

**The Accident**  
**By Dr. Mona Morstein**  
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Chapter One

It was a lovely day, Steed thought, as he motored down a quiet side street after having spent the morning doing some shopping. He was glad to be back in London; Germany was really such a dreary country, two months there finding a mole and setting up a new East side connection was enough to have his heart aching for the blossoming fields of an English summer countryside. And, he wasn't too happy to have had to shoot the fellow. The best way to forget the whole unpleasant business was to distract his mind by acquiring a few new suits and some bottles of a magnificent claret he had discovered right before this assignment had arisen.

Since it was near noon, Steed had the idea to lunch at a French Bistro he liked in Hertfordshire; then, at four he had to meet with His Nibs on the decision of his new partner. Mrs. Gale had left for America three months ago, and, as Steed preferred to have a female associate for those times when he needed a partner, His Nibs and him were to decide which woman Steed should be assigned among Steed's Ministry female colleagues. The problem was, Steed had at one time or another met the few women in The Ministry, and while he fully respected their abilities, he had not really found one he believed he would work well with. And besides, Steed felt using a trusted amateur, one without any association to undercover work, would be a much more invaluable asset in enabling them to investigate through-out the country with less suspicions arising than if he and another agent worked in tandem. Steed knew people wondered about him and what exactly he did in life; to work with someone without such suspicions hanging over her, as he had with Mrs. Gale, was his ideal. Unfortunately, neither Steed nor His Nibs had found the right amateur woman, so it seemed that Steed was resigned to selecting a woman from The Ministry rolls.

But, as he motored slowly down the street on his way to a delectable pair of lamb chops, his eyes casually glanced into his rearview mirror and caught a hold of a nymph in an open-top Lotus, the roof down allowing him to gaze upon her high gorgeous cheekbones and silky auburn hair. He watched her for an extra moment until he suddenly espied a cat dart across the street right in front of his car. Slamming on his brakes, the Bentley came to a screeching stop, only to be pushed slightly forward as the car behind him crashed into his rear.

Eyeing the cat safely arrive at the opposite kerb, Steed exclaimed, "My goodness me," and grabbing his umbrella from beside him, jumped up until he was sitting on the top of the driver's seat, then climbed over the door of his car—

his usual manner of egress—and smoothly sauntered over to the woman in the Lotus, who was just getting out of her car as well.

Emma Peel was 28, tall, wealthy, and highly intelligent. She wore a fashionable dress that flattered her thin yet shapely build. Her husband, Peter, had been an air force test pilot whose plane had been reported as crashing into the Amazon a year ago. Neither the plane nor his body had ever been found, and, at this young age, Emma had had to get used to the grief and emptiness of widowhood. She had withdrawn from all society for many months after Peter's death—as she had come, finally, to term it instead of “temporary disappearance”—and then, with the encouragement of her friends and business associates, had slowly crawled out of her shell to mingle, in a still distant manner, with the world again. The day before, on a whim to satisfy a friend, Emma had let herself be taken to a fortune teller. Generally disbelieving all such supernatural endeavors, Emma had been assured by her friend that this fortune teller was the real thing, authentic, accurate, and honest. At the end of the rather unimpressive reading, the fortune teller had told Emma that she would soon meet a tall, dark, stranger who would deeply affect her life. She had laughed, paid the bill, and disregarded the whole session.

However, she could not help noticing the over six foot height, brown hair, and handsome face of the man who had so casually lept over the door of his car and was now walking toward her, swinging an umbrella. She also couldn't help noticing how wide his shoulders were on top of his lean body.

“Good afternoon,” Steed said, lifting his bowler slightly in greeting, “Terribly sorry about the precipitous declension of my brake pedal, but there was a small cat involved.” Steed didn't mention that he had been distracted by staring at her in his mirror. He joined her in looking at her crumpled front bumper and bonnet.

“Yes, well,” Mrs. Peel answered, “your precipitous declension, as you say, has ruined my front end.” Mrs. Peel was not really angry with him, for she realized that if she hadn't been staring at the back of his bowler head, intrigued by both his hat and car while she had driven behind him, she would have been able to brake sooner and avoid hitting him. After all, an immaculately dressed man in a bowler driving around a quiet side street in London in a 1928 Bentley was not something one saw everyday. It showed a certain confident, quirky gentleman style that the man comfortably portrayed.

Steed noticed that Emma's own body's front end looked just fine to him, and decided to stay focused on the incident with the cars. “Dear me,” he added, pointing to the damage with his umbrella, “it seems poor Bessie here has inflicted some little damage on your Lotus, while escaping injury herself.” He smiled at his Bentley and gave it a couple of pats. “That's my good girl.”

“While I appreciate your concern for the feelings of your car,” Mrs. Peel drawled, “I wonder if you might tell me who you are and then I think we should exchange the details of our insurance companies.”

“Of course, how unforgivably rude of me. Steed, John Steed, at your service, madam,” he said. “And you are...?”

“Mrs. Peel.” At those words Steed felt a tinge of disappointment, which disappeared immediately as she continued her introduction, “Mrs. Emma Peel.”

Ah, he thought, that would explain her lack of a wedding ring. She was young to be a widow, he thought, and felt a brief touch of sadness for her. Then suddenly his mind clicked and out of the innumerable names he had stored in his head, Peter Peel jumped out. Had been a test pilot, hadn't he? Crashed somewhere over a year ago? Aside from the fact that his growling stomach would have to wait a bit longer to be treated to a delectable meal, Steed had an inspiration that this might turn into a very useful coincidence.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Peel, I have excellent insurance," he assured her. "And I shall take full pecuniary responsibility for this unfortunate affair."

