

Close enough

by Errant Etta

1. Steed's View

Steed leaned across the billiard table, one foot off the floor, choosing the best shot available from the scattered pattern of multi-colored balls on the green baize. "I tell you Jeremy, I don't think I've ever been *quite* so angry before. Well, certainly not with a woman, if you don't include sisters."

The younger man stood, the butt of his cue resting on the floor, toying with the blue chalk, watching Steed, and wondered what was going on. Steed was never open with him about things that happened outside of work. Any information he knew as fact about his personal life had been gleaned during their close association in the Ministry over the last few months. He liked to think he was Steed's friend, but realized he was only one of many younger agents that the man had worked with during his lengthy career there. He didn't think Steed had many close friends, just lots of admirers and acquaintances.

Steed continued, "She acted as though *I'd* caused the accident myself. That little *thing* she drives doesn't deserve to be called an automobile, so low to the ground a person couldn't even see it with her following that closely. And *she* rear-ended *me*. I think you know what a traffic court would say about that." Steed sighted down the cue, "the side pocket." The balls clacked. "She flew at me like a demented tiger. *Demanded* to see my license. Got right up in my face, to sniff and see if I was inebriated, I think." The ball dropped in.

Jeremy didn't think he'd ever seen Steed quite so upset about something not connected with his work. To call this even highly unusual was an understatement. It was unheard of in the course of his experience with the older man.

"Well, Steed, you know" he began trying to think of the best thing to say in a situation which was entirely foreign to him.

Steed went right on talking as if he hadn't heard while lining up the next shot. "Asked for my insurance. Said that it was *my* fault, said *I* braked too quickly. I told her one *always* stops at occupied pedestrian crossings. It was not *my* fault her car was so tiny that she couldn't see around the *automobile* in front. She said my brake lights were faulty. Far corner." The shot just missed. "You see the woman's upset me so she's spoiled my game," He racked the cue. "I'm just not in any condition to continue. Let's go into the lounge and have a last one. I really must be going soon anyway." Steed took his coat from the hook and donned it,

adjusted his cuffs and straightened his tie. Jeremy racked his cue, put down the chalk that he had been holding and followed.

They walked through the archway into a very large room paneled in dark, understated carved oak. Groupings of leather covered chairs and sofas, flanked by tables holding brass lamps, were strategically placed, creating isolated spaces. Seeing all the seating by the windows occupied, they headed for an unoccupied island near the massive fireplace with its pale green, Italian marble surround. The tall, dark, solid, impeccably dressed Steed, a stark contrast to the slight, wiry, blond, young man who was his colleague in an occupation no one would have suspected of either of them. Jeremy tried to look as well tailored as his mentor, but succeeded in looking like a boy fresh-scrubbed by his mother in preparation for Sunday school.

A white-coated waiter approached took their drinks order and Steed began again as if he'd never stopped.

"She had the audacity to question the *suitability* of my vehicle, when a grown man could not even *fit* in that tiny car she was driving. But what *really* angered me is that she would *not* take my word as a *gentleman* that I would see the situation rectified to her satisfaction." He'd gotten quite red in the face.

"Now, Steed." Jeremy began.

"Don't now Steed me, Jeremy." Steed said to the younger man and would have continued but the drinks arrived.

They settled back and began the rituals associated with the masculine pursuits of lighting cigars and savoring brandy. These familiar habits seem to have a calming effect on Steed. Jeremy decided, though he wanted to ask a few questions, that he would let the matter drop. He settled back and searched his mind for a topic that would pacify his friend.

"Steed, have you been invited to the charity ball Winthrop is giving?" he asked. "I've heard it's to be the biggest ever. Orchestra, dancing 'til dawn, a wine tasting and you know his cellar. Should be a bash not to be missed."

"Just got back in town last evening and with *that* person and her *tiny car*, I haven't even checked the stack on the hall table. Old Winthrop's fetes are always good though. If the music's not the thing, you can always taste the wine. Usually lots of pretty unattached ladies to choose from as well." Steed stretched out his long legs and lounged back in the chair. "When is it to be?"

"Saturday, I thought if you're going alone we could drive down together. You'll let me know?"

"Natalie out of town again, or out of sorts?" Steed looked at his friend and smiled a smile that could be interpreted as smug or sympathetic, depending on your mood.

"She's down in Sussex at some hen party." Jeremy sighed in exasperation. It was painful to be in love with someone you felt just tolerated you most of the time. "She was to come back on Friday and go with me. Some of the other

women there will be coming up that day, but she called last night to say she'd decided to stay the weekend. Women! She knew I'd been counting on her to go with me." Steed had taken him under his wing since he had come to the Ministry. He knew Steed's reputation as a Casanova, had heard the rumors that flew through the corridors downtown, but he'd really never seen him with any woman more than a few times running. He hoped he'd volunteer some advice on this personal matter, as he had done in his professional capacity, but hesitated to ask straight out.

Steed read his mind. "Don't look to me for advice Jeremy, growing up in a house *full* of women, mother, sisters, aunts and cousins, has not taught me one thing more than any other man. Women are strange creatures, some stranger than others, and it's the rare man who understands one, much less the entire race. As my Auntie Phillipa used to say, stand up straight, be polite and try not to get soup on your tie and you will do as well as the next fellow." He swirled his brandy and sniffed in the smoky vapors.

He wished Jeremy wasn't so smitten with this Natalie of his. He had seen in his career that the dangers of their profession and marriage just didn't mix well. It seemed to be the same with policeman and others in dangerous professions. The divorce rate was astronomical and entanglements of that sort just didn't seem worth the bother to him. He'd never met any woman that had caused him to even consider changing his bachelor status for more than a very short while.

He drained his glass, ground out the stub of the cigar, and rose to leave. "Well, I really must be going. I'll call and let you know. I have to meet that tigress at some pub down south of town in the morning. The Plow, I wonder how many pubs called the plow there are in this country? It really was most vexing, I didn't have my insurance card and she wouldn't give me her address so I could post the bloody thing."

Jeremy could see he was beginning to fume again. "What's her name? Did you know her?" He simply had to know who could possibly get Steed so out of sorts. The man was always cool and collected, even when in dire straits. Jeremy hadn't seen it often but occasionally, when confronting some of the miscreants they came across in their activities for the Ministry, he would be afraid himself of the look that came into the big man's eyes. The thought of his being this visibly upset made Jeremy wonder what could have caused it. It couldn't have been just a bump that did no damage to his beloved antique car.

"Mrs. Peel, Mrs. Emma Peel. Her face seemed familiar but I couldn't place her. Perhaps she resembles someone I used to know. She's quite young and obviously a *liberated woman*." He spoke the last two words as if they were an epithet and not at all to his liking.

"Emma Peel!" the name burst out; "she's a friend of Natalie's. She was going down to Sussex to that girl thingy with all of them. Consciousness raising session, Natalie called it. She's the one whose husband, that test pilot fellow, crashed his plane over Brazil about a year and a half ago. It was in all the papers. You probably saw her picture then. That's why she looked familiar. They

looked for weeks and weeks, never found a trace they say. And to top it off she's a rich heiress, Her father was Sir John Knight, the one who founded Knight Industries. You know, they say she runs it all herself now. Supposed to be something of a genius. Writes technical papers about astrophysics and such. Altogether too good to be true, beautiful *and* rich *and* smart. A fellow I know knew a fellow who tried to take her out. She wouldn't give him the time of day. Of course her husband hadn't been gone all that long at the time, but he said some very unkind things about her attitudes on men in general." He said all this almost in one breath.

At some point during the diatribe Steed had sat back down and thought *the things you can find out that you really don't want to know*. He rose again. "Well, I really must be going and I'll get in touch about Saturday" he turned and left the club.

Out in the street he walked around the back of the big green Bentley inspecting the rear end closely. Not a scratch, that was one thing. He really must go and see if the brake lights were faulty. She had been rather fetching but that temper was enough to put a damper on any ventures down that avenue. Just as well, she had seemed very young. His reputation was disreputable enough on that front, even though he thought it not at all deserved. He wouldn't add cradle robbing to his list of crimes. Being the black sheep cousin of an earl was quite enough.

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1. Emma's View

She leaned back in the chair and listened to the cackle of female voices. She was exasperated with the male sex in general and one in particular right now, but she thought that perhaps fifteen women all seeming to talk at the same time might be a bit much. Maybe coming to this thing had been a bad idea. *My consciousness is raised as high as it needs to be* she thought, but Natalie and Susan had been so insistent.

"You work too hard. You need to take some time and relax." Susan had said.

"All work and no play makes Jane a dull girl." Natalie had chimed in.

Sometimes she wondered if she shouldn't have been a hermit when people said such stupid things, but she had been to school with both of them and they were the nearest thing to close friends that she had. She'd always felt so different from all her contemporaries. Didn't share their fascination with what she thought of as superficial things, but she tried to fit in. At least as much as her independent streak would let her.

Natalie and Susan closed in on her, approaching from the french doors that opened on to the terrace. They walked across the lawn to the grouping of teak bench and chairs nestled in a curve of the perennial border. Susan, whose hands had tended all those flowers blooming around her, tall and going slightly thick

around the middle at the early age of twenty-five. The result of her two young sons off now with their father to provide a place for this female happening to take place. Natalie, small and slightly plump carried two tall glasses and offered her one.

