bugger the bloody natives . . .”

“Tut, tut, mustn’t voice one’s prejudices—”

She waved a hand dismissively. “There should be a few ten-bob notes lying about on the dresser. Just give ’em to her and send her on her way.”

He snatched up a couple of banknotes and dashed out of the room just as the front doorbell rang.

It was on the second ring that Steed opened the door. The well-dressed middle-aged woman who stood before him seemed surprised when she beheld him, probably, he thought, because he was still in a dressing gown at this hour of the day. Her easy grin quickly turned into a reserved social smile.

“Mornin’,” he said cheerfully.

“Good morning,” the woman pleasantly replied, regarding him with interest. Steed, beaming her a foolish smile in return, waited for her to state her business, but she merely looked at him, saying nothing more.

He shifted his feet. “Er—”

“Does Mrs. Emma Peel live here?”

“Indeed she does.”

“May I speak to her, please?”

“Old girl’s still in bed, I’m afraid. Can *I* help you?”

“Who, may I ask, are you?”

“The husband, of course,” grunted Steed, affecting a shocked expression. “Wouldn’t be hangin’ about here in me dressin’ gown otherwise.”

The woman gave him a penetrating stare. “Quite. How tactless of me. So you are Mr. Peel, are you?”

“If she’s Mrs. P. then I must be Mr. P., what? Ha ha!”

“You say your . . . wife is still in bed?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, we mustn’t disturb her, must we?” The woman opened her handbag and took out a small notebook and pen.

“I say, can’t I be of service?”

“Not to me,” the woman replied with a wry little smile, jotting in her notebook, then tearing out the sheet and handing it to Steed. “Please ask Mrs. Peel to give me a ring after lunch, at this number. I need to speak to her.”

“Will do, will do—”

“Thank you. Mr. Peel. Good day.” The woman turned to go.

Steed glanced at the piece of paper. It bore nothing more than a local exchange telephone number. “Er, I say, madam, I’m afraid I don’t know who you are—”

“But of course not. Silly me,” said the woman, turning around and smiling at him. “You may tell Mrs. Peel that Honoria Glossop of the St. Botolph’s Sorority called, to discuss the church raffle.”

“Right. Mrs. Glossop—”

“*Miss* Glossop.”

“*Miss* Glossop. Sorry. Er, Miss Glossop, Botolph, raffle, wife to ring after tiffin. Right-ho!”

“Cheerio, then. Mr. Peel.” Still smiling, the woman strode off. Steed watched her get in her car and waved to her as she drove off.

He shut the door, rubbing the back of his neck. Honoria Glossop . . . He wondered if he’d ever met her before. Woman seemed vaguely familiar, as did her name, but he couldn’t place her in any context at the moment.

As he got halfway up the stairs, the telephone in the entry rang. *No rest for the wicked* . . . He ran back down and picked up the handset. “Peel,” he grunted, and paused to listen. “Splendid! I’ll collect ’er in a couple of hours.”

“What did she want?” asked Emma as soon as Steed returned. “And who rang?”

“The woman is a Mrs., er, *Miss* Honoria Glossop, of St. Botolph’s Sorority, and she wants to talk to you about the church raffle,” said Steed, sitting down on the bed beside Emma. “The telephone caller was Moody, letting me know the Bentley’s ready.”

“Honoriam Glossop?” exclaimed Emma, laughing.

“I had no idea you were such a devoted parishioner. What’s all this about a sorority and a raffle?”

"I haven't a clue. Perhaps the woman wants me to flog the raffle tickets, or get me to join the choir or something. Honoria Glossop! What a name!"

"Funny woman," he said. "The way she looked at me . . . and the way she called me 'Mr. Peel' sounded like some kind of naughty private joke."

"No doubt Miss Glossop takes a dim view of men who greet respectable spinsters clad only in a dressing gown." She nudged him. "Why don't you take it off and get back in bed? I shan't take a dim view of that at all."

"Darling, we've things to do—"

"They can wait," she said, taking his hand. "We've only a couple of days until Helena's party, and—" Emma looked into his eyes. "Oh, John, if anything were to happen to you—"

"Nothing's going to happen if I'm prepared," he said. "Look, half the morning's gone already. I'm going to wash and shave—"

"John—"

"We're going shopping, remember? And there's the Bentley to collect. I also want to go to Langbourne this afternoon and take another ride through the park."

"You want to go riding *today*?"

"Yes. The weather's perfect for it."

"But you're going riding on *Sunday*."

"Exactly. All the more reason for me to choose my mount now, take him through his paces and get a good feel for him. The horse needs to get to know his rider as well. With luck, Helena still has that bay gelding I rode last year . . ."

"All right," she sighed. "You shower first, and I'll follow as soon as you're finished."

Steed, dressed in old riding breeches, well-worn boots and hacking jacket, raised a few curious eyebrows when he and Emma arrived late in the morning in St. Mary Meade's high street. They did their shopping efficiently and quickly for the most part (Steed lingering perhaps a little longer than necessary at the wine merchant's), as most of the locals had already completed their rounds of the shops and returned home in time for lunch.

"When do you expect to be back?" Emma asked Steed as she drove up to Moody's garage.

"Between half past four and five, I reckon. In plenty of time to prepare dinner." Steed got out of the car and came round to the driver's side. "Don't forget to ring the Glossop Woman," he said, bending down to give Emma a kiss, "whoever she *really* is."

"What do you mean?"

"I finally remembered where I'd come across that name before."

"Where? Who is this woman?"

"Met her through Bertie Wooster."

"Eh?"

"Read your Wodehouse," he grinned. "As for who she really is, I cannot say. I think she's having you on, for reasons known only to her."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "I can't wait to chat with her."

"Don't let me keep you, then."

"Right. See you later." She put the car in gear and sped off.

"I say, Moody," Steed called out, striding into the bay where his Bentley stood freshly washed and polished and handsome as ever. "What ho!"

It had just gone four when Steed let himself into the house. He was about to call out to Emma when he heard a woman's voice coming from the study. "Sorry I'm late, darling," the woman was saying, "but my car wouldn't start for some reason. It was awfully nice of the garage man to give me a lift all the way out here, don't you think?"

Steed stopped in his tracks. He knew that voice. It belonged to the Glossop Woman. *And she addressed Emma as "darling" . . . Odd, that . . .*

"He told me," continued the Glossop Woman, "your . . . husband had been to the garage earlier in the day."

Steed harrumphed loudly, stamped his feet a few times, and announced in a booming voice, "Emma! It's Lover Boy, back from the hunt!" He marched into the study and up to Emma, planting a hearty kiss on her cheek and giving her a playful swat on the buttocks.

Emma coloured.

"Ah, I see you found our Miss Glossop! How do, Miss G., how do?"

"Hello again. Mr. Peel." The Glossop Woman regarded him coolly.

"I wasn't expecting you 'til later," Emma hissed in Steed's ear. "You're home early, darling," she said in an audible voice.

"Got a bit winded, takin' all those damn' jumps," he grunted.

"You or your horse?"

"*Me*. Damn' hunter's sound as a bell."

"I must speak to you," she whispered. "Privately."

"I'll just run along upstairs, m' dear, get cleaned up a bit. Can't have me smellin' all horsey and lookin' like this, what?" He grinned broadly at Emma and the Glossop Woman. "If you ladies'll excuse me—" He disappeared before Emma could take him aside for a discreet word.

Emma turned to the woman. "Before you say another word, I just want to say—"

"—that it's none of my business. It isn't. Though I quite understand your need to take a lover—"

Emma blushed. "If would just let me explain—"

"I grant you, he *is* nicely put together and not unattractive, physically—"

"It's not—"

"—but you know sex isn't everything—"

"I *beg* your pardon!" Emma's face was burning.

"Don't look so shocked, darling, we *are* living in the latter half of the twentieth century, after all, and can discuss these things freely now. A good romp between the sheets is delightful, to be sure, but

one *must* have something to talk about from time to time. This fellow of yours, though, strikes me as rather . . . limited, intellectually—”

“He is nothing of the sort.”

“How long have you two been living together?”

“We’re not . . . That is . . . He arrived a couple of days ago—”

“You’ve only known him a couple of days? Really, my dear—”

“I didn’t say that.”

“And already he’s passing himself off as your husband . . .”

“As everyone in St. Mary Meade thinks he is, he might as well,” said Emma hotly.

“I must say I’m quite surprised by all of this. No wonder I didn’t know anything about it until now—”

“You don’t know anything about it at all, and you won’t, since I can’t get a word in edgeways—”

“You mustn’t be angry with me, darling. Of course you must live your life as you see fit.”

“I’m much obliged to you,” said Emma with an icy glare.

“I only want you to be happy. After all you’ve had to put up with, you deserve to be.”

“As it happens, I couldn’t be any happier.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Is he . . . decent to you?”

“He loves me. Is that ‘decent’ enough for you?”

Steed returned downstairs and was at the study doors when he dropped the cigarette he had just taken from his cigarette case. Bending down to pick it up, he overheard the Glossop Woman say, “That’s very nice. But can *you* love *him*? He’s obviously *witless*—”

“My lovers are *my* business—”

“You have more than one, dear? Is that wise?”

“Certainly not! I *love* him. *Him*. *Him alone*—”

Steed bustled into the study. “The wife talkin’ about me behind me back again, eh?” he said with a wink at Emma’s guest. “Not too unkindly, I hope, eh, old thing?”

“Shut up,” she said sweetly to him. “And not a peep out of you until I’ve finished,” she said not so sweetly to the Glossop Woman. Emma turned back to Steed. “You can drop the Chinless Wonder act. Allow me to introduce you to my mother, Lady Beryl Knight.”

“Your *mother*?” gasped Steed, wishing he might sink through the floorboards and all the way to the other side of the Earth.

“Mother,” said Emma, turning to Beryl, “John Steed.”

It was Beryl’s turn to gasp. “Mr. Steed!” She looked from him to her daughter. “But Emma, dear, you told me Mr. Steed was dead—”

“Mr. Steed was underground. But only metaphorically speaking. As you see.”

“Lady Knight,” murmured Steed, summoning all his *savoir faire* and charm. He inclined his head and took her hand.

“John was officially dead until yesterday afternoon,” said Emma. “He only got here a couple of

days ago—”

“I regretted deeply never having met the man my daughter loved, Mr. Steed,” murmured Beryl, her hand still in his. “I am delighted to do so now.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine, Lady Knight, though I wish our introduction might have been under less . . . sensational circumstances.” There was an awkward pause before he spoke again, and Beryl wondered if he’s overheard her conversation with Emma. “May I offer you something to drink?” he asked, his customary urbanity returning. “Sherry, perhaps? Gin? Or a brandy and soda?”

“Nothing for me, thank you, Mr. Steed.” Beryl peeked at her watch. “You mustn’t let me stop *you*, however. And do smoke your cigarette before you shred it to bits between your fingers.”

“Thank you,” said Steed, promptly lighting up. “Will you be joining us for dinner, Lady Knight? I’m the chef this evening, and I’d better get started if we’re—”

“Were you planning to stay the night here, Mother?” broke in Emma, crossing to the drinks table mixing herself a small whisky and soda.

“And sleep where, in the cat’s basket?” laughed Beryl. “You still haven’t furnished this house. And even if you had,” she added with a wry smile, “you certainly wouldn’t want me here, not with . . . a new husband to adjust to.”

“*Mother!*”

“I’m staying at the Cat and Fiddle, where they serve very decent food, if lunch was anything to judge by.” Beryl gave her daughter a kiss. “The car will be repaired by noon tomorrow, and I will then drive back to London.” She looked from Emma to Steed. “Forgive my intrusion. Had I known, I never would have descended on you like this.”

“I’ll ring you in a few days, all right?” said Emma, setting down her drink. “Now if you’ll give me a few minutes, I’ll run you back to your inn.” She fled from the study.

Steed and Beryl walked out into the entry. “I may be a fool, but I’m not a complete idiot,” he said wryly to her. “I’m not at all like Bertie Wooster, I assure you. Do accept my apologies for the deception.”

“No need to apologise,” said Beryl, with a broad smile. “You have an appreciation for the absurd. As do I. Though I confess I was initially dismayed at my daughter’s choice. You were quite convincing in your role, you know.”

“So your daughter tells me,” Steed laughed. “It all started, you see, when a local tradesman came the other day to repair the boiler. Emma is known hereabouts as ‘Mrs. Peel’, but the fact that she’s a widow is not known. I had no wish to compromise her, so I pretended to be ‘Mr. Peel’ when the tradesman quite understandably took me for her husband. Well, villages being what they are, word got out that Emma’s ‘husband’ had returned from abroad, and with God knows what other embellishments added to the story. I should point out, however, that it was *my* idea to play Peel as an utter ass.”

“I can guess why,” said Beryl, with a canny look at him.

He shook his head. “What *will* the villagers think when they discover I am not really ‘Mr. Peel’ and not really an ass. At least not all of the time.”

“From everything I’ve heard about you, I doubt you are *ever* an ass.” Her kindly, searching eyes met his. “Emma tells me you love her. Do you, Mr. Steed?”

“I do,” he said plainly and directly, holding her gaze. “I want to wed her, but I fear she’s so completely gone off the whole idea of marriage she will never—”

“‘Never’ is absolute and irrevocable, Mr. Steed, like despair and death,” Beryl murmured, taking his hand in both of hers. “You won her heart long ago. Her mind won’t be half as difficult to conquer.”

“I’m ready, Mother,” said Emma, rattling down the stairs.

“I think you are,” replied Beryl, with a little smile at Steed.

Emma’s faced clouded over with puzzlement. “I’m sorry, I don’t follow—”

“You will, dear. Soon. *Au revoir*, Mr. Steed. I enjoyed our chat. Remember the motto of the noble Percy family: ‘*Espérance*.’”

“I’ll bear it in mind, I promise you. *Au revoir*, Lady Knight.”

“Just what were you two talking about?” Emma asked her mother as they drove away from the house.

“A charming man,” said Beryl, “but a wee bit insecure, I think.”

“What rubbish! You’ve only just met him, Mother! How can you—”

“Men usually are, when they’re in love for the very first time—quite unsure of themselves and touchingly vulnerable. One must help them along, my dear, with gentleness, with patience, and with understanding.”

“‘Old trout,’” said Emma later that night, settling back on her pillows and pulling the covers up to her chin. “You called my mother an ‘old trout.’”

“I didn’t know she was your mother, at the time,” Steed muttered drowsily.

“She’s not *that* old—”

“I know . . .”

“Then why did you assume she was an ‘old trout?’”

“Only old trouts come calling when people are still in bed.”

“That’s what *you* think.”

He yawned, and turned his head in her direction. “Who’s ever come to *your* door in the morning—besides the milkman—who wasn’t an old trout collecting for the Crippled Dogs’ and Cats’ Home?”

“That’s not the point—”

“Is this all you could think about while we were—”

She glared at him. “I thought of it just *now*. I would simply like to know— After all, she *is* my mother—”

Steed closed his eyes. “You haven’t gone and *told* her . . .”

“Certainly not! What do you take me for, an imbecile?”

“God knows what you women talk about when we’re not around,” he sighed.

“You might like her, if you give her a chance.”

“I *do* like her.”

“Yes, well, you *would* say that, of course—”

“Emma—”

“She’s a good woman.”

“Emma . . .”

“And she is *not* an ‘old trout’, by any *stretch* of the imagination.”

Steed rolled over on his side, dragging the covers off her. “We’ll talk about it in the morning, darling,” he muttered with another sigh, and fell asleep.

30.

Barefoot, and clad only in her kitten-print nightgown, Emma padded into the kitchen, yawning noisily.

Steed stood at the counter, making toast. “Good morning!” he said. “And a lovely, sunny one it is.”

How a body can be so cheerful this early in the day beggars the imagination. With a moan she sank onto one of the chairs and, resting her elbows on the table, pushed her hair back from her forehead and began massaging her face.

“I put the coffee on as soon as I heard you stirring about.”

She only grunted in reply.

Steed gingerly fished out two slices of fresh toast, quickly dropped them into a small rack, and reloaded the toaster.

“I didn’t hear you get up,” Emma uttered hoarsely, yawning again.

Steed chuckled. “I’m not surprised. You were fast asleep, snoring ever so delicately—”

“I don’t snore, I . . . purr. *You* snore.”

“Quite. I’ll try to remember to get you earmuffs for Christmas,” he said, laying the table.

“Isn’t that coffee ready yet?”

“A watched pot never boils, my dear.”

“When *did* you get up?”

“Couple of hours ago.”

“And what have you been up to?”

“Had some tea, took a walk . . .” He brought butter, preserves, sugar, and milk to the table and set them out in front of her. “Your coffee, Modom,” he said, fetching the pot and pouring her a cup.

Emma dragged cup and saucer under her nose and inhaled. “Mmmm . . .”

He rested his hand on her shoulder. “Aren’t you chilly?”

“Uh-uh.” Emma raised the steaming cup to her lips and took a wary sip.

“Shall I fetch my dressing gown for you?”

“I’m fine.” She looked up at him and smiled. “Really. Now sit down and have some of this rejuvenating brew yourself.”

“I’m in need of rejuvenation, am I?”

“I hedge my bets.”

Steed took his place across the table as she poured him a cup. “I spoke with Helena a while ago,” he said. “She’s found a few gowns she thinks should fit you, and suggested you drive over to pick one out. She’s also asked her seamstress to come and make whatever alterations you might require.”

“Ooh, that’ll be fun,” said Emma, biting off a bit of buttered toast. “What time is it now?”

“Almost a quarter past ten,” he said, glancing at his watch.

“As soon as I’ve had my toast and coffee I’ll get dressed—”

“No hurry, you’ve loads of time. Helena said the seamstress won’t be there until about half past one—”

She put down her toast. “In that case, I’ll get *undressed*,” she murmured, giving him her best siren stare.

“No, you won’t. You’re going to eat your porridge.”

Emma screwed up her face. “What porridge? You know I can’t stand the stuff! It looks like something the cat coughed up!”

Steed laughed.

“You won’t find any in my house.”

“I’ll make you some pancakes, then, shall I?”

Steed was in the study, examining the books on the shelves, when Emma walked in, dressed and carrying a coat slung over her arm. “Perhaps you’d like to come with me?” she said, coming up to him.

He reached behind some books and pulled out an album. “I’m afraid I can’t.” He blew on the album, sending up a little cloud of dust. “Snodgrass rang to let me know he’s made arrangements with the bank in St. Mary Meade to open an account in my name, and I’ve been instructed to stop by there this afternoon to sign a lot of papers. I suppose I shouldn’t complain—it means I’ll finally be able to lay my hands on some money.”

Emma was staring at the album he was holding. “Where’d you find that?”

“Behind these books here,” he indicated with a nod of his head.

“I thought I got rid of it.” She tried to take the album from him but he held it back from her. “Give it to me, please.”

“You don’t want me to look at it?”

“I would rather you didn’t.”

“Come on, be fair. You got to look at snapshots of *me*—”

“That was different—”

His eyes met hers. “Very well, if that’s how you want it,” he said a little stiffly, holding the album out to her.

“It’s not like that at all,” Emma exclaimed, pushing the album aside. “I have never kept anything from you. It’s just— There are some things best left— Oh, hell, go on, look at it. Well, go on then!”

He slowly opened to the first page. It was a studio portrait of Emma in a wedding gown.

Emma retreated to one of the armchairs by the fireplace.

Steed slowly turned the pages. In all the time he had known her, he had never seen a single wedding picture displayed anywhere in her apartment or her office. Nor had he ever seen a single photograph of her husband. And here the bastard was on nearly every page, a glowing Emma at his side: at the altar; on the church steps; running the gauntlet of guests pelting them with confetti; standing behind an elaborate wedding cake, beaming and toasting each another with champagne . . . “I deliberately left it behind,” Emma was saying, “but he stuck it in one of the boxes with my books.” She

laughed dryly. “He, too, had no use for it. I discovered it after I moved here and unpacked my things. I meant to get rid of it.”

“Get rid of it, if you must; better still, replace it,” Steed said, putting down the album and coming up to her. As she raised her head to him, he bent down and kissed her.

“John—?”

“How late d’you think you’ll be at Helena’s? I ask because I’ll be making seafood for dinner, and that won’t take very long—”

“I don’t know; I’ll ring you,” Emma said, rising. “Darling—” She pushed an unruly lock of hair off his forehead. “I’m not sure I know where to begin—”

“I do. But not now. After this weekend.” He glanced at his watch. “Look here, I’d better be off. And so had you, if you want your party frock to fit.” Giving her one more kiss, on the cheek, he strode out of the study, leaving Emma to ponder what he was hinting at.

Having concluded his business with the bank in St. Mary Meade, and with a wallet now filled with crisp new banknotes, Steed first stopped by the vintner’s, where he passed a good half-hour browsing the stock before making his purchases. From there, he went to the grocer’s, and from there to the fishmonger’s. “I’ll have a dozen of those oysters,” he said to the shop assistant, “and a half pound of the scallops. If you wouldn’t mind keeping them on ice for me for a while, I’ll collect them on my way home.”

“Certainly, sir.” The shop assistant wrapped Steed’s orders and put them in a small refrigerator. “We close at five.”

“I’ll be back well before then.”

“Very good, sir.” The man smiled. “Pardon me, but you wouldn’t be Mr. Peel by any chance, would you?”

I’d as soon hang myself. . . “I would indeed,” said Steed with a smug grin.

“Please give my compliments to Mrs. Peel, and kindly let her know we’ll have another delivery next Wednesday of the Highland salmon she’s so partial to.”

“Will do. Cheer-oh!”

Steed whiled away the better part of the next hour enjoying a drive through the local countryside in his Bentley, trying to refine his plans for the mysterious Mr. Corso, but his thoughts kept returning to Emma. He came back to St. Mary Meade for his oysters and scallops half an hour before the fishmonger shut up shop, and headed back to the house.

He was juggling wine bottles, food, and house keys at the kitchen door when he felt something first butting then rubbing up against his leg. He looked down to see a thin little ginger tabby cat at his feet. “Well, hullo, there, Puss,” he said, intending to pet her, but quickly realising that was an impossible task at the moment. “Here, let me get in the house.” He managed to insert the key in the lock and open the door. “Well, come in, then,” he said, dropping his packages on the kitchen table.

The little cat followed him into the kitchen.

“Hungry, are you?”

“Miaow,” said the cat, its bright green eyes looking directly into Steed’s.

Unburdened, he bent down to pet it. It let him stroke its head, then butted it against his hand. “Mrrrow.”

“You’re a bonny wee creature,” he murmured, running his hand along its back, “even if you are a bit scrawny. What’s your name, eh?”

“Mrrr.”

He smiled at the animal. “All right, since you won’t tell me, I’ll just have to call you ‘Ginger.’ Hardly original, I grant you, but better than the generic ‘Puss.’ Now, then, Ginger, you look like you could do with some tucker.” He put the scallops and a couple of bottles of white wine into the refrigerator, but held back the oysters. “Did you know,” he said to the cat, looking about for a small knife and a suitable dish, “that Samuel Johnson used to go out first thing every morning to the costermonger’s to buy Hodge—that was his cat’s name—oysters for breakfast? The good fellow never sent his servants, because he didn’t want to demean them by asking them to run errands for a mere animal.” He prised open an oyster, removed its flesh, and cut it up. “Dr. Johnson loved his Hodge.”

Steed scraped the cut-up oyster into a small dish and started working on a second oyster. “I’d give you cat meat, which you would probably like better, being a modern moggy, but I’m afraid I haven’t any.” He finished with the second oyster and embarked on the third. “Still, this ought to tide you over, until we can get you some proper food. There!” He put the dish on the floor in front of the cat. “Tuck in!”

The cat approached the dish, sniffed it warily, wrinkled its nose, then sniffed it again, and finally gave the cut-up oysters a desultory lick. It then looked up into Steed’s eyes. “Mrrrow,” said the cat, before falling greedily to eating. Steed could have sworn it was smacking its tiny lips.

“Good, ain’t they?” he grinned, filling another dish with water and placing it beside the cat.

“John!” Emma called, bursting into the house. “John?”

“In the study.”

“Ah, there you are!” said Emma breathlessly, swooping in. “You should see the gown—”

“Tell me,” he said, looking up from the book he was reading. He was stretched out on the sofa, the cat curled in his lap.

Emma drew a breath, then paused. “On second thought, no. You’ll see it for yourself soon enough.”

“Suit yourself,” he smiled.

“Molly!” cried Emma, spying the cat. “Where have you been all week?”

“You know this beastie?” Steed put down his book.

“She turned up on my doorstep, bedraggled and frightened and begging for food, two days after I moved in.” Emma scooped the cat up from Steed’s lap and cuddled her. “You little darling,” she murmured, kissing the cat, “I was worried about you—” She turned to Steed. “She disappeared the night you turned up.”

“She seems to have forgiven me. In fact, I think she’s rather taken to me. Probably because I fed her.”

“Good. You found the cat meat.”

“What cat meat?”

“There are a few tins in the pantry.”

“I never thought to look . . . I gave her oysters.”

“*Oysters?*”

“Yes. I got them for us, but when I saw the poor waif and had nothing else to offer her—”

“Well, I dare say Molly needed the oyster more than *you*,” said Emma wryly, setting the cat back down on the sofa next to Steed.

“Ah, so ‘Molly’ is her name. How’d she come by it?”

“I made up a list of what I thought were suitable names, and read it to her. She stopped me by meowing when I got to ‘Molly.’”