"That's very good of you, Mr. Steed," Mrs. Peel smiled. Of all the people in her social circle, which was very wide, she could not really recall anyone quite like him. An umbrella! of all things, on a beautiful summer day. He was a positive throwback to Edwardian England.

"A gentleman can do no less," Steed replied. "And, please, call me Steed. Everyone does."

At that moment a lorry turned the corner of the street and approached where Steed and Emma stood by their cars. Steed's head slowly turned to look at the lorry and its occupants as they passed by and then repeated its smooth movement by once again drawing his expressionless face to Mrs. Peel.

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear," Steed said, taking off his bowler and handing both it and his umbrella to a surprised Mrs. Peel, "but may I impose upon your courtesy to hold my hat and broly for a moment?"

With those items somewhat thrust into her hands, Mrs. Peel was forced to comply. "But, what..." she began, and then the most extraordinary thing occurred.

This lean, languid, debonair man suddenly erupted into a hurricane of energy and took off running down the street after the lorry at phenomenal speed. Emma stood temporarily stunned and speechless, and then, as if by reflex, began trotting down the street after him, still toting his paraphernalia.

Steed raced down the street himself surprised that he had run into two of the most wanted international criminals right on Crowdon Place. There had been rumors that they might come to England for some nefarious deeds, but no one had seen or heard of them yet. They were dangerous men, involved in everything from drugs to bombs; one, at least, was known to carry a gun. Since he was wearing one of his favorite suits, Steed hoped apprehending the two men didn't get it too wrinkled or torn. It would put a decided time crimp in his day if he wound up having to go back to his flat and change clothes before lunch.

The lorry slowed as it approached the upcoming stop sign and Steed impulsively leapt up onto the driver's side step leading into the cab. In one quick motion he opened the door, punched the shocked driver as hard as he could maintaining that awkward position, then grabbed the driver by his shirt front and yanked him out the door onto the street, where he landed unconscious after hitting his head. Steed then swung into the cab, put the gear in neutral, and applied the handbrake whilst almost simultaneously using his left leg to hit the passenger's right arm, knocking a gun out of his hand. The lorry now stopped, Steed punched the passenger directly on his jaw, and then clamped his strong

hand around the man's neck and flattened his face into the dashboard a few times before dragging him out the door and letting him fall to the pavement next to his partner as Steed jumped down from the lorry.

Glancing around the quiet street, Steed noticed the only other witness to his actions was Mrs. Peel, who had followed him up the street. Steed smiled as he waved at her, and then peremptorily patted down his pockets, a playful frown creasing his lips when he realized he couldn't find what he needed.

"I say, Mrs. Peel," he asked, "you wouldn't happen to have some handcuffs, or, perhaps, a ball of twine on you?"

Unable to refrain from blinking her eyes several times, Mrs. Peel stammered, "Uh, no, I don't."

"Well, then, we'll just have to improvise." Steed searched the unconscious men's pockets, pulling out two knives, which he also calmly handed to Mrs. Peel, who, shaking her head, put them in his bowler. The driver began to stir and Steed sat him up only to punch him into unconsciousness again, laying him back down gently to the street.

Standing up, Steed looked at Mrs. Peel rather contritely. "I'm awfully sorry for the violence, Mrs. Peel; it just doesn't fit a lovely day, does it? I hope you will allow me to make amends for the accident and this ugly matter—would you join me for a delicious midday repast at a charming Bistro I know just outside town?"

"I'm sorry, I already have a lunch date," Mrs. Peel said. It seemed to her that she had wondered onto the staging of some absurd play. She almost pinched herself to make sure she was still awake.

"Oh, how very disappointing. Well, perhaps another time."

Steed climbed back into the lorry and removed the keys from the ignition. Walking around the back of the lorry, he unlocked the door and opened it. Tsk, tsk, tsking at the box of missile parts he espied, Steed carried each man into the back of the lorry, setting them on the floor and then closed and locked the door again. He brushed his suit off, checking for wrinkles or tears, satisfied that neither were present in any appreciable manner. Then Steed looked around the street again and with an "Ah!" excused himself once more from Emma's presence and darted into a phone booth at the street corner. He spoke on the phone for a few minutes and then rejoined Mrs. Peel at the lorry, taking his bowler and umbrella from her. He placed the knives under the driver's seat in the lorry, then replaced the hat on his head at a very calculated angle. Once more facing Mrs. Peel as a well-dressed gentleman, Steed swung his broly in a full circle a few times.

"Ah, that's better," he said. "Shall we return to our cars? The tow-truck will arrive soon for your car." He motioned for Mrs. Peel to walk beside him and they began the return to their cars at the other end of Crowdon Place.

"The damage isn't that bad, Mr. Steed," Emma said, easily keeping pace with Steed's slow stroll, "I'm sure I can still drive it."

"Just Steed, please. No respectable gentleman would allow a beautiful woman to appear in a crinkled car—it would be too unacceptably incongruous. No, no, a tow-truck it must be."

"But I do have a lunch date to get to. In fact, I'm already late."

“Have faith! I shall not desert you dessertless!” Steed said. Before Mrs. Peel could respond he added, “Look at that Bentley shimmering in the sunlight; what lines, what style. It’s a sight to equal the Mona Lisa.”

They walked in silence for another few steps. Finally Mrs. Peel could take it no longer.

“Who are those two men you just...dispatched?” she asked.

“Oh, those two? Just some fellows who trampled my begonias. Really inexcusable crime, that.”

Mrs. Peel was not known for cowering from the answers she sought. “You must work for the government. M.I.5, perhaps?” she persisted.

“Must I?” Steed asked. “Well, I’m certainly not doing any more work today. No, today is a perfect day for driving out of town, enjoying a quiet gourmet meal, then taking a walk around our green and glorious English countryside. Do you ride, my dear?”