“Out here all alone? You’re supposed to be here to enjoy yourself.” Susan bubbled. “I invited you down to relax and share your opinions with us and you come late and have to leave early, you tell me. And I find you sitting here all alone.”

Emma took the drink and as they settled on the other chairs said, “I am relaxing but I’m afraid that my opinions might not be ones that should be shared with everyone right now. If you’ll go look at my *poor* Lotus you’ll see why I’m keeping my thoughts to myself. On the way here I collided with a great *monstrosity* of an automobile driven by the most pompous, I can’t think of a word that describes the man, *person*, when he stopped with absolutely *no* warning. None. No brake lights, and in that narrow lane with the high hedges on either side, just outside of Hadden, you know the place I mean. He jumped down, and I will say he checked first to see if I was alright, but the way he went on about that Bentley, you’d think it was the only one in existence.”

Natalie blinked and exchanged glances with Susan. It certainly was out of character for their friend to be so overwrought, or at least for her to show it. She seemed always so in control, so self contained.

“I was sure that he’d been drinking he acted so upset about the car, all out of proportion. It wasn’t even scratched but there’s a bloody great bash on the bonnet of *my* car *and* a broken headlamp. He didn’t move as if he were inebriated so I got as close as I could, but didn’t smell any alcohol on his breath. He *said* someone was crossing the road, but *I* never saw a person there at all. *And*, of course, he had no proof of insurance. *Said* he had inadvertently left it at home. So now I have to leave early to go meet him at a pub to get the information. He asked for my address so he could post it. As if he thought I was foolish enough to think I’d ever see a trace of it if I did.”

She seemed prepared to go on indefinitely so Natalie broke in. “Emma, come on up to the house. We’re going to start on relationships. I hope I get some pointers on how to deal with Jeremy. He takes me so for granted, always going off for weeks at a time and expecting me to be waiting patiently when he deigns to remember I’m around. He says he loves me, but sometimes I wonder. He’ll never talk about the things he does. I don’t even know exactly what he *does* do with the State Department.”

“I can’t give you any advice on men.” Emma said with a smile. “Very little experience in that department. I’d known Peter for ever.” Her friends became quiet, she never talked about him. “And I think a comment I heard sums it up quiet nicely. God gave men a brain and a penis, unfortunately he only gave them enough blood to operate one at a time.”

They both laughed out loud and Emma joined in. You could never tell what she would say next.

“Come on up, you have to share that with everyone. It’s a true statement if ever I heard one.” Susan said only giving her husband a slightly guilty thought.

As they walked across the lawn Natalie asked, “Who was he? The man you’re going to meet.”

She stopped dead when Emma answered, “His name is Steed, John Steed.”

“Not *the* John Steed.” Natalie seemed breathless as a silly grin lit up her face.

Emma arched an eyebrow, turned to face her, “I have no idea if he is *the* John Steed but that’s what his driving license said when I finally got to see it. He expected me to take his word as a *gentleman* that he would see the situation *rectified* to my satisfaction, as he so quaintly put it. Do you know him?”

“I wouldn’t say I know him, but I’ve met him. He works with Jeremy. We’ve been at several functions at the same time.” Natalie explained.

“I’ve seen him too,” Susan cut in, her eyes met Natalie’s and she matched her grin. “He plays polo with Roger’s brother’s team. Ooooh, Aaaah!” she breathed. She and Natalie giggled.

“He seemed, oh I don’t know, slightly effeminate to me.” Emma’s face took on a definitely puzzled expression.

“Not when you see him in action, my dear.” Susan tried to explain, “He just exudes sex appeal. All muscle and grace. It makes me shiver just to think about him charging down the field. Seems part of the horse, like one of those centaur creatures.”

“He danced with me once at a party.” Natalie chimed in. “Made me want to throw Jeremy clean away. But I’ve heard all those rumors that run around about him. What would he want with pudgy old me? He’s been quite the lothario if you listen to what they say. But I can tell you first hand he doesn’t *feel* effeminate up close. Built like a brick house, but very light on his feet.”

“And he won some sort of metal for bravery in the war, my sister-in-law told me.” Susan rushed to volunteer.

“Well, I can’t think how I could possibly have so *misjudged* the man.” Emma said sarcastically, thinking *the things you can find out that you really don’t want to know*. She turned and they followed her to the house.

When all the women were settled around the large but cozy sitting room, with drinks and plates full of munchies the conversation again turned to the accident and John Steed. He was the cousin of the Earl of Mountford, next in line but one for the title. He had a big estate out in the country but didn’t live there. No he lived down town, had a flat there, but sometimes was away for months at a time.

His brother-in-law ran it for him, the estate I mean. His mother and one other sister, the one who had never remarried after the war, lived there too.

Emma's brain began to whirl. All these women wanting to put their two pence worth in. The babble was beginning to give her a frightful headache. She began to be relieved that she would be leaving in the morning even if it were to meet this paragon about whom everyone seemed to know all these details.

They were a strange family really. Very patriotic, most of them in the Army or Navy at one time or other, but a decided eccentric streak ran through the family. Sometimes more than eccentric. A couple of the relations were quite mad. Not violent you understand, just not of this world, as they say. He'd been paired with a number of beautiful women but nothing ever came of it. Some one volunteered that she'd heard his heart had been broken during the war but she really didn't know the details. It was a shame really. His nephew, his sister's boy would probably inherit. What he really needed was a good woman to settle him, a child or two. Being a father always was good for a man. Made them grow up and stop being just large little boys. Grow up as much as they were capable at least. Much laughter from all the women in the room at that salvo.

Emma decided she would leave on that parting shot. Her consciousness had been lowered if anything, she thought as she made her apologies. The accident had taken more out of her than she first realized, the excuse she used. She left the room followed by solicitous murmurs and heard the conversation resume as she made her way up the stairs. She knew they would talk about poor Emma now that she was gone. How lost she was since Peter's death. They didn't realize she was finally becoming her own person, not someone's wife or daughter and she liked it. Wished they would stop trying to pair her off with every eligible man who came along. The man woman dance was not the be-all, end-all of life.

Next in line but one, that explained it, that man Steed's pompous, imperial attitude. Emma thought about her mother's family. Well, to be fair not all of them, but most had been highly incensed when their aristocratic daughter had married a self-made industrialist, even if he was rich. His knighthood hadn't come until after her death and they had all but cut off the upstart and his daughter by then. Besides you knew the Queen handed out those titles on a regular basic to actors and entertainers, just anyone these days. It had no real meaning anymore, they said. Emma had to admit she was a reverse snob in that area. A persons accomplishments meant more to her than their ancestors. She went to sleep dreading the meeting tomorrow.

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2. Steed's View

Steed cruised up slowly through narrow street looking for a space large enough to park the big green touring car. It was sometimes difficult to do, especially in

older places where the streets hadn't been widened and cars were parked, lining the curbs on either side, leaving only a narrow path through the center of the road. Yes, there were drawbacks, but he thought the pleasure derived from driving the Bentley worth the occasional headaches. Ah Ha! there was a place and not too far from The Plow.

He didn't believe his eyes. That *woman* had just slid into *his* space in that little blue micro-car. She had to have seen that it was the only spot on the street where he could possibly park. She looked up at him and flashed a radiant smile that he felt said *Ha Ha, Beat you to it*. She opened her door and totally blocked his forward movement. He fumed silently as she reached in for her bag but couldn't help noticing her long legs and the graceful way her body moved as she closed the door and crossed the street in front of him. His eyes seemed glued to her swaying hips as she disappeared through the door.

Well, this couldn't take too long. He would give her the information and perhaps sample the local ale. Some of the smaller pubs did serve very fine ale and it never hurt to find a fresh source of the simple pleasures.

It took a while to find another space to park and he had to walk rather a long way. As he made his way toward the doors that she had entered, jauntily swinging his umbrella, heads turned to watch his progress. He seemed unaware of the heads turning or the admiring female glances that followed in his wake.

The interior of the pub was dim after the bright sunlight. He stood a second in the doorway until he could make her out at a table across the small, crowded room. She smiled again acknowledging his nod and the doffing of his bowler. He approached the table.

"Mrs. Peel, might I offer you a drink before we attend to business?" He swallowed his annoyance at her earlier rude taking of his parking space. She was a lady after all and quite lovely when she wasn't angry he noted. One must be civil.

"It's still a little early for me, thank you." She said glancing at her watch.

"Nearly noon, Mrs. Peel. These local ales are sometimes quite good. Are you sure I can't persuade you?" He put on his most charming smile, the one that rarely failed.

"Well, just a half then. I still have a good deal further to drive and must see about finding a garage to repair the Lotus."

He waved his umbrella to attract the attention of the man at the bar. "Landlord, two halves of your finest local ale." And turned back to her. "My dear, if you don't have a garage in town I can recommend the one I use quite highly. Very high caliber repairs, done quickly, and at reasonable rates." He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and retrieved his wallet. "I believe I have a card here somewhere," he continued as he looked through it. "Ah, yes, here it is. Donahue's. I know it sounds like an Irish pub, but the mechanics there are very qualified. Their repair work on bonnets and wings is so exact you can *not* tell that they ever have been damaged."