“I hope you won’t employ the same method with any children you might someday bear . . .”

“What are you reading?” she asked, to change the subject.

“Jane Austen.”

“Let me guess, *Pride and Prejudice?*”

“*Persuasion*, actually,” he replied with a little smile, gently moving the cat and getting up. “You must be hungry. I’ll start dinner.”

31.

“I must get you a proper apron for Christmas,” Emma said as Steed tucked a fresh tea towel into his belt.

He set about preparing their dinner while she found a tin of cat meat and fed Molly.

The cat quickly gobbled up her food, and now sat in the pantry doorway daintily washing her face. “What will you do with these?” Emma asked, coming up to the sink where Steed stood rinsing a small colander full of scallops.

“Sauté them in butter and white wine and a little garlic, and serve them with long-grain rice.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“I can manage, thanks . . .” He gave the colander a couple of good shakes before setting it aside and taking out a sauté pan.

He put the pan on the burner before turning to her. Her face registered disappointment, and she seemed oddly anxious all of a sudden. “You *can* open a bottle of wine—it’s chilling in the fridge,” he said, “and pour us some while I faff about with the food.”

Emma crossed to the refrigerator.

Steed got the rice going before turning his attention to the scallops. Busy with his tasks, he did not speak, and Emma sat mutely at the kitchen table, sipping her glass of Riesling and occasionally glancing up at him with that anxious look still in her eyes.

By the time the rice had steamed itself to fluffy perfection, the scallops were nearly ready and filling the kitchen with their mouth-watering aroma. Steed found a tablecloth, and held it out to Emma. “Um, perhaps you could lay the table . . .”

A few minutes later he set their food on the table, found his errant wineglass, and took his seat across from Emma. He reached for the wine bottle and topped up her glass. “*Bon appetit*, my dear.”

Steed was usually enthusiastic and voluble at mealtimes, but this evening he was low-key, eating with detachment and hardly saying a word.

“John?” said Emma, holding the wine bottle in one hand, “I asked you if you’d like some more—”

“Hmm?” He glanced up at her. “Sorry. I was . . . distracted.”

She poured him another glass of wine. “I’ll say. All through dinner.”

“Sorry,” he repeated. “I’m just . . . preoccupied . . .” He speared his last scallop. “Aren’t you going to finish your food?”

“I should have burnt that bloody album the minute I found it!” Emma said angrily, pushing aside her plate.

“My preoccupation had nothing whatsoever to do with that—”

“I knew those photographs would upset you—”

He put down his fork. “I admit I was a bit rattled by them, but not upset,” he said. “I mean, I’ve known from the moment we met that you’d been married.” Steed reached for her hand. “*Mrs.*

Peel.” He smiled. “Actually, I’m relieved to have seen them. Present fears are less than horrible imaginings. I no longer need wonder, in idle moments, what he looked like . . . what you looked like . . .”

“Pity the marriage was such a bloody waste of time. *He* made a complete *mockery* of it.”

“*You* didn’t,” Steed gently replied, producing his cigarette case. “Don’t think of it as a flop,” he said, lighting a cigarette, “think of it as merely a . . . a dress rehearsal that misfired.” He took a meditative drag on the cigarette. “All you need is a new production, and a new leading man with whom you might well enjoy a long, solid run.”

“Are you generalising, or have you someone in mind?” she asked, her eyes meeting his.

“I’m not generalising,” he answered quietly.

“John, are you asking me if—”

“Until a certain matter is resolved,” he said, “I have no right to ask you to—” Getting to his feet, he took another drag on his cigarette, then tossed it in the sink. “Until then, I have no right to ask you anything.”

“Darling, you can ask me anything you wish—”

“Then promise me you’ll never forget how very deeply I love you,” he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper, and walked out of the kitchen.

Emma found him a while later in the study, poring over his map again, a large whisky and an ashtray holding the smouldering remnants of a cigarette at his elbow. He was so absorbed that he did not hear her come up to him.

“Mind if I join you?”

He started. “Of course not,” he said, putting out the cigarette. “Would you like a drink?”

“I would.”

“Whisky? Or brandy?” he asked, crossing to the drinks table.

“Brandy.” Emma moved to the fireplace.

He brought her drink to her before fetching his whisky and ashtray.

“And let me have one of those fags.”

Steed set down his drink and the ashtray, and fished about in his pockets for his cigarette case. “Here you are, my dear,” he said, opening it.

“Forget about that, at least for tonight,” she said, waving a hand at the map on the desk. She took out a cigarette and waited for him to light it for her before taking an armchair. “Come, let’s sit by the fire.”

He pulled the armchair opposite closer to her and sat down. “You’re right, I should put all that out of my mind for the time being and enjoy our time together.”

“I wish you wouldn’t put it like that,” she said, reaching for his hands.

“There, there, now, I didn’t mean to sound so . . . grim.”

They steered the conversation to neutral subjects, sipping their drinks and smoking another couple of cigarettes, but the tension between them still lingered, like undischarged static.

Steed finished his drink and got to his feet. “Where did you leave that album Helena gave you?” he asked Emma.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s over there, I think—”

He followed her glance. The album still lay where Emma had left it, on the far end of the sofa table. “We never did get round to looking at it properly the other night, did we?” he smiled, taking her hands and pulling her up from her chair.

“We got off the subject,” she murmured.

He led her to the sofa.

With Emma curled up comfortably beside him, Steed opened the album across his knees. “Let’s start over,” he said, leaning in closer to her. “These two bewildered individuals are my parents, and that swaddled puddin’ clutched in Mamma’s arms is me. At the ripe old age of one month. I suspect I wasn’t supposed to happen. Mamma was thirty-eight when I arrived, and Papa nearly fifty.” He sighed. “Always were awfully fond of each other, those two . . .”

PART THREE

*Or have we left undone some mutual rite,
That thus with parting thou seek'st us to spite?*
Donne, *Elegy XIII*

32.

“I hope the weather holds through the weekend,” Steed said to Emma the following afternoon, tossing the two suitcases he was carrying into the back seat of the Bentley.

“The Beeb announced this morning that there’s a chance of rain on Sunday,” she replied. “You may have to scratch your plans to go riding.”

“We’ll see.”

“If you can’t go riding with Corso, what’s Plan B?”

“I’ll improvise.”

“John—”

“Will you stop fretting? I’ll decide on Plan B after I’ve taken his measure.”

Emma looked dubiously at him. “But—”

“But me no buts,” he said, opening the car door for her. “Now in you get.” He tucked the lap blanket snugly about her, then jogged round to the driver’s side and vaulted into his seat. “Your scarf on securely?”

“Yes. Chocks away!”

“I do wish you wouldn’t use pilots’ lingo,” he grumbled, cranking the engine. “I’m *Army*, remember?”

“Sorry. ‘Mount ’em up and move ’em out’, as they say in the U.S. Cavalry.”

“You mean as John Wayne says, in the cinema,” Steed said, as they bumped along the drive to the main road. “You were too young during the war to have had any Yank G.I. boyfriends.”

“Actually, I was too *old* for them,” drawled Emma. “The notion of being addressed, with a wink, as ‘baby doll’ by gum-chewing, adenoidal males appalled me.”

Steed laughed. “They weren’t *all* like that, you know.”

“I *don’t* know, and never will. If you desert me, I’m off to the nearest convent.”

“Now *there’s* an appalling notion.”

“Your deserting me?”

“Your retreating into a convent.”

Emma glanced obliquely at Steed. “Where there’s a convent, darling, there’s bound to be a monastery hard by . . .”

“As I will never desert you,” he said, “I shan’t let that fact distress me too much.” He slowed down and turned into the road. “Better pull up your collar, we’re going to a canter,” he grinned,

accelerating and changing gears.

“I’m quite looking forward to Helena’s party,” said Emma presently, “but I can’t help feeling apprehensive about the mysterious Mr. Corso of Manderley Hall.”

“You needn’t. I tell you, Corso’s not about to do anything foolish in front of a houseful of witnesses.” He looked at her. “Promise me you’ll try to have a good time this weekend—”

“Only if you promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Not to worry, my love, not to worry. I plan to thoroughly enjoy myself.”

Something in his tone made Emma cast an anxious glance at him. *He’s too complacent, and complacency leads to carelessness . . .* “And promise me you won’t do anything rash,” she added softly.

Steed did not miss the look on her face. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to a single one of these parties that hasn’t been a roaring success,” he said, determined to take Emma’s mind off Mr. Corso and other such irritations. “Some of the themes were particularly good. You already know about the Roman one, and the Austen one, and the space fad Helena went through in the late ’fifties . . .” He began to regale her with stories about the parties he had attended over the years, liberally sprinkling his narrative with hilarious anecdotes that had Emma laughing raucously by the time they reached the gates of Langbourne Park.

“I’d better pull myself together,” she said, dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief he handed her, “or else your family’ll think I really *am* mad.”

“They won’t notice one way or the other.”

Steed stopped at the open gates, where the bow-legged Jarvis was already anticipating them. “Young Mr. John! Good afternoon, sir, good afternoon,” said the old man, tugging at his cap, “and to you, Mrs. Peel, good afternoon to you.” He was about to step aside when he paused in the middle of the drive and just stood there, frowning and scratching the back of his neck. “Er, will *Mr.* Peel be arrivin’ by separate conveyance?” he asked, thinking to himself that Mrs. Peel had come to Langbourne the other day with her husband.

Emma smiled benignly at the old man. *God forbid.*

Steed coughed discreetly. “Mr. Peel is not with us, I’m afraid.”

“I can see that,” said Jarvis.

“What Mr. Steed means,” interjected Emma, before Steed could come up with a further tactful response, “is that Mr. Peel will not be joining us tonight, or any other night, for that matter, as he is dead. Deceased. Dropped off his perch. Gone to meet his Maker.”

“Good God!” exclaimed poor Jarvis, all sense of decorum abandoning him.

“Whether God, or the Devil, I cannot say,” sighed Emma. “May we drive on now?”

Jarvis shuffled out of the way. *Husband dead but two days, and widow’s taking part in that mummery-flummery up at House, and with Young Mister John firmly in tow? The end of days, the end of days . . .*

“You were hardly a paragon of subtlety, Mrs. Peel,” grinned Steed as they drove toward the house. “Poor old Jarvis nearly had a stroke. And did you see the look he gave you?”

A throaty laugh erupted from Emma. “All Downstairs’ll be abuzz within minutes with the

scandalous revelation that the Black Widow has already ensnared poor Young Mister John in her deadly web. Then again you're hardly a paragon of virtue, are you?"

"Maybe not, but all the ladies of my acquaintance are."

"Even me?"

"Especially you," he said, looking at her. "*A perfect woman, nobly planned, To warn, to comfort, and command.*"

"How *too* gallant of you, my liege," she murmured.

Before long they reached the house, Steed pulling up and parking directly in front of the entrance. "Fear not, dear lady, your reputation shall not be sullied," he said, opening the car door for her and giving her his hand. "The good Robinson'll sort out Downstairs in no time."

"What reputation?" said Emma wickedly. "Might be rather fun, giving the lot of 'em something to *really* hang their hats on."

"Let's play it by ear," Steed said, his mind now racing ahead to the evening's festivities and what they would bring.

Robinson must have been lying in wait for them, for it took the old butler no more than a few seconds to respond to Steed's deftly-aimed umbrella ferrule pressing the doorbell button.

"Young Mr. John, Mrs. Peel, good afternoon," said Robinson, admitting them into the house. "I shall send Wilkins Junior to fetch your bags from your motorcar and bring them to your rooms directly. Meanwhile, I shall announce you to Her Grace."

They followed Robinson through the hall to the drawing room.

"With your permission, Mr. John, I will ask Wilkins to move your motorcar to a, er—"

"—less obtrusive location?" Steed suggested.

Robinson coughed discreetly. "Aptly put, sir . . ." Having reached the door to the drawing room, Robinson rapped firmly on it and waited for the duchess's response.

"Beat to quarters!" they heard the duchess heartily call out.

"It would appear that is my signal to show you in," murmured Robinson, opening the door. "Young Mr. John and Mrs. Peel, Your Grace," he said, gliding into the drawing room.

"First Mrs. Peel, now my sister," muttered Steed, lingering in the doorway as Emma and Helena cordially greeted each other. "I only understand *Army* commands, Helena . . ."

Helena fixed Steed with a battlefield commander's imperious stare. "Oh, very well, then. *Charge!*"

"*Infantry* commands, Nell—"

"Tiresome boy . . . Over the top! Fire at will!"

Emma turned to Steed. "Just don't shoot 'til you see the whites of their eyes, darling," she said with a grin.

"I will fall back and regroup behind the lines," Robinson reported to the duchess, "and give the order to young Wilkins to reposition the armoured division along our eastern flank, once I have billeted Major Steed and, ah—"

“—Major-General Peel,” Emma interposed sweetly, with a mischievous that-trumps-you glance at Steed.

Robinson drew himself to rigid attention, stamped his foot, and saluted Emma. “Ma’am.”

“I will personally escort the General and her Aide-de-Camp to the officers’ barracks,” said Helena. “Carry on, Sar’nt-Major Robinson.”

“Ma’am.” Robinson once more stamped his foot, saluted crisply, executed a flawless about-turn, gave one more ear-shattering stamp, and marched out of the room.

“Had enough of your war games?” Steed asked his sister dryly. “You might offer us drinks—”

“Emma, you haven’t met my husband yet, have you?” said Helena, ignoring Steed. “No, of course you haven’t.” She frowned. “He’s about somewhere, I just can’t think *where*, at the moment . . . Well, never mind, he’ll turn up.” She now turned to Steed. “If it’s booze you want, you can help yourself to whatever you find in the library. Just don’t pester the staff for exotic plonk from the cellars. But first, let me take you both to your rooms, give you a chance to get sorted.”

Helena escorted Steed and Emma to the first floor of the east wing. “We had these rooms refurbished earlier this year.” She paused in front of a door about two-thirds of the way down the corridor. “I think you will be most comfortable, my dear,” she said to Emma. “I’ll leave you to it for now, but do come back down to the drawing room any time you’re ready for the final fitting of your gown. My seamstress’s assistant is here, just in case there are any little adjustments to make.”

“I shan’t keep you waiting long, I promise,” said Emma, letting herself into her room. “I can’t wait to try it on.”

“See you in a bit, then,” said Helena with a parting smile. She hooked Steed’s arm and hauled him further down along the corridor. “You’re in this room, John.”

“Who else is on this floor, besides us?”

“Nobody. Apart from the bishop, who has a room on the ground floor on account of his arthritic knees, you two are our only house guests this week-end.”

“Well, that’s something to be grateful for,” Steed dryly remarked. “Where’s the loo? At the bottom of the kitchen garden?”

“Both bedrooms have the Necessities *en suite*. It may surprise you to learn they even feature hot and cold running water, as well as modern flush toilets. We’re not completely uncivilised, you know.”

“Only if you consider Victorians civilised,” he shot back sarcastically.

“What the devil—” Helena began, scowling at her brother. A few moments later, the scowl evaporated as comprehension dawned, and she burst into laughter. “Aren’t we the Doubting Thomas?” she chuckled.

“Keep winding me up, and I might go so far as to deny you thrice before cock-crow,” muttered Steed.

“If you do, it shan’t bother me one whit,” she said, “seein’ as how I ain’t the Messiah. And by the way, you’re mixing up your Apostles.”

“I’m not the saintly type.”

“Precisely. Which is why your room adjoins the Widow Peel’s,” said Helena. Steed’s bewildered expression prompted her to add, in a dropped voice, “They’re connecting rooms, you daft bugger.”

He cleared his throat.

“I probably won’t see you until this evening. Oh, I remember where Gerry’s got to. You’ll find him in the gunroom, ogling some new implement of death he’s acquired behind my back, and one which you will no doubt have the morbid curiosity to see. I dare say he’ll also be more than happy to join you in that drink you wanted.” Helena kissed Steed on the cheek. “Don’t dally with Emma all afternoon,” she said to him in a cheeky undertone. “She still has one final fitting of her gown before the party tonight.”

33.

“Very pretty,” said Steed, walking through the door connecting his room with Emma’s. He was dressed in wing-collar shirt, white waistcoat, and black evening trousers. The shirt collar was unbuttoned and the white bow tie round his neck unknotted.

The two bedrooms were mirror images of each other, but there the similarity ended. Hers was decorated in pale greens and yellows, with the furniture upholstered in delicate floral prints, and narrow stripes; the canopy bed’s fabric was solid yellow-gold satin that elegantly complemented the other colours. His was unmistakably masculine in its décor: dark greens and burgundies predominated in the upholstery and bedding, and the wide carved bedstead was dark mahogany.

“I’m not ready yet—”

“I meant the room. I haven’t seen it since Helena had it redone. You, my dear, *always* look lovely. I say, could you give me a hand with this wretched collar?”

“Just as soon as I do this last bit,” Emma answered, applying the finishing strokes of eye shadow to her right eyelid. She was sitting at a small mirrored table littered with an arsenal of tubes, brushes and pencils dedicated to the cosmetic arts.

“You know, you’ll freeze tonight, in that.” He came up behind her, struggling with one of the studs on his stiffly starched shirtfront.

“I have not yet dressed.” Emma picked up a tube of something-or-other and squinted at it. “What I have on at the moment happens to be a petticoat. As if you didn’t know.”

“Really?” Steed tugged at his cuffs. “I thought it was another one of those skimpy shifts you’ve always fancied.”

“Oh, go away,” she sighed, grimacing as she tried to avoid smudging her eyeliner. “I’ll be done in a minute, if only you don’t lurk.” Satisfied with her makeup, she picked up a bottle of scent and began applying it to her wrists, neck, and cleavage.

“I’ll go put on my coat,” he said, ambling back to his room.

Several minutes later, Emma stood in front of the full-length mirror, eyeing her reflection critically and smoothing out imagined imperfections in her gown. The gown was of brilliant electric-blue chiffon, with a form-fitting, scoop-necked and cap-sleeved bodice and a flowing skirt cut on the bias, its hem tapering from knee level in the front to just above the ankles in the back.

“Most alluring,” said Steed, wandering back into Emma’s room. “It even has sleeves. Sort of.”

“Very funny. Now do me up, will you?” Afraid she might rip out a seam with her contortions, Emma had given up on her attempts to pull up the back zip.

He obliged. “How does one manage if one is alone?”

“One doesn’t wear gowns like this, that’s how,” replied Emma. “How do I look?”

“Hmm.” Steed slowly walked around her.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like it—”

“I think it wants something.” Steed was standing behind her, studying her reflection in the glass.

“This, perhaps.” He reached into his inside breast pocket, took out a box, and slipped it into her hand.

Emma raised the lid and gasped when she beheld the platinum necklace of sapphires set in small diamonds, matching earrings, and ring. “John, I . . . I’m speechless,” she breathed, turning around to face him.

“I meant to give these to you on your birthday a few years ago, but certain unforeseen events intervened, and I lost . . . I lost the opportunity,” he softly replied, lifting the necklace out of the box and putting it around her neck.

Emma faced the glass as Steed fastened the clasp. “Stunning,” she uttered, her eyes misting.

“So you are,” he said, kissing the nape of her neck.

Emma put on the earrings, then picked up the ring and gazed into the dark blue depths of the large oval gemstone.

“This one’s meant for your *right* hand,” he said, gently taking the ring from her and slipping it on her right ring finger.

Emma turned back to Steed, her expression tender, expectant. “John?”

He took her in his arms. “Patience, my love, I beg you, patience,” he said to her, kissing her lips, “just for a little while longer—”

“Be careful tonight, my darling, and when you ride with . . . that man . . . on Sunday—”

“I will be. I’m not about to lose you *again*.”

They kissed once more before drawing apart.

“For now,” said Steed, fingering the ends of his bow tie, “all I ask is that you make me look presentable.”

“I’ll do my best,” she smiled at him. He was so finicky when it came to knotting his ties, especially bow ties. “I seem to be all thumbs at the moment,” she said, after an unsuccessful attempt at fastening his collar. “Here, lift up your chin. That’s better . . .”

It took her a few minutes, but she finally succeeded in knotting his tie. “There you are,” she said, tightening the knot.

“Do I pass inspection?”

She stepped back for a look, made a few minor adjustments to his tie, stepped back again, and nodded. “Most elegant.” She smoothed his lapels and dusted him off. “You look quite beguiling in tails.”

“Thank you.”

“Wait, hold on a minute,” she said, licking the tip of her forefinger and gently rubbing a smudge of lip rouge from the corner of his mouth. “There. *Now* you’ve passed inspection.”

Steed caught her hand and kissed it. “My lady,” he said, bowing.

“My lord.” Emma acknowledged him with a deep curtsy.

He offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

“We shall indeed,” she murmured with a smile, the sparkle in her eyes far outshining that of her jewels.

34.

Steed and Emma walked into the hall and headed slowly toward the grand staircase. People had begun to arrive, some milling about in the hall chatting, some already making their way up the vast stone staircase to the floors above. The men, uniformly dressed in white tie and tails, were ideal foils for the brilliantly gowned and elegantly coiffed women moving gracefully amongst them.

“Good. We’re early,” said Steed, taking a quick look at the guests.

“We are?”

“Yes.” He chuckled. “See that couple over there, chap who looks like Eric Blore, with Betty Grable’s twin in tow? That’s the Earl of Bingley—Bingo, when he’s at home—and the Countess. They’re always among the first to arrive. You watch, old Bingo’ll be the first to belly up to the trough—”

Emma laid her hand on his Steed’s arm. “Where exactly is the party?” she asked him. They paused to let an elderly dowager pass in front of them.

“In the Great Chamber. On the second floor.”

“I was thinking, perhaps we should go up separately.”

His eyes widened. “Why ever for?”

“It might be best if we are not seen together, as a couple.”

“Nonsense! We’re going to a party! I want to show you off.”

“That may not be prudent.”

He laughed, taking her by the hand and drawing her arm through his. “Quite the contrary, my darling. It’ll keep the predators at bay.”

“John—”

“Nothing’s going to happen tonight, I told you. Relax. I won’t have you fretting and frowning all evening, spoiling the utterly spellbinding effect you always have on everyone, and especially me.”

“All right,” she capitulated, knowing that further discussion would be pointless, “but do be careful nevertheless.”

“You mean carefree, don’t you,” he said, raising her hand to his lips.

A beaming Steed escorted Emma up the staircase, thinking to himself that she was hands down the loveliest woman present, and completely oblivious to the worried glances she cast in his direction from time to time out of the corners of her eyes.

The Great Chamber—originally one of the rooms of state, but later, in the eighteenth century, coming into use as a ballroom—had been transformed for the occasion of Langbourne’s annual Yuletide fête into a nineteen thirties New York City nightclub, as conceived by Hollywood films of the era. The decor, like the films, was black-and-white. A sleek black surface, polished to a glossy sheen and covering approximately one-third of the room’s hardwood flooring, had been installed for dancing. Small round tables, covered with floor-length white tablecloths, clustered four deep all around the dance floor. Each one of the tables was illuminated by a small black electric lamp, and each bore a graceful

onyx ashtray.

Against the walls at either end of the room stood massive tables laden with all manner of food and decorated with clever ice sculptures in Streamline Moderne designs. At the centre of each table stood a tall, cascading champagne fountain. Just inside and to the right of the doorway a large bar had been set up; opposite and to the left of the doorway, in the far corner of the room, stood a grand piano, its raised lid partly obscuring the man now taking his seat at the keyboard. Drums, cymbals, and a high hat occupied an area a few feet to the left of the pianist. On the floor in front of the drums lay a double bass, dwarfing the electric guitar leaning against the amplifier beside it. A few white bentwood chairs and white music desks were grouped nearby.

Sitting down, the pianist first adjusted the bench, and then played a couple of brief passages. Satisfied that the instrument was in tune, he launched into a medley of Cole Porter songs.

“Wow!” was all Emma said as she and Steed strolled into the room.

“Told you it would be fun,” he murmured. “I have to hand it to her, Helena does know how to throw a party.”

“Pity I’m the Merry Widow, and not the Gay Divorcee,” Emma said. “Would’ve been much more appropriate, under the circumstances.”

“Perhaps I should’ve worn my top hat after all,” Steed grinned. “Shall we dance, Ginger?”

“Let’s have a drink first, Fred.” She led him to one of the champagne fountains, where he obliged her with a glass and a funny anecdote.

The pianist finished his medley, and looked up to see a short, portly, balding man come up and wrestle the awkward double bass into an upright position. “I shoulda listened to my mother and stuck with the cello,” he grunted, “but no, I hadda go study with Koussevitsky . . . Goddam bass fiddle . . . Like wrasslin’ a freakin’ tree.”

The pianist chuckled. “Come off it, Manny, you love it,” he said, watching the bassist. “Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll give you an A.”

“OK, Danny boy, I’m ready to rock and roll,” said Manny, with a wink at the pianist. He waited for the note, then began tuning the instrument.

“I sincerely hope not,” said the pianist. “Strictly Cole Porter, Gershwin, Berlin, Kern, Arlen, and that lot tonight. This is supposed to be the ’thirties, not the ’fifties. You know, Rogers and Astaire, not Elvis Presley.”

“No kiddin’,” said Manny dryly. “I wasn’t being literal. I mean, this is a double bass, not a Fender bass.” He gave one of the pegs another slight turn, then plucked the string. “Rats. Gimme that A again, would you please?”