Emma thought she had never met a more exasperating, interesting, slippery, intriguing man in her life. She watched him gliding down the street, an athletic grace pervading his stride. “You’re not going to tell me anything about all that back there, are you?” she asked.

Steed smiled at her, something he found it inordinately easy to do. “Actually, no. Why spoil such a delightful stroll with a beautiful woman by addressing the boring details of an unpleasant happening.” Steed raised his umbrella and pointed at his car. “The Bentley, by the way, can turn corners much better than one would expect, purrs along magnificently at 70 mph, and you are already familiar with its quite sensitive braking system. I know you modern women enjoy the elan of the sports car, but, really, I firmly believe one just cannot beat tradition and grace when it comes to driving.” Steed looked at Mrs. Peel again, his eyes unreadable. “And when it comes to other things as well,” he added surreptitiously. He could see the firmness in her eyes and lips, and the intelligence in her eyes. A very attractive combination, Steed thought.

Moments after they had arrived back at their cars, a black sedan with three men in it turned onto the street and Steed went to meet it twenty feet from Mrs. Peel, first tipping his bowler to her in excuse for once more leaving her. He spoke too softly to the driver for Emma to hear, but she did see him give the lorry’s keys to a man in the back seat. The car drove down the street, stopped by the lorry and Mrs. Peel saw one man get out and enter it. He started it up and then drive it off following the sedan. She wondered where they were taking the lorry, and the men inside it, but knew it was futile to ask.

Steed came back to the Bentley, and opened the passenger side door for her. Motioning her to enter his car, he said, “Allow me to drive you to your luncheon date, Mrs. Peel. The tow-truck should be here within five minutes, but there is no need to make you or your companion wait further. Steed’s taxi service is now up and running.”

“But, look here, Mr. Steed,” Mrs. Peel complained as she approached Steed and the open door, deliberately using the “Mr.” to maintain some control of the situation, “who is towing my car? Where will it be taken? How will I get around until it is fixed?”

“Just Steed, please,” Steed said, yet again without any irritability in his voice. “And once more I can only ask you to trust me. All will be well for you and your car. It shall be fixed up in no time—actually I was assured it will be delivered to your apartment building by noon tomorrow.”

“But, you don’t even know where I live.”

“The telephone book shall suffice, I suppose, then,” Steed smiled, as she climbed into the Bentley. Emma was sure he would not have to rely on the phone book. Suddenly her stomach twittered and her heart thrilled as she realized he *did* work for some aspect of the government. Some important aspect. He had been able to get a great deal accomplished with just one short phone call. The arrival of those men, getting her car fixed so quickly, and delivered to her home...Very impressive and efficient. He seemed harmless enough in dealing with her, at least, and he had been able amuse and intrigue her, even if just for a few minutes. Mrs. Peel realized, though, that through all of this they hadn’t exchanged driver’s licenses or his insurance, nor called the police. He was very smooth, she gave him that. Mrs. Peel decided to play along and give him the benefit of the doubt until tomorrow noon to see what happened.

Steed walked around to the driver’s side, threw his umbrella in the back seat, and hopped over the door sliding down until he was seated properly behind the steering wheel. They drove in relative silence to the restaurant Emma had named, except for Steed’s commentary on the tender salmon he had had there once, his recommendation for Mrs. Peel’s lunch choice. Other speech seemed to be unnecessary and unwanted by both of them, and each sat with their own thoughts of their shared afternoon encounter.

Upon arriving at the restaurant, Mrs. Peel opened the door before Steed could get out and do it for her, and stepped out. Steed raised his bowler to her, “It’s has been charming to meet you, Mrs. Peel.”

He’s a dangerous man, watch out, Emma suddenly thought to herself, smiling outwardly at him, but she did not elucidate to herself *how* exactly he was dangerous to her. “Well, Mr. Steed, it has been, at least, interesting. I look forward to seeing my car tomorrow.” She couldn’t believe she was trusting this man so completely. He didn’t really inspire trust, he was too hard to pin down for her to feel that should could trust him, yet here she was, leaving her beloved Lotus in his hands just like that.

“My dear, you shall not be disappointed.” Then Steed surprised her by picking up on her thoughts. “Once you see how trustworthy I am, perhaps I might convince you to share that day in the countryside with me.”

Emma smiled, “Perhaps.” And then she walked into the restaurant, Steed not taking his eyes off of her. When one had been an active, successful agent as long as Steed had, one developed a somewhat eerie ability to size people up rather quickly, getting a feeling for who they were and what they were capable of. Steed’s analysis of Mrs. Peel was quite favorable in all the categories he could think up, and he had a new idea to bring up to His Nibs later this afternoon. At that he drove off towards one more chore before he could finally get to his lamb.

Mrs. Peel, much to her mirth, found herself ordering the salmon for lunch. After apologizing to her friend Gloria for being late due to a minor car accident, she kept quiet about the extraordinary events that had followed it. While they were eating their salad and Emma was trying to pay attention to what her friend was saying about some Lord's profligate son, a rather indiscriminate man dressed in a plain blue suit came into the restaurant and once he had made eye contact with Mrs. Peel, came over to her.

"Forgive me, madam, for interrupting your lunch. However, I have been instructed to give you these keys."

Mrs. Peel swallowed some lettuce, reached for the keys, and asked, "By whom? What are they to?"

"By a gentleman, madam. They belong to a blue Lotus open-top, parked outside," the man replied, "Your hire car until tomorrow noon." He then handed her an envelope which smelled sweetly of lavender. "Here is a note for you, as well," he added, then bid her and her friend good afternoon, turned and left.