“Do you refer them to all the people whose automobiles you damage?” her eyebrow rose and she looked at him with what he thought was a very unbecoming smirk.

Before he could open his mouth the barman came with the ale. Deciding that he would ignore her sarcastic remark he took a sip of the dark amber liquid before he said something a gentleman ought not to. “Very good, mellow, full bodied, and not too bitter.” This directed at the barman hovering for their approval. “The hops are grow locally I take it.” Steed smiled at him.

The barman nodded. “Yes sir, just down the road.” He took the money Steed handed him and retreated behind the bar.

Steed took another swallow and continued smiling at Mrs. Peel, “reminds me of the ale my Auntie Matilda used to brew in a large barrel in the scullery. She had a little corner of the kitchen garden fitted out with trellises for the hops. Used to make me help cut them and carry them to a room in the barn loft to cure. Itchy work, but the final reward was worth it. A drink fit for the gods, agricultural gods, of course.”

She looked at him quite strangely, he thought, while he talked, but a tiny smile turned up the corners of her mouth. That did suit her much better.

“You grew up in the country then?” she asked.

“Oh yes, during the golden age between the wars. Wonderful boyhood. All the out of doors to roam in. No housing estates there, just open country and horses and little farms all scattered about. Pretty, good-sized river to swim in, in the warm months. And a big wood down the valley to prowl and play Robin Hood. Carefree time, no responsibilities at that age. I’m sorry to say that kind of life doesn’t seem to exist much anymore.” He wondered as he talked what in the world he was doing. This was not normal conduct for him at all. He was a very private man. He didn’t think he had spoken of his boyhood to anyone who hadn’t shared it since, he couldn’t remember when. But that little smile at the corners of her mouth and the innocent look in those very dark, brown velvet eyes made him want to make the smile bigger.

He shook his head and taking copies of his insurance papers from his wallet handed them to her. “Here are the papers you came for Mrs. Peel. Since you have a long drive I will leave you now. My telephone number is also there if you have a problem. Thank you for meeting me and good bye.” He had wanted to add for now, but stopped himself. He took his bowler and umbrella and left the pub.

He ruminated as he drove back into town on the titian tresses, the creamy skin, the big dark eyes and the lithe, graceful body. He shook himself. She was a child and with a very bad temper, he had cause to know. He was happy as he was. No use in stirring up trouble for himself. If he wanted a beautiful body there were plenty of those. More than a few females had given him assurances spoken and unspoken that all he had to do was call.

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2. Emma's View

She saw the gargantuan green vehicle approach. There was obviously no way they could pass one another in the narrow confines of the car-lined street. She spotted a space and darted in it, smiling at him to show she had solved the impasse. He looked down his nose and glared at her with his smoky gray eyes. She could feel them bore into her back as she leaned in to get her purse. Emma could feel herself getting very irritated with his imperial rudeness as she crossed the street and went into the pub.

It was not well lit at all and it took her a moment to become accustomed to the change from the bright sunlight. She spotted an empty table and took a chair facing the door. She drummed her fingers impatiently. Well, at least he had shown up. She had thought that he might not. She had chosen this place because she knew it. The woman who owned it was the sister of the postmaster in the town where she'd grown up. You couldn't be too careful these days. Not that she thought she couldn't handle herself.

She'd been taking karate classes for almost eighteen months now. They had helped her control her temper as well as being a wonderful exercise for her body. The five tenets: patience, perseverance, courtesy, courage, and control were words that seemed to her to be a very basic but thorough plan to live by. Mental as well as physical disciplines were included in the course. The instructor started and ended every class with meditation and relaxation exercises and encouraged his students to practice the techniques on their own.

She took a deep breath to relax and then she saw him. He was looking down his aristocratic nose again. Ramrod straight he stood and surveyed the room as if he was surveying his domain. He saw her and nodded his head as if to acknowledge the presence of a subject. He doffed his bowler. How many people wore bowler hats now days? She smiled. It was rather funny to see this tall man looking like a tailor's advertisement among the lunchtime crowd in The Plow.

He crossed the room and offered her a drink. So early? She refused the offer politely she thought, she had to drive home after all and though there didn't seem to be any problems with the drivability of the Lotus she'd feel safer if she were alcohol free. She also had to make arrangements to have the damage to her car repaired. He pressed her with a reference to the local ale. She knew that Mrs. Griffin, the owner, did keep a very good traditional brew on hand. Still, but then he smiled at her. That smile, a very charming smile that changed his whole appearance, did something to her. Something she didn't quite understand. But she felt her irritation melt a little and said she'd take a half.

Then he did it again. Waved his umbrella and called across the crowded room to the man behind the bar as if he were a lackey who should cater to his whims.

Anyone else would have gone to the bar and placed their order. Probably waited 'til the half-pints were drawn and brought them back to the table themselves, but not *Mister Next in Line But One*. She felt her hackles going up again. Then he offered the services of the men who handled his automotive repairs. Her tongue got the best of her and the courtesy tenet she had just been thinking of bit the dust. She really had to get the best of her sarcasm.

She thought he was going to return the remark in kind but the barman saved the day. He sipped the ale and praised it. His tone was not rude at all when he talked to the man, commenting knowledgeably on the ale. He smiled again. He really had a special smile and very nice eyes.

He began to tell a story about his aunt that didn't sound at all as if he were the upper class snob that she had assumed he was. The cadence and inflection of his voice was really quite charming. She prodded him slightly asking if he'd grown up in the country. That sort of life held fond memories for her. He talked then briefly of his childhood and she heard a wistful quality in his voice that made her start to like him just a little. And he looked directly into her eyes when he talked. His attention didn't wander; his eyes didn't roam up and down her body, as so many men's seemed to do, making her feel like a cut of meat in the butcher's window. Sometimes first impressions, she thought, especially those made under stressful circumstances and with preconceived prejudices, might not be reliable.

Then suddenly he was all business, handed her the papers and did not even wait until she had finished her half-pint to leave. She sat at the table and watched his back as he left. He did seem light on his feet for a big man, just like Natalie had said. He probably thought nothing of his highhanded manner. She'd probably never cross paths with him again. She wouldn't wonder about it anymore.

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3. Steed's View

Steed and Jeremy enter the huge hall together. A vast number of people were scattered through out the house and on the lawn beyond. It was still light out until nearly ten this time of year. Small clusters of conversation mingling together created a sound like the buzzing of a very large beehive. They advanced together, the tall, dark man and the slight, blond one and visited several of the small groups like bees going from flower to flower.

The lilting strains of music filtered through the overlay of babbling voices. They wound their way toward its' source. A small orchestra was situated on the terrace just outside a huge room filled with dancing couples. The music flowed in through the open windows and doors filling the room. The musicians' position on the terrace also provided a pleasant backdrop for the guests who were eating, drinking or otherwise occupied scattered through out the house and grounds.

Steed watched the graceful movements, and some not quite so graceful, of the beautifully dressed twosomes that seemed to float around the room. The band was playing old show tunes from the thirties. Steed smiled remembering his sisters, aunts, and cousins compelling him to dance with them in the parlor in his home. His sister Edith, at the piano, pounding out the tune. He was the only available male partner, so had to dance every dance. They would pass him around between them and otherwise dance with each other. This mostly happened on the rainy days because he would escape them by retreating to the out-of-doors if he could. He would always raise a ruckus but secretly enjoyed it. He had watched those old time musicals and secretly wished he were as graceful as Fred Astaire. This was a secret divulged to *absolutely* no one. He knew if his contemporaries ever even guessed the truth his life wouldn't be worth living.

He was a good dancer, nevertheless, and he cast his eye around the floor for an appealing partner. He danced with several women, short, tall, young and old. He flirted with every female that looked his way. Soon all the eyes in the room seemed to be following his progress around the floor; the women's lustful and the men's grudgingly admiring. He seemed totally unaware of the almost universal attention but was enjoying himself immensely. That only added to the mysterious charm that surrounded him.

The orchestra took a well-deserved break and everyone filtered in to the large dining room across the hall. A magnificent buffet was arranged and people milled about filling their plates and glasses. Steed mingled talking to everyone it seemed before finally coming to the table. He had waited until the crowd had thinned out somewhat and was pleased to see that there were still many delectable dishes waiting to be tasted. As he made his way along the board he spied a crowd of men across the room. They buzzed about a woman in a green dress like bees around a single flower. His curiosity peaked he advanced slowly toward the clustered males. He didn't remember seeing what must be a beauty in green. She had to be spectacular to warrant the attention. He could never resist a challenge.

When he could see her, she was facing away from him. Tall and slender with auburn hair piled high and twined with narrow green ribbon that matched the emerald dress. It was fitted snugly to her body but just below the waist flared and hung in gracefully draped folds to almost touch the floor. Sheer transparent flowing sleeves, gathered at the wrists, were the only window to let you see the creamy skin except for the exposed nape of her neck. Steed hovered on the outskirts of the throng waiting to glimpse her face. He heard her speak and his right eyebrow lowered.