While Manny fiddled with his bass, the pianist peered out at the people gathering in the room. “Well, look who’s here,” he said softly.

“Huh?” The bassist glanced at the pianist, and following the latter’s eyes looked out at the assembly.

Steed had dashed off to have a quick word with his sister, leaving Emma standing by herself at

the buffet table nibbling on a slice of pineapple. She wasn't alone for long. A middle-aged, moustached, military-looking gentleman who had been foraging nearby stepped up to her with a polite offer to replenish her glass (even though it was still more than half full).

As soon as Manny's eyes caught sight of Emma, he gave a low whistle. "Oho! I see whatcha mean, Dan my man," he said. "Whadda tomato!"

"Eh?" The pianist frowned. "It's 'tom-ah-to' over here, by the way—"

"*Tomato, tomahito, potato, potahito, let's call the whole thing off,*" crooned Manny, with a grin at the pianist.

"Let's not. We're getting paid very handsomely for this evening, remember?"

"You're right, I don't get many gigs as classy as this," said the bassist, his eyes back on Emma.

"Who were you referring to as a . . . er, 'to-may-to'?"

"Why, that dish over there by the table, talking to the 'stache. Weren't you staring at her? I wouldn't blame you if you were. I mean, we *can* still look, even if we can't touch the merchandise, right?"

"Actually, I was looking at someone else," said the pianist. "Which lady has caught your fancy, then?"

"That one there. The Angel with the Blue Dress On."

The pianist quickly spotted whom the bassist meant. "I see . . ." He lowered his hands to the keyboard and played a few bars of *Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart*. "What we in this country might describe as a 'right looker'," he grinned at the bassist.

"You think that guy with the soup strainer's her husband?"

"No, that chap's married to someone else. He's retired Army, Colonel . . . Colonel . . . Thingummy, I can't think of the name at the moment. Lives in the neighbourhood."

"And who's our Blue Angel?"

"That I'm afraid I don't know. I've never seen her before."

"Whadda shame." Manny scratched his pate. "So who were *you* looking at?"

The pianist was still watching Emma. "Oh, just someone I *do* know . . ." Now his eyes widened. "Well, I'll be damned . . ." He embarked on a spirited rendition of *And the Angels Sing*.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, darling," Steed said, sidling up to Emma. "Hullo," he grunted at the retired colonel, who looked a bit put out at being interrupted in mid-war story. "We've met before, I think. John Steed. Duchess's younger brother."

The colonel grunted in reply.

Steed reached for a platter of cold shrimp on the table just behind Emma. "Have a bite, my love," he murmured to her, delicately holding a sauce-dripping shrimp with thumb and forefinger and raising it to her lips.

"Ahem . . . If you'll excuse me, m'dear . . ." harrumphed the colonel. He retreated to the safety of the bar, which at the moment was catering to an exclusively male clientele.

"Thanks for rescuing me from Colonel Blimp's nostalgic reminiscences about the Great War,"

said Emma, after she'd washed down the shrimp with champagne. "Stupid man, to hear him talk you'd think he *enjoyed* it."

"He probably did," Steed replied darkly. "Every war has a certain number who do, and for different reasons. He was one of the lucky ones who was never gassed, never shot, and never shell-shocked."

"He's too thick to be shell-shocked," snapped Emma. "Probably thinks nightmares and flashbacks a lot of unpatriotic twaddle cooked up by effeminate communist shirkers."

"He may do, but he is nowhere near as well-adjusted as he thinks he is. I gather he never could take to civilian life, and that he still runs his household like an Army barracks. But enough about him. What do you say we take some of this food back to one of the tables, and sit down?"

In the meantime the rest of the musicians had arrived and taken their places. The drummer, after deciding on the exact placement of his stool, made some minor adjustment to the high hat; the saxophonist and clarinetist removed reeds from mouthpieces and stuck them in their mouths to wet them down properly; and the guitarist's right hand was busily tweaking a bunch of little knobs on both guitar and amplifier.

Steed carried the plates of food, and Emma their drinks, to one of the few unoccupied tables at the edge of the dance floor. "I wish they'd get on with it and play some music," said Emma, with a glance in the musicians' direction, as Steed helped her to her seat. "I've been looking forward to the floor show."

"To assess your competition, my dear?" he smiled.

"To keep an eye out for suspicious characters."

"Don't bother. Helena'll put a word in my ear when our friend shows up."

"But she's never met the man—"

"But she's met the rest of the county. He'll be the only one here she's never seen before. That makes it all quite simple."

"John—"

"You promised me you'd forget all about that and enjoy yourself tonight."

"All right, but I can't help—"

"Are you going to break that promise, then?"

"No." She covered his hand with hers. "I shan't spoil this evening for you."

He raised his glass of champagne to her. "Here's looking at you, kid," he said in a gruff American accent and grimacing with a Bogart-like effort at a grin before leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

"But you must remember this," Emma said, rising, her features relaxing into a playful expression, "a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh . . ."

"Em—"

But she already had her back to him, striding across the unpeopled dance floor toward the pianist.

“Good evening.” Emma rested her elbows on the piano, her chin on her interlaced fingers.

“Good evening, madam,” replied the pianist, looking up at her. “Is there something in particular you wish us to play?”

“*Anything* would do at this point.”

“So sorry, we are dawdling a bit, aren’t we?” he smiled. “If you’re ready, lads?” he called out to the other musicians, glancing at the fake book in front of him. “OK, on my cue, *Anything Goes*. Just wait for it.”

“Waiddaminnit.” Manny had been watching Emma as she approached the musicians, and now came up to her, bass fiddle in tow. “Hi,” he smiled at her, then turned to the pianist. “Maybe the lady would like us to play something special for her,” he said to the pianist.

“Maybe so. But we’ll open with *Anything Goes*. Requests will come later, after the second set.”

“Aw, c’mon, Dan,” said Manny, turning back to Emma with a broad smile. “What would you like to hear, ma’am?” he asked her.

“Well, since you ask . . .” Emma gave Manny her sweetest smile. “How about *In the Mood*?” Here she cast a languid glance in Steed’s direction.

Manny didn’t miss a beat. *Somebody’s gonna get lucky tonight*, he thought wickedly, looking at Steed. *She ain’t just a tomato, she’s a real peach, buddy, and I hope you know it*. “Whaddya say, Danny-O?”

Like Manny, the pianist, too, did not miss a beat. *Always did have the luck of the devil, didn’t you, me buck?* “But of course,” he murmured. “We mustn’t disappoint the lady, must we?”

“Emma, darling—” Steed walked up to Emma, took one look at the pianist, and fell silent.

“*In the Mood* on three, chaps,” the pianist said smoothly, “one, two, three—”

“Well, aren’t you going to dance with me?” Emma said to Steed, taking his hand.

“Yes, John, aren’t you going to dance with the lovely Emma?” said the pianist, attacking the keyboard with more than usual glee.

“You two know each other,” said Emma, as Steed whirled her round the dance floor.

“A passing acquaintance,” Steed casually remarked, reversing.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then ask him yourself.”

“I think I’ll do just that.”

They finished the dance, Steed deliberately manoeuvring to a stop in the vicinity of the piano. He ambled back to their table as Emma, with an insouciant swing in her hips, sauntered up to the pianist.

“You’re here to keep an eye on him, aren’t you?” she said to him.

“Beg pardon?”

“Mother sent you.”

The pianist stared incredulously at her. “Mother had nothing to do—”

“All right, then, the Ministry—”

“My dear lady,” he broke in, “I have no idea what you are talking about. What my brother does

for a living is *his* business, and the fewer of us who know anything about it—”

“Your *brother*?”

“You *are* talking about Johnny, I assume—”

Emma wilted. “You’re his *brother*?”

“I am.”

“*You are*? I mean, you *are*?”

“Yes.” The pianist chuckled. “Shall I summon Helena to verify the fact?”

“Then why didn’t he *say* anything—”

“Tell me, how long’ve you know him?”

“Long enough.”

“In that case, you know how he likes his little jokes.” The pianist looked intently at her. “You’re Mrs. Emma Peel, aren’t you?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Delighted to meet you, my dear! Do forgive me, but I’m afraid we’ll have to continue this conversation a little later. I’ve got to get on with the show, or my sister will box my ears.” He looked at the musicians, who were watching and listening with interest. “First set, beginning with *Anything Goes*, on my cue,” he said to them, then glanced back at Emma. “I’ll join you and John at your table for a drink after this set—with your permission, that is.”

“By all means, please do,” Emma murmured, making her way back to the table as the band struck up.

“You might’ve told me,” she said sourly, helping herself to some champagne from the bottle Steed had scrounged and brought back to the table, “before I made an ass of myself.”

“Told you what?” asked Steed, smiling mischievously.

“That Horowitz over there is your brother, that’s what.”

“I knew you’d put two and two together eventually.”

“Oh? How? The only thing you ever told me about him was that he’s a teacher.” She sipped her champagne moodily. “I can’t even recall his name.”

“He *is* a teacher. And his name is Daniel.” Steed reached for the bottle. “Sir Daniel, actually, but he’s not fussy.”

“What, and where, does he teach?”

“He’s on the faculty of the Royal College of Music.”

Emma listened to the musicians, who were all top-notch, but Sir Daniel’s playing— cleverly improvised and technically flawless, but never soulless in its perfection—truly stood out. “He’s brilliant. Why have I never heard of him?”

“Because you’re not a scholar of eighteenth-century chamber music—Daniel’s speciality.”

“But he’s a first-class pianist—”

“He never sought a concert career. Too demanding on one’s personal life. Daniel is quite content playing at small private functions, or with his musician friends at home, and he loves teaching.

Ideal life, I'd say, for a man who has always enjoyed spending as much time as possible with his wife and children. Kids are all grown up now, so he has that much more time with Felicity." Steed smiled at Emma. "Drink up, my dear. I'm rather keen on having this next dance with you."

35.

After half a dozen men had cut in on Steed, leaving him to dance with less adept and attractive women, he was beginning to lose patience. To be sure, he had expected no less; still, it *was* annoying, particularly as Emma didn't seem to mind at all. Every time she was steered anywhere near him by her latest partner she would throw him a dazzling smile over her shoulder before whirling away in a blur of blue.

Pleading a gouty foot, Steed managed to extricate himself from the clutches of one particularly daunting female old enough to be his mother. The old dragon had at least two left feet, not to mention talons on her hands that threatened to draw blood wherever she touched him. He returned to the table he and Emma had earlier staked out, relieved to find the bottle of champagne still in the ice bucket where he'd left it, untouched. He poured himself half a glass and stood sipping champagne and watching the dancers negotiate the crowded floor with grace and, for the most part, precision. Emma, however, wasn't faring quite as well with her current partner, who was shorter than her by at least a head, and who apparently had taken lessons from The Dragon.

"A fine fellow you are, getting sloshed when you haven't had one proper dance yet with the lovely Widow Peel," said Helena, coming up to Steed and taking his glass from his hand.

"I can't help it if some bloke cuts in before I take three steps with her," he said dryly. "And I'm not getting sloshed—not that it's any of your business, even if I were."

"It most certainly is my business. I simply won't have you pissed, er, passed out behind the potted palm, inconveniencing the guests and discombobulating the help."

"Ha ha ha."

Helena leaned in closer to him. "I dare say Emma would be quite put out, too."

"Not half as put out as I," he muttered. "Say, you haven't seen anybody arrive yet who might be our Mysterious Man from Manderley, have you?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know when he does." She glanced at her watch. "Though I'm beginning to wonder if he'll come at all . . ."

"Oh, he'll come, I promise you." Steed took back his glass of champagne and finished what remained in it. "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll try my luck once more with the divine Mrs. Peel," he said, handing the empty glass to his sister.

"I won't have you dancing cheek to cheek with anyone but me," Steed murmured to Emma as he deftly cut in and spun her away.

"His cheek was nowhere near mine."

"Precisely . . ." He glanced at her bodice.

"Where *were* you? That beastly little man was hauling me about like a sack of potatoes, and treading on my toes."

"You were having so much fun dancing with everyone else I thought I'd have a drink."

"I was *not*. I want to dance with *you*, not a bunch of old fogies."

“Ah, but that’s the price you must pay for being so indescribably fascinating, my love.”

They danced with effortless elegance, Steed artfully guiding Emma away every time he caught sight of a potential interloper gliding too near. “That’s more like it,” said Emma with a grin, easily reversing at the merest pressure of his hand. “You just spared me a couple of more crushed toes from that particular troll.”

Steed gently squeezed the fingers of her hand.

“Of course, there is one place we can retire, where absolutely no one can cut in on you,” she said, lowering her voice to just above a whisper and lightly pressing her cheek to his.

“Let’s just finish this dance before we return to our table—”

“I wasn’t thinking about our table,” she breathed in his ear.

Steed’s arm tightened about her waist.

Presently the music ended. They came to a stop, and slowly drew apart. With a small bow, Steed took Emma’s hands and raised them to his lips. The cheeky irreverence that had sparkled in her eyes was gone, and she now looked at him with frank desire.

“Let’s slip away—” she began, but was interrupted by an announcement by Steed’s brother from the piano.

“Our first set technically concluded with the last number,” he said, “but our hostess has asked us to play one more tune. As Her Grace also happens to be my sister, I thought it imprudent to decline.”

Daniel’s remarks were met with titters of laughter and a sprinkling of applause.

“Don’t know whom she had in mind when she asked for this,” he said, scanning the audience, “but I expect whoever it is’ll know. Ladies and gentlemen, Cole Porter’s *‘Night and Day’*.” “We can’t leave the party now,” said Steed, sweeping Emma into his arms and guiding her toward the centre of the dance floor.

“Not this instant, darling, but after the dance—”

“That would be highly indiscreet,” he said, as they whirled past the musicians.

“Oh, who’ll even notice?”

“My siblings, for starters, followed by the rest of the *beau monde*. Apart from that, I have yet to meet up with Mr. Corso.”

“He’s not here yet?”

“Helena hasn’t seen anybody who might fit the bill.”

“Maybe he won’t show up.”

“Why do you all think that?” he exclaimed. “He *will* come, I tell you.”

“Another one of your gut feelings?”

“That, combined with many years of experience. —Oh, no, you don’t,” he said to a man who looked like he was about to cut in. “This dance is exclusively mine, me buck!”

“What’s your plan?”

“To finish this dance with you without interruption.”

“I meant—”

Steed pulled her a little closer. “What a lovely melody,” he said, giving her a kiss and another whirl. “The words are very nice, too, as I recall . . .”

The set concluded. “Seeing as how I have utterly failed in my efforts to seduce you,” said Emma, as they walked off the dance floor, “I think I’ll have another bite to eat. Want anything?”

“Slowly, slowly catchee monkey,” Steed uttered with a sly grin. “Some more of those shrimp would be nice, and maybe a slice or two of cold roast beef, and a few marinated artichoke hearts and mushrooms . . . Meanwhile, I’m going to have another drink.” He let go her hand and started back to their table.

Emma crossed to one of the buffet tables, collected a couple of plates, and began piling them with all manner of delicacies.

Steed sat down at the table, where he found a clean glass and poured himself a liberal amount of champagne. *Where the devil are you, Corso? I’ve far better things to do than hang about here all night, waiting for you* . . .

“Johnny, my dear boy!” Daniel wandered up and gave his brother a warm bear hug. He was a few inches taller than Steed, lankier, with deep-set hazel eyes and black hair shot through with grey. The family resemblance was not as pronounced as it was in Helena, but the stamp of the clan was certainly evident in Daniel’s nose and penetrating eyes. “Dear boy.” He sat down, removing his spectacles and slowly rubbing the lenses with his handkerchief. “You gave us all quite a shock. Good to have you back, and in as fine a form as ever I’ve seen you.”

“You have no idea how good it is to be back,” said Steed, sipping his champagne.

“Don’t I?” Daniel glanced about at the other guests. “Where is your enchanting *incognita appassionata*, Emma?”

“If she’s so *incognita*, how is it you know my *appassionata*’s name?”

Daniel helped himself to some champagne. “Even though I’ve scarcely seen you these past ten years, I do keep up with Helena’s family gossip, you know,” he laughed, holding up his glass to his nose and enjoying the tickle the bubbles gave him before taking a sip. “She—Emma, that is—is a very fetching woman,” he remarked, setting down his glass. “You two cut quite a figure out there on the dance floor . . . Very fetching, indeed . . .”

“Emma is also charming, brilliant, witty, and . . .” Steed met his brother’s eyes.

“And?” prompted Daniel, his eyes twinkling.

“And I love her. That good enough for you?”

Daniel pursed his lips. “The question is, old boy, are you good enough for her?” he said, in a tone of mock older-brotherly severity.

Emma, in the meantime, was about to return to Steed and their table when someone bumped into her, nearly causing her to drop her two plates. “Hey!” she said, wheeling about. “Watch it!”

“A thousand apologies, mademoiselle,” said the dark-haired man standing next to her.

“*Madame*. Didn’t you see—”

“Pardon, *Madame*. I did see, but only you, not the dishes in your lovely hands,” he smoothly

replied. "Do forgive me, I beg of you."

Emma stared coldly at the man. Of middle height, he looked to be in his thirties but already tending to that telltale plumpness of dissipation; his hands were very hirsute, all the way down to the first knuckle of his fingers; and his cold black eyes made her shudder.

"Max de Winter, at your service, madam," he said with a bow.

"Mr. de Winter," Emma smiled icily. "You must excuse me, I promised to bring this food back to our table."

Duke Ellington's rich sounds now filled the ballroom, recorded music supplying entertainment during the interval between the live musicians' sets.

"Just listen to that," said Daniel, paying scant attention to his brother's remarks. All his attention was focused on the music. "Now there's a man who knew—"

"I was waylaid," announced Emma, coming up to the table and setting down the plates of food, "or I'd've been here sooner. Hullo, Sir Daniel, how kind of you to join us."

Daniel got to his feet. "Just 'Daniel' or 'Dan', my dear." He drew a chair out for her and seated her at the table. "I warned you I'd come by for a chat after the first set."

"So you did." Emma gave him a warm smile. "Have a shrimp," she said, pushing one of the heaping plates toward him as he resumed his seat.

"Don't mind if I do. Helena always lays on the most decent grub . . ."

"Who was that man you were talking to?" Steed peremptorily asked Emma.

"Jealous, Johnny?" said Daniel, reaching for another shrimp. "Humph. Never pegged you for that type, myself . . ."

"Emma would never give me cause to be jealous," Steed tersely replied.

"Smarmy little man," said Emma, "he seemed to make a point of elbowing me when my hands were full. Said his name was Max de Winter."

"Did he indeed?" Steed rose. "I think I'll have a word with him," he said, grabbing a shrimp and popping it in his mouth as he walked off.

"Tell me," said Daniel, turning to Emma, "has my young brother acquired violent tendencies in recent years, particularly when it comes to defending the honour of ladies of his acquaintance?"

"I don't think so," Emma replied, spearing a slice of roast beef with her fork. "Then again, we have been apart for the past couple of years—"

"Quite so, quite so . . ." He poured champagne into her glass.

"Max de Winter . . ." Emma picked up the glass and turned it slowly in her fingers. "I've never met the man before, but his name rings a bell—"

"*Rebecca*," Daniel said promptly. "Daphne du Maurier."

Emma stared at him in utter mystification.

"It's a well-known novel, and a corker at that," he said. "Du Maurier wrote it. Surely you remember: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'. You must have seen the film, with Laurence Olivier as Max, and . . ." He paused, frowning. "Can't remember the leading lady at the

moment . . .”

“Joan Fontaine.” Emma shifted in her seat and scanned the room for Steed. “Of course . . .
Manderley . . .”

36.

Steed stood grazing at the buffet, and now decided to sample some of the bleu cheese.

“You are the fortunate gentleman escorting the beautiful auburn-haired lady in the *electricque* gown,” a silky voice behind him said.

Very casually, Steed turned around. *Max de Winter, eh? Aren't you the clever laddie . . .* “I am,” he replied, taking a small bite of cheese. “Why?”

“I just happened to bump into her . . . May I ask, what is her name?”

“You may, but I may not answer,” said Steed with a cold little smile.

“Mrs. Peel, isn't it? Mrs. Emma Peel?” the man said, a dangerous smile of his own playing on his lips.

“If you know, why ask me?” Steed slowly ate his last bit of cheese.

The man chuckled softly, catching the glance Steed shot in Emma's direction. “I also know that she is, how shall I say, an intimate friend of yours.”

“Very nice cheese,” said Steed, licking a tiny crumb from his finger. “And now I think a cigarette and a whisky are in order.” He took his cigarette case from his pocket and held it out to the man, observing the tiny flicker of recognition in the man's eyes. “Won't you join me at the bar, old sport?”

“I'm afraid I have little in common with my brother,” Daniel was saying to Emma, “thanks—or perhaps I ought to say no thanks—to the fifteen-year difference in our ages. Poor lad, it hasn't been easy for him, being the baby of the family. First there was me; then two years later, the twins Julia and Adriana; then Helena; and then, ten years after Helena, Johnny came along and surprised everyone. The girls doted on him, of course, he was such a dear little fellow—but I was married and had a child of my own by the time he was ten. I really didn't play any kind of role at all in his childhood, I'm afraid.” He finished his glass of champagne and set it down, declining Emma's offer to refill it. “But I'm boring you with all this,” he said. “Do forgive me.”

“Not at all,” said Emma. “I've known John for some time, but he's always been . . . reticent about the details of his life, thanks in large part I believe to his profession, but I also think he . . . Well, it doesn't matter . . .” She left it at that, thinking it best to say no more.

“He has never revealed very much of himself to anyone,” said Daniel gently, recharging Emma's glass.

Emma looked into Daniel's kindly face. “No, I don't suppose he has,” she smiled. “Until lately.”

“Mmm.” Daniel reached for another shrimp, and munched on it thoughtfully. “Now that you mention it, he *did* tell me something this evening that took me quite by surprise . . . Er, d'you mind if I have another splash?” He reached for the bottle.

“Of course not. What was it he told you?”

“Oh, er, it doesn't matter. I expect he'll tell you himself. Later. I say,” he said, forgetting about

the champagne, "would you do me the honour of having this dance with me, Mrs. Peel?"

"Emma. I'd be delighted."

They both rose, and Daniel offered her his arm.

"A lovely melody, don't you think?" he said, as they walked onto the dance floor.

"It is. Gershwin, isn't it?"

"That's right. *Long Ago and Far Away*. A little before your time, but it hasn't lost any of its poignancy and charm after all these years . . ."

"Well, aren't you going to order our drinks?" Steed said to Corso, lighting one of Trelawney's specials. "Mine's a blended Scotch whisky."

"You invited me. Why should I order?"

"Because you're smoking my cigarettes."

"*My* cigarettes, you mean, Mr. Steed."

Steed gave Corso another icy smile. "Awfully decent of you to let me have one of 'em before you kill me, old sport," he said in a low voice. He turned to the barman. "Whisky, neat, please."

"Coming right up, sir. And for the other gentleman?"

"What other gentleman?" murmured Steed. "Ah, you mean this chappie here?" He gave Corso a disdainful appraisal. *I may have at least a decade and a couple of stone on him, but I'm a lot more robust than this little piss-ant*. "A glass of sherry, I think. Sweet."

"Make that a double bourbon rocks, barman," Corso barked. "Now why should I want to kill you?" he said softly to Steed.

"You tell me."

"You do not know? And you such a cunning man. Mr. Steed, you disappoint me."

So do you, you weasey little sod, so do you. "It's enough for me to know you want to kill me. *Why* doesn't concern me in the least."

"You really *do* disappoint me—"

"You know, I really don't give a damn, Corso."

"At least you know my name."

"Do I?" Steed sneered. "Your name—whatever it may be—doesn't matter to me one way or the other, either." He took one last drag on his cigarette before crushing it out. "This is neither the time nor the place to conclude our little chat. Do you ride?"

"Ride what?" murmured Corso, pointedly looking across the room at Emma.

Steed clenched and unclenched his fist. "Horses," he replied, his eyes narrowing.

"On occasion."

"Good. Another one of those occasions is about to arise. Keep any animals at that house of yours?"

"One or two."

"Even better. In that case," said Steed, tossing down the rest of his whisky, "you and I shall go riding, Corso, and will finish our business then."

"I shall enjoy that very much, Mr. Steed," said Corso, with another dangerous little smile. "Just name the place and the time, and I will meet you . . ."

Steed waited for Corso to leave before returning to Emma and Daniel, who had returned to their table and were eating and sipping more champagne.

"Ah, there you are, John," said Daniel, getting to his feet. "I've got to get back—second set's coming up, and I want a word with the chaps about one of the covers we'll be doing." He turned to Emma. "I enjoyed out conversation and our dance, Emma. I look forward to seeing you again."

"Me, too," she smiled.

"Enjoying yourself, my dear?" said Steed, sitting down across from her.

"I was. Now tell me about your meeting with Corso."

He picked at the food still on the table, selecting an artichoke heart. "Not now. The night is still young, and I want to enjoy it to the fullest."

"John—"

"There's nothing much to tell" he insisted, "and what little there is can keep till later. Listen, they're playing *Skylark*. My goodness, that does take me back a few years . . . Shall we dance, darling?"

Steed soon got Emma to forget everything and everyone but him. They danced, drank more champagne, laughed, and danced some more, so completely absorbed in each other that they did not notice the time flying by.

The second set came to an end. "Now," Emma said to Steed as they walked arm in arm back to their table, "is later."

"Eh?"