"A hire car, Emma? But I thought you said the accident was minor. And what on earth is that envelope about?"

Emma looked at the keys dangling from her fingers. She saw the curiosity in her friends' eyes, and for some reason felt that it was very important to not say anything about what had happened, even though that Mr. Steed was not making it easy for her. It was as if she was being tested for something, and he was, well, tempting her in some way.

Emma put the envelope in her purse and dug her fork back into the salad, "Oh, really, Linda, it's just nothing important. Now, tell me more about Lord Edderly's son." Emma was never very interested in gossip on the most boring of days; on a day like today, it seemed like she was just aware of Gloria's lips moving, but couldn't focus on anything she said. Luckily, Gloria was a very loquacious woman and thoroughly enjoyed having the chance to carry most of the conversation, so Emma's silent thoughts of Steed did not put a damper on Gloria's fun.

Finally the lunch was over. They left the restaurant and saw the Lotus parked across the street, just as the blue-suited man had said. Waiting until Linda, who had never learned to drive, got into a cab and drove off waving good-bye, Emma then crossed the street and approached the car. The roof was up and Mrs. Peel could see a lovely bouquet of roses placed on the driver's side of the seat. She unlocked the car and entered, moving the bouquet next to her, not missing the gorgeous aroma of the red flowers filling the tiny car. She then took out the envelope and read the note inside:

Mrs. Peel,

I certainly couldn't leave you without transportation for the rest of the day. The hire car will be picked up when your car is delivered tomorrow. I hope the salmon was as good as my lamb shall be.

Steed

Mrs. Peel didn't know whether she should be angry or bemused. Mr. Steed had gall, that was absolutely true, yet it was equally matched by a charm that pervaded his demeanor. She drove off with a feeling that she had not seen the last of Mr. John Steed, and while her mind set itself with diffidence, her heart beat just a little faster at the thought.

## Friendly Fate

### Chapter Two

Two weeks later, Mrs. Emma Peel stood with her friend Gloria Wimble in the first floor drawing room of Sir Paul Buttonsby's Surrey home sipping a fine dry white wine. The large glass doors leading to the patio were open and the fading blue sky of a late summer evening melded beautifully into the majestic oaks that had been in the Buttonsby back lawn for over four hundred years. Although Emma was still not at her social best, she found Sir Paul to be a delightful old man, gentle and kind. The fact that Sir Paul had known and respected her father added a warmth to his home for her, and so, knowing it was good for her to continue her efforts to leave her house, she had accepted his invitation for his summer party. Sir Paul had a party in each season of the year; Emma had not been to the winter or spring affairs.

Mrs. Peel smiled at the short thin man with welcoming eyes as he approached her and Gloria where they stood off to the side of the doors.

"Emma, my dear, dear girl. I'm so pleased you were able to make it here tonight. You always did brighten up a room just by appearing in it," he said, smiling so wide, it seemed to take up half his face. "And Miss Wimble, very glad to see you as well. Hope you're taking good care of Emma; she's very valuable to me, you know." His lifted Emma's hand to his lips and kissed it fondly.

Emma was touched by his sincere and effuse words. "Sir Paul, it's always a pleasure," she said.

Her host looked with her his eyes full of compassion. "How are you doing, Emma?" he asked.

She smiled wanly. What, really, could she say to this sweet man? "Fine, Sir Paul. I'm fine."

Being too much a gentleman to pry, he instead turned to Gloria, "And you Miss Wimble, still growing those roses?"

"Yes, Sir Paul. Hope to have a new breed out in a year or two that will be positively electrifying." Gloria had a unique way with words, Emma though, bemused. Electrifying roses?

"Well, good for you. I hope to see both of you again later. But it is ever the host's duty to mingle, even if it means leaving the side of two beautiful women." He strode off with a "Ta-ta".

"What a darling man," Gloria said.

“Yes, he is. I’ve known him for almost my whole life, and I’ve never known him to ever get irritated or angry at anything. One time—“ Emma suddenly cut her story short as she stared across the room at a tall brown-haired man who stepped into the room from the hallway. Pausing briefly, his eyes seemed to take in the entire room in a glance, including Emma and her friend.

“Emma?” Gloria asked, and then followed her eyes. “What on earth are you looking at?”

What *am* I looking at, she thought. Silly me, no need to be surprised. Just because he’s never been at any other party you’ve been to doesn’t mean it couldn’t be coincidence. As if he had sensed her gaze upon him, Steed suddenly turned from chatting with a Colonel, and looked her way, grinned and nodded his head once in a silent hello before returning to his conversation with the military man.

“Oh,” Gloria said, “you’re looking at John Steed.”

Emma’s attention was raptly drawn to her friend. “Do you know him?”

Gloria shook her head slowly, “No. But it seems you know him.”

“Well, we’ve met once, a couple of weeks ago,” she said. “But, no, I don’t know him.”

“I don’t think anyone really ‘knows’ him. He’s rather a bit of an enigma.”

Emma smiled blandly, hiding her interest in another sip of wine. “Do tell.”

Gloria leaned forward, “Well, he has quite a reputation, you know. He’s quite a cricket and polo player; he’s wealthy, but no one knows how he came by his money; he’s quite a man about town as well, charming, debonair.” That last, Emma thought wryly, I figured out myself.

Gloria continued, her voice sinking down to a whisper, “But then, he gets rather mysterious. He disappears, all of sudden, sometimes for months at a time, and no one knows where he goes or what he does. Of course it’s assumed he works for the government, but no one knows in what capacity. And he seems to know almost everyone important. He’s dated a few women, not many, really, but nothing serious came of it. A confirmed bachelor, apparently. That’s all I know. Rather dreamy-looking, isn’t he?”