"I really couldn't say." She brought her hand up and lowered her head to look at her wrist. "My dance card seems to be filled." A stilted laugh.

He thought he heard a tightness in her voice. When she turned and he saw her face, he thought he recognized a masked look of exasperation behind the smile. She reminded him of an exhausted vixen that the hounds had brought to bay, fighting gamely.

He advanced through the throng. "Ah, there you are my dear, I've brought your plate." Looking down at the plate and then up to meet her eyes. "Filled with the bounty of Winthrop's groaning board. Let's find a place out on the terrace. It seems rather crowded in here," He offered her his arm.

She met his eyes and smiled at him. "It's about time, I wondered where you'd been." She took his arm he guided her out of the presence of the crowd of admirers.

They exchanged no words as they exited the room, crossed the terrace and walked across the lawn. He could feel the tension through her hand where it rested on his arm. He started to press it between his arm and side in a gesture of reassurance but thought better of it. She might misinterpret his meaning and he felt compelled to put her at ease. She reminded him of the small wounded creatures that he and his youngest sister had often found in the woods and brought home to tend. Helpless and stressed, being hovered over by strange giants, they would either retreat and become passive or fight desperately to escape. She seemed to be one of the fighting variety. One had to be very slow and quiet to win their trust. Even with his best efforts he had sometimes failed.

Twilight had descended. At the far edge of the circle of light that spilled from the house they found an empty table. He placed the plate on it and held the chair for her to sit. "I will leave you now and go and see if there is anything left for me." He smiled down at her.

"No, please. You keep your supper. Thank you for the rescue. I knew I shouldn't have come." She hesitated and started to rise.

"I'll stay and share it, if I may. I was being greedy and there is plenty here for two." He looked down at her for permission.

"Yes, do." She settled back in the chair.

He sat across from her. The sky was becoming that dark shade of blue that comes before the blackness of full dark. She sat with her back to the house and her features were blurred in the failing light. He could see from the way she held herself stiffly that she was unsure of his intentions. He was unsure himself, but cast about for a way to put her at ease.

"It seems we have a friend in common." He finally said, reaching for a bite from the plate. "Natalie Chalmers, a colleague of mine is seeing her. As a matter of fact we rode down together because she was unable to attend."

"I saw her just the other day. The day," she paused and took a small hors d'oeuvre from the outer edge of the plate between them on the table, "the day we collided." She looked him in the eye. "You work with Jeremy at the State Department?"

"Yes." He said reaching to his pocket to retrieve his handkerchief. He had neglected to bring a napkin or silverware and they were reduced to eating foods not meant as finger foods with their fingers and the results were becoming somewhat messy. He carefully wiped his fingers and extended the cloth to her as

he continued. "I'm called on when I'm needed. It's not exactly what most people would call a steady job."

"Natalie says," she hesitated, wiped her fingers with the white cotton square and returned it. "She says she doesn't quite know what Jeremy does. He doesn't talk about it."

"Well, Mrs. Peel, some people have such mundane jobs that they probably don't think others would be interested to hear the details. Or, perhaps, they just want to forget get about it themselves and relax, when they have free time." He watched her trying to gauge her response in the darkness that was surrounding them.

"That may be so, but I think she would like for him to confide in her. Make her feel that she is not just an isolated part of his life. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Anything Natalie has told me should remain between the two of us, but if you are close to Jeremy you might pass it along if the occasion arises. I think if things don't change soon between them, she may feel she should break the whole thing off."

"I try never to become involved in the personal lives of my colleagues, but Jeremy was talking just the other day and I think they may be at cross purposes. I get the feeling he feels he is not very important to her." He didn't add that he thought maybe breaking it off would be best all round if Jeremy were to continue in his present line of work.

"Communication does seem to be a problem for everyone. I've seen very few couples who were completely honest with each other and it seems if people could just be open about what they feel it would be, I don't know, better for all concerned." She stopped a moment to reach for his handkerchief and wipe juice from the roast beef that had dribbled down her chin.

Steed spotted a waiter with a drinks-tray crossing the terrace. "Could I trouble you for that Mrs. Peel?" He took the handkerchief and waved it above his head. The waiter spotted the white flag in the darkness and headed down toward them.

"Not only did I neglect the silver and the linen I forgot the drinks but I think we might remedy that situation now." The waiter reached them and Steed took four glasses and lined them up on the table.

"So you won't have to make the long journey across the lawn again." He told the waiter smiling.

"No trouble at all, sir." The young man answered. "Would you like some silver and a napkin, perhaps another plate?"

"We're just fine as we are." Emma answered for him, her lips turning up in a smile.

"Yes, everything is as it should be." Steed said as the man turned to leave. He looked at her and smiling handed her a glass. "Tell me, Mrs. Peel, what you said a few moments ago, why do you think you shouldn't have come?"

She took a sip of champagne. He could see the by the tilt of her head she was considering her answer. "Can I ask you a question first, before I answer?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Peel." He looked directly at her face but couldn't make out the expression in the darkness.

"Will you answer truthfully?"

"It depends on the question." He tried to lighten what seemed to be becoming a serious conversation. "There are some things a gentleman doesn't discuss with a lady."

"That touches on what I want to ask. Are you the same with everyone, or do you have different personalities to fit different occasion?"

"This is getting to be a very deep discussion," he said voicing his earlier thought. "The answer is no, I'm not the same with everyone. I think everyone is something of a chameleon. They change to suit the occasion and the company."

"Has there ever been anyone that you were just yourself with?"

"That's two questions and you haven't answered my first yet. But no, sometimes I'm not even myself with myself. I don't think most people would want to be totally honest with themselves, let alone anyone else. I fear civilization would collapse if total truth were the rule." As he spoke he wondered to himself if he had ever thought these things, much less voiced them. What was he doing being so open with an almost total stranger and a very young one at that?

"Well I guess that answers the original question I was going to ask. I wanted to know if you would be honest with me."

They were both quiet for a time as they sipped the champagne. Finally he broke the silence. "Mrs. Peel, I will be as honest as it is possible for me to be. I learned a long time ago that sometimes you can not say precisely what is on your mind without causing what can be, at times, irreparable harm to yourself and others."

"I guess that will have to do," she said. She inhaled deeply. "I didn't want to come because I was afraid of precisely the situation you rescued me from. All my life I have been first a daughter and then a wife. Now at last I am trying to become just me, myself. It seems no one is able to understand that. Everyone, friends, family, business colleagues, acquaintances, just the entire world wants me to pair off with someone. It's as if they think being by myself, I can't possibly be happy." She said it all in a single breath and reached for one of the remaining glasses on the table. "I want to know if you agree."

"To be honest, I'm not the best person to ask. But I do have a *dishonest* suggestion that could solve your problem, at least for tonight. I will be your escort for the remainder of the evening and beat off all the eager young men who try to accost you with a very large stick."

She laughed and the sound of it made him join her. He took the remaining glass; they clinked them together and drank a toast to the plan.

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3. Emma's View

As she dressed to go to the Winthrop's charity ball she dreaded what the night would bring. She chose her most concealing outfit, a floor-length, high-necked emerald gown. If Knight Industries hadn't been a co-sponsor of the event she would just have sent a donation and stayed home. But as it was, every person in her office had reminded her, hourly it seemed, all yesterday that *this* was the night. Mrs. Winthrop had called personally and offered her a guest room if she didn't want to face the long drive back to her flat. She had declined.

If tonight went the way she thought it might, she would leave as early as was politely possible. She hadn't mixed much lately. At first, after Peter's disappearance, people had been solicitous. As time passed, his death was taken for granted when no trace of the plane had been found, and they treated her as a grieving widow. Then, for perhaps the last six months, people had been subtly, and some not so subtly, trying to pair her off with every man who came along. Why couldn't people understand that she was happy as she was, at least for now?

She arrived at the party and was immediately aware that it would be a trial. It seemed to her that every person she had ever been introduced to was there and wanted to speak with her. Politely conversing with everyone that approached, she made her way through the house but avoided the room where the dancing was going on. That would be too much of an opening to the men whose eyes she felt followed her across the room.

After an hour or so she began to feel that there was not enough air in the place even though it was summer and all the doors and windows were open wide. Even in the huge hall a sort of social claustrophobia seemed to take hold of her. People surrounded her and she felt trapped by the press. She retreated to the ladies room. When she heard the music from the orchestra stop she realized that she would have to go down and at least speak to her host and hostess before she could make some excuse and escape.

As she descended the stairs it seem to her that she must be emitting some strange pheromone. Men of every description flocked around her. Offered to bring her drinks, food, asked for dances. She tried to be polite. With what she hoped were witty replies she tried to fend them off, and at the same time search for Winthrop or his wife so that she could make her excuses and leave. A smile painted on her face she felt trapped.

Suddenly Steed was by her side offering his arm. What was he doing here? It really didn't matter he was a means to an end. The other men had fallen back with his arrival and looked on like they knew they were outclassed. She took the offered arm and a path through the crowd appeared.