"You said you'd tell me about Corso 'later.' Well, 'later' has arrived. Tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened."

"I'm in no mood for your jests, Steed. What did Corso say?"

"Nothing much."

"He wants to kill you—"

"Wanting something is a far cry from accomplishing it."

"You're not taking this very seriously—"

"Seriously enough. I did invite him to go riding."

"And?"

"He accepted."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? The other day you said—"

"I haven't forgotten. But let's not worry about that right now, my darling. I have more, er, pressing matters on my mind right now."

Emma stopped and whirled about to face him. "What could be more pressing than a man who means to kill you?"

Steed held her by the waist and drew her into a kiss. “Taking you back to my bed and making passionate love with you for the rest of the night,” he whispered, kissing her again.

She sighed. “Oh, well, since you put it that way . . .”

37.

Emma lay on her belly, her face buried in her pillow and her left arm flung out over the edge of the bed, sound asleep. After a while she stirred, then rolled over on her back, her arm flopping across her body. Muttering, she turned on her left side. An unpleasant pricking and tingling began to creep up her cold, numb arm, and woke her up. She blinked her eyes and stared at the expanse of empty bed before her. “John?” *Where are you?* She squinted at the clock on his bedside table. Half past nine.

She struggled upright. *John . . . Always the early riser*, she mused, pushing her hair back. Still . . . The party was still in full swing when they slipped away shortly before midnight, only breaking up about the time they were finally getting to sleep. Nothing had been planned for today, as far as she knew. He certainly never mentioned anything. *Why couldn't he have had a bit of a lie-in this morning?*

Emma yawned. *He must've got peckish . . . That's it, he's downstairs, eating breakfast.* She struggled out of bed, looking for her slippers and dressing gown. *What the hell, might as well go down myself . . .* She was put out by his thoughtlessness, all the more so as he'd been especially attentive to her last night.

“Good morning, Mrs. Peel!” The young maid who was setting out chafing dishes on the sideboard in the dining room sounded unnaturally chipper, Emma thought irritably. Doubtless she and Steed got on like a house afire. “I'll be fetchin' the coffee urn in just a minute—”

“Morning.” Emma looked at the table, but there were no signs that anyone had yet sat down to eat at it. “Has Mr. Steed been down to breakfast already?”

“No, ma'am, no one has. I've only now started settin' up, like. Duchess'll be down shortly, though. Her Grace ordered breakfast later'n usual, for ten, on account o' the do last night. On Sat'days breakfast's usually on by seven.”

Early risers all, these blasted Steeds . . .

“But if you'd like summat now, Mrs. Peel, some juice or coffee to start with, I can—”

“That's all right, thanks. You carry on. I'll come back at ten.”

“Very good, Mrs. Peel.”

Emma slowly climbed the stairs and returned to the bedroom, wondering where Steed had got to. He'd said nothing to her last night about going anywhere, much less first thing in the morning . . . She stood in the middle of the room. *Think.* She checked her bedroom, then the bathrooms. No signs of him anywhere. She found his dressing gown on the floor by his side of the bed. *If he's not in his dressing gown . . .* She went to the wardrobe and looked inside. His suits were there, but his riding kit was gone. *You went riding?* Now she was cross. *You left our bed at the crack of dawn to go riding? Couldn't wait until tomorrow, you impossible man?*

She descended the stairs nursing her resentments and thinking of things to say to him when she heard a cacophony of voices coming from the dining room.

“What is all the commotion, Robinson?” came Helena's rather impatient voice.

“I do not know, Your Grace. Cunliffe has been back and forth between the stables and the house half a dozen times—”

“What does he want?”

“I cannot say, but I did hear him mention Young Mr. John, with some urgency, I might add—”

“*What* about my brother?”

“Cunliffe would not say—”

“Mrs. Peel came down not a quarter hour ago, Your Grace, askin’ for Mr. John,” chimed in the maid.

“Hush, child,” said Robinson. “Return to the kitchen.” He returned his attention to the duchess. “Cunliffe insisted on speaking to Your Grace—”

“Cannot a body have breakfast of a Saturday without melodrama?” demanded Helena, quite put out by all the ado. “Someone *please* fetch Cunliffe in here. *Now*. I will *try* to get to the bottom of whatever it is, since nobody else seems able to.”

Emma hung back from the dining room doorway, unsure of whether she should inject herself into the scene.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Your Grace.” A middle-aged man in working clothes, his cap clutched in his hands, was ushered into the dining room by Robinson.

“What is it, Cunliffe?” said Helena, coming straight to the point as she helped herself to coffee from the urn on the sideboard.

“I refused, Your Grace. I refused to do as Mr. John told me.” Cunliffe stared at the floor.

“Refused to do what, Cunliffe? Oh, do begin at the beginning, and not *in medias res*. I’ve not had much sleep.”

Cunliffe twisted his cap in his hands. “Mr. John come to t’stables ’bout seven this mornin’, asked me to saddle up Jupiter. I told him Jupiter got a nasty cut on his left foreleg yesterday morning, out in t’ lower pasture, and vet’nary said to confine him to his stall for few days—”

“Did my brother ask for another horse?”

“Mr. John were right put out about Jupiter not bein’ fit. Angry, even. Then he ordered me to saddle the black stallion—”

Helena blanched. “*Warlock?*”

“Aye, him, but I refused, Your Grace. Told Mr. John Warlock weren’t yet trained proper, that Your Grace only got him a fortnight ago.”

“And what did my brother do then?”

“Mr. John were angry with me, and saddled beast himself. I warned him Warlock could be a right devil—”

Emma strode into the dining room. Steed’s unreasonable behaviour towards the groom was completely out of character, she thought anxiously. Steed was never uncivil, let alone downright rude, to anyone. Something very serious must have happened to set him off . . .

“Yes, thank you, Cunliffe,” Helena broke in, reading the worry in Emma’s face. “I shouldn’t be too concerned,” she said calmly, primarily for Emma’s sake. “Mr. John is an excellent horseman, and won’t have any trouble at all with Warlock.”

Cunliffe looked unconvinced, but kept to himself whatever thoughts he had on Steed's ability to handle the stallion. "Aye, Your Grace."

"I apologise to you, Cunliffe, for my brother's disgraceful behaviour. You were doing your duty, and he had no cause to abuse you, let alone any right to do so."

"No offence taken, Your Grace," Cunliffe replied mildly. "Reckon Mr. John didn't realise he was being a bit sharpish, like. All keyed up he was, you know, like a good hunter waitin' to be away as soon as call is sounded." He toyed with his cap, waiting to be dismissed by the duchess.

"That is most gracious of you, Cunliffe. Nevertheless, I shall have strong words with my brother when he returns."

With mounting apprehension, Emma spoke up. "Is there a horse I can ride this morning?"

Helena gave Emma a shrewd glance. "How well do you ride, my dear?"

"Not very. John did mention, thought, that you might have an American saddle—"

Helena turned back to the groom. "Will Minerva do, d'you think, Cunliffe?"

"She'd be my choice, Your Grace."

"Excellent. Please see to it, then."

"Very good, Your Grace." With a nod of his head, Cunliffe turned and followed Robinson out of the room.

Helena looked at Emma. "Hang on, you're not thinking of going after him—"

"I have to find him."

"If that wretched brother of mine could find nothing better to do than pick a row with you first thing in the morning," Helena snorted, "he can damn' well stew in his own juices—"

"It's nothing like that at all," said Emma. "Do forgive me, but I must go upstairs and get dressed—"

"Pardon me for being so tactless, but what's the silly ass playing at, then?"

"He's not playing at anything," said Emma. "He's deadly serious. As is someone else, someone who is deadly serious about killing John."

Stunned, Helena could only hold her head as Emma dashed out of the dining room.

38.

Steed reached the crest of the ridge and pulled up. “Steady, there,” he murmured to Warlock, gently stroking the horse’s glossy black neck. He was glad he’d ridden these parts again the other day, on Jupiter, and gained a better sense of the terrain than he would have done from maps alone. Warlock was a handful, as he quickly discovered, and certainly not a horse one would want to contend with on unfamiliar territory, especially under the present circumstances.

Warlock pranced nervously, literally champing at the bit as Steed kept a firm grip on the reins, watching and listening, occasionally giving the animal a soft word and soothing pat. Presently he heard a whinny behind him. Firmly gripping Warlock’s flanks with his knees and holding the reins tightly, Steed pulled the stallion’s massive head in the direction of the sound and wheeled him about, facing the approaching horse and rider.

“Dead on time, Corso,” said Steed.

“Curious turn of phrase,” replied the man with a low chuckle, riding up to Steed’s right flank. “I am very much alive, as you can see. The question is, however, how much longer *you* will be.”

“That depends on your sporting instincts, I’d say,” said Steed, a steely glint in his eyes. “Unless you don’t have any, in which case you are no gentleman—and then *I* will be a very dead one in a matter of seconds.”

“Ah, but I have, and I am,” said Corso with another chuckle. “You don’t seriously believe you would still be alive otherwise?”

“You tried to kill me once before and failed.”

Corso shook his head. “No, that was not me. I did not want to shoot you from a safe distance, like some poor stupid deer that doesn’t know it is being hunted, even when the fatal bullet drops it permanently in its tracks.” He sighed. “That idiot. He thought he would get a bonus from me if he finished you off the same way he did the other two. I gave him a bonus, all right. I slit his throat.”

“Such a personal touch,” said Steed. “Which is what you have in mind for me.”

“Quite.”

He met Corso’s eyes and held them. “Luckily, I’m a hands-on sort of chap myself and don’t mind getting my fingernails dirty, when necessary.”

“I am well aware of your propensities, Mr. Steed.” Corso’s lips twisted into an unpleasant little grin. “Is that beautiful woman you seem so fond of—what is her name? Mrs. Peel?—is she aware of your propensities? Does she know that you have killed with your bare hands, the very same hands that now explore and caress every little curve of her delectable body—”

Steed’s riding crop cut painfully into Corso’s wrist. “Shut up, you disgusting—”

“What is disgusting about enjoying a woman?” murmured Corso. “Especially one as delicious as Mrs. Peel?”

“The fact that you even pose such a question means you’re incapable of understanding the answer to it,” Steed snarled. “Now let’s get on with it. In 1944, I was on a mission with the two men

you've already killed. Our mission was to identify and then kill a man in our Resistance cell who was in fact collaborating with the Nazis. We identified the traitor, and I slit his throat. So why don't you just tell me who you are, you miserable little shit, and why you want to kill me for something that happened over twenty years ago?"

Corso rubbed his wrist. "You shouldn't have done this," he said quietly. "It was . . . ungentlemanly." He looked up at Steed. "You mean to say you still don't know? Really, Mr. Steed, I thought you more clever than that. That man you killed, in 'forty-four, was my father."

39.

Warlock pawed the ground, snorting and tossing his head. Steed shifted in the saddle and pressed the horse's flanks even more firmly with his knees. "Your father was a murderer as well as a traitor," he said to Corso, stroking Warlock's withers. "Fifty innocent inhabitants of one French village were rounded up and summarily executed by the SS thanks to him."

"You killed my father, Mr. Steed. What does that make *you*?"

"I was ordered to kill him before he caused the deaths of more innocent people—"

"Just following orders, were you?" sneered Corso. "What about innocent people like my mother? Did you ever spare a thought for her, or the two children she was left with to care for, penniless, friendless—"

"War, as anyone who's been in one will tell you, is hell, Corso. And you know, your father never mentioned anything about any family—"

Corso's eyes narrowed. "If he had done, would it have made one whit of difference to you? Would it have prevented you from carrying out your . . . orders, if you had known his infant daughter and widow would slowly and painfully die of hunger by the end of that winter?" His eyes now widened, flashing with hatred. "My mother died so that I might live to avenge my father. She cursed his murderer with her last breath, and I swore to her that I would someday find and execute all who were responsible."

"What are you waiting for, then?" snarled Steed. "Here I am. Kill me."

Corso laughed. "No, no, no, Mr. Steed, that would be so . . . unsportsmanlike. I could have killed you by now, had I wanted to. You didn't even notice me ride up until I was only several yards away from you. All it would have taken was one easy shot from a pistol. Fortunately for you, I did not bring a pistol with me, as I have other ideas . . . After all, you dispatched my father by far more intimate means."

"It won't be easy, strangling me on horseback," said Steed in a low, cold voice.

"Strangling?" Corso cocked his head and grinned. "Only cowards, and old women, strangle men to death. My father was a Corsican, Mr. Steed, and Corsicans are not like you effete English. We live, fight and die like men—with passion, with fury. And we understand *vendetta*. You are not going to die a tidy death, Mr. Steed. You are going to die like the coward you are—slowly, painfully, and acutely aware of your useless life flowing out of you as you lie helpless and alone." He laughed. "Well, perhaps not entirely alone. You will have the memory of Mrs. Peel to console you."

"Dismount, Corso, and have at me like a man, then!"

"Let's have our morning ride first," said Corso with another malevolent grin. "I want to give you a gentleman's sporting chance, don't I."

"Like the cat with the mouse—"

"Like the hound with the fox, Mr. Steed, like the hound with the fox. You fancy yourself an excellent horseman, do you not? Show me what you and that temperamental stallion are made of as we

race to the quarry!” Corso whipped his horse round and slapped Warlock’s haunches with his riding crop before taking off along the ridge crest.

Steed managed to lean well forward, just keeping his seat, as Warlock reared then lunged forward in pursuit of Corso’s mount.

Warlock reached full gallop in no time, thundering along the hard turf with ears laid back and nostrils flared. Steed gave him his head, sensing that the beast had every intention of catching and passing the other horse. They would have a clear shot across the meadow up ahead before encountering any obstacles, which would give Steed just enough time to make the necessary adjustments before meeting the first hedge.

Contrary to what Steed had overheard the night before at the party, Corso was a very good horseman. Nevertheless, Warlock had steadily gained ground on Corso’s mare and was only a few lengths behind as they approached the hedge at the far end of the meadow. Corso made the jump with room to spare. Moments later, Steed leaned forward into the jump, feeling every confident movement of the animal underneath him. Warlock sailed over the hedge cleanly, landing in perfect stride, and now pounded along harder than ever across the second meadow, moving ever closer to Corso and scattering a few terrified sheep who hadn’t the sense to get out of the way sooner.

Corso glanced over his shoulder, then dug his heels into his mare’s flanks, urging her toward the stone wall separating the meadow from a wooded area beyond. Most of the wall was intact, standing some four feet high, but in one or two places it had crumbled away, leaving low, narrow gaps. It was toward one of these gaps that Corso headed, until suddenly, at the very last moment, instead of leaning into the jump he pulled up on the reins and wheeled his horse sharply left.

By the time Steed realized what Corso was up to, it was too late to check Warlock. The stallion was in stride, for the jump, and Steed had no choice but to settle into it. The gap in the wall rushed toward horse and rider, but it was much narrower than it had appeared from afar, and its crumbling stones were sharp and jagged.

At the last moment, Warlock balked. Steed flew out of the saddle and over the stallion’s head, the reins still clutched in his right hand. Somehow he managed to land feet first, but he slipped on the loose and broken rock at the base of the wall, his left leg slamming into a cluster of large fragments of stone before it slid under him as he fell on it.

Despite the sharp pain in his leg, Steed struggled to his feet and back into the saddle. “Come on, old boy, don’t let me down again, eh?” he said to Warlock, patting his neck and touching his flanks with his heels. “Give chase!”

Corso was already at the top of the meadow by the time Steed came charging up, and now spurred his horse on. The quarry lay about a mile beyond and to the right of the trees covering the upland directly ahead.

40.

Corso reined in his mount at the tree line and watched as Steed's black stallion rapidly closed the distance on them. He watched and waited several moments longer, then jerked the mare's head round, kicking her flanks, and took off for the thickest part of the wood.

Warlock's strength increased in direct proportion to his zeal to overtake the mare. The huge horse plunged straight ahead, heedless of Steed's efforts to slow him down and guide him eastward to a sparser section of the wood. Steed scraped his legs on a number of tree trunks, and on one occasion had to lie back flat in his saddle to avoid being unhorsed by a low-growing branch. Thinner shoots whipped constantly at his face, one even drawing blood that now trickled from his forehead down the bridge of his nose and into the corner of his eye.

Several hundred yards beyond the wood the ground levelled out, flat and hard. A stream flowed along the wood's edge, and beyond it lay a wide, overgrown track that once was the quarry road.

Corso could hear Warlock grunting and snorting and crashing through the trees behind him as he spurred his mare out of the wood to the stream, then across it to the track heading in the direction of the quarry.

Warlock burst out of the woods, gathering speed as he coursed through the stream to the quarry road in pursuit of the mare. He was at full gallop now, swallowing up ground and rapidly gaining on the other horse.

Steed and Corso were now neck and neck, but Warlock had strength and speed to spare. Effortlessly he pulled ahead of the mare, quickly leaving her behind in a whirl of fine rocky dust, never slowing down until he reached the rim of the quarry.

Wiping away blood from his eye with the back of his hand, exhausted, and feeling the pain acutely in his leg, Steed relaxed his knees to sit more loosely astride Warlock as he walked the stallion back and forth along quarry's rim to cool him down.

"Congratulations, Mr. Steed," said Corso dryly, trotting up to him. "You win."

"Only the skirmish," replied Steed, equally dryly. "But not the war."

"Just so."

"Not yet, perhaps—" Steed reached behind him, underneath his jacket, and withdrew a revolver, which he now aimed at Corso. "Dismount," he barked, drawing back the hammer.

"Tut, tut, how very unsportsmanlike, Mr. Steed. You disappoint me."

"War and killing are not sport."

"Do you plan to shoot me in cold blood?"

"I might. You had two men killed in cold blood." Steed tried to press Warlock's flanks more firmly but the shock of pain that shot through his injured leg made it impossible.

Steed's momentary distraction gave Corso the opportunity he was waiting for. He swiftly brought up his left arm, which had been hanging loosely at his side and out of Steed's view, raising the riding crop in his left hand and bringing down the thicker end of it with full force across Steed's right forearm. Steed heard a dull crunch as the revolver leapt out of his hand, discharging when it hit the hard

ground, then bounced off some rocks and into the quarry. Letting go the reins, Steed managed to grab one end of Corso's crop with his left hand, giving it a good jerk and noticing how much thicker and heavier it seemed than any ordinary riding crop.

The crop flew easily apart in Steed's grip, nearly causing him to fall backwards out of the saddle. He somehow struggled upright, while Warlock, spooked by the gunfire, violently tossed his head and snorted and stamped at the quarry's rim. Steed saw that what Corso was holding was no riding crop but a short swordstick, with a mean brass ball-and-claw head and a thin, double-edged, razor-sharp eighteen-inch steel blade.

He heard Corso laugh sardonically as he looked at his forearm and realized it was broken. *Not merely aesthetic, that brass knob . . .* Steed winced in pain as he tried to raise his arm. *Damnation . . .* He grabbed Warlock's bridle with his left hand, tugging at it and whispering softly to the agitated horse, trying to soothe him and get him to move away from the quarry's edge.

A flash of steel caught the corner of Steed's blood-clouded eye as Corso slashed the sword blade across Warlock's croup. The stallion neighed with pain and fright, rolling his eyes and flattening his ears as he kicked out with his hind legs. Steed tried to hold on with his knees as he groped vainly for the reins with his left hand, but the pain was just too intense. He cast one grim look to his right, into the depths of the quarry. *No one could survive a fall into that . . .*

Steed shut his eyes as the terrified stallion lurched forward and reared up on his haunches, pawing the air with his hooves. His strength sapped, Steed let his body go limp as he felt himself lose what little was left of his seat on the horse.

Still upright on his hind legs, Warlock took a couple of awkward steps and turned away from the quarry's edge before dropping back on all fours, just as Steed fell to the ground behind him.

"A narrow escape, and a lucky one," said Corso, looking down on Steed lying half-conscious in the road. "For me, that is." With an agile dismount from his mare, Corso now stood straddling Steed, the blade in his hand glinting malevolently as he touched it to Steed's forehead. "Falling to your death in that quarry would have been uncomfortable, but quick." He looked at Steed's right arm, then deftly slit open the sleeve with his blade. "Do you know you have a bone sticking out about halfway up your forearm?"

"How jolly," Steed said weakly, managing to turn his head for a look. His right arm was covered in blood, and indeed something thin and sharp and whitish seemed to be jutting out from the rent in the fabric some six inches above his wrist.

Corso flicked the blade at the congealed blood on Steed's forehead, where the branch had cut him earlier. Fresh blood began to ooze from the wound. "You seemed to have some trouble with that left leg of yours," murmured Corso, slowly but carefully tracing a line from Steed's neck to waist with the blade, exerting just enough pressure to cut the shirt open but not the skin. "Do you think you can stand up?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Corso, get it over with," said Steed, the cold sweat on his forehead mingling with the blood and finding its way into his eyes.

“If you hope for the *coup de grâce*, you hope vainly, Mr. Steed,” chuckled Corso. “Have you forgotten? I said I wanted you to die slowly. Painfully.”

Steed’s arm hurt excruciatingly. He didn’t know how much longer he would remain conscious. Not that it mattered. If he had to die according to Corso’s plan, he would at least miss the most painful part if he passed out. Steed reached up to touch Warlock, who had come up to him and was gently nuzzling the left side of his head. “Good lad,” he murmured, “good lad.”

Smelling Steed’s blood and Steed’s fear, Warlock uttered a soft whinny and gave a nudge to Steed’s left shoulder, as if to reassure and comfort him.

Corso roughly grabbed Warlock by the bit and jerked him away. “Next time,” he snarled, holding his blade where the stallion could see it, “I won’t be so gentle with you.” Warlock backed off, snorting, and stopped a few feet away, watching warily. Corso bent down, reaching for his right boot top. “The hunt is over, Steed, but not quite finished.” He pulled a knife from the boot. Steed could see it was the sort of knife a commando might use, to slit a throat silently and efficiently. Corso tested the blade with his thumb. “Sharp, but not too,” he said, kneeling behind Steed’s head. “I don’t want to sever it clean off, you know, just half way.” Corso grasped a handful of Steed’s hair with his left hand while holding the knife to his neck, under the left ear. “Die, and be damned, you bastard!” he spat.

His head pulled back, Steed was looking up at Corso as he felt the sting of the blade cutting into his neck. An instant later, he was looking up at Warlock, the black stallion’s eyes flashing demonically as he reared up, neighing in fury and lashing out with his forelegs.

41.

“My dear, do you think this is wise?” said Helena when Emma returned, dressed in tweed jacket, breeches, and boots. “You don’t know the territory, and you yourself confessed you’ve not exactly got the best seat on a horse—”

“I prefer doing *something* to moping about.”

“John’s been riding since he was a boy, and he knows Langbourne well,” Helena replied in soothing tones. “I am sure there is nothing to fret about.”

“Helena, someone wants to kill him. And that someone is your neighbour, the one who’s living at Manderley.”

“Mr. Corso? *Him?*” Helena laughed. “If he’s gone ridin’ with John, he won’t get very far. The Colonel thinks the chap’s hopeless as a horseman.”

“The Colonel also thinks women are hopeless at everything except motherhood,” Emma countered dryly. “I suspect the Colonel’s low opinion of Corso’s horsemanship is based exclusively on the fact that Corso is not English and is not upper crust.”

“That’s as may be,” said Helena, “but surely John knows what he is doing, and has a plan.”

Emma frowned. “That’s what’s worrying me,” she said, pacing. “John’s plan—if one can call it that—was to invite Corso to go riding *tomorrow*. And I was supposed to come along.”

“The weather’s changeable. In fact, we’re expecting rain this evening. Perhaps John decided—”

“Then why didn’t he say anything to me, and why did he leave me behind?”

“Sounds to me like he wanted to get on with whatever it is on his own,” said Helena, unable to think of any other reasonable excuse for her brother.

“Yes, and without thinking it through.” Emma paused. “He only met Corso last night. He knows nothing about him, never mind what kind of horseman he is. He only got about four hours’ fitful sleep last night. And yet off he goes first thing this morning, without a word to anybody, on a horse he’s never ridden before, a horse who everybody seems to think is . . . difficult . . .” She bit her lip. “The only time he’s ever this . . . irresponsible . . . is when he gets—”

“—cocky. I know,” said Helena with a sigh.

“There’s something else,” Emma said, resting her hand on Helena’s shoulder.

“What, my dear?”

“He . . . He said he had to be done with this business once and for all before he’d even consider asking me—” Emma’s voice caught.

“Are you saying he finally plucked up the nerve to—?”

“I think so. In fact I’m sure of it.”

“My dear girl.” Helena got up and put her arms around Emma. “I’ll talk to Gerry. He can organise a posse or whatever one organises under such circumstances, to seek out our silly old Toad and fetch him back in time for lunch, after which Gerry will stick the time-honoured shotgun in his back and prod him into action.” She gave Emma a kiss. “All right?”

Emma smiled wanly. "All right."

Helena was about to summon Robinson for assistance in finding the duke when Robinson burst *sua sponte* into the dining room, trembling with uncharacteristic agitation. "Your Grace," he bleated, "the duke requests your immediate attendance in the stable yard." He jerked his head in what was intended as a bow, and fled.

"Exit Robinson, pursued by a bugbear," said Emma to an astounded Helena.

"*Exeunt omnes*," Helena corrected her as they sped after the butler.