In a nightmare waiting to happen way, mused Emma to herself, although he did have on an exquisite suit that fit his broad shoulders and narrow waist excellently. She changed subjects with Gloria and they spend some time discussing Gloria’s upcoming trip to Greece until her friend had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom.

Steed noticed Emma’s departing friend and excused himself from Lady Benson. Taking a glass of red wine from a passing server, he slowly moved toward the solitary Emma. Steed noticed Mrs. Peel’s slenderness and her magnificent cheekbones, and her silky auburn hair. He was rather determined to enroll her as her partner, and His Nibs had given his full approval. Steed had spend the last two weeks investigating Emma and her life and her family history—it was all very English, and very solidly patriotic. He had been fascinated with all her achievements in her young life—her intellectual genius, her athletic aptitude, her ability to run a large corporation, and her impressive resiliency to

recover from some harsh life events. Those characteristics made excellent agent material.

Finding out she would be at this party had not been too difficult. Once Steed had spent a number of days researching her, her family, their business, their relations and close friends, it seemed only natural to by chance form an acquaintance with Sir Paul at his club, and, over a couple of brandys, learn about his yearly summer party to which, of course, Mrs. Emma Peel had been invited and was, happily, expected to appear.

Steed had high, though realistic hopes, that Mrs. Peel would have the qualifications and the impetus to join The Ministry. Steed was sure, after their brief meeting two weeks ago, that Mrs. Peel had shown interest in his work and, he mused, in himself. Although that latter part wasn't necessary, Steed couldn't hide the fact from himself that it was a pleased thought. It wasn't that Steed wanted to partner up with Mrs. Peel just to maneuver her into a sexual relationship; his years with Mrs. Gale proved that he was well able to contain any unwanted sexual energy and focus on respecting and honoring his partner on whatever level she choose. And Steed was too much the consummate professional to let a mere physical attraction bias him in his analysis of her as a partner material. Yet, looking at Mrs. Peel brush her hair from her face with such a sultry yet playful motion...It was rare to find such an uniquely accomplished and beautiful woman, Steed couldn't help but find himself attracted to her.

Mrs. Peel watched him approach, a sly grin on her face.

Steed spoke first, "Good evening, Mrs. Peel. Fancy meeting you here. I must say you look positively divine."

"Yes, fancy that, our meeting here," Mrs. Peel answered, skipping over the complement, her voice somewhat heavy with sarcasm. "So, tell me, who are you going to attack tonight? A couple of waiters?"

Steed's eyes raised in shock. "Mrs. Peel! I'll have you know I am solidly understood to be a waitress sort of man. Although, I wouldn't exactly use the work 'attack' to describe—"

"Never mind," Mrs. Peel interjected. "Just what are you doing here, Mr. Steed?"

"Just Steed, please," he said, resuming the little interplay they had began in their first meeting, "Why, I've just come for the convivial company of Sir Paul, and to imbibe his excellent Chardonnay. 1955, a year the rains perfectly watered the Avignon grapes." At that Steed raised his glass to her, smiled, and took a sip.

Mrs. Peel tilted her head to the side, and narrowed her eyes at him. What does it want from me? It couldn't just be something as banal as a date, for his actions were too off-putting in that pure regard, and he knew it. She knew Steed was prevaricating, but, yet, there was something about his handsome, amiable countenance that made it hard for her to be angry with this whole charade. But, she tried.

"Look here, Mr. Steed, I have never seen you at an affair of Sir Paul's, and I have a strong feeling that it is less a coincidence than it appears. I should be very grateful to you if you would explain just exactly what you are doing here tonight, and how it impacts on me."

Steed ignored her words. "I hope your car was fixed to satisfaction?"

Well, he at least deserved a thank you for that. "Yes, it was." She paused and a brief silence fell between them. *Oh, all right*, she thought, momentarily resenting how well she had been raised to obey the social forms. "And thank you for the roses."

He bowed, and she saw just how rich and full a head of hair he had. Her husband had had thin blond hair. She stopped that set of comparisons immediately.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Peel," Steed said. "Nothing goes better in the world than a lovely lady and a bouquet of roses."

Suddenly Mr. and Mrs. Smythe-Barney, both portly and bejewelled, strode up to Mrs. Peel.

"Emma, why how lovely you look tonight," Mrs. Smythe-Barney said, turning to her husband, "doesn't she, Daniel?"

"Indeed she does. Indeed she does," he confirmed.

"Good evening, both of you," Mrs. Peel said. "How are your dogs?"

Obviously that was a question dear to their hearts, as both their eyes lit up with affection.

"Oh, fine, fine, just fine. Little rascals, the bunch of them. Won another award at Dorset, you know. Oh, fine little rascals they are," Mr. Smythe-Barney beamed.

"Good evening. We're Mr. and Mrs. Smythe-Barney," his wife said, addressing Steed. "May I have the pleasure of your introduction?"

Steed snapped to attention in all seriousness, and Emma found herself suppressing a giggle. "I'm terribly sorry. How very rude of me," Steed said. "Steed, John Steed."

Mr. Smythe-Barney eyes drifted up in thought for a moment. "John Steed, John Steed. I say, are you related to Edgar Brice Steed, vice-president of the First Bank of London?"

Mrs. Peel watched Steed closely yet could not detect any palpable reaction to the question, except for a brief pause. "Yes," Steed answered. "He's an elder brother."

"Fine chap, fine chap, he is. Knows his finance, I'll say that for him."

"Yes, I'm sure he does," Steed agreed smoothly. He then quickly added, "Forgive us Mr. and Mrs. Smythe-Barney, but Mrs. Peel here was feeling a little warm and we were just about to step outside for a breath of rejuvenating late summer air." Emma just stared at him silently.