They crossed the terrace and she felt the grassy carpet under her feet. She felt the muscle of his arm through the cloth of his coat; it seemed an anchor she

could hold. She wondered warily just what his intentions were but he had been a means of escape and she had taken it. When they reached a table and he offered to leave she was reassured. He was alone, unmarried and seemed to be content. Perhaps, she could find out his secret if he had one. Or maybe it was just that he was a man and the double standard applied by society to all matters of sex allowed him to be single and happy and denied that right to her.

He sat across from her, his face illuminated from the light flowing down across the lawn. He really was an attractive man, though in a very different way than Peter had been. She wondered at the way the young men at the house had fallen back before him. There seemed an aura of strength, or she couldn't find the word that described it, but something very different that she had never seen before. He was, she decided a very mysterious person. Maybe he could be the means to discover how she could approach her life and live it to *her* satisfaction and not someone else's.

The conversation started out on a neutral note and she tried to guide it toward the goal she had set. He tried to banter and lighten the mood but she pressed. She was impressed with his openness though it seemed guarded. Very few people of her acquaintance would actually voice their true thoughts. In the end she did not totally succeed in her quest, but thought that if it might be possible to speak with him at length, he might reveal the answers to her questions. The problem of how to deal with the physical attraction she was beginning to feel was pushed firmly to the deep recesses of her very active brain.

When he made the proposal that he would be her escort for the evening her feelings were mixed. She actually liked parties and the social whirl. It was just recently, well actually since the death of her husband, she had been, it seemed to her, the target of much unsought and unwanted attention from the opposite sex. She had met and set her cap for her husband at a very early age. She had no actual experience in the dating game and for now at least didn't want to play that game. Quickly and with no thought for the consequences, unusual for her, she accepted his offer.

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4. Steed's View

They walked across the lawn together and entered the room where the buffet had been served. It was much less crowded and the tables were almost bare.

She looked up at him, "I need to go and repair the damage." She glanced down at her fingers.

"My apologies for not having all the necessary accoutrements on hand, my dear, I'll endeavor to see that such an omission of the basics doesn't occur in the future."

She laughed and swept off up the staircase saying over her shoulder, "I'm holding you to your word that you'll be waiting when I come down."

He watched her glide up the stairs along with every other male in the room. She seemed not to be aware of the effect she had on them. No wonder she was being pursued. "*Beautiful and rich and smart*" he remembered Jeremy's words. As he walked off to visit the retiring area to repair the damage to his own greasy fingers he wondered how this would all play out. If she truly didn't want an involved relationship right now but needed an escort occasionally it might work out quite well indeed. The wheels in his brain turned. She was very young and he sensed inexperienced in many ways, but he had always enjoyed teaching. His face was a picture of satyric revelry as Jeremy approached.

"Steed, I wondered where you'd got to."

"Jeremy," he'd forgotten all about the young man. Well, maybe just as well they were riding together tonight. He somehow didn't think it would pay to move too quickly with Mrs. Peel. "Met a pretty lady and you know how that is. Having a good time yourself?" he asked as he dried his hands.

"It's all right. I thought you might be in the room where all the wine tasting is going on. Got waylaid there for a while. The orchestra's starting up again."

"Yes, fine." He seemed preoccupied. "Have to meet someone. I'll catch you up later." He made a beeline for the door.

Jeremy looked after him and wondered who this pretty woman could be. He followed and saw Emma Peel herself come down the staircase and greet Steed, who waited at the foot, with a dazzling smile. She took his arm and they walked toward the music. Jeremy smiled and nodded his head. Just like Steed to walk off smiling with the same woman he had been incensed with just the other day.

They stopped at the edge of the dance floor. Steed turned to face her.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance Mrs. Peel." He smiled at her with a conspiratorial gleam in his eyes.

"I'd be delighted Mr. Steed." She took his offered hand and they moved out on to the floor.

"Just Steed, Mrs. Peel, everyone calls me Steed." He took her in his arms and they began to dance. "It occurs to me that we have never been formally introduced."

"We aren't in the Victorian era Steed, but I can't believe everyone calls you *just* Steed. Even your Mother?"

"Well, you're right about my mother. She doesn't call me just Steed. When she's angry she calls me all the names I own, after going down the line of all her children. In my childhood it was one good thing about being the youngest. By the time she got to me, I'd usually made good my escape. By the time she found me her temper had cooled, most of the time anyway." He chuckled when he saw her smile and hoped he had succeeded in diverting her attention. She was quite an accomplished dancer he thought. Followed his lead as if they'd danced together

for years. It was always so much nicer when you didn't have to struggle with your partner. Some women just seemed unable *not* to try to lead themselves and it made it difficult, trying to avoid treading on toes. He felt her tense beneath the hand at her waist.

"Mrs. Peel?" he looked at her and could see tears just below the surface.

"Just remembering. Do you know the lyrics to the tune they're playing?"

"I'm sure I've heard them, but all I can recall at present is the title. They can't take that away from me."

"You were talking about your mother and I just started to remember mine. Well that's not true really." She stopped when the music ended. "Let's go sample the wines. I hear Mr. Winthrop has quite a number of highly thought of vintages available tonight."

Steed let the conversation cease and escorted her into the room where the wine tasting was going on. They both tasted several of the wines chatting with the others in the room. As they passed a buzz of conversation started in their wake. By the time they had taken their glasses and retired to a table on the terrace nearly everyone at the party was apprised of the altered status of two of the most talked about guests that night.

"What were you remembering?" he asked when they were settled. The music of the orchestra provided a welcome privacy for their conversation.

"Oh, just..I was thinking hearing you talk. You seem to have had such a happy childhood. All your family. With me it was mostly just my father. No brothers or sisters. And...my mother died when I was very young. I don't know if the memories I have of her are really mine, or things I dreamed, or made up of the things other people told me. I do know that she had a collection of those old seventy-eight records. The big thick ones. I used to play them and I think I can remember her singing. But that may be wishful thinking on my part." She looked into his eyes seeming to ask a question.

"You really must keep those old recordings, my dear, they will be worth a fortune one day." He flippantly tried to lighten the mood.

Embarrassment was written on her face, she dropped her eyes and bent to sip her wine. He immediately knew it was the wrong thing for him to have said and felt like kicking himself when he saw a tear roll down her cheek.

"I guess this wine and the champagne before.." she stopped and raised her hand to her face, stopping the tear with her finger.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips and kissed her fingers where the tear had been. "My dear Mrs. Peel, please forgive me. That was an incredibly insensitive thing to say. I," he stopped and search for the right words. "Will you listen to someone who has lived a little longer than you and has had some

experience with," he paused again, "grief and loss and life in general?" he waited for her response.

She nodded and looked up into his eyes. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. He felt like a lecherous old man because of his earlier thoughts. She really was so young.

"I'm sure you have heard this all before, but I have found that if you examine the things that grieve you too closely and too often, they become... sometimes bigger... more than you can deal with. Lock them in a room in your mind. Don't forget the hurt, but use it only to...help you avoid similar problems in the future. Remember the good things often. If you think you remember your mother singing, don't doubt that it is real. If it makes you happy then it is real. Try to make new memories, happy ones, and you can look at them when things are not going as you want them to. Am I making any sense?" Her eyes hadn't left his during the entire soliloquy. She nodded and a smile played at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let's go make some happy memories."

They danced and laughed and drank 'til nearly dawn. She danced every dance with him and when it was time to leave she was very tipsy. Jeffery had to follow them driving her little blue Lotus. The sky was pearly pink when they pulled up in front of her building.

"Are you alright to go up by yourself?" he asked.

She raised her head from his shoulder and nodded sleepily. He jumped over the door on his side of the Bentley and came around to hand her from the car. He walked her to the door and put her a card in her hand.

"My number if you ever need an escort."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for a memorable evening." She smiled a slightly crooked smile, turned and went into the building.

He stood a moment looking at the closed door 'til Jeffery had parked her car. They got into the Bentley and drove away.

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4. Emma's View

As they crossed the lawn Emma wondered what exactly she was getting herself into. Steed was a difficult man to fathom. She had been blessed or cursed, depending on her mood, with an uncanny ability to read people's motivations. She had always had it. Since childhood she had been able to understand intuitively how to proceed in almost any situation, because she was able to predict how most people would react. She had considered going in to psychiatry, but was disgusted by the barbarity of the state of the discipline. They didn't understand

how the brain worked and so used primitive tools to, it seemed to her, drug patients into lethargic docility or even worse to send jolts of electricity through their skulls to disrupt the delicate neural conducting system and induce a state of befuddled blankness. Progress in the field was being made in such tiny increments she didn't think her active and impatient mind would have been able to stand the restrictions that would have been placed on it. At least they weren't still using insulin shock and icy water immersion. A shiver at the thought ran up her spine.

Almost the only person she was not able to understand was herself. Occasionally she would meet a person who was such an accomplished dissembler that she had difficulty assessing them. She didn't want to think the worst of Steed, but was afraid that this might be the case. On one or two occasions a person's motivations were so well hidden, even from themselves, that on short acquaintance they would be opaque. She wondered if that could be the problem here.