By the time Emma reached the stable yard, well ahead of Helena, the duke had sagely faded back to give Cunliffe room to take charge and give orders to three frightened stable boys cowering in one of the stalls. In the centre of the yard, alternately plunging and rearing with dreadful neighs, was Warlock, his sleek black coat white with foam and gritty with dust.

"Stay put until I say," Cunliffe calmly ordered the stable boys as he cautiously approached the panicked stallion. "Whoa, lad, whoa," he crooned, pausing every few paces and repeating the words in a low, gentle tone. "Softly, there, Blackie," he said, edging nearer to Warlock, who had pricked up his ears and now stood snorting and pawing the ground, all nerves and eyeing the groom warily. "Come to me, my boy."

Emma sidled up to the duke. "Has Minerva been saddled?"

"Shhh." The duke put his finger to his lips. "We must let Cunliffe try to calm the horse and get him under control."

"Damn the horse! Something's happened to John, or he'd've come back on him!" Emma took the duke by the arm. "I've *got* to find him—"

Cunliffe had managed to get within arm's reach of Warlock when the stallion again erupted into a panic, neighing and bucking. The groom dodged out of the way, all the while keeping a close eye on the animal, waiting for the beast's fit to exhaust itself before attempting another cautious approach. Eventually Warlock calmed down enough to cease bucking and rearing, and resumed nervously pacing the yard in a circle.

Cunliffe took up the stallion's pace, from several feet out, and circled the yard with him, slowly moving in closer and closer. "Easy, lad," he said, coming nearer. "Easy . . ."

Emma watched the scene with mounting frustration. "Your Grace—"

"Horse's got a nasty cut on his left haunch," Cunliffe said, adding incredulously, "If I didn't know better I'd say he were slashed by a cavalry sabre."

Emma's guts knotted. "Where can I find Minerva?" she called out sharply to Cunliffe.

"Didn't have time to saddle 'er for you Miss, what with Warlock—" Cunliffe started to say with a quick glance at her over his shoulder. "Come, Blackie," he murmured to Warlock, slowly reaching for the reins.

"Damn it all, don't you understand? John needs help!" cried Emma, looking from Cunliffe to the duke.

"Don't just stand there like an idiot, Gerry! Mrs. Peel is right, John needs help! Now!" Helena,

flushed and slightly out of breath, came up to her husband and Emma.

“That’s all very well, my love,” said the duke with a sigh, “but where do you propose we start looking?”

Helena turned to Emma. “Have you any idea where he might be?”

“Quarry,” Emma answered without hesitation, recalling Steed’s remark about it being the most dangerous place in the vicinity.

“You, Thomas,” Helena called to one of the stable boys, “get Minerva ready—”

“Sod Minerva,” snapped Emma, “there isn’t time.” She ran up to Warlock and leapt into the saddle, grabbing the reins from an astonished Cunliffe. “Somebody call an ambulance. Now. Right, you, take me to him,” she said to the equally astonished Warlock, wheeling him about and kicking his sides. “Go, damn you!”

“Good heavens,” said the duke. He turned to Helena, whose earlier flush had disappeared completely from her face. “Call Sir Bruce and tell him to go immediately to the quarry, via the old gated road at the northeast end of Langbourne,” he said to her. “He knows the way. Ask him to come with an ambulance.”

“Right away. What will you do in the meantime?”

“Saddle a horse and follow Mrs. Peel.”

42.

She found him lying a few feet from the quarry's edge.

"Steed!" cried Emma, sliding off Warlock and running up to him. She knelt at his side, paling at the sight of the gashes, still oozing blood, over his left eye and under his left ear, and she gasped when she saw the bit of bone protruding through the skin of his blood-soaked right arm. Grey-skinned and damp with sweat, Steed lay very still, his eyes closed and his chest barely moving with his shallow breaths.

"Corso!" screamed Emma, leaping to her feet. "Show yourself, you miserable—"

On the ground nearby lay Corso's knife and mangled swordstick. Emma snatched them up, looked at Steed, then peered intently at the ground. All about were hoof marks and several freshly crushed stones. Slowly she walked back toward Steed, scanning the surface of the road. Something a few feet from his head, at the edge of the quarry, caught her eye. She came closer. Small globs of greyish organic matter . . . She looked over the edge into the quarry. Fifty feet below, lying in a grotesque heap on a pile of rock, was Corso's body, the skull crushed.

Swallowing hard, Emma turned back to Steed. Once more kneeling beside him, she very carefully cut away what remained of his right sleeve with Corso's knife. Her hands were still trembling when she picked up Steed's left hand and pressed her fingers to his wrist. When she finally found the pulse, it was thready and irregular. *Where is everybody, for God's sake?* She tore off a piece of his shirt and began blotting the cuts on his forehead and neck, her anxiety and sense of helplessness rising by the minute. *He needs a doctor, now . . .*

Steed's eyelids fluttered as he drifted back into consciousness. No longer sensing any pain, he felt quite calm and relaxed, as if he might be settling down to sleep. *To sleep, perchance to dream . . .*

Emma called his name softly.

He looked up to see something, no, someone looming over him. He tried to bring the image into focus.

"It's me. Emma."

Emma . . . He frowned in concentration.

"Mrs. Peel."

He finally saw her face clearly. "Mrs. Peel," he muttered, a flicker of recognition momentarily brightening his dull eyes.

Emma smoothed back a few damp and bloodied locks of hair from his brow.

"Sorry, my dear," he sighed. "Kept you waiting too long . . ."

She looked at him with mounting concern.

"It's too late . . ."

"Not at all," she said, stroking his head. "Help is on the way." *Please . . .*

"I promised you . . . Dinner . . . Drive to the coast . . ."

"Shhh—"

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Never mind," she said softly, fighting to keep her voice steady and reassuring. "We'll just stay here."

Steed closed his eyes, taking shallow, rapid breaths. *Those beautiful, tender brown eyes of yours . . .* "A lovely custom, Mrs. Peel," he murmured with a weak smile.

"What custom, darling?"

"Mistletoe . . ." He opened his eyes again and looked into her face. *So tender, so yielding . . .* "Permit me, once again?"

Emma bent down and kissed his lips.

"Been wanting to do that for ages," he sighed, trying to raise his left hand to her face but finding himself unable to do so. "Emma . . ."

She took his hand in hers.

"Champagne . . . Gift from Madame . . . Come out on the balcony, my darling . . . lovely moon tonight . . ." Steed turned his head to one side.

Emma squeezed his hand, then gently lowered his arm and laid it across his belly. "It shan't be long now—"

He twitched. "I can't move."

"You mustn't try. You must lie still until help arrives—"

"Too late." *I can't feel my body . . . Oh, God, better to die than to be pitied by you . . .* "I'm sorry, my love," he uttered, overcome with exhaustion and giddiness, "so sorry . . ." With one last look at her, he let his eyelids fall shut, tears streaming from his eyes.

"Hush, darling," whispered Emma, stroking his damp cheeks, "hush—"

As she bent down to kiss him again, Warlock ambled up, lowering his massive head with an anxious snuffle and very gently nosing Steed's shoulder.

The shrill sound of a bell pierced the air. Emma raised her head to see an ambulance tearing up the quarry road in a swirl of dust. *Thank God . . .*

The ambulance skidded to a halt and a tall, broad-shouldered man with a thick, untidy mane of grey hair was the first to leap out of the vehicle. "Who's that damned woman meddling with my patient?" he shouted, striding towards Steed, as two attendants emerged from the rear of the ambulance. "Don't move him, for God's sake!" he cried out to Emma. "If you want to be useful, get that beast out of the way!"

Emma quickly got to her feet and grasped Warlock by the halter, her eyes flashing. *Damned woman indeed!* "Move him?" she fumed. "I'm not *that* stupid! Just who do you think you are—"

A clatter of hooves behind her announced the arrival of the duke and Cunliffe, the latter wasting no time in leaping from his mount, grasping Warlock's reins, and leading the stallion several yards down the road out of everyone's way.

"Bruce Huntington," said the man, kneeling at Steed's side and visually examining him. "Who the devil are you?"

Emma glared at him. “The man you are looking at,” she replied in a frosty tone, “just happens to be my . . . betrothed.”

“Sir Bruce,” called the duke, dismounting.

Sir Bruce grunted, looking up briefly to acknowledge the duke before returning to his examination of Steed. One of the ambulance attendants trotted up with a doctor’s bag, which he placed on the ground next to Sir Bruce.

“See to the woman,” Sir Bruce said to the attendant.

“I don’t bloody need seeing to, *John* does,” snapped Emma

“My dear, you’ve had quite a shock,” said the duke, coming up to Emma and leading her away. “You mustn’t mind Sir Bruce. He can be a bit brusque at times, but he’s a fine doctor, Edinburgh trained, and you won’t find a more capable man.” He pulled a small silver flask from his inside breast pocket and offered it to her. “Have some brandy.”

“I don’t want any brandy—”

“Drink it,” repeated the duke firmly but kindly. “If you don’t, I’ll ask Sir Bruce to give you a sedative.”

Emma sullenly took the flask from him.

“Any guess as to what happened here?” the duke asked her.

“Look down into the quarry,” she said, after swallowing a mouthful of brandy.

“Dear me, dear me,” sighed the duke when he returned a few minutes later.

“That man down there meant to murder John.”

“I see . . .” He turned to look at Warlock, who stood placidly at Cunliffe’s side some yards away. “Stallion’ll have to be put down, of course. Pity.”

“Why?”

“Killed a man, that’s why. I’m sorry, but there it is. Can’t risk—”

“He saved John’s life! Don’t you see? No, you don’t, do you. Corso—the dead man in the quarry—had already put a knife to John’s neck and begun to cut. John was completely helpless. His right arm is badly broken, he can’t move . . .” Emma took another pull on the flask. “But for Warlock, Corso would’ve slit John’s throat.”

Sir Bruce had completed his examination of Steed, and was getting to his feet as the duke walked up. Emma watched the two men exchange a few words, while the attendants put Steed on a stretcher and took him back to the ambulance. The doctor shook his head in reply to something the duke said, then turned and jogged to the waiting ambulance.

“Wait!” shouted Emma, sprinting after Sir Bruce. “I’m coming with you!”

“That’s not possible,” said Sir Bruce, turning around as she caught him up. “I suggest you go back to Langbourne—”

“Please—”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot permit that,” he said gravely.

Emma’s face went white. “He’s not—”

Sir Bruce's expression softened. "Don't fash yourself, dear. He's alive, but he's unconscious, he's lost quite a bit of blood, and he's in shock. We must get him to hospital without further delay." He clambered into the ambulance as quickly as his large frame permitted, and it sped away, soon disappearing from sight.

"Come, my dear." The duke strode up to Emma and put his arm around her shoulders. "Helena will be along presently, with the shooting brake," he said, gently leading her back down the road, "to take you back to the house. Sir Bruce will telephone when he has more to tell us."

"He's . . . all right," said Helena, striding back into the drawing room where she, her husband, and Emma had been closeted for the past few hours. The three of them had exchanged scarcely more than a half dozen words in that time, and only the duke had succeeded in keeping still for more than two minutes at a stretch.

Emma, who had been pacing and fidgeting in front of the fire ever since Robinson appeared to announce the telephone call from the hospital, anxiously looked up at Helena.

"I spoke with Sir Bruce," said the duchess. "John is . . . well, if not exactly all right, he will be."

"What's his condition?" asked the duke, before Emma could speak.

"Compound fracture of the right arm. Left leg severely sprained. Bruised ribs. Mild concussion. John is *not* paralysed—just a temporary loss of feeling in the limbs, due to trauma resulting from his fall, and shock. They've cleaned him up, pumped him full of antibiotics, and set the broken bone. Sir Bruce assures us John should recover nicely, with a few weeks' rest, and should be released in time for Christmas."

"Splendid news, my dear, splendid news," the duke sighed in relief.

"Oh, and Sir Bruce very particularly asked me to tell *you*, my dear," Helena said slowly, turning to Emma, "that John will dance at your wedding yet."

Emma sank down on one of the settees, covering her face with her hands.

"Funny sort of thing for Sir Bruce to say," mused Helena, joining Emma on the settee, "dour old stick that he is."

Emma began to weep.

The duchess looked up at her husband. "Pour us a couple of stiff drinks, Gerry, love—"

"Forgive me—" Emma managed to snuffle.

Helena put her arm around Emma. "Don't be silly, there's nothing like having a good cry every now and then," she said. "Though I must say my heartless little brother has given you far too much cause to shed tears." She gave Emma a hug. "High time somebody gave him a good talking-to . . ."

The duke set down two glasses of whisky on the table in front of the settee. "Is that wise?" he asked his wife. "He's rather banged up at the moment—"

"As if that would stop me," Helena snorted. "Unfortunately, he is allowed no visitors. Security, they said. A load of cobblers, if you ask me. They're transporting him to some hush-hush government

facility in a day or two—an asylum for the criminally insane, I shouldn't wonder, considering the way he's behaved . . .”

PART FOUR

*But we will have a way more liberal
Than changing hearts, to join them; so we shall
Be one, and one another's all.
Donne, Lovers' Infiniteness*

43.

Christmas Eve, and they still haven't released me from this bloody charnel house . . . Steed dressed slowly, hampered by the plaster cast on his right arm, and grew more and more annoyed by the minute. *They know bloody well I'm expected at Langbourne . . .*

Helena had invited him to Langbourne for Christmas every year since her marriage, and he had spent a fair number of Christmases over the years in the company of the duke and duchess and their growing family. Only this time, he wouldn't go alone. He would bring Emma with him.

For the three weeks he'd been convalescing, he had not been allowed to see or speak to anyone except his doctors, his nurses, and a succession of drab bureaucrats who insisted on taking him through endless boring debriefs. Corso, it turned out, had been the unknown factor in a particularly troublesome equation Mother and his gang had been wrestling with for months. He had been the mysterious, unidentified head of a small but particularly deadly network of spies and cutthroats with no loyalty to anyone but him, and who gladly plied their dirty trade for anyone willing to pay for it. And they didn't come cheaply. After Corso's death, however, the tightly-knit network soon unravelled, beset by deadly betrayals and power struggles that quickly led to the identification and discovery of the network's surviving members, and the discovery of Corso's true identity. "Like father, like son," Steed had said, when he was told, "simply following in Dad's bloody footsteps and into the family business of greed, treachery and murder."

By the time he knotted his tie—a prodigious feat, under the circumstances—the last remnants of his patience had vanished. *The least Mother could have done to show his gratitude for my role in the Corso business was make sure the quacks signed me out by now . . .*

Well, at least they let Helena send over some decent clothes . . . Bit awkward, escaping in a hospital gown, never mind in very poor taste . . . He picked up his bowler and the elegant walking-stick (a gift from Mother) propped up against his bed, and limped to the door, cautiously opening it and peering out into the corridor. *Perfect . . .* Steed limped back to the motorised wheelchair at the foot of the bed and sat down in it, laying his stick across his thighs and covering his legs with a pillow and a lap-rug. He pulled the brim of his bowler down over his eyes, rearranged his lap rug more artistically, and then wheeled boldly out the door.

"Damn and blast!" he bellowed, rolling past Matron, who was checking the shift roster. "That Steed'll be the death of me yet! *Impossible man!*"

Matron was all too familiar with the fat, wheelchair-bound, irascible man from the Ministry known only as “Mother”. Mr. Steed was by no means the first patient “Porky” (as Mother was known on the ward) had called on, and she had had to remind him on more than one occasion to pipe down and cease disturbing her patients.

“Sir,” she now said to him, in a tone liberally laced with sarcasm, never looking up from her clipboard, “please *do* try to remember this is a hospital ward, not Newgate Prison. There are *unwell* people here, who are trying to *rest*.”

“Yes, yes, I *know* that,” came the testy reply as man and wheelchair continued their progress down the corridor.

Matron sighed, and made some marks on her roster.

Not many people were walking about the corridors—not many people on this ward were capable of walking—and Steed rolled out to the car park unnoticed. He took a quick look round before getting to his feet and pushing the wheelchair behind some dustbins. Another quick look, and he hobbled to the car he’d chosen for his getaway. It was an old Rover, parked in one of the staff spaces. He tried the door handle. Unlocked, of course. Even better, the keys were in the ignition. Just as he had expected.

He climbed behind the wheel, smiling smugly. The car belonged to the proctologist, who was reputed to be a very able physician but who, when it came to the petty details of daily life, tended to be on the absent-minded side. Steed had seen the fellow hanging about the ward on several occasions, searching for his mislaid car keys, only to be told by some exasperated sister that the first place she’d look is his car, since that’s where they’d always been found before.

Steed effected his escape without incident and headed in the direction of St. Mary Meade, constantly watching his mirrors and scanning the roads for any signs of pursuit or interception. He saw nothing to give him alarm, and indeed encountered hardly any traffic at all during his journey.

He turned into the long and bumpy drive to Emma’s house, eager to see her again but at the same time feeling anxious and uncertain.

He slowed in front of the house. All the curtains had been drawn and not so much as a wisp of smoke rose from any of the chimney pots. He slowly drove round to the back, peering at the outbuildings and the fields beyond. No signs of activity anywhere. The house and grounds appeared completely deserted.

He stopped the car and sat tapping the steering wheel. No point in sitting here; he might as well drive on to Langbourne. Helena might know where Emma was.

Steed was about to thrust the car into gear when he paused, thinking this might be the ideal place to leave the purloined Rover. The good doctor was bound to discover it missing before long, but it would take the police rather longer to find it here. He got out of Rover and headed for the garage and his Bentley.

In spite of everything, Steed enjoyed the drive to Langbourne, though he had to admit it was much easier for a man with a cast on his forearm and a wonky leg to drive the Rover than the Bentley.

He parked in the huge forecourt, slipped his arm in the sling he'd remembered to bring along, and, walking-stick in hand, marched stiffly up to the massive front door. He rang the bell and waited for some moments before the door creaked open to reveal the butler. "Good morning, Robinson," said Steed, walking into the vast hall and removing his bowler.

"Young Mister John!" exclaimed the butler, his normally sombre expression lifting as he took Steed's hat and coat. "Good afternoon, sir, and the greetings of the season to you."

"Thank you, Robinson. Happy Christmas to you, too."

"The duchess is expecting you in the drawing room."

Despite his sore leg, Steed was able to keep up with the old man, who led him to the far end of the hall.

Robinson rapped discreetly on one of the doors.

"Come in."

Robinson took a couple of paces into the room and bowed. "Young Mr. John, Your Grace."

The duchess was sitting on the settee by the fire, stroking an enormous ginger cat lying curled in her lap and purring audibly. "About bloody time, and all," Her Grace muttered. "Show him in, Robinson."

"Your Grace." Robinson retreated with another small bow.

"Well, come in, Toad, don't loiter," said the duchess.

"Hullo, Nelly-Belle," said Steed, coming into the room, swinging his cane with something of a swagger. He walked up to his sister and planted an affectionate kiss on her cheek.

"How's the old stump?" she asked, giving first Steed's leg and then his silver-handled mahogany cane sceptical glances. "Or is this tarted-up stick you're brandishing with such insouciance just another one of your fads?"

"My leg aches something chronic. The cane is definitely not an affectation." He held it up and smiled. "Rather handsome, wouldn't you say?"

"You always were," she wryly replied. "And that little scar above your eye gives you quite the rakish look. Though I must say you do look a bit peaky, now that I've had a proper look at you. Now put that stick down before you brain me and dear old Puss." She waved a hand at the armchair opposite. "Sit yourself down."

"Thanks, but I'd just as soon stand."

Helena looked up at him. Her brother's initial good spirits seemed to have flagged, and he now limped back and forth in front of her with an oddly disquieted expression. "Why so down-at-mouth all of a sudden?"

"Hmm?"

"Must you be so peripatetic, Toad, dear? If you won't sit down, at least stand still. You'll make me dizzy with all this to-ing and fro-ing." The cat in her lap uttered a drowsy "mrrrow" in agreement.

"Very well." Steed lowered himself into the armchair, wincing.

Helena watched him drumming the fingers of his left hand on the armrest and staring into the

fire. "What is it, Toad? Apart from that leg of yours?"

"Mrs. Peel's gone."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Peel. Emma. She's gone."

"Gone where, dear?"

"I don't know. I called on her before coming here, but the house was deserted—"

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. "Come in," said Helena.

Robinson reappeared, bearing the coffee tray, which he set down on the table between Helena and Steed. "The coffee, Your Grace," he announced, quite superfluously. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you, Robinson."

Robinson made one of his little bows and was about to withdraw when the duchess spoke. "Oh, Robinson, you can publish to all and sundry that we are having coffee in the drawing room."

"Very good, Your Grace," he murmured with another elegant little bow, a barely perceptible smile on his lips as he withdrew.

Once the butler was out of the room, Steed spoke. "Perhaps she wrote me . . ."

"Who, dear?"

"Emma," he said, with growing impatience. "Mrs. Peel."

"I don't think so. The only post that came for you was something official-looking. From your bank, I believe. It's upstairs, on the escritoire in your bedroom."

He rubbed his jaw. "Did she telephone, leave any message—"

"The bank manageress?"

"Emma!"

"Why should she do that?" Helena poured the coffee.

At times, his sister could be exasperating. "I thought . . ."

"Shall I give you a chuck under your chin, darling?" said Helena sweetly.

"For heaven's sake, Nell, I'm not a child—"

She chuckled. "My remark was directed to Mr. Buzzfuzz." She looked down at the cat, who with eyes closed was kneading her lap, an expression of exquisite joy on his handsome leonine face. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Me, or the cat?"

"You. Coffee is toxic to cats." Helena gently shifted Mr. Buzzfuzz from her lap and reached for the coffee pot.

"Yes, thanks," he answered, his voice inflected with irritation. "I'll put it to you simply: have you any idea where Emma might be?"

"I might." She poured coffee for herself and Steed. "Cream and sugar, Toad, or are you watching your figure these days?"

"Look, if you *do* know, will you please tell me?"

"You were told to come *directly* to Langbourne as soon as you were released from hospital, were

you not?" she said, handing him his cup and saucer. "But then you never do what you're told—"

"Don't hector me, Helena. How many times must I remind you that I am no longer a child?" He set down his coffee and pushed himself up from his chair, his face growing paler. "Damnation, woman, has something happened to Emma?"

Helena looked up at her brother with a what's-all-the-fuss-about expression. "Of course nothing's happened to her."

"I'm in no mood to play silly buggers. What is it you're not telling me?"

"I think Emma is quite capable of telling you herself what you need to know," replied Helena. There was a soft knock-knock on the door. "Come in."

"What are you saying?" He reached for his cane. "You don't mean she's—"

"Something tells me you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, as it were," Helena murmured, a little smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She looked past him, toward the doorway. "As you are lamentably wont to do, from time to time."

Following the direction of his sister's gaze, he turned around to see Emma.

"Steed," murmured Emma, hastening toward him, her hands outstretched.

Abandoning his cane, Steed took a few stiff paces toward her and grasped her right hand. "It's back to 'Steed' now, is it? Not even 'John'?" he said softly, kissing her hand before releasing it.

"Old habits," she said. "Let me have a look at you . . ."

"I stopped by your house before coming here—"

"—instead of doing as you were told," broke in Helena.

"Well, you know, you might have let me know, Helena," said Steed in a surly tone of voice.

"How? They wouldn't let you talk to anybody, remember?" she said to Steed in a manner she might have used with a half-wit. "I invited Emma for the holidays. Surely you might've guessed I'd never let the poor gel rattle about that unfurnished house of hers all alone, especially at Christmas!" Helena turned to Emma. "Sometimes, I think my brother was dropped on his head in infancy," she said with a sigh.

Emma stared pointedly at Steed's cast and sling. "Didn't I say you couldn't deal with that . . . that murderer without my help?"

"You did."

"Yet off you went, all by yourself, without a word to me or anybody else, blindly charging into the fray—"

"I was inspired by the Light Brigade."

"Forgetting, of course, what happened to *them*."

"But I had you to come to my rescue."

"I had nothing to do with that. It's Warlock you have to thank for saving your life." She glared at Steed. "Sheer bloody luck it was, too! You were very nearly killed!"

"'Very nearly' doesn't count. After all, a miss is as good as a mile—"

"I found you half dead," she said, "covered in blood, delirious—" Emma turned away. "Have

you *any* idea what you put me through?”

Steed scowled at Helena, who had been eavesdropping shamelessly. “Between the two of you,” he growled, “you’ll finish the job Corso started by henpecking me to death. Haven’t you something to do somewhere else in this house, Helena?”

The duchess made a point of staring at the mantel clock. “Dear me, is that the time?” she said in mock astonishment. “The vicar should be here shortly; by the sound of it the vandals are already at the gates; and I still need to attend to the preparations for dinner. Reluctant as I am to do so, Emma my dear, I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you alone with my imbecile brother while I attend to my duties. Will you be all right?”

Emma’s tensed features relaxed. “I think so.”

Helena gave her a warm parting smile before marching out of the room.

44.

Emma came up to Steed, circling his neck with her arms and touching her forehead to his. “Oh, John . . .”

“Damned woman should have let me know,” Steed grumbled. “I don’t mind telling you it came as a bit of a shock, seeing your house all closed up and deserted, and no word from you—”

“Shut up, darling,” murmured Emma, stopping his lips with a kiss.

“I can’t even take you in my arms properly,” he muttered, silently cursing his plaster cast, his sling, and his throbbing leg. *This will prove awkward indeed . . .*

Emma kissed him again.

“Have you been staying here these past three weeks, then?” he asked a little while later, shifting his weight.