"Oh, well don't let us interfere with that. Do take care Emma, and perhaps I shall see you soon at one of my little bridge soirees," Mrs. Smythe-Barney said.

"I look forward to it," Mrs. Peel had just time to reply before being ushered out the patio doors by Steed, the hand with his wine glass hand encompassing her left arm and the other politely placed firmly on her mid-bank.

"Come, come, my dear. Can't have you fainting away," Steed said, urging her down the patio and onto the manicured lawn. After about twenty-five feet, Mrs. Peel recovered her shock at his inconsiderate action, spun out of his arms and stood still, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Those are dear friends of mine, Mr. Steed. I do not appreciate lying to them, nor being made to be a fainting female. I have never fainted in my life.”

“Never?” Steed asked. “Well, it’s quite an odd sensation, you know.” And then he said no more, leaving Mrs. Peel once again wanting both to be entirely rid of, and yet probe every aspect of, him. Enigma hardly encompasses him, she thought, slightly annoyed at his handling of her.

“I’m going back inside,” Mrs. Peel stated, turning towards the lighted manor house.

“Wait,” Steed urged. “Let’s at least have a short walk. It is rather refreshing out here, and the stars are beginning to come out. We should at least make a wish.” Steed suddenly found himself enjoying this quiet moment alone with Mrs. Peel; her jasmine perfume added a gorgeous scent to the gardenias and carnations growing all around them.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Peel smiled. “And what do you wish for, Mr. Steed?”

“What I’ve wished forever,” he said grandly, waving his arm to the Heavens.

“And that is...”

“Why, dinner with you, Mrs. Peel.”

“You’ve wished that...forever?” she asked, her tone of disdain evident.

“The last two weeks since I’ve seen you have certainly seemed like forever.” Then, before Mrs. Peel could respond, he continued on in a more serious vein. “I have a proposition to discuss with you, Mrs. Peel. And a luscious veal at Cambini’s, I find, enhances any conversation.”

Mrs. Peel was intrigued. “And what would be the topic of this discussion?”

Steed ignored her question for one of his own. “Will you have dinner with me?”

Although that was the bluntest statement Mr. Steed had used with her yet, Mrs. Peel was not about to lose control of this situation so easily. So far Mr. Steed had run things; now it was time for her to exert some power, see how *he* handled it. “I’ll think about it,” she said, and began walking back to the manor.

Steed fell in beside her. He felt no irritation at her brusque feint. Unlike many men of his generation, Steed felt comfortable around strong women, a legacy of his childhood and the numerous indomitable aunts he had been surrounded and loved by. He was pleased to finally see Mrs. Peel shown the innate strength his research of her had found was an integral aspect of her personality. It showed her as being more fully recovered from the grief following the loss of her husband, during which time she had rather meekly retreated from all active contact. Steed needed to test Mrs. Peel’s reactions; an agent can generally work in a civilized fashion, but must definitely be able to flash into anger and action, frequently calling upon an inner strength of will. He would not put her in the occasionally dangerous position of being his sometime partner if he felt she did not have the verve and vigor required as backbone; so far Mrs. Peel had passed his little tests well. Certainly, it seemed that she had kept quiet about his little fracas with the lorry; first and foremost keeping secrets was a vital agent

trait. Especially since if Mrs. Peel became his partner, she would automatically be elevated to a very high level of security clearance.

Steed still carried his wine glass in his hand. Mrs. Peel glanced at the almost full level of alcohol in it.

“Not drinking tonight?” she asked.

“Judiciously,” Steed answered. “Too much alcohol, even this remarkable vintage, makes my shoulder ache. It’s an old injury.” He pointed to his right shoulder.

“Oh?” she asked.

“Yes, a terrible bicycle accident. Auntie Rose said you could hear me crash into the old oak even over the whacks of the croquet match around the back of the house. Dislocated the joint. The bike’s handle bars and training wheels didn’t fare so well, either.”

Mrs. Peel widened her eyes and tilted her head to the side, nodding it once, “A very old injury.”

“Yes. Of course, not long after, an awkward moment involving roller skates and a stone wall reinjured it and it has never been the same since.”

“Why, little Mr. Steed was a clumsy lad.”

Steed sighed deeply over her continued use of his formal appellation. One day, she’ll call me Steed. He found it surprising to him how he looked forward to that time.

“Not clumsy. Just sometimes too daring for my own good.”

They were just approaching the glass doors. Mrs. Peel wondered if she could ever depend on him to tell her the truth, but decided that this bantering, for all it’s frustrating aspects, was rather fun.

“And now?” she asked.

“Well, old habits die hard, don’t they, Mrs. Peel?” And with that Steed bid her good-bye and disappeared into the drawing room, greeting some bearded man effusively. Mrs. Peel rejoined Gloria; ten minutes later she found herself casually looking around the room for Mr. Steed. He wasn’t there, and although she said *Good* to herself, instead of feeling relief, a waver of excitement at the thought of him thrilled through her stomach.

I will definitely think about dinner with him, Emma thought. What on earth could his mysterious proposition be? She remained at the party another three hours, but the next day didn’t seem to remember many details after Steed had left.

## Friendly Fate

### Chapter Three

Emma mused to herself that what she felt was anticipatory paranoia. Reclining on her sofa in a silk bathrobe late one night in her penthouse flat, she

attempted to read but her generally imperturbable concentration kept failing her. It had been a week since she had seen that, well, intangible Mr. Steed at Sir Paul's party, and since then she had felt annoyance with herself for her inability to let a day pass without wondering when he would be contacting her for her response to his request for a dinner date. Emma knew he would, but when? She had given the question of whether she would go to dinner with him little thought; she knew she'd accept the moment he had asked on Sir Paul's lawn. However, she had needed to let Mr. Steed know she was not so easily led around; that she could grab hold of a situation and meld it to her desires, even when she did not fully understand entirely what was occurring.