When they reached the house she excused her self and his *necessary accoutrements* remark made her laugh. Maybe that was the reason. He seemed to be stuck in a time far in the future from the one in which he rightfully belonged. A throw back to the past, an earlier chivalrous time. She ignored the conversations going on around her in the ladies room, the sidelong glances. Everyone had been trying to pair her off with a man. Well, she would accommodate them. She would have a wonderful time tonight and give them fodder for their gossip and maybe they would put some other single person on their lonely-hearts list.

He was at the foot of the staircase waiting. He smiled that charming smile and the charade began. She played her part with, she thought, flair. When he took her in his arms and she felt the hard shoulder muscles underneath his jacket she thought Natalie was right. He certainly didn't *feel* effeminate at all. He was a smooth and graceful dancer, communicated the next steps to her with subtle movements of his hands and slight pressures from his body where they chanced to touch. She wondered if he was a horseman. It was the same sort of communication that you get and give when riding a well-schooled horse. Ah, yes, Susan had mentioned polo. The centaur comment. She could understand it now. She recognized the sensual signals he was sending but ignored them.

The music began to filter in. She recognized the tune. Gershwin. He mentioned his childhood in response to a comment she had made. He spoke of his mother and memories, faint memories of her own mother prompted unwanted feelings. He sensed her tension through his hands. She didn't know why but she started to tell him what she was feeling and then the music stopped and she came to herself. Why was she confiding in this perfect stranger? A man she didn't really know or trust.

They made their way to the place where Winthrop was displaying the bounty of his renowned cellar and circulated through the room, her hand on his sleeve. He

was witty and seemed to know everybody. She could feel the eyes follow and hear the renewed conversation in their wake.

He guided her to a table out on the terrace. It was full night now and the stars were bright, with no moon in the sky. The lighting was just that reflected from the house, muted, dim and the music from the orchestra hovered around them and made her feel that they were alone. He looked straight into her eyes and asked what she had been remembering. She didn't know why, she had never been one to confide, but she started to tell him. He made a flippant remark and she realized her mistake. She broke eye contact. Embarrassment and a hurt she couldn't explain combined and a single tear rolled down her cheek. She could not stop it. She made a weak excuse and reached to wipe the tear away.

A strong, gentle hand reached to take hers and he kissed her finger where the salty tear had been. His voice was low as he apologized, asked her forgiveness and offered her advice. She met his eyes and saw a pain in them that was, perhaps, deeper than any she felt. He seemed to open himself and try to make her see a way to heal the hurts she carried with her always. Some, not all, of her distrust melted and she decided to go along with his suggestion and see how the night played out. She smiled at him.

They danced 'til nearly dawn and drank more wine and champagne and brandy until her mine was whirling and she was having to give her body direct commands in order to keep upright. She trusted him to see that she arrived home safely and he didn't disappoint her. She dozed on his shoulder and when they reached her flat he didn't escort her directly to her door but left her at the entrance to the building. It reinforced the trust that had been building all that night and when he handed her a card with his number she knew that she would use it. He was a very mysterious man and she wanted to find out more about him.

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5. Steed's View

Almost two weeks later the phone rang. When he answered, he recognized the voice and smiled at the empty room.

"Is this Steed's escort service?"

"Yes, Mrs. Peel. I don't usually answer the phone myself but everyone else is engaged at present. I can offer my services if needed."

"Yes, well, I was wondering if you might have someone who could go to an opening with me the twenty fifth. At eight. Formal dress required. Just anyone will do, so long as he's taller than I am."

“That narrows the field considerably, but I am looking at the engagement calendar and see that I am the only escort free that particular night. Will I do? Shall I pick you up at seven thirty?”

“I’ll be waiting. See that you’re not late.” She rang off.

He smiled again. He had been wondering if she would call. He thought this whole experiment might be fun.

It went on like that for a couple of months. Every week almost they attended some function that she had been invited to. He enjoyed her company. She was witty and intelligent. Sometimes that intelligence scared him. He wasn’t used to being overshadowed by the mental brilliance of the women he went out with. But it was fun to see her stop pompous intellectuals in their tracks. She was so knowledgeable on so many topics it made him feel slightly slow, but she seemed totally unaware of that fact. When she went off into her mental stratosphere he found if he asked for a translation into plain english, she was really a very good teacher. It was suprising to find he didn’t resent the fact that she was really a very brilliant woman. She asked his advice and treated his greater experience with a sort of respect that soothed his male ego and it somehow balanced out.

As time went by, they began to see each other on a more personal basis. They went horseback riding. She was a quite accomplished rider, though she said she hadn’t ridden much in years. What did years mean to someone so young, he wondered? He took her on long drives to out of the way restaurants he had found that he especially enjoyed. He was delighted when he could show her a place she hadn’t known. They went to the theater, the symphony. He took her dancing. One night the band was playing show tunes. They whirled around the room and he told her, he couldn’t think why, he’d never told anyone before, of his boyhood dream of being as graceful as Fred Astaire. She had laughed and said she thought his dream had come true. When he walked along swinging his umbrella he reminded her of Gene Kelly in that movie, dancing down the sidewalk. He laughed and felt inordinately proud of himself.

They seem to have a lot in common. Liked the same music, had read many of the same authors. They introduced each other to their own favorites and discussed the similarities and differences at length. They had gone to many sporting events. Some she knew well and enjoyed. Some he introduced her to for the first time and was pleased with her enthusiasm, for the most part. Flashes of her temper were occasionally seen, but he found that if met them head on, they dissipated quickly. For all their differences they were a lot alike.

On a couple of occasions they had run across one or another of his colleagues and things had become strained. He didn’t want her exposed to that darker side of his life. He thought, as he came to like her more and more, that she might be repelled by the underlying savagery he knew existed beneath the face he showed to the world. He thought about that night a Winthrop’s party and how he had said he would be as honest as he could. Well, he was being as honest as he thought possible and still maintain the relationship.

He was out of town occasionally on missions for the Ministry, but she had her business and her own pursuits so it wasn't as if they saw each other on a daily basis and it hadn't interfered. Today he returned from having been away for more than three weeks in the eastern block for the Ministry. When he came in there were several messages from her on his answering machine. The last was especially amusing to him.

"Steed, this is the third time I have called. Are the whole lot of you at that escort service on holiday? You may not be getting my business if this continues in the future. You must let the clients know when you will be unavailable. It's only good business to try to maintain a good working relationship with the people whose fees are your bread and butter. Maybe you need some basic business courses. The customer is always right, you know. But seriously, I went to a party unescorted and bandied your name about. It worked to keep off the panting hoards almost as well as your handsome presence. Be advised, if episodes of this nature continue I will be forced to take drastic measures. Let me hear from you. Is everything alright?" This last with a note of true concern.

He called her in the afternoon.

"Mrs. Peel, just.."

"Steed, It's about time you returned my calls. I was beginning to worry."

"No need, my dear, I've been out of town on a little sudden business from the State Department." As he said it he wondered how long this could go on. She was much too intelligent to fool with so weak a cover for very long, but he continued. "I told you that they call on me when I'm needed. This was one of those times. Took a little longer than expected to get things settled down. If I'd known it was going to take so long I would have let you know."

"Weren't there telephones or a postal service in what ever corner of the world you were in?" she sounded just a touch angry.

"Let me take you to dinner tonight Mrs. Peel, we can discuss it. I know a nice little place not far out of town. The food is delightful, and the wine list very good, indeed. There's dancing too if you like."

"What time should I expect you?"

She startled him with her quick acceptance. He had expected to have to grovel a little.

"Shall we say seven. It's about an hour's drive."

"I'll be ready."

He heard the click of the receiver and then nothing. He was just going to have to face it. Being with her was nice, more than nice, but he knew at the beginning,

had always known, that nothing could come of it. She was not someone he could bring himself to hurt. She had affected him in a way he had hardly recognized until it was too late to put a stop to it. He would just tell her tonight. He smiled ruefully to himself. He hadn't even taken her to bed. Never even kissed her, once he let anything start he might not stop, but he felt protective, not fatherly or brotherly at all, but he didn't want to see her hurt by life more than she had been. He knew if they continued she would be. If she knew what he did, the dangers that he faced, the possibility, no likelihood, that he could be killed any day while working for the *State Department* she wouldn't want to face that. He didn't want her to have to.

He prepared himself all day; told himself it was for the best. But she made him feel young and carefree when he was with her. She seems to smooth off some of the rough edges he knew he had and tried to hide from everyone. He wanted to sleep with her, so badly it hurt. He dreamed about it at night. It had just somehow never seemed the right time to take that step. He sensed that it would be a major one for her. Not like the casual affairs that he'd mostly had in his life. So he had held back but knew that she was aware of his desire. There was no way possible for her not to be. His body had betrayed him like an adolescent at times and he'd had to remain seated or make some excuse to leave her for a little until things were under control again.

So he dressed carefully as if he were going to a funeral and in a way he felt he was.

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5. Emma's view

When she woke up that afternoon after arriving at dawn, she had such a hang over and was so mortified she thought she would never dial the number he had given her. But, time seemed to erase the worst of her embarrassment. When an invitation came for a special charity opening for a play that she would enjoy, she thought *all he can say is no*, so she called. She had a wonderful time. It went on like that for several weeks. She always called and he always seemed to be free. She wondered what kind of job he did for the State Department that was so sporadic. He'd said he was called when he was needed, but this was strange. She put out feelers when she talked to anyone she knew connected with that branch of government. Her company had several defense contracts and she met with various government representatives fairly often. They all knew him it seemed, but would steer the conversation in another direction when she pressed for details.