“No. I stayed for a couple of days, until we were sure you were on the mend. I only arrived here about an hour ago. From London.”

“You’ve moved back.”

“To London? Certainly not. Why would I do that?”

“You don’t like the house, and rural life bores you senseless.”

“Nonsense. I love the house, and I’m anything but bored. I wanted to spend a few days with my mother, leave Molly the Moggy in her care, and attend to some business, that’s all.”

“Family firm business?”

“Among other things, yes—”

“Can’t manage without you, can they?”

“As a matter of fact they can, and they have done very nicely from what I see.”

“But you’re still running it.”

“Not any longer.” Emma turned away. “I only went back to the firm after separating from Peter because it was . . . something to do,” she said, crossing to the settee where she bent down to stroke the cat. “I have no desire to return. It’s in excellent hands. Let Knight Industries make money for me on their own from now on.” She straightened up, and looked directly at Steed. “Did you honestly believe I’d go away without so much as a word to you?”

He could see the hurt in her eyes. “No, I—”

“I would *never* do such a thing to you, John. Ever.”

“I . . . I was afraid something had happened to you,” he said lamely.

“Liar. You thought I walked out on you.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you had done. Look at me—”

“That you would believe, even for a moment— And you claimed to prize me for my fidelity . . .”

“You mustn’t be angry with me, Emma, my darling, I’m just so . . . unsure of myself—” He took a few painful steps toward her. “I don’t know *what* I was thinking. If indeed I was thinking at all. Probably thanks to all those pain-killers they plied me with . . .”

“You know what I think? I think you’ve let one of your demons get the better of you,” she said, in a gentler tone of voice.

He tried to embrace her, but the cast on his arm got in the way. “Oh, damn . . .”

“Shouldn’t you get off that leg? Sit down by the fire.”

“I sat in a car for two hours,” he said, limping back and forth. “I need to walk about a bit.” He picked up his stick.

“How bad is it?”

“I still can’t put all my weight on it, I daren’t attempt a tango, and I probably won’t go riding any time in the foreseeable future.”

“Perhaps the latter is just as well,” said Emma, putting her hand on his good arm. “Tell me, are you limited in any other activities?”

He looked into her eyes and caught something of the familiar mischievous gleam in them. “You seem to forget I was confined to a hospital bed for the past three weeks.”

“With a bevy of pretty nurses to cater to your every whim,” Emma smiled, “and give you daily sponge baths. I haven’t forgotten.”

“I think ‘coven’ is the collective noun. Those harpies were merciless. Especially when it came to the sponge baths.”

They had come up to one of the windows that afforded a particularly good prospect of the lake and the park. “Beautiful,” said Emma, admiring the panorama.

“Ravishing,” murmured Steed, admiring her. “If you’re not going back to Knight, what will you do?”

“Finish researching a couple of articles I’ve been working on for ages . . . plant a kitchen garden . . . Take a few cookery classes . . .”

“Cookery classes?”

“Why not? I have seen the error of my ways. Thanks to you. And what about you? What will you do?”

“Write my memoirs, make dandelion wine . . .”

“In between dispatching diabolical masterminds?”

“I’m leaving the masterminds to the younger chaps to dispatch,” he replied, tracing a pattern in the rug with the tip of his stick.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been suspended from my duties.”

“*What?*”

“Over the way I handled everything. From my ‘death’ in France, to the Corso affair. Either I resign, or they retire me involuntarily.”

“Of all the—” exclaimed Emma, outraged. “Those unfeeling, *ungrateful*—”

“You mustn’t be so indignant,” said Steed. “Let’s face it, I made a right bugger’s muddle of it all. They’re right, you know.”

She wouldn't be placated. "After all you've given them—"

"I'll be officially retired as from the first of the year. Until then, I'm in leave status." He leaned on his stick and looked up at her. "That life is over."

"Have you no regrets?"

"My escapade with Corso was an exercise in extremely bad judgment and foolhardiness. When one loses the ability to act dispassionately and sensibly, one becomes a danger to others as well as to oneself. It's high time I packed it in. I should have done so two years ago, if truth be told. And no, I have no regrets. I shan't miss that life. I have a new one ahead of me now."

"Have you any plans for this new life of yours?" she asked, her eyes meeting his.

"I just might pitch my tent in the country after all. But that depends on— If Helena can put up with me hobbling about this house for a little while, at least until I get sorted—"

"There's always my house, you know," she said. "Or, more precisely, *your* house—"

Steed examined the highly polished toes of his boots. "I . . . You know I'm uncommon fond of you—"

"Just 'fond' now, is it?" she teased. "That's not the word you used a few weeks ago."

"I meant what I said to you then."

"I know that. As did I," she countered softly.

He crossed slowly to the fireplace. "Emma . . ." he began uncertainly, "I . . . Oh, damn it all, Emma . . ." He was pacing again. "What could you want with a broken-down old war horse like me? I'm sped with the spavins, spoilt with the staggers; I don't have a job any more; I don't even have a hearth to call my own— The old Steed's more of a gelding now—"

Emma came up to where he now stood warming himself by the fire. "Gelding? What *did* those nurses do to you in that hospital?" she deadpanned.

"I was speaking metaphorically—"

"I sincerely hope so," she murmured. "You poor thing, two minutes from being dispatched to the knacker's yard—"

"Exactly where I belong.

"Not by a long chalk." She ran her fingers up and down under the lapels of his coat. "*Come, live with me and be my love, And we will some new pleasures prove Of golden sands, and crystal brooks, With silken lines and silver books.*"

"You've been reading Dr. Donne, I see."

"Mmm. Curled up in bed with him every night these past three weeks."

"You're baiting me," he said with a wistful smile.

She, too, smiled. "In a manner of speaking."

"Emma, I'm hardly what my grandmamma Steed would have styled a 'catch'—"

"Bother Granny," Emma whispered, drawing Steed back into her arms and kissing him.

"All I have to offer you is my love," he said, returning her kiss with equal tenderness.

"Isn't that all that matters?"

“Dearest Emma— Oh, *damn* this bloody arm . . .”

She had her arms firmly about Steed, who was now giving her more passionate kisses, when the door suddenly flew open and a little girl burst in. She looked to be about five years of age, with dark wavy brown hair and very bright blue eyes. “Oh, *there* you are!” she happily exclaimed, running up to the settee and throwing her arms around Mr. Buzzfuzz, who was still placidly dozing where Helena had left him earlier. “Dear Fuzzy. Grandmamma said I’d find you here!” She was hugging the cat, who didn’t seem to mind at all, when she noticed the two adults standing a few feet away with embarrassed looks on their faces. “Uncle John!” beamed the little girl, releasing Mr. Buzzfuzz and dashing up to Steed.

“Hullo, Clara,” he smiled, bending down. “Put your arm about my neck, so I can lift you up with my good arm.”

Clara happily complied.

“You’ve certainly grown, haven’t you,” he grunted, hoisting Clara up and giving her a peck on the cheek.

“That’s what grandmamma said,” she replied seriously, turning her head to get a better look at Emma. “I don’t think I know you,” she said to Emma. “Are you my auntie?”

“Not exactly,” smiled Emma. “How do you do, Clara. I am Mrs. Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel.” She extended her hand to the little girl, who shook it with a firmness and gravity uncommon in five-year-olds.

“How do you do. ‘Emma’ is pretty name. And you’re very pretty. Just like the princess in the fairy tale Mummy read to me last week.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Oh, but it’s true.” Clara held her arms out to Emma, who took the child from Steed. “I want a cat just like Fuzzy, but Mummy won’t let me. She thinks I’m too young to take care of a cat properly.”

“And what do you think?” asked Emma very seriously.

“I look after my brother. He’s two. He’s much more difficult than a cat.”

“This child will go far,” said Emma, glancing at Steed. “Would you like me to set you down now, Clara?”

“Yes, please,” said Clara. As soon as her feet touched the floor, she ran to the doorway. “Grandpapa promised to take me down to the Water,” she announced joyously. “Bye, Uncle John, ’bye, Mrs. Peel!” they heard her call as she disappeared out the door.

“Emma, my darling—” began Steed, only to be interrupted by Helena’s boisterous reappearance. *Is there no balm in Gilead?* He glowered at his sister.

“John, you’re wanted on the ’phone,” she boomed. “Some absurd little man who insists he’s Mother, for heaven’s sake, and demands to speak with you about a stolen car, of all things, and who simply *won’t* take no for an answer. Take the call in the study. Oh, and Vicar wants to see you about your disinterment. You’ll find him in the morning room.”

With a helpless look at Emma, Steed followed Helena out the door.

45.

The sun was already setting when Steed and the vicar, chatting amiably, entered the sitting room. The Reverend Mr. Tucker was a short, rotund gentleman in his early seventies, possessed of the grace and lightness of tread characteristic of many portly people. An affable natural dignity limned his movements and speech, and a keen sense of humour shone from his large, alert eyes. In his parish he was fondly referred to (behind his back, of course) as “Friar Tuck.” He had lost his wife some years ago, and it was discreetly whispered that the widowed housekeeper who had been looking after him ever since enjoyed a warmer relationship with her employer than that of mere servant. “I must confess I do look forward to Her Grace’s annual Christmas Eve get-together with increasingly unseemly eagerness,” the vicar said, patting his belly. “They say self-restraint’s the first thing to go when one finally stumbles into the abyss of senility.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” murmured Steed. He was looking at Emma, who sat by the fire talking with two of his nieces, while Clara and another little girl played dollies’ tea party at the women’s feet. Several other people were in the room, grouped in clusters, talking and laughing.

Mr. Tucker followed Steed’s gaze. “I don’t believe I am acquainted with the lady seated between Amanda and Elizabeth,” he said, regarding Emma with appreciation, “though I *have* seen her before somewhere. Handsome woman. Very handsome indeed.”

“Her name is Emma Peel,” Steed replied. “Widowed several months ago. Moved to St. Mary Meade from London, after her husband’s death. Come, I’ll introduce you.”

“I dare say she shan’t remain a widow for long,” said the vicar, watching Steed’s face. “I don’t doubt the banns will be published within the year.”

“Let us sincerely hope so,” said Steed. “Er, for the sake of the lady’s happiness.” They came up to the three women.

“Darling Uncle John, there you are!” cried the plump young woman called Amanda, leaping to her feet and throwing her arms around Steed before Elizabeth, who had also got up, could do so. “We all sobbed our eyes out when Mamma broke the news of your death.”

Steed embraced and kissed his nieces, apologizing for not having greeted them sooner. “Vicar is seeing to my resurrection, as it were,” he smiled, “and wished to speak to me concerning that unfortunate and all-too-premature grave embellishing St. Swithin’s churchyard. I see you’ve both met Mrs. Peel.”

He turned to Emma, who had also risen. “My dear, may I present you to the Reverend Christopher Tucker, Vicar of St. Swithin’s and optimistic guardian of my errant family’s immortal souls. Vicar, Mrs. Emma Peel.”

Emma and the vicar cordially shook hands and exchanged pleasant words as more of Steed’s relatives slowly filtered into the room filling the air with animated conversation. “I baptised young John,” the vicar was telling Emma, “not a week after I got the living at St. Swithin’s. Indeed, his was the very first christening I celebrated in my new parish. A most placid infant. Not a peep out of him the

entire ceremony.”

“The same can be said of him at his funeral,” said Emma dryly.

Mr. Tucker looked from Emma to Steed, then back at Emma, suddenly remembering where he had seen her before. A little smile formed on his lips. *Well, well, well* . . . He glanced at Steed out of the corner of his eye. *Why, you young devil* . . .

“I remember feeling quite distressed by the fact that, while I had the honour of christening John, and the duty of burying John, I never had the pleasure of marrying John,” said the vicar. “Ah, I see the duke has come into the room. I must have a word with His Grace about tomorrow’s lesson . . .” Excusing himself, Mr. Tucker crossed the room.

“And *I* must have a word with *you* later,” Steed said to Emma, glancing about circumspectly.

“Why later? Now’s as good a time as any.”

“Not here. It’s too . . . public. And I’m about to be besieged by the rest of my kin—”

“Well, it *is* your first post-mortem public appearance.” She gave him a smile. “Anyway, what’s all the mystery? Can’t you just whisper whatever it is in my ear?”

“No, that wouldn’t do at all.” He saw that Helena had come into the room. “Do excuse me, m’dear.”

She watched, amused, as Steed ran the gauntlet of kinfolk, all greeting him with uniform delight and, on the part of the females, prolific hugs and kisses, before he reached his sister, who thankfully stood all by herself.

“Are Emma and I in the same two rooms as before?” Steed whispered to Helena.

“No, I instructed Hopkins to make up the Blue Apartment for you. You know, on the top storey. Your things have already been brought up there.”

“Oh.”

Helena eyed her brother slyly. “Emma is in the Primrose Chamber. Directly below you.”

“What was wrong with the other two rooms?”

“They are already occupied.”

“Thanks a lot. . .”

“Where there’s a will, Toady . . .”

Steed gave her a dark look.

“You’re resourceful, John—”

“I’m also discreet, particularly when a lady’s honour is involved.”

“Of course you are, dear.”

“You’re a right sadist, you are, d’you know that?”

“*Espérance, mon vieux, espérance—et courage,*” she uttered in a rich, velvety voice. “I’ll all fall pat, you’ll see.” Turning to the rest of the assembly, Helena announced, “Let’s all retire to our rooms, change into our glad rags, and reconvene here in an hour for drinks.”

The duke ambled up to Steed and Helena. “With that broken arm of yours, John, you’ll have the devil of a time with your studs and your tie.”

Steed looked daggers at his sister. “Had Mrs. Peel been more conveniently situated, she could have lent a hand—”

“Robinson has kindly volunteered to act as your batman for the occasion,” the duke said. He held his arm out to Helena. “Shall we?”

The duke and duchess left the room, and were followed in short order by the rest of the family.

Steed fell into step with Emma as she neared. “Meet me in the gunroom in forty-five minutes,” he muttered in her ear.

“All right.”

Forty minutes later Steed, minus stick, was walking about the dimly lit gunroom, looking without his customary interest at the various implements of death displayed on the walls and in cases. For the fifth time in as many minutes he patted his left coat pocket, and then took out his watch to check the time.

A wall clock ticked quietly in a dark corner of the room.

Precisely on the stroke of the quarter-hour Emma entered the room, softly shutting the door behind her.

Steed wheeled about. “Emma—”

“Where’s that shillelagh of yours?” she asked, coming up to him.

“Never mind that—”

“Should you be limping about without it?”

“I’m not *that* decrepit—”

“You’re not at all decrepit,” she said, making a minor adjustment to the white silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. “Now, then, what was it you couldn’t whisper in my ear earlier?” He cleared his throat. “I’d’ve preferred a less martial setting,” he began, his hand straying to his left coat pocket, “but I couldn’t think of any room less likely to be invaded than this one.” He paused, admiring Emma. She was dressed in a sleeveless gown of dark-green velvet, a brocade pelisse in shades of burgundy, black and gold thrown over her shoulders. The diamond and emerald pendant sparkling on her bosom he recognized as a Christmas present he had once given her. “How especially lovely you look tonight,” he murmured. “The setting should be ruins, and moonlight, and owls, not an armoury—” He cleared his throat once more. “Emma, my love, I would like to ask you— That is, would you—”

Emma’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Ooh, I’d *love* a fag—but should we be smoking in a powder magazine?”

“Odd’s bodikins, madam, I am not offering you a *cigarette*—”

Before Steed could continue, the door to the gunroom flew open and a young man dressed in the resplendent parade uniform of a hussar burst in, followed by three eager-faced boys. The young hussar threw a switch on the wall, bathing the room in brilliant light, then marched the boys toward a long, low case opposite the doorway. “Come along, then, Luke, Matthew, Mark—” He stopped, and pivoted in Steed and Emma’s direction. “U.J.? Is that you?” he cried, bounding up to Steed, who had self-consciously moved a couple of feet away from Emma. “Oh, I say, I’m most awfully sorry,” he said,

seeing Steed's black look. "I didn't realize— Interrupting something, am I?" He turned to Emma. "A thousand pardons, dear lady," he said with an elegant bow.

"Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel." She extended her hand.

He drew himself up to his full height, and, taking Emma's hand, bowed once more. "First Lieutenant John Maximilian Fitzwilliam Steed De Burgh, 11th Hussars, at your service, Mrs. Peel."

"That's quite a mouthful," she said, regarding the tall young officer with interest. With his dark wavy hair, piercing blue eyes, and rich baritone voice, he was the likeness, she imagined, of John Steed twenty years ago. "What may I call you?"

"What everyone else in the family calls me," he grinned. "Johnny." He glanced at Steed. "So as not to be confused with U.J.—er, Uncle John—who I'm told hasn't gone by that particular variant of our shared Christian name since his boyhood. Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Peel."

The three little boys crept nearer.

"Which one of you is which?" asked Emma, bending down to shake hands with each of the boys.

"I'm Matthew, the eldest," said the brown-haired, freckle-faced lad with the cowlick, shaking Emma's hand solemnly. "That's Mark, and of course that leaves young Luke, here." Mark and Luke each stepped up, like soldiers about to be decorated by the Queen herself, and shook Emma's hand with gravity.

"Well, now that we have all four evangelists here, can the twelve apostles be far behind?" growled Steed. He fixed Johnny with a glare. "Don't you think your kit's a bit much for a mere family bean fest?"

"It is a bit, I admit," affably agreed Johnny, "but you know the children fancy it, rather." He whirled about gracefully, his pelisse flying. "Little Clara calls me her Nutcracker, don't you know. And one must *never* disappoint the ladies."

"Indeed not," Emma said with a glance at the broody Steed. "Would you like a word with your uncle?"

"His uncle wouldn't like that at all," muttered Steed.

"Ah, well, actually, I brought the lads in to show them great-great-grandfather Fitzwilliam's presentation sabre." Johnny turned his expressive eyes back on Emma. "Fitzwilliam was the colonel of my regiment in his day."

The door swung open once again, admitting the duke, his four daughters and their husbands, the vicar, and the little girl who had earlier been playing with Clara. Emma tapped Steed on the shoulder. "There's your twelve apostles," she said with a grin.

"Eleven. One hopes that Judas—masquerading in drag as Helena—has already hanged himself."

The duke was saying, as he marched up to one of the gun cabinets, "Bought these two Purdeys from old Bingo, don't you know, a few weeks ago. I've been covetin' 'em for years, but Bingo, obstinate ass that he is, refused to sell 'em. Sheer bloody-mindedness, of course. The man couldn't hit a grouse

with a twelve-bore at ten feet if his life depended on it. The Countess finally talked him into partin' with 'em, and for a most reasonable sum, bless 'er."

"Mrs. Peel—" Steed started to say, only to be interrupted by Young Johnny. "I say, U.J., I had a good look at that Bentley of yours when I arrived. You know, if you ever want to get rid of the old girl, let me know. I promise I'll take good care of her."

"That car now belongs to Mrs. Peel."

Johnny's eyes widened. "Oh? Oh! I see." He stole a glance at Emma. *Must be one corker of a woman if she likes guns and swords and antique motorcars.* He couldn't help reflecting sadly on the fact that all of the young ladies of his acquaintance didn't give a toss about old cars and old weapons.

Emma's hand brushed Steed's. "I think I'll join the others for drinks," she said to him. "His Grace and the troops appear to be in orderly retreat to the sitting room." She smiled winningly at Johnny. "He's all yours. For now."

"Morning room, fifteen minutes," Steed whispered in her ear.

Johnny's eyes never left Emma as she walked out of the room. "*Goddess, excellently bright,*" he sighed, and turned to his uncle. "Where did you ever find that divine creature?" he asked, wishing he were at least ten years older than he was.

"We ran into each other one day in 'Town, long ago. We're very old friends."

"She's hardly what I would describe as 'old,'" said Johnny, putting his arm around Steed's shoulders. "You two make a very handsome couple. Ever thought of poppin' the old question to her, U.J.?"

"Never crossed my mind," Steed sarcastically replied. "But what a jolly good idea." He tousled the head of little Luke, who stood closest to him. "Right, shall we show these young gentlemen the sabre?"

Some twenty minutes later Steed, cursing his injured leg for slowing his progress, made his way to the morning room. Emma was already there, examining the porcelain figurines displayed in a glass-fronted étagère.

"Well, so much for a private word with you in the gunroom . . ." said Steed, limping toward her. "My nephew can be rather vexing at times."

"A chip off the old engine-blockhead, your Young Johnny," she grinned. "If you want your Bentley back, I shan't mind."

"Oh, damn the Bentley—"

"Really, darling, how *can* you speak of your beloved like that?"

"I haven't asked you here to chat about motorcars," he said impatiently.

"I'm sorry, I'll try to be serious. You don't look to be in the mood for silliness."

"You're right, I'm not." He stood before her. "Every time I come to this house I feel as though I'm in Piccadilly Circus at high noon. I thought about delaying this to a more auspicious time and place, but I can't. I've delayed far too long as it is."

"Delayed what?"

Once more his hand dropped to his coat pocket. “I— That is, will you— ” He cleared his throat. “Emma. My dearest. Will you do me the honour of—”

“Ah, Mr. Steed, at last I’ve found you!” An elderly, bald, bespectacled man shuffled into the room.

Steed and Emma were again compelled to draw apart. “Odd’s teeth,” muttered Steed. “*Now* what?” He peered at the intruder. “Winkle! What are *you* doing here?”

“Forgive the interruption, Mr. Steed, madam,” said the man, who was the Winkle of Snodgrass, Tupman and Winkle. “The felicitous news of your, ah, vitality, sir, and of your imminent arrival at Langbourne was of course communicated to me by Mr. Snodgrass, and I then arranged to pay a call on you here, on my way to my daughter’s for the Christmas holiday. Mr. Snodgrass has drawn up the papers needed to restore to you your property, et cetera and so forth, and it will only take a few minutes for me to review them with you and obtain your signature where required.”

Steed groaned. *My life is disintegrating into a French farce . . .*

“His Grace has generously permitted us the use of his study. If I might prevail upon you to spare me half an hour, at most?”

“Oh, very well . . .”

“Excellent. Mr. Snodgrass and I thought to spare you an unnecessary trip to London, as well as any attendant delays. This way, the papers can be posted right after Boxing Day, and without the necessity of further discommoding you.”

“The terrace, in thirty minutes,” Steed uttered through clenched teeth to Emma before leaving the room with Mr. Winkle.

Half an hour later, Emma was strolling briskly up and down the terrace. The night promised to be very cold, she thought with a shiver, perhaps even bringing a dusting of snow on the morrow, Christmas Day. She glanced in the direction of the house. All the ground floor lights were on, warm and inviting, and soon it would be time to go in to dinner. She hoped Steed would turn up soon, so she could drag him back indoors and in front of a blazing fire.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Emma. That tedious old fart Winkle had to explain everything to me *twice*.” Steed walked slowly up to her, his limp more pronounced than before.

“Let’s go back in the house, darling, it’s growing quite chilly out—”

He looked around. They were alone. Everyone else was apparently safely indoors. *At last*. “In a minute.” He put his sound arm about her. “That better?”

“Yes, but it would be even better if we—”

Steed wasn’t going to waste any more time. “Emma,” he said, “will you—”

“Fear no more, Princess Tiger Lily, for we have come to rescue you!” cried a high-pitched voice behind Steed. Young Matthew, now wearing a battered tricorne and eye patch, with the steel claws of a garden weeder protruding from the end of his left coat sleeve, leapt over the terrace wall. Next came Mark and Luke, gnashing their teeth and menacingly brandishing small sticks. Two squealing little girls—Clara and her cousin Fiona—comprised the rear guard, and now came tumbling over the wall,

shrieking like banshees. “Release the fair princess, Bluebeard,” Matthew barked fiercely at Steed, “and draw your sword, you blackguard!”

“Zounds!” thundered Steed, letting go of Emma and turning to face his attackers. “Avast, you mutinous dogs, afore I have ye flogged, aaarrgh!”

Emma was laughing so hard that tears rolled down her cheeks.

Matthew’s one visible eye flashed, and he turned to his companions. “Repel boarders, Smee!” Mark shook his stick with menace as Luke struggled to inspire terror with his much smaller weapon. The girls, meanwhile, shook their fists at Steed while casting pitying looks at Emma. “Abandon ship!” cried Matthew, and all four children scampered off, yelling wildly.

“Young Dead-Eye there is destined to become First Sea Lord,” sputtered Emma, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I fail to see what’s so funny. I can’t be alone with you for ten seconds before half a dozen of my damned relations—” From the house came the deep metallic resonance of a gong. “What I’ve been *trying* to say to you—”

“I think we’re being summoned to dinner,” broke in Emma.

“Blast dinner! Just let me have two uninterrupted minutes alone with you—” He reached for his pocket.

Emma, however, took him by the arm. “It can keep a while longer, darling. We must go in. Bad form to keep a duke waiting.”

“Emma—”

She steered him towards the house. “Come along, Mr. Toad.”

Steed’s eyes flashed. “*What* did you just call me?”

“You heard.”

“Mrs. Peel—”

“*Poop, poop, poop.*”

“Sdeath! I get no respect from my family, Helena persists in treating me like a child, and now *you*—”

“Oh, stop making such a fuss—”

“She *promised* me she wouldn’t tell you—”

“She didn’t.”

“Then how—”

“I overheard her call you that.”

“I expect you wormed out of her how I came by that ridiculous nickname?”

“I *asked* her, yes—and she told me.”