Emma put the book down in defeat and took a sip of her peppermint tea. She had to admit that Mr. Steed's (she snickered knowing how much he wanted her to use "Just Steed") desire to meet with her was quite a puzzle to her usually extremely nimble mind. She dismissed immediately the triteness of a date; she was sure there was something more to his invitation. If Mr. Steed worked for the government in some secret way, how did that involve her? Did he have some concerns about the integrity of Knight Industries? Well, Knight Industries' impeccable reputation would be easy enough to verify, if that was the case. Or did Mr. Steed have some concerns about some of Emma's friends, or business associates, and wish to pry from her such information that might affect their lives? He would certainly find her resolutely unhelpful in that area. She would never discuss them unless Mr. Steed was absolutely able to convince her that one of her friends was truly a traitor or a criminal. Emma laughed—what a ridiculous thought!

So, what could it be? Emma sighed and looked around at her comfortable yet luxurious surroundings. Her life since Peter died had been slow and easy; she had needed it to be to recover from her devastating grief. But, now, nine months later, Emma felt herself becoming somewhat restless and wearied with her life without her husband. Although emotionally, she was stronger and could socialize more, she also felt an ennui setting in that was disturbing to her. Few of her girlfriends were as athletically inclined as she was so she had no one really to frequently share her love of riding, shooting, fencing, mountain climbing, and the like, so Emma had not participated in those previously exciting past-times since Peter's death. To make things worse, somehow she had gotten on the dreaded list as a generous donator to worthy causes, and had in the last three months been invited to innumerable charity functions. Emma was to attend a fundraiser to raise money for research on neurological diseases tomorrow. Although she naturally sympathized with the poor unfortunate people who were so afflicted, such events inevitably bored her to tears. She doubted Mr. Steed ever condescended to attend affairs where the main activity was sitting and listening to people drone on about diseases, or new houses, or politics, or women's organizations.

Emma rubbed her tired eyes. What would it be like, she wondered to be... a spy. A secret agent. Emma's heart beat a little faster at the idea of investigating crimes and intelligence matters, of following supposed enemies down dark alleyways, of not

knowing really who was a friend and who was an enemy, and having the brains and brawn to survive it all with one's decency intact. The world of ciphers, codes, silent movements over walls, unraveling mysteries...if that was Mr. Steed's life, it definitely did not include the inevitable chicken lunches and interminable speeches.

Emma stood up, stretched her lithe yet strong body, and went to bed. Her dreams were of her wandering through murky heaths yet they had an element of distinct satisfaction about them that confused her when she woke the next morning.

Mrs. Peel dallied about her flat most of the morning. She made a phone call to Knight Industries to talk to her operations manager about a new idea she had for making processing orders more efficient, tried to read some more and then dabbled with some water painting. Finally it was time for her to get ready for her dreaded luncheon engagement. Emma showered, then dressed in a lovely beige skirt and matching long sleeve shirt with vest. She put in some subtle gold ear rings; she had never been one for showy jewelry. Emma had stopped wearing her wedding ring a few months ago, as it had helped her face the hard fact that Peter was really dead, and that she must go on with her life without him. Without them all, husband, brother, parents. With a quick flick of her head she stopped her morbid thoughts and, checking herself in the mirror, she left her flat.

The drive to the motel where the fundraiser was occurring took thirty minutes and she soon found herself standing at the entrance of a room filled with large round tables and assorted men and women already standing around talking. Emma was impressed with the size of the room but then realized that with the eminent London MP Lord Peter Sutterfield sponsoring the affair, who had become very involved in promoting neurological research after the sad death of his own son last year from some such disease, anyone invited was pretty much guaranteed to attend.

Emma ran various excuses for needing to leave through her head, then choose the best one for this group, to be used if the affair was still going on after two hours.

She felt the presence of a body standing behind her in the hallway. She had not heard the person walk up to her. As Emma turned to see who it was, a now familiar voice spoke.

"Why, Mrs. Peel. What a pleasant coincidence meeting you here."

Mrs. Peel rolled her eyes in consternation at the grinning man in a bowler hat, gently swinging an umbrella. Mrs. Peel wondered if the umbrella was some teddy bear substitution. "Mr. Steed, there was no coincidence about it. You either have been spying on me through my friends or my telephone, or you followed me here. I should hope, for your sake, it was the latter occurrence, for I should be most displeased to learn it was through either of the other manners."

Steed smiled. He did like her spirit. She was coming along just fine—getting more and more spirited, and even beginning to develop a little bit of an overtly suspicious nature. However, her ire did seem genuine, and was understandable, and Steed did not want to begin promoting a disdain towards him or his plans for her. He decided that sincerity would be best at the moment.

“Mrs. Peel, please, I understand your concerns. Please be assured that my discovery of your attendance at this beneficial affair was very innocently done. Lord Sutterfield and I belong to the same club. During a game of billiards two night ago he quite excitedly ticked off the companies that were to attend this fundraiser; Knight Industries was one he mentioned. It was purely an educated guess that you yourself would be representing your company, given your renown for personal philanthropy.”

“What club do you and Lord Sutterfield belong to?” Emma tested Steed.

“The Athenaeum,” Steed answered, his face impassive.

Emma was impressed by his words; she believed they were true. And she was somewhat touched that Mr. Steed had noticed her irritation and cared enough to defuse the situation. And he had done it very well.

Still...this whole way of meeting her was rather peculiar. “You could have just called me up on the phone,” Mrs. Peel said, crossing her arms.