One evening as he took her home he stopped at a small club he knew. They sat and listened to the small band and talked for an hour or two before he dropped her off. After that they began to see each other fairly often. She discovered that he was a very athletic person. He kept a bay gelding at a stable not far from his home and knew the exactly the horse to hire for her. She hadn't ridden in so long

she was sore for days but after that it became almost a weekly ritual. She thought of buying the mare but decided against it. She thought this might not last too long and she knew she wouldn't ride alone. It brought back too many memories.

They went to symphonies and musicals. He was really a closet Gershwin fan. He could sing, off key, all the old songs, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Noel Coward, and just about any other composer from that era she could name. He would serenade her on long trips until she would finally beg him to stop. He would laugh and tell her if she would sing along loud enough she could drown him out. He took her dancing and taught her to tango. She had taken the usual lessons, ballet and ballroom. The Tango was mysteriously absent. He laughed and said he understood. "All those adolescent bodies pressed together would cause any sensible adult to question the propriety and advisability of letting that happen, even chaperoned." He seemed to know every restaurant in the country, their proprietors and which had the best wines.

She really was getting to like him, maybe too well. He was such fun. He seemed to be a boy sometimes. Peter had never acted that young, been that willing to make a fool of himself, not even when she had first known him. And he *had* been just a boy then. Steed didn't seem to care that she was intelligent and sometimes showed it when they were together. He seemed to get a kick if she challenged an acknowledged expert in some field. If she was proven right, he seemed almost to take the credit for it. Peter had not wanted her to *display her superiority*, his words, he seemed threatened somehow. She found herself comparing the two of them more and more often and she felt guilty, disloyal some how.

She had found Steed sexually attractive from the first, well almost the first time she had met him. Since that night at the Winthrop party, and the attraction had grown the more she got to know him. More and more it had become difficult for her to ignore it. She was also aware that she was attractive to him. Even menus in laps or racing schedules held strategically couldn't mask his interest. He hadn't made an advance; well the occasional innuendo and sometimes she saw a look in his eyes that made her stomach turn over.

She argued with herself for sometime. This was a big step. She faced it, she was afraid. Even though this was the 1964, she had been raised in the forties and fifties. Nice girls, women, she corrected herself did not enter into uncommitted relationships and she had heard enough about Steed to know he wouldn't offer marriage or possibly even a monogamous relationship. She'd overheard snippets of gossip in restaurants and once in a ladies room. She was minding her own business in a stall. She hadn't intended to hear, but there was really no way she could help *but* hear. She couldn't very well leave just at that particular moment. Anonymous voices, "Well, yes I saw her. I'd heard she and John Steed were an item, but I saw him with a very pretty blond woman." "I just don't know what to say. Last week he was in a restaurant with a" Emma had coughed loudly then. The voices stopped and she had waited until she heard the footsteps leave before exiting.

She had taken steps to be prepared, just in case. No one could accuse her of being stupid. She had gone to see her gynecologist and blithely lied about nonexistent symptoms. She thought he looked at her from under lowered lids in a leering way that put her hackles up. It was her life and she would live it in anyway she saw fit. She lifted her chin just a little higher. She left his office with a prescription for birth control pills, but hesitated to get it filled. Finally she did. The instructions said she must wait at least one cycle. She was a little relieved. A breathing space to reconsider.

When a machine answered her calls for three weeks she was at first not too concerned. There had been times when he was away. She had other things to occupy her time, but she had to admit that she missed him. During the second week with no contact she began to be concerned. She made some calls, pulled in a few favors. She obtained copies of his service records, his transcript from Oxford. With the bits and pieces she had gleaned from the gossip she had heard she began to see that there was another side to this charming man she thought she knew. She remembered how tense and edgy he had become on a couple of occasions when they ran across colleagues of his.

As she put two and two together she was at first furious. How could she have known him for so long and known so little about him. He was one of those dissemblers. She'd go flush those little pills right down the toilet. To think she'd even considered it. Sex wasn't all it was cracked up to be anyway. She'd decided shortly after her marriage that there were two kinds of women. Those that closed their eyes and thought of England and those that were portrayed in the romance novels. She had decided she fell someplace in between. She had loved Peter, she truly had, but she had never been transported to those heights she had read about. She felt tender toward him and tried to please him, but had finally decided that the phrase she had heard in church "wives submit yourselves unto your husbands" had been written just for her. She had tried to research the situation but the dearth of material about it had defeated her purpose. What was available seemed to be written for and about men. The usual state of affairs she thought.

She smoldered for several days. If she could have found him during that time she would have, she didn't know what she would have done, but it definitely wouldn't have been pleasant for him. As she turned the whole thing over in her mind day after day she began to try to see his side. There was the State Secrets law to consider. If he were one of those James Bond type people he wouldn't be able to tell just anyone. But she wasn't just anyone, or maybe she was one of those James Bond women the misogynist Fleming wrote about to him. No, he had always been a gentleman. *She* had been the one planning the seduction. She remembered the night of the party, when he had said he would be as honest as it was possible for him to be. Well, maybe he had been.

She was in a quandary. What should she do? If she continued as if she didn't know what was going on, would he tell her eventually? Or continue to treat her as just a friend? Did she want that? She thought of Natalie and Jeremy. They had finally broken it off. Natalie had cried on her shoulder and they had talked of how total honesty was necessary in good relationships. Was that what had put such a

strain on her marriage at the last? She and Peter had never been totally honest. He didn't even know how she thought. She knew she hadn't been, could never bring herself to upset him by saying what she really felt. Steed was right, total honesty was impossible, but still, she *liked* him so much. She felt so different when they were together. He made her feel she *was* what she wanted to be, just herself, and strangely she thought; he had helped to make it possible. Given her the confidence she had lacked, the unconditional approval she had looked for from her father and from Peter, but could never seem to get. No matter how she tried.

So she finally decided to proceed as planned. When he called this afternoon she had almost panicked. It gave her very little time. She left the office immediately and went home to set the stage. Everything was ready at seven when the doorbell rang.

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6. Unified View

Steed stood at the door screwing up the courage to ring the bell and do what must be done. He finally pressed the button. Emma heard the chimes and her courage almost failed her, but she put down the spoon, dropped the needle onto the record she had ready on the stereo, and hurried to the door. She took a deep breath, arranged a smile on her lips and opened it.

"Steed, right on time." Her insides trembled at the sight of him. Dressed to perfection, as always, in a three-piece, navy, chalk striped suit, a heavy gold watch chain visible across the vest. His jacket was unbuttoned and she couldn't help but notice the bulge at his groin. "Come in, there's been a slight change of plan." She hoped her voice was steadier than her heartbeat.

He was glad she spoke first. This might be harder than he thought. She was dressed in one of those fitted, flowing dresses that he loved. The neckline was so low her small breasts were almost exposed. He felt a stirring and removed his bowler and held it to hide his reaction to the sight of her.

"Mrs. Peel, what is that delicious aroma? Italian?" If they were going to stay here it was going to be a very trying night indeed. Being in public would have helped.

"Yes, everything is almost ready. I thought rather than drive for hours we could just eat in and catch up on the last few weeks. Come in, take off your jacket, make yourself comfortable. I'll get us something to drink. Sherry? Brandy? Scotch?" She turned to go into the kitchen.

"Sherry." He called after her. He looked around uncomfortably. If he didn't know better he'd think she was trying to seduce him. It was evident she had on no brassiere. He could see her nipples outlined through the thin fabric of the dress. He folded his jacket and lay it on the table just inside the door with his bowler and

umbrella. In her minimally furnished flat there was no hat rack. He had just seated himself on the couch and placed a cushion on his lap when she entered carrying a decanter and two glasses.

“You pour, I’ll just go and drain the pasta. You could come and toss the salad if you would.” She took the glass that he had handed to her and looked down for his answer.

“I’ll be in, in just a moment” he watched her turn toward the kitchen and tried to think gruesome thoughts. If he could just keep his eyes off her, he took a deep breath and rose to follow.

She was rinsing the fettuccini before she mixed it into the Alfredo sauce waiting for it. She pointed at the salad bowl on the worktable. “There it is, the vinaigrette is there beside it. Mix it to your taste, I always seem to get too much or too little.”

She leaned over and took the garlic bread from the oven. The soft fabric of her dress conforming to her hips tantalized him. He stepped closer to the table than was necessary and with his back to her began to follow her instruction, Rugby statistics running through his mind.

“Did you hear the new album? I bought it just the other day. I thought you would like it.” This as she mixed the pasta into the sauce. The strains of Gershwin filled the flat. “It’s just out, a new mix for stereo. Have you heard it?” she continued.

He was having a hard time following her conversation. He cleared his throat. “I’ll just take this out to the table.” He held the large bowl rather lower than he normally would have and walked out the door without waiting for a reply. Seated himself quickly when he reached the table.