“Mrs. Peel—”

“Here, take my arm, Long John,” said Emma with exaggerated solicitude. “You *are* a bit wobbly on that peg leg of yours. . .”

46.

Steed and Emma stole through the empty sitting room to the hall, pausing in the doorway just long enough to catch their breath before slipping in behind the last of the stragglers.

Christmas Eve dinner at Langbourne was not a formal affair, notwithstanding the fact that dinner dress was *de rigueur* for all save the children. Other than the duke and duchess more or less leading the way, no protocol attached to the family's procession into the dining room. Indeed, the scene in the hall was one of genial chaos, with children hastily being stripped of their disguises (there was already a small pile of old tunics, hats, toys, and the odd garden implement next to the main staircase) and herded toward their respective parents. Merry chatter and laughter echoed everywhere, mingling with the yaps, yelps, and clackety-clack of claws on hardwood when several dogs of varying shapes and sizes managed to escape their sequestration in the library and shoot through the hall with unrestrained canine exuberance.

"Dogs! Dogs!" cried Margaret, the duke and duchess's oldest daughter, chasing after the animals. She was having some trouble keeping up with them, hindered as she was by her gown and high-heeled pumps. Married to a Scottish laird, Margaret was the tweeds-and-brogues breed of female who loved horses, dogs, and children and was far more at home astride one of her hunters or marching across a moor on a grouse shoot than tripping about on parquet floors, but her sense of humour never left her and she was enjoying a hearty laugh as she vainly strove to corral the escapees. "You anarchists," she called after two whippets who darted between Steed and Emma. "Oh, no, you don't, Delilah, *you're* not going anywhere," she said, managing to grab the excited Jack Russell bitch by her collar in time to prevent the animal bowling into Steed. At the commotion, the others turned to see what was going on. Margaret now glanced up at her uncle and Emma, a cheerful grin on her face. "I told Mamma to lock the beasts in the stables for the evening, but she wouldn't hear of it. I do hope they haven't damaged your gown, Mrs. Peel."

"The gown is unscathed, and will live to be worn another day," Emma smiled.

Margaret straightened up, still hanging on to the bouncing Delilah. By now everyone else had closed in. She handed over the dog to a manservant who appeared carrying several leashes, then turned to her parents, who had come up beside her. "I say, what with all the fuss, seems U.J. and Mrs. Peel have overlooked something," she said, with an upward glance.

"Indeed," said the duchess.

Steed and Emma looked at each other, then back at the duke, the duchess, and Margaret.

"Ancient custom, said to predate Christianity, but now a well-known and I dare say quite popular Christmas tradition," explained the duke, his eyes twinkling.

The duke's hint was not wasted on Emma. She gently elbowed Steed in the ribs, then pointed an index finger upwards.

Margaret's husband, David MacGregor, a large fierce-looking man clad in Highland dress, now stepped forward. Only his appearance was daunting, however, and it was utterly belied by his merry

disposition. “Och, give the bonnie lassie a kiss, you daftie, or by heaven I’ll kiss her maself!” he exclaimed.

“Legend has it that a kiss under the mistletoe,” the duke said just as Steed obliged by giving Emma a chaste little peck on the cheek, “inevitably leads to marriage.”

“That’s no’ a kiss, man,” David groaned. “Our wee cat laps ditchwater with greater enthusiasm.”

“The very first time you kissed me was beneath some mistletoe, remember?” Emma whispered to Steed, putting her hands on his shoulders.

“I’ll never forget,” he murmured.

She proceeded to give him an unhurried kiss to the lips.

Unable to manage a proper embrace, Steed could only put his uninjured arm about Emma’s waist, but he did manage to kiss her with much more panache this time round.

“Aye, that’s better,” said David.

“I don’t wish to seem the wet blanket,” said the duke, hooking his arm through the duchess’s, “but the servants will be most put out if we don’t go in to dinner directly.”

Steed took Emma by the hand, and all followed the duke and duchess in a cacophony of laughter and chatter.

The dining room was freshly decorated with holly, ivy, and fragrant spruce, and an enormous Yule log crackled in the fireplace. The brilliantly polished mahogany table was set with the festive Victorian china service, crystal wineglasses, and silverware that were deployed once a year for the Christmas season. Gleaming silver candelabra, so shiny they looked new-minted, were placed at equal intervals along the table, their candles casting a warm, intimate glow on the place settings.

“Any more mistletoe anywhere?” Emma murmured to Steed as they passed through the doors.

“Alas, no. This’ll have to do for now,” he said, raising her hand to his lips.

Everyone soon found his place at table, and sat in eager, animated anticipation of the arrival on covered silver platters of stuffed goose and turkey; steaming dishes heaped with cooked vegetables and tubers; and plates of assorted delicacies to accompany the repast. Steed was pleased to find that he and Emma were seated side by side at the end of the table customarily presided over by the duchess, with Emma to his left and his youngest niece, Deborah, to his immediate right.

Steed leaned back in his chair, smiling at his niece. Dark-blond, blue-eyed, and well-proportioned, Deborah was nothing short of beautiful. This evening, she was dressed and coiffed in a style mimicking the fashion of the early nineteenth century, to emphasise her classical beauty. Had she lived during the Regency, she would have been famous for that beauty, doubtless painted more than once by Sir Thomas Lawrence and perhaps even by Ingres.

“Stare at her udders much longer and I’ll go off my feed,” Emma said dryly to Steed. “Sometimes I wonder what you ever saw in me,” she added, glancing at her own décolletage.

He swivelled round to face her. “Your beautiful brown eyes,” he replied, looking into them, “your chestnut tresses, your endless legs—” He found her hand again. “What about me?”

“Your lily lips, your cherry nose, your yellow cowslip cheeks,” she sighed, batting her eyes and leaning in closer to him. “Oh, and your bum.”

“*Really*, Mrs. Peel,” he muttered, letting go of her hand.

Emma gave him a dazzling smile. “*Really*, Mr. Steed. It’s a very nice one.”

Dinner was served, and the sounds of twenty voices mingled with the clatter of silverware on china and the ring of crystal against crystal as everyone launched into the abundant food and drink as enthusiastically as they did into all the conversations.

At the end of the table to Emma’s left sat Young Johnny, and it wasn’t long before she turned her eyes on him, struck by the fact that he behaved and spoke so like his uncle that one might have mistaken the two men for father and son.

Young Deborah, recently married, understandably paid a good deal of attention to her husband, seated to her right, but not before she devoted some time to her “poor U.J.,” casting pitying glances at his slung broken arm and solicitously cutting up his food with an uninterrupted stream of sympathetic comments, much to Steed’s suppressed annoyance.

Steed ended up spending the better part of dinner chatting across the table with Margaret; the vicar, who possessed a fund of equine knowledge unusual in a man of his calling; and Helena, who at the moment was interested primarily in observing group dynamics.

During a lull in the conversation, Emma turned back to Steed. “Eat your vegetables,” she said, watching him pick half-heartedly at the last bits of food on his plate.

“You’re paying a lot of attention to my nephew this evening,” he said, pushing his peas about with his fork.

“And why not?” She patted his arm. “Think of it as my getting to know *you* better. You were exactly like him, weren’t you, when you were his age—”

“Not as good-looking,” he muttered sourly.

“Bollocks,” she whispered, brushing his cheek with her lips.

“I wish *I* could have you all to myself—”

“You can’t. It’s a dinner party. And the night is still young.”

“The night may be young, but *I’m* not . . .”

“Don’t pout. We’ll have plenty of time to ourselves later.”

“You mean next week,” he said in a sulky tone of voice.

“Sooner than that. Be patient.”

“I’ve been the soul of patience all day long—”

“So you have, my love,” said Emma, covering his hand with hers and giving it a tender squeeze. “And you can soldier on for a couple more hours. Now finish your peas. And do try to enjoy yourself. I certainly am.” She turned back to Young Johnny, who was recounting a highly humorous anecdote that brought forth delighted laughter from everyone within earshot.

Damnation. Steed looked at Margaret, who had been watching them, and recognized the amused little familial sparkle in her eyes. Time to pre-empt any amused little familial comment she might at any

moment make. “Acquire any good horseflesh lately, Maggie m’dear?” he asked in a hearty, country-squire manner. “And how’s that hunter of yours, what’s the chap called, the dapple grey?”

The servants began clearing the table for service of the dessert and coffee.

Deborah broke off her tête-à-tête with her husband and turned to Steed. “I’m so sorry you couldn’t be at our wedding, Uncle John,” she said, casting her languid cornflower eyes on him. “We all missed you dreadfully.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world had I any choice in the matter.”

“It was a *lovely* wedding. George and I are so very happy.” The good-natured George smiled and made a noise that signified contented concurrence.

Steed listened politely to his niece rabbit on about her wedding, the honeymoon in Italy, the joys of marriage . . .

“I’m delighted for you both,” he smiled, trying to conceal his irritation. He cast a glance in Emma’s direction. She was still engrossed in Young Johnny, damn the young rascal. “Any chance of a discreet word or two in your ear?” he quietly asked, turning to her. “Surely that whelp has exhausted his juvenile fund of anecdotes—”

“Oh, do hush, John,” said Emma. “He’s about to tell us what happened when the goat escaped from the dressing-room.” She turned back for the rest of Johnny’s story.

Damnation, Steed thought blackly, wondering how some damn’ fool story about a damn’ goat in a damn’ dressing-room could be so damn’ fascinating.

“You’re the only one in the family who’s still unwed,” prattled Deborah, leaning in to Steed, “and you *so* very handsome and charming. There *must* be simply *legions* of women—”

He took a deep breath. The girl wouldn’t shut up. *If only someone would break some china, or some wind . . . If only I could speak to Emma for just two minutes together, alone and without interruptions . . .*

“I think that’s your uncle’s affair, don’t you?” drawled Helena, whose personal radar, constantly rotating and radiating, now honed in on her youngest child.

Nice choice of word, Nell. Steed drummed his fingers on his thigh, wishing intensely for dinner to be over.

“Marriage is wonderful—” Deborah cast an adoring eye at her smiling husband.

Helena coughed discreetly. “My dear child—”

Deborah, however, paid her parent no heed. “—when it’s to the right person.” She smiled coyly at Steed, her eyes flitting for an instant to Emma before melting back into her uncle’s. “Surely you’ve found the right person by now.”

“Perhaps I have,” he said, a little sharply, averting his eyes and staring at the candelabrum in front of him.

The girl’s eyes sparkled. “Do tell!”

“There’s nothing *to* tell,” he said, tempering his tone as he struggled to regain his composure. Unconsciously he flicked a glance in Emma’s direction again.

Deborah missed nothing, and was not to be silenced so easily. “Out with it, Uncle John, you *are*

getting married, aren't you!"

"How do I know she'll marry me if I haven't even asked her?"

As sometimes happens at human gatherings, the conversation suddenly ceases and the entire company fall quiet for no apparent reason. According to legend, this occurs when an angel flies by. So it was that, at the precise moment Steed uttered his reply to Deborah, a wayward angel chanced to detour through Langbourne's dining room.

Emma was now looking at Steed, though he was far too self-conscious to notice. *Dear silly old Toad, can you seriously doubt my answer?* she thought, filled with endless affection for him.

By now everyone else's eyes were on Steed, and more than one glance fell on Emma as well.

With a broad upward sweep of her arm, Emma put the back of her hand to her forehead and fell back in her chair. "*And whispering, I will ne'er consent*," she declaimed in a stage whisper clearly audible to all, pausing only briefly to savour everyone's amused expression before leaning in to Steed and adding dramatically, "*consented*." She emphasised the full stop with a kiss to his flushed cheek.

"*Love, and a cough, cannot be hid*," the duke urbanely interjected, getting to his feet. "Right, everyone. Cigars and booze in the library, for any and all who want 'em."

Margaret and Helena wasted no time in getting up and heading for the doors. They were soon followed by several of the men.

"Emma—" Steed urgently whispered in her ear as he got to his feet, "a word—"

"I rather fancy a colorado perfecto after that marvellous dinner, darling," she smiled, rising and hooking her arm through his, "with, I think, an Islay malt, neat."

47.

The Blue Apartment comprised a bedroom, dressing room, bathroom, and sitting room, and took up the entire top floor of the east wing. The east wing's interior, completely rebuilt in the eighteenth century following a disastrous fire, was unmistakably Georgian in every detail, with one notable exception: the late-Elizabethan bed in the Blue Apartment's bedroom. Originally the bed had been in the state bedroom on the second floor of the main house, but when that part of Langbourne underwent renovations in the early nineteenth century, the bed was moved to the Blue Apartment at the behest of its occupant, the then-duke's eldest son, reputedly a man of libertine inclinations and eccentric tastes. The bedstead, with its ornately carved oak posts, headpiece and tester, and richly embroidered midnight-blue wrought satin curtains faced with gold lace, was magnificent. King Charles II had visited Langbourne early in the Restoration, and had entertained a particular favourite of his, Lady Eloise de Burgh, in that very bed which Steed was now sourly contemplating as he tugged at one end of his bow tie.

All of his attempts to spirit Emma away from his family to some unpeopled locus, if only for a few minutes, had been doomed to failure. The whole clan seemed hell-bent on keeping their collective beady eyes on them both the entire day . . . Even Mr. Buzzfuzz, discovered after dinner napping on a Chippendale chair in a corner of the library, kept opening one green eye and fixing it on Steed and Emma every time they came within his orbit.

Steed flung aside the bedcovers, only to fling them back. Emma was in the room one floor below, and there was no chance . . . Too many overly-inquisitive and annoyingly restless people running loose in the house. By the time they all settled down for the night, Emma would be fast asleep, and he would have no hope of a discreet rendezvous with her.

Steed fished his cigarette case out of his pocket before peeling off his arm sling and dinner jacket and tossing them on the bed. He picked up a small flask of brandy from the dresser, then stalked out of the bedroom into the sitting room, where he threw himself into an armchair by the fire. He lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply, and followed with a long pull on the flask. After his sharp and ill-advised response to Deborah, everyone at the dinner table easily concluded that he and Emma had not reached what in his grandmother's day would have been called an "understanding." To be sure, Emma did her best to paper over his *faux pas*, but he was humiliated nonetheless by having embarrassed her so roundly. "Badly done, old boy, *badly* done," he said angrily, flinging his cigarette into the fire.

He felt a pair of hands on his shoulders, and very nearly flew out of his chair.

"How now, my lord?" Emma's voice came from behind him, gentle and caressing.

Steed leapt to his feet and wheeled about, grimacing when his leg reminded him with a sharp pain of his injury.

She stood before him, still dressed in her evening gown and pelisse. Illuminated only by the firelight, she appeared unearthly, a figure in a dream. Steed blinked. "What—? I mean, how—?"

"I simply popped up the stairs."

“But the door’s over there—” he said, glancing at it. It was a good twenty feet away. “You couldn’t have—”

“Here, I’ll show you.” She led him to the wall to the right of the fireplace, just behind where he had been sitting, and pressed one of the panels. It opened to reveal a narrow spiral stone stair leading downward.

“What the devil—”

“It connects to my bedchamber.” She looked at him, a crooked little smile forming on her lips. “Don’t tell me you of all people didn’t know.”

“How the hell would I?” he answered, his annoyance with Helena mounting by the second. “Damn that sister of mine, playing silly buggers with me ever since I was a boy—”

“Now calm down—”

“I don’t need help making a fool of myself—as I have repeatedly and conclusively demonstrated to you—”

“Calm down.” Emma reknotted his tie. “Surely you know about the Blue Apartment—” She stepped back to make sure the tie was straight.

“All I know is that the Viscount What’s-’is-Name, who lived here during the Regency, was a rake, and that the enormous bed in there was supposedly slept in by King Charles, *circa* 1664.”

“When he wasn’t interfering with the dairy maids and the farmers’ daughters, the randy Viscount conducted a secret affair with a certain lady of quality.”

“Bully for him. But what on earth has that got to do with—?”

“How do you think the Viscount managed to pleasure his mistress when she visited, if she was lodged discreetly in a room one floor below?” Emma made a tiny adjustment to his tie. “There. Put your jacket back on.”

Steed coughed. “Mrs. Peel . . .”

She dropped him a deep curtsy. “My lord,” she said demurely, then broke into laughter. “Stop pretending to be shocked. You’ve spent all evening trying to think of a way to be alone with me tonight.”

“I have, but not for the reason *you* think,” he replied, struggling to put on his jacket.

“Liar,” said Emma with a deep chuckle. She took his arm.

“If that’s what you think, why are you asking me to get dressed?”

“You’ll see.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

They left Steed’s room unobserved. “My dear, it is getting rather late,” he said as they descended the stairs to the hall.

“Shh! I think our overcoats are in here,” she whispered, leading him to a narrow and nearly invisible door near the foot of the stairs.

“Overcoats?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s so cold.”

“All the more reason for you to put this on,” she said, handing him his topcoat before pulling out her own coat.

After donning his coat, Steed took Emma’s from her hands and did his best to hold it for her. “Do you mind telling me what you’re up to?”

“Be patient.”

They stole out of the house. “I can’t give you any ruins,” Emma said once they were outdoors, “and I don’t know if there are any owls out and about, but there is a lovely moon in a brilliantly clear sky tonight. Look.”

Steed lifted his head to see a nearly full moon bathing Langbourne’s grounds in pale light.

“Let’s go down to the lake,” she said softly. “It’ll be breathtaking by moonlight.”

They skirted the house and walked through the gardens to the gravel walkway that would take them to the hourglass-shaped lake. The view did indeed take Steed’s breath away. Trees and bushes in the far distance stood silhouetted against a black-velvet sky dotted with countless stars that sparkled like diamonds. The arched brick bridge spanning the lake at its narrow waist now appeared no more substantial than a patchwork of shadow and moonlight hovering ghostlike in the air. In the foreground, weeping willows along the lakeshore bent in supplication toward the water, while the moon’s reflection shimmered like quicksilver on the lake’s still surface. But not even the cold, unearthly beauty of this winter landscape could distract Steed from the very warm and very real beauty of the woman walking arm in arm with him along the lake’s edge toward the bridge.

“It’s called ‘Duke’s Water,’” said Steed, drawing her closer to him, against the chill of the night air. “A corruption of ‘Tewke’s Water’, I believe.”

“That’s what the duke told me,” she said. “He also told me that the original park, with its formal gardens, was completely redone in the eighteenth century by none other than Capability Brown.”

“The Water was Brown’s idea, formed from a widening in the stream—the ‘lang bourne’—that gives this house its name.”

They were on the bridge now, and stopped to look out across the moonlit water. “But I didn’t drag you out here just for the scenery or for a history lesson,” said Emma.

“Then why did you?”

“To give you the opportunity to ask me properly.”

“Ask you what?”

She smiled. “What you’ve been trying to ask me ever since you got here this afternoon, you goose.”

He looked out over the lake and into the distance. “Made a proper pig’s dinner of it, didn’t I?” he said, finding a pebble on the bridge parapet and flinging it into the water.

“Hardly.” She took his hand in both of hers. “Your family never gave you the chance, that’s all.”

“And then to embarrass you like that at dinner—”

“*You* were the one squirming under Deborah’s relentless inquisition, not I,” laughed Emma, adding affectionately, “Nothing you might say or do could ever embarrass me.”

Steed kissed her cheek. “My dear,” he began, then cleared his throat. “I’ve never done this before, you know.”

“Poor Toad, about to embark on the most terrifying journey of his life,” she said, squeezing his fingers. “Just close your eyes, darling, and think of England.”

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more . . . “I’d rather keep them wide open, and I’d much rather think of you,” he replied, looking into her eyes. He cleared his throat again. “I, er, understand that one is expected, at this juncture, to get down on bended knee—”

“That would be unwise, under the circumstances.”

“It would also be impossible, under the circumstances. I’d only end up on that bum of mine—”

“—and most certainly come a-crupper,” Emma said with a perfectly straight face, giving a couple of pats to the *locus in quo*.

He drew her to him. “Emma, my darling— Sorry, this damned broken arm makes things damned awkward—”

She put her arms around him. “Not *that* awkward,” she replied, with a kiss to the tip of his nose.

“I have always admired you for your intelligence, your wit, your honesty, your fidelity—and it took me no time at all to fall in love you. I do love you, with every fibre of my being. Every time I look into your eyes I look into your soul, and I love you all the more.”

Emma pressed her cheek to his. “You’ll have me in tears any moment now—”

“Do you love me, Emma?”

“Of course I love you, you silly old Toad. You, and only you.”

He took a couple of steps backward. “Warts and all?”

“Warts, scars, broken bones, wonky legs, and all.” She held her arms out to him.

“Then *grow old with me, the best is yet to be*,” he murmured, easing once more into her embrace and kissing her. “Will it please you to marry me, Mrs. Peel?”

“Yes, Mr. Steed,” she answered, closing her eyes, “yes, it will. Mightily.”

They stood holding each other for some time, neither saying a word. “Emma, my dear,” Steed eventually said, “I don’t wish to seem unappreciative, but it *is* rather cold out here—”

“Poor dear, what *was* I thinking, dragging you and that bad leg of yours out here in the dead of a December night?”

“Well, it *is* very romantic . . .”

“So is the cosy fire in your apartment,” she said, linking arms with him. “Come on—”

“Never mind the Merry Monarch’s couch,” he murmured, giving her another tender kiss.

“Back to the house with you—”

“Right. It’s far too cold and dark out here for the one thing I have yet to do . . .”

“—and back in front of that fire, or you won’t be doing *anything*.”

He chuckled. “Yes, dear.”

“And where’s that sling of yours? You didn’t bring it along, did you? Well, then, hook your thumb in your coat, take the weight off that broken arm—”

“Yes, dear,” he laughed, pulling her closer and giving her a noisy smack of a kiss on the cheek.

By the time they reached the house and nonchalantly strolled into the hall, everyone else in the house had retired and they were able to return to the Blue Apartment unobserved.

The fireplace in the sitting room blazed with a merry fire. “Sit down and warm yourself,” said Emma, helping him remove his overcoat before taking hers off. She tossed the coats over the back of the settee.

“In a minute . . .” said Steed, spotting the silver tray on the table between the two armchairs standing in front of the fire. The tray bore two sparkling crystal champagne flutes, a single white carnation between them; and a silver ice bucket with a bottle of champagne protruding from it, its neck wrapped in a white linen napkin. Propped up against the bucket was a small square envelope.

He picked up the envelope and took out the note that was inside.

Emma came up to him. “Who’s it from?”

“Guess. ‘About bloody time, and all, Toad,’” he read. “‘The carnation’s a bit sickly, I grant you, but it’s the best the greenhouse had to offer. The champers, on the other hand, is top drawer. Too good for you, but it’s the *least* we could do for the long-suffering Emma.’”

Emma burst into laughter.

“I don’t find Helena amusing *at all*,” muttered Steed, patting his pockets.

“Nevertheless you love her,” said Emma, “as much as she loves you. So, are you going to open that bottle now, or not?”

“Not yet.”

“Ah, I’m to be the even longer-suffering Emma, am I?” she grinned, picking up the carnation and pinching off its stem. She inserted the flower into Steed’s buttonhole. “There,” she said, placing her palms on his lapels. “*Very* dashing.” She kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Before I uncork the bottle . . .” He reached into his coat pocket and produced a small wooden box, opening it to reveal a diamond solitaire set in an exquisitely wrought yellow-gold setting. “Grandmamma Steed left me this ring in her will. My grandfather brought the gem from South Africa and presented it to Grandmamma after she accepted him. I’d like to think optimism prompted her bequest, but more likely it was resignation on her part, as I was the only unmarried grandchild at the time of her death.” He paused, scowling at his cast-encased right arm. “*Damned* awkward,” he muttered, then looked back up at Emma. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to hold the box, and raise your left hand,” he said. “I’m sorry—”

Emma took the box from his hand.

“D’you like it?” he asked, taking the ring from the box and slipping it on her finger. “Not too

snug?”

“It’s beautiful, darling,” she murmured, the flawless brilliance of the stone and the superb craftsmanship of the setting taking her breath away.

“I believe it is customary for one’s fiancée to select the engagement ring,” he said, “and I would never presume to pick one out without you. However, I want you to have this gem.” He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Grandmamma had a very long and very happy marriage to my grandfather.”

“History has been known to repeat itself, from time to time,” said Emma, with a loving look at Steed.

“I’m counting on it,” he replied with a smile. “After Christmas, we’ll go to a jeweller and you can choose a setting you like for the stone.”

“It’s perfect just as it is,” she said, kissing him again. “I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“And now, my dear Mrs. Peel,” he said, picking up the bottle of champagne and glancing approvingly at the label, “I think a celebratory drink is in order.” He proceeded to uncork the bottle and pour the champagne, handing her one of the flutes before raising his own glass to her. “Days of ease, and nights of pleasure,” he said softly, his eyes meeting and holding hers as they drank the toast.

“You’re going to have to stop calling me ‘Mrs. Peel’, you know,” she said, sitting down in one of the armchairs.

“Shall we set a date?” said Steed, joining her in the other chair by the fire.

“We can just stop by the local Register Office as soon as we get the licence,” said Emma.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather we were married by Friar Tuck—”

“With you dressed up as Robin Hood and me as Maid Marian?” Emma sputtered, bursting into laughter. “And the Sheriff of Nottingham as your best man?”

“I meant the Reverend Mr. Tucker,” Steed said with a sheepish grin. “As he pointed out, he’s christened me and buried me; I think the least I can do is let ’im marry me.”