She smiled to herself. When she entered with the main course and bread he was already seated. “I’ll just go back for the wine. Do you want to light the candles? The matches are over on the table by the door.”

Hurriedly he found the matches and lit the candles beginning to think she was doing this just to goad him.

She smiled on her return. She wondered how he had gotten the candles lit and returned to his chair so quickly. She stood directly behind him; her left hand resting on his shoulder and leaned across his right, letting her body press against him as she filled his glass. She didn’t know how she could have been more blatant unless she’d met him naked at the door.

As her small breast brushed his cheek he finally realized she was trying to seduce him and doing a very good job of it. He might as well stop this right now. “Mrs. Peel, I..., we..., do you remember a conversation we had about,”

“Making happy memories?” she interrupted. “Yes, that’s what we have been doing and I’ve been wanting to thank you for that advice. It’s some of the best, wisest I’ve ever gotten.”

She met his eyes and smiled. He couldn’t help it. He returned her smile. They finished dinner, kept the conversation light. He relaxed during the meal and was

able to help her clear the table and wash the dishes. He washed. She dried and put away. When they were finished and there was nothing to distract them, he became uneasy, she was anxious. The sensual undercurrent was evident to both of them. It seemed to hang in the air.

They returned to the living room. Brandies were poured. Steed walked to the large wall of windows and stood looking out into the night. He took a deep breath. Better to get it over with now.

Emma settled on a corner of the couch and was deciding what her next step should be when his voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Mrs. Peel, have you talked to your friend, Natalie recently?”

“Yes, do you mean about her ending things with Jeremy?”

“Yes, exactly. Earlier when I spoke of that conversation...that’s what I was referring to. The honesty, communication part of the,”

“Oh, You mean about your job at the *State Department*?” a slightly sarcastic tone.

He whirled around to face her.

“Don’t worry, no one violated the State Secrets thing. I just did a little probing and put two and two together and got five.” she smiled hesitantly.

His eyebrows lowered and the crease between them deepened. His gray eyes narrowed slightly and the look on his face was one she hadn’t seen before.

“Steed? Will it make a difference to you if I know? I thought, well, I thought it would make things easier, not harder.”

“I don’t think you’re aware of everything that’s involved.”

“And you’d have to *kill* me if I learned the truth?” her voice rising and angry “Like a spy movie?”

“No, but there are dangers, real dangers, not like in stories, it’s not a game.” His voice was hard; it almost scared her. “People can and sometimes do die. I don’t want you involved in it. It’s better that way, easier.”

“Easier for who? You? Don’t I have the right to make my own decisions? Take my own chances?” She was on her feet, closing the distance between them. Her temper taking over. He turned his back. “Look at me, don’t shut me out.” She almost screamed.

“I can’t talk when you’re not going to be rational.” He turned to face her. “You won’t hear anything I’m trying to say.” He stepped around her heading for the door.

“Steed.” Her voice was softer, the tone still angry but not the previous uncontrolled note. “Can’t you just talk to me about it? I won’t make you divulge any secrets for God’s sake.” She came up behind him and put her hand tentatively on his shoulder. “Come finish your brandy. It was specially bought just for you.” Her voice had become normal again, coaxing.

He let himself be led to the couch. The touch of her hand stirred up the earlier reaction. She refilled his glass and he stared to speak.

“Tonight proves my point, we’ve gone about as far as we can before this,” he paused, “relationship has to progress. I have a career, a life that is at times dangerous. You’ve experienced loss. You’ve bounced back. You’ll do well in life. You’ve got everything you need to be all you want to be. I wouldn’t want to be the cause of anymore pain for you. I know..., I know there are limits to what a person can bear and not be irreparably damaged.” He stopped and just stared into her eyes.

She was silent for what seemed a very long time. She reached up and touched his cheek. “I think some things might be worth taking that chance.” She leaned up and kissed him.

His reaction was immediate. His hand came up and cradled her head. The kiss lasted a very long time, what started softly became more passionate until Emma’s lips began to feel swollen. He broke the kiss and his lips began to touch lightly on her cheeks, her eyes and then her neck. His free hand came to her breasts as the other slid down her back. His mouth was on hers again his tongue exploring, his fingers teasing her nipple. Her hands went to his hair. She let her fingers slide in the thick mane and held his mouth on hers. Her body arched toward him, pressing her breasts against his hand. When his hand left to slide inside her dress she thought for a second he was going to stop and moaned against his mouth. Her right hand slid from his hair and she began to unbutton the vest. The watch chain confused her and she pulled back to see what was happening.

He looked down, freed his hands and began to take off his vest and unbutton his shirt. She was mesmerized as she watched. She looked up and saw him watching her face. His eyes were very dark and a small smile she hadn’t seen before softened his face. She reached around behind her to unzip her dress and was surprised to find the zipper already half way down. They watched each other until each was naked from the waist up. He pulled her to him and began to kiss her again. She closed her eyes and gave herself to the sensations his exploring hands created. Her hands rested on his shoulders but soon began their own explorations. She felt the hard muscles under the smooth skin, the crisp hair on his chest. She followed the trail that led down to his belt and on down over his trousers to the bulge she had seen earlier. She outlined the long hard shape of it

and when she pressed her hand against him it was his turn to press back and moan.

She pulled away reluctantly, took his hand and led him to her bed. His eyes never left hers. When they were beside the bed she began to unbuckle his belt. Her hands trembled. He smiled that small smile as he took over. She watched and began to have a tiny doubt when she saw the size of his erect penis when it was freed. He saw the hesitation in her face and didn't know whether to be proud or reassuring. He closed the small space between them and slid her dress down over her hips. Hooked his fingers in her underwear and they too slid to the floor. She stepped out of them and pressed her full length against him, blocking her view of size of him, so much bigger than Peter had been. His arms went round her.

"Emma, before we go any further, do I.. do you.." his voice was low against her cheek.

"It's taken care of." She smiled against his neck. He had thought of the practical during this and he had called her Emma. She knew there was a reason she liked him. Her hands ran up his back and she pulled them onto the bed together.

The kissing and exploring began again. He whispered "You're so beautiful," and she smiled and returned the compliment. "So are you." His mouth was on her breasts, suckling each in turn while his hand when to the hair at her pubis and beyond into the soft folds between her legs. The feelings he created as his fingers explored gently, probing, entering, retreating and finally starting to manipulate her swelling clitoris made her press herself against his hand, moaning softly. His lips left her breast.

The cool air touching the warm, wet nipple was startling, but he captured her attention when he moved down and spread her thighs, leaning down until his lips and tongue burrowed in to the hot moist center where her thighs met. Reflexively she tensed her thighs; he pressed them apart with his hands and continued. The sensations he was causing were feelings she had never experienced before. Her breathing quicken and she pressed herself against his face. He raised up looked at her. "Do you like it?" his voice hoarse. She couldn't answer but raised her hips toward him. A momentary renewal, then "Tell me if you like it." His voice demanding that she answer. "Yes, yes" she breathed and he returned. Her hands went down to tangle in his hair. His tongue continued and his fingers entered her, moving slowly then more quickly. As she felt the beginning of a muscular contraction contact was abruptly broken. She looked down and saw his body moving up to cover hers.

She felt the throbbing heat of his penis press against her seeking entry. She spread her legs wider and reached down to accommodate him. The sudden thrill as he entered and she received the hard smooth length of him sent a sudden shiver down her spine. He began to move slowly and she was almost immediately in the same state of near completion his tongue and fingers had induced. He seemed to sense it and stopped. "Don't stop, please" she thrust her hips against him in a desperate attempt to finish, her legs wrapped around his

thighs and her hands went to his buttocks to press him farther, deeper. He began to thrust again faster and faster until all of her consciousness was focused only on the sensation he was causing, building higher until at last the exquisite explosion, an involuntary arching spasm as she cried out his name.

She was aware as the delicious tingle radiated through her that he had reached the apex seconds later, the same arching and the inarticulate cry, the pulsing heat and the rhythmic contractions of his buttocks. He rested on her. She was dimly aware of the weight and the damp heat of him. She clasped him tightly to her. *With my body I thee worship*, she understood what it meant now. Kissed the soft place where his neck curved into his shoulder. Tasted the salty male taste of him on her lips.

He raised up on his elbows, lowered his mouth to hers. Kissed her gently and pushed up. "No, stay here a while." She didn't want him to leave. Wanted to stay like this always. He kissed her softly and lowered himself to cover her again. Her hands roamed over the skin of his back, feeling the muscles relax. Felt his breathing return to normal. Felt their hearts beating together gradually slow.

He did roll off her then, a slight sucking sound as their sweating bodies parted. He faced her on his side propped on his elbow. He smiled that small smile, *her* smile she thought, and his eyes roamed up and down her body. He reached out and touched the beads of perspiration between her breasts. Brought his finger to his lips and tasted it.

"More garlic on the garlic bread next time, Mrs. Peel"

She pushed his elbow out from under him, "If you don't like it, next time you cook."

They laughed. And Gershwin played in the background.

"Is this what you had in mind by happy memories?" she asked.

"Not precisely, but close enough, my dear, close enough."

The end