“I’ve already done the whole fancy church wedding bit—”

“But *I* haven’t. I’d like a few souvenir snaps of you on the church steps with *me*, of you standing with *me* in front of *our* wedding cake, of you toasting *me*—” He refilled their glasses with more champagne.

“And you shall have them, my love,” said Emma, thinking what an idiot she could be at times. “St. Swithin’s it shall be.”

“I’ll speak to Vicar about publishing the banns once we decide on the day,” said Steed, fishing out his cigarette case and lighter, “which of course cannot be any sooner than the day I get this damned cast off my arm. I want to be able to clip and kiss you properly on our wedding night.” He paused to light a cigarette. “There is one small matter, however—”

“What’s that?”

“How are we ever going to convince the denizens of St. Mary Meade— I’m assuming we will go on living in the neighbourhood— How are we ever going to get them to believe I’m not in fact ‘Mr.

Peel’—”

“—but my *other* husband, ‘Mr. Steed?’” she said with a laugh.

Steed groaned. “I’ve gone and ruined your reputation, arsing around masquerading as ‘Peel’—”

“Salvage operations will begin forthwith,” said Emma. “I have an idea.”

“You do?” he said, not sounding particularly reassured.

“We’ll circulate the story that an eccentric uncle of yours died recently and left you, his favourite nephew, a sizeable inheritance—but one which you will receive only upon legally adopting his surname, to wit, ‘Steed’.” She gave him a smug little smile. “What do you think of that, Johnnykins?”

Steed sipped his champagne thoughtfully. “By Jove, I think she’s got it,” he said to his glass before raising it to Emma.

“It’s getting late, darling,” said Emma presently, “and we do have to attend the Christmas service tomorrow. I’m afraid there’s no getting out of it—”

“Service isn’t until ten o’clock, and we can skip breakfast.”

She got up and came up behind him. “Still, I think it’s high time we both were a-bed,” she said, putting her hands on his shoulders.

“An’t please your ladyship,” he said, picking up the bottle as he rose from his chair. “We can finish the champagne in— Oh, blast, I can’t manage both the bottle and the glass—”

“Here, I’ll take the glasses.”

They walked into the bedroom. The bed had been turned down, a pair of pyjamas lay neatly folded on the pillows, and the fireplace burned even more brightly than the one in the sitting-room.

“Good heavens,” said a wide-eyed Emma, “that’s not a bed, it’s a ship of the line. Are we going to be piped aboard?”

“I shouldn’t think so,” said Steed, setting the bottle on the night table nearest to him. “You and I are the only crewmembers on watch tonight.”

“Let’s hope we’ll be able to find each other on that deck,” she murmured. “I’ll send up a flare if I lose you.”

“You shan’t lose me,” he grinned. “We’ll be clinging to each other below-decks.”

“I’ll just pop downstairs for my toothbrush, then, shall I?”

Steed was milling about in the bedroom when Emma reappeared with her things.

“You’re still dressed,” she said to him.

“Oh, there you are,” he said, with a slightly embarrassed look on his face. “Er, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to help me get out of these clothes. Can’t manage one-handed . . .”

“How did you manage to get them on?” asked Emma, removing the studs from his shirtfront one by one.

“Robinson was my acting valet.”

“Ah.” She unknotted his tie and unfastened his collar button. “D’you think you can return the favour?” She turned her back to him. “I can’t quite get the little hook at the top of the zip.”

“I’ll do my best.” He unfastened the hook. “*Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime Tells me from*

you, that now it is bed time,” he said, slowly lowering the zipper and letting her gown fall to the floor. “*Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals, As when from flowry meads th’ hill’s shadow steals.*” He briefly rested his left hand on her shoulders. “*Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread In this love’s hallow’d temple, this soft bed.*” Next he unhooked her brassiere. “*License my roving hands,*” he murmured, gently caressing her, “— or ‘hand’, in this pathetic case—*and let them go, Before, behind, between, above, below . . .*” He glanced at the negligee she had tossed on the bed. “Did you bring this nightdress?”

“Yes,” she said, pulling off her undergarments and stockings.

“What ever for? *Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee, As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be, To taste whole joys.*”

“It’s a bit chilly—”

“*Cast all, yea, this white linen hence,*” he said, stripping off his clothes, “*There is no penance due to innocence.*” He tossed aside the pyjamas and got into bed. “*To teach thee, I am naked first,*” he continued, as she slid in beside him. “*Why then,*” he concluded, putting his good arm firmly about her, “*what needst thou have more covering than a man?*”

Epilogue

Not many people outside a few cognoscenti in the musical community were aware of, let alone cared about, the fact that St. Swithin's had one of the finest pipe organs in the entire kingdom. *Verily the king of instruments*, thought the Reverend Mr. Tucker, taking his place in front of the altar as the opening notes of the *Trumpet Voluntary* sounded, *and never more regal than when Sir Daniel is at the keyboard*. Mr. Tucker smiled beatifically at Steed, who stood to the vicar's left fidgeting with his cravat for the tenth time that morning. Steed was the picture of elegance in his dove-grey morning coat and trousers, notwithstanding the fact that his stomach was doing somersaults.

"Got the ring?" Steed turned to his best man, Georges Delacroix.

"What ring?"

"Damn it, man—"

"Sh! Do not blaspheme in the house of *le bon Dieu, mon chère ami*, especially on your wedding day."

"Georges—"

Delacroix, frowning and uttering little French noises of consternation, very deliberately searched his pockets, all the while keeping an eye on Steed's facial expression, which grew more distraught by the moment.

"For God's sake, Georges—" Steed burst out in an exasperated whisper.

"*Calme toi, mon brave*," Georges grinned, taking a small box out of his right coat pocket. "*Voilà la bague!*"

Steed let out his breath. "Fine time to be sodding me about, old boy," he muttered. "I'm wound tightly enough as it is."

"Just think of the lovely Emma, *mon ami*—"

"She is all I *can* think of. I haven't seen her—"

"You are not supposed to see each other the day of the *mariage*. It is bad luck."

"I haven't seen her for nearly three bloody weeks!"

George's eyebrows lifted. "Oh? *Pourquoi pas?*"

"She's been staying in London, with her mother, getting her gown and whatever else women decide they cannot live without on their wedding day . . ."

"Or their wedding night," Georges said with a wink.

Steed coughed. "Shouldn't she be here by now?" he said.

"She will be, soon."

"I've heard of brides being jilted and left standing at the altar, but never bridegrooms—"

Georges shook his head. "She will not disappoint you, John, but if you do not calm yourself, you will disappoint her tonight." He glanced down the aisle. "*Regarde*, here she is."

Steed turned around and caught his breath.

Emma, dressed very simply in a plain crème-coloured gown and matching toque, slowly walked

up the aisle to the altar on the arm of her godfather and uncle, William Knight. As she took her place to Steed's left, her cousin Dorothea, acting as matron of honour, glided into place beside her.

Mr. Tucker beamed first at the couple and then at the congregation, took a deep, luxurious breath, and in his ringing baritone began the marriage service. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony, which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church . . ."

Steed strove valiantly to keep his eyes on the vicar, but they kept straying leftward, in Emma's direction. She stood beside him with her eyes lowered, holding her small bouquet at her waist. He noticed her hands trembled slightly. "Having second thoughts, my dear?" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

"Not at all," she whispered back, without looking up. "Are *you*?"

"Hardly." Steed shifted his weight and concentrated on the vicar's words.

". . . and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly . . ."

Now holding her bouquet in only her left hand, Emma discreetly dropped her right arm and found Steed's hand, gently brushing it with her fingers.

". . . Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other . . ."

Steed gave her fingers a quick, light press.

". . . Therefore if any man can shew just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter hold his peace." The vicar paused for a moment, as was customary at this point in the ceremony.

Somewhere in the church a door slammed. The congregation gasped in unison. Steed's heart jumped; he looked at Emma, whose face drained of colour. The vicar looked at them over his spectacles, then whispered, "Sorry about that, it's the vestry door. Refuses to stay on the latch." He waited a few moments to allow the assembly a collective sigh before continuing with the rite.

"I require and charge you both," said Mr. Tucker solemnly, looking from Steed to Emma, "as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it . . ."

Emma finally lifted her eyes, turned them on the fidgeting Steed, and smiled.

The vicar addressed Steed. "John, wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," Steed replied, looking at Emma.

The vicar now addressed the bride. "Emma, wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded husband, to

live together after God's holy ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," said Emma, looking at Steed with glistening eyes.

"Who giveth this Woman to be married to this Man?"

Having received the bride at Uncle William's hands, Mr. Tucker nodded at Steed, who now took Emma's right hand with his.

"Say after me: 'I, John, take thee, Emma—'"

Steed took a deep breath and turned to Emma. "I, John, take thee, Emma," he began, his mouth suddenly gone completely dry, "to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, f- for better for worse, for richer for p-poorer, in sickness and in health, to love . . . to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

They loosed their hands, and Emma took Steed by his right hand.

The vicar looked at Emma. "Say after me, 'I, Emma, take thee, John—'"

She looked at Steed. "I, Emma, take thee, John, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to . . . obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth."

They loosed hands once more.

"The ring," Steed whispered urgently to Georges.

Delacroix solemnly handed him the ring. Steed fumbled and nearly dropped it before he succeeded in placing it on the vicar's prayer book.

Mr. Tucker took up the ring and solemnly delivered it back to Steed, who now held it shakily over Emma's left ring finger. "With this ring I thee wed," Steed uttered, "and with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." His hand was now shaking even more, but he managed to slip the ring on her finger, and they knelt down before the vicar.

"Let us pray," said Mr. Tucker.

At the end of the prayer, Mr. Tucker joined Steed's right hand with Emma's and signalled them to rise. "Those whom God hath joined together," he pronounced, "let no man put asunder." He then turned to the congregation. "Forasmuch as John and Emma have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a Ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together . . ."

Completely oblivious to the conclusion of the ceremony, Steed and Emma stood face to face, never taking their eyes off each other. "Ahem, you may *now* kiss the bride," said Mr. Tucker, giving Steed a little prod with the toe of his boot.

Steed took Emma into his arms. "You realize, my dear," he whispered softly to her, "this is our

first kiss as man and wife.”

“The first of many, many more, my love,” she whispered in reply. “Oh, damn it all, I’m going to blubber, even though I *swore* I wouldn’t!”

“If you do, I’ll go all weepy—”

“My darling,” she murmured, yielding to his kisses.

“*Allons, enfants,*” said Georges as the magnificent opening to Handel’s *Zadok the Priest* began to fill the church. “That is your signal to depart. The guests are all outside, waiting for you.”

Steed took out a handkerchief and gently dabbed at Emma’s eyes, then blew his nose. “Ready to face the music, as it were?” he said with a brave smile, stuffing the handkerchief in his pocket and offering her his arm.

“*Once more unto the breach, eh?*” she grinned at him through tears of joy as they walked slowly down the aisle, arm in arm.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” he whispered into her ear, barely touching her cheek with his lips, “just before I finally succeeded in asking you to marry me.”

“We’ve always had a knack for nonverbal communication, haven’t we?”

He looked at her. “We certainly have,” he murmured, then raised an eyebrow. “And you can put all thoughts of *that* out of your mind for the time being,” he added in a languid undertone, “we’ve still the reception ahead of us.”

“Ah, but didn’t you tell me not so long ago that half of all pleasure lies in the anticipation thereof?” she riposted.

His eyes caressed her. *How I do adore you, Emma my darling, my beloved . . .* “Touché, my dear, touché!” he smiled, and burst into hearty, joyous laughter. “Oops, watch it, love, the rice and confetti are starting to fly!”

After posing for more photographs outside the church, Steed and Emma were finally allowed to retreat to the privacy of the closed coach-and-four that was to take them to Langbourne for the wedding luncheon and reception.

Steed took off his top hat and tossed it on the seat opposite before taking Emma firmly into his arms. “I missed you,” he said, kissing her ardently.

“And I you,” she murmured, closing her eyes as his hands caressed her.

“Pity Langbourne’s a short drive from the church,” he said, in between kisses, “or I’d tup you right here and now.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” drawled Emma, pushing him off her and giving a playful tap of her forefinger to the tip of his nose, “you’d only ruin your perfectly-knotted cravat, and spoil my makeup.” She smoothed her gown. “I will not arrive at our reception looking *en déshabillé*, with a triumphantly grinning bridegroom in tow,” she said with a grin.

Steed leaned back in the corner, looking at her through half-lidded eyes.

She laughed, and held her hand out to him. “Come here,” she said. “There’s something I want

to give to you.”

He slid over to her.

Emma took a plain gold wedding band from her handbag and held out to him. “Will you wear this for me?”

He took the ring from her, and saw that there was an inscription on the inside. “‘To Toady, from Pollywog’,” he read aloud, and looked back up at her. “Er—”

“As I know *your* childhood nickname it’s only fair you know *mine*,” said Emma. “‘Pollywog?’”

“I told you I was a bit of a tomboy growing up,” she said.

“So you did.”

“I preferred playing with the boys to playing dollies—”

“So you do,” he grinned.

“Careful, John,” she cautioned him with a wry smile. “I loved going down to the pond with the boys to catch slimy things, and they dubbed me ‘Pollywog’ because I always caught the smallest frogs—”

“What did you do with ‘em?”

“The boys, or the frogs?”

“I don’t think I want to know about the boys,” he said, still grinning. “The frogs.”

“Slaughtered ‘em and had frog legs for dinner, that’s what.”

Steed’s eyebrows shot up.

Again Emma laughed. “Don’t look so horrified. We’d catch them, watch them jump about, and then take them back to the pond where they belonged.”

“Thank goodness for that,” said Steed. “I wouldn’t want to be wed to a cold-blooded cannibal.” He looked at the ring again. “Where did you buy this?”

She named a well-known Bond Street jeweller.

He sighed. “I’ll never be able to show my face there again, you know.”

“Don’t be silly, darling, they thought it awfully sweet, actually—”

“And so it is,” he said, giving her an affectionate smile and handing the ring back to her.

“You won’t wear it?”

“Only if *you* put it on my finger.”

She did so, then raised his hand to her lips, kissing it tenderly. “I love you, you impossible, wonderful Mr. Toad,” she said, as he enfolded her in his arms once again.

The luncheon and reception were held in the ballroom, once again transformed under the duchess’s able supervision. Several tables in two parallel lines, covered with white linen tablecloths, had been set up perpendicular to the head table at which the bride and groom would sit. Another table had been placed a few feet from the wall between two windows, an enormous white wedding cake, with a blindingly polished Army officer’s dress sword lying next to it, at its centre. Colourful spring flowers were liberally deployed on all the tables and throughout the room, imparting a subtle, fresh scent to the air. A small dance band played in one corner, just loud enough to be heard without drowning out

normal conversation.

“A simple family wedding’, you said,” Emma murmured to Steed, shaking hands and exchanging words with everyone in the long line slowly snaking into the ballroom. “I had no idea half of England was related to you. I feel like Little Orphan Annie.”

“This is just the legitimate family,” he murmured back in reply. “None of the bastards were invited.”

Finally the last of the line straggled in. Steed escorted Emma to the head table, where they were joined by Beryl, Uncle William and his wife, George and Vivienne Delacroix, Dorothea and her husband, the Reverend Mr. Tucker, and the duke and duchess. Once the guests had found their seats at the other tables, the duke rose and opened the bottle of Dom Perignon, specially reserved for the newly-married couple and chilling in the ice bucket in front of him. Liveried footmen appeared with bottles of champagne and began to pour. The duke filled two intricately cut antique crystal flutes Helena had bought specially for the newlyweds, handing them to Emma and Steed as they stood up. He raised his glass to them. “*Look down you gods, and on this couple drop a blessed crown,*” he said, then turned to the guests. “My lords, ladies, and gentlemen—the bride and groom!”

The assembly all rose, champagne glasses lifted in salute, with a resounding “The bride and groom!”

Once the toast was drunk, Steed raised his glass to Emma. “*I love thee, I love but thee, With a love that shall not die Till the sun grows cold, And the stars are old, And the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold,*” he said, bending to her and kissing her warmly before touching his glass to hers.

When Emma’s turn came, she set her glass down and put her hands on his shoulders. “*Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*”

Their lips met in a prolonged kiss, and when they eventually drew apart, Emma slowly picked up her glass and took an unhurried sip, all the while keeping her eyes on Steed’s, now burning into hers. The guests, who heretofore had stood in silence, now broke into thunderous applause.

The last flash of the photographer’s bulbs finally brought Steed out of his trance. He gestured to Emma to resume her seat before sinking down onto his own chair. All followed suit, and the footmen returned to start serving the luncheon.

Emma found Steed’s hand and stroked it. “Bearing up all right, are you?” she said softly, leaning closer to him.

“You might say that,” he muttered, gulping down the rest of his champagne and refilling his glass before refreshing hers.

“You’re the one who wanted a wedding with all the trimmings,” she said, gently blotting the tears in the corners of Steed’s eyes with her serviette.

“I did, and I don’t regret it for a moment.”

“Nor do I, my darling,” she said, kissing him tenderly. “Nor do I.”

Plates of food materialised in front of them, and the delicious aromas rising from them quickly turned Steed's thoughts to matters culinary.

Lunch dragged on it seemed for an eternity.

"If we eat any more," Steed murmured to Emma, dabbing at his lips with his serviette, "we'll be sleeping it off for a week."

"Somehow, I doubt that," she said, patting his thigh.

"I wish you wouldn't do that . . . just now . . ."

"Right. Up you get. Off that lovely bum of yours. It's time for the Ritual Sacrifice."

"Another one? Wasn't slaughtering the Fatted Steed at the Altar sufficient?"

"I'm a jealous goddess," Emma archly replied.

"You just want to have your cake, and eat it, too . . ."

They made their way through the guests to the table with the wedding cake. "I dunno if I can eat a crumb of this," Steed whispered to Emma. "I'm as stuffed as a Christmas goose."

"Of course you can. It'll give you . . . stamina," she whispered back into his ear.

"Saucy wench . . ." Steed picked up the sword. "I say, this is the sword presented to me by my grandfather D'Arcy upon my commissioning," he said with a faraway look in his eyes, reverently taking up the blade and balancing it. "For years I've wondered where it had got to . . ."

"Well, here it is. Shall we slice the cake now, darling?"

Steed turned to her and presented arms, then lowered the sword to the horizontal, just above the top tier of the cake. She covered his sword hand with hers, and they guided the blade into the first cut.

More photography, more champagne and more toasts to the happy couple ensued.

Presently the band resumed their places and tuned their instruments.

Sir Daniel now walked up to the bandleader and whispered a few words in the man's ear before turning to the guests. "My, but you *are* a noisy lot, ain't you?" he called out to them with a laugh. "Now pipe down for John and Emma's first dance together as man and wife."

"Our cue, I think," Steed said to Emma, taking her by the hand leading her to the dance floor.

Sir Daniel smiled at them. "I've asked them to play the waltz from 'The Merry Widow'," he said, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

A ripple of nervous giggles spread through the room.

Emma turned and looked at the guests. "That's why John married me," she said. "We widows are *ever* so grateful . . ."

Unrestrained laughter followed.

Sir Daniel turned back to the bandleader. "Maestro?" he said, and walked off the dance floor. Steed and Emma gracefully eased into the music and the waltz.

"Such a lovely melody, don't you think?" Steed murmured after a while, "not to mention the words that accompany this particular bit."

"Remind me," said Emma, her cheek just brushing against his.

"*Your ev'ry touch caresses, and leaves me in no doubt, whispering 'tis true, 'tis true, I so love you'.*" He smiled,

letting his left hand, lightly resting on her waist, slip just a little higher.

The little kiss Emma planted at the corner of his mouth he found infinitely more seductive than any licentious kiss she might have dared attempt. “How soon can we get out of here without attracting comment?” he whispered gruffly to her.

“Not until I dance with Georges, Uncle Bill, Gerry, the vicar, et al., and you dance with my mother, Dorothea, Georges’s wife, Helena—”

Steed groaned.

“Cheer up. Dancing is like making love—”

“I don’t want to make love with them, I want to make love with you.”

“*You’re* the one who wanted all this fol-de-rol . . .”

“I know, I know,” he muttered. “I’ve made my bed, and now I must lie in it.”

“Just so, but in the meantime, think about the other one that awaits you,” she murmured.

“Precisely what I *don’t* want to think about right now.”

“Half of all pleasure, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” he said tetchily. “Words to live by . . . or to eat . . .”

The waltz soon came to an end, and as the strains of the next melody filled the room, everyone else so inclined took to the dance floor. Steed next danced with Emma’s mother, and Emma with her uncle, and eventually they gave the remaining members of the wedding party the obligatory dance.

“Well,” said Steed, sipping a welcome glass of champagne with Emma afterwards, “what’s the drill now? The photographer’s finally departed, my kinfolk are all well-lubricated, and everybody’s having a wonderful time.”

“I’d like another dance—”

“Certainly. Just give me a few minutes to refresh myself with some of this excellent champagne,” he said.

“You carry on,” said Emma with a grin, setting her glass down. “I have someone else in mind for a partner.”

“Married less than a few hours, and already you weary of me,” he said, feigning dejection. “Who is the fortunate man?”

“See for yourself.”

Young Johnny came up to them, looking spectacular, as usual, in his dress uniform. He bowed to Emma. “May I have the pleasure of the next dance, ma’am?”

“Bugger off, you impudent brat,” said Steed, taking another sip of champagne.

“I would be delighted,” said Emma, aiming one of her most charming smiles at the young officer. “I’ve always wanted to be whirled about a dance floor by a handsome Hussar.”

“Dashed flatterin’ of you to say so, dear lady,” said Johnny, looking very pleased. He offered Emma his arm. “Er, forgive me, Mrs., ah, Steed, but now that you and my uncle are wed, what may I call you?”

“Why, Auntie Em, of course,” Steed smirked. “Toto.”

“Just ‘Emma’ will do,” she said, taking Johnny’s arm. The band started in on the next number. “Another Viennese waltz! How lovely!”

Steed was patiently nursing his drink when Beryl came up beside him. “Any more where that came from?” she asked, glancing at his champagne.

“Lady Beryl.” Steed rose, taking the half-full bottle from the ice bucket nearby.

“Sit, sit, sit,” she said. “I dare say you’ve been danced off your feet by all your female relatives.”

Steed filled her glass before resuming his seat. “I’m used to it,” he chuckled.

“Who is that good-looking fellow my fickle daughter has abandoned you for?”

“My nephew. Young Johnny. Helena’s youngest.” Steed paused for a sip of his drink. “I remember my Grandmamma jokingly saying that if a chap wants to be handsome, all he need do is join the Hussars.”

“I see a strong family resemblance between you and him,” Beryl drank some champagne. “Doubtless Johnny is as handsome in mufti as he is in his regimentals,” she said, with a little smile.

“He hasn’t yet learnt to knot his ties as artfully as me, though,” said Steed, also smiling.

“The waltz is coming to a close,” said Beryl. “It’s high time you and Emma took French leave and had some time to yourselves. The rest of us’ll manage nicely enough without you.” She got up, and Steed followed suit. “I’ll see you later.” She kissed Steed’s cheek before walking away to rejoin her brother-in-law and a few other people sitting at another table.

“Happy now?” Steed said to Emma, after Johnny brought her back and took his leave.

“I’ll be even happier after another glass of champagne and a smoke. You don’t have any cigarettes on you, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact I have.” He poured her a fresh glass of champagne. “Here you are, my dear.”

“Thanks. Mmm. Nice and cold.”

“I suggest we step out into the corridor. We shan’t be pestered much out there, and I noticed ash urns deployed strategically.”

They left the room and walked down to the far end of the corridor where they lit their cigarettes and smoked silently, relieved to be away at last from all the noise and all the people.

“Hey, where are we spending our wedding night?” Emma asked Steed, putting out her cigarette.

“In our nuptial bed, I trust,” he murmured, melting into her eyes.

“That goes without saying. Don’t trifle with me, darling—”

“I plan to do much more than trifle, I assure you.”

She gave him The Look. “John—”

“The Blue Apartment had been made up for us—”

Emma pulled a face. “I don’t want to sleep in that huge, fusty old bed—”

“I doubt we’ll be sleeping—”

“John—”

He embraced her, silencing her with a kiss on the mouth. “Where, then?”

“I don’t care.” She covered his face with kisses. “Let’s slip away, now—”

“Let’s do.” He took her by the hand. “This way, to the servants’ staircase . . .”

A few minutes later they were outside the house.

The carriage that had brought them to Langbourne from the church stood unattended nearby.

“Come on!” cried Steed, dashing up to the carriage and opening the door. He bowed as Emma walked up to him.

Instead of getting in, however, Emma hitched up her skirts and climbed up into the driver’s seat, and held her hand out to Steed.

He slammed the carriage door shut and leapt up beside Emma. “You’d be more comfortable inside,” he said.

“Not without you beside me,” she replied, putting her arm about his waist.

Steed took up the reins. “Walk on!” he called to the horses, and the carriage lurched forward. They crossed the forecourt at a brisk trot and headed down the drive. When they reached the main gate Steed turned into the road and urged the horses on.

Holding on to their hats as best they could, laughing, and from time to time attempting a kiss, they clattered into one of the local villages, much to the astonished delight of the people in the high street. “Where would you like to go?” Steed asked Emma, rather breathlessly, as they approached a crossroads.

“Anywhere you care to take me, my love,” she said, pulling closer to him, “anywhere at all!”