“How very banal,” Steed answered, once again reverting to his insouciance as he sensed Mrs. Peel’s mood was better.

Mrs. Peel shook her head. “So, to what do I owe this sudden appearance?”

“I was wondering whether you had decided to have dinner with me. I know this charming Italian restaurant in Kent, Cambini’s, and they have the most exquisite veal, and quite a superb collection of vino. At your convenience, I can book a table for two. What do you say?”

Emma noticed that people were taking their seats. Mr. Steed stood patiently in front of her, his cologne very pleasing, masculine yet with a flowery touch. She studied his handsome face and gentle eyes, that were almost boyish in his anticipation of her answer.

“I should like to know the nature of this request,” Emma said, hanging on to her reticence for a second longer.

“All will be revealed by the time the soup arrives.”

“Oh, all right, Mr. Steed,” she said, “Pick me up Wednesday night at 7 p.m.”

Mr. Steed bowed to her. “Excellent. You shall not find my chariot tardy, madam.” Then he stood, tipped his bowler to her, and began walking away, his last words coming as his swinging umbrella completed a full circle, “Enjoy the chicken, Mrs. Peel.”

Two days later, Steed drove his Bentley through London to pick up Mrs. Peel. The car purred along splendidly, and the evening was still warm enough, in the ending days of summer that he could drive with the top down. He was on his way to pick up an utterly unique woman as uncovered in his research, interactions with her and his usually unerring intuitive insights into people. Although Steed was almost entirely an agent used in areas of action and investigation, all agents were always encouraged to seek out recruits for the department. Since The Ministry, as the department was informally termed, was the most secretive security organization in the country, few people knew of it and a favored way of getting new people involved was through the recommendation

of already established and respected agents. That was why His Nibs had been so eager to agree to Steed's desire to convince Mrs. Peel to begin an agent—Mrs. Peel's assets were innumerable, and there just did not seem to be any demerits to her character. She was able to maintain secrecy, was intelligent, calm, yet confident, easy-going yet fully aware of when her patience had run out and able to assert herself when that happened. Steed had watched her walk, and spin out of his arms on Sir Paul's lawn—she had a grace and agility in her movements, and, given her previous hobbies of shooting and fencing, Steed assumed she had well developed reflexes, strength and quickness. More than he was willing to admit to himself, Steed really hoped he could convince her to be his partner.

Mrs. Peel was waiting for him outside her building, and he rolled up exactly at 7 p.m. Leaping over the door of his car in his odd manner, Steed strode around the Bentley and opened up the passenger side door. Mrs. Peel was dressed in an black gown with lace collar and had an ermine wrap around her shoulders.

"Mrs. Peel, you look like Aphrodite herself. Please, *entre vous*."

Mrs. Peel noticed that Steed, immaculately dressed in a three piece brown suit with cream tie, and matching brown bowler, was quite an impressive sight himself. The carnation in his buttonhole finalized his elegant look. She climbed into the car. "Thank you, Mr. Steed." Steed nodded his head once, then darted back around the car and leapt over the door to slide down the seat.

"You have an odd method of entering and leaving your car, Mr. Steed."

Steed started up the car and drove off. "One might say I have many odd traits, Mrs. Peel."

No doubt, thought Mrs. Peel. They drove in relative silence for a few minutes, both letting the date unfold slowly.

"I saw one of your water paintings at Tyson's Gallery last week," Steed suddenly said, surprising Mrs. Peel. "I was shopping for a Napoleon print to fit into a lonely space on my wall, and there you were, over a Ming vase. Really, I must complement you on your perspective and use of colors; the shading of the front and side of the manor house captured the emptiness of the approaching winter for the parents and their daughter perfectly. I fear it may have been a somewhat autobiographical representation, though that would certainly show a stark courage on your behalf." His voice evenly displayed a tone of earnest sympathy.

If Mr. Steed had just admitted he was really an alien from Mars, Mrs. Peel could not have been more stunned. Not only had he seen her painting—and how Donny Tyson had convinced her to put one of her paintings in his gallery she still didn't really know—but Mr. Steed had been able to interpret the painting exactly the way she had painted it. And somehow intuit that it was a representation of the first, sad winter following the death of her brother. And, he had been so, well, tender, with his words. Mrs. Peel was faced with the realization that this man beside her had a depth of character she had not as yet ascribed to him. For some reason, that pleased her greatly, and released a world of tension from her muscles regarding this evening with him.

Emma struggled for the right words, as Mr. Steed drove down the road not rushing her. “Thank you, Mr. Steed,” she said. “You have truly envisioned exactly my meaning in the painting. I must say, I’m a little surprised.”

“Well, you have every right to be, I suppose. We haven’t had much chance to really get to know each other. And learn,” he turned to smile at her, “that we both are art lovers. Although I must admit, I am absolutely inept at drawing or painting myself. That’s quite a gift you have.”

“My mother was an artist, and she interested me in all aspects of art, from sketching, to painting, to sculpturing.”

“Indeed. I don’t suppose you do any paintings of Napoleon confronting Lord Nelson at sea, do you? I just haven’t been able to find the right one that shows the magnificence of the English fleet in all its glory.”

Emma smiled. “Sorry, that’s not quite in my repertoire.”

“Too bad. I hope a tender veal is.”

Once more the conversation temporarily died, yet neither of them were uncomfortable with the silence. It seemed just fine to be driving out to the country on a lovely summer evening, whether they spoke or not. Emma felt herself soften to this man who up until this car ride had seemed to her generally sly and cunning, his debonair good humor used mainly to manipulate people. But as she glanced at him through the corner of her eye and saw his honest pleasure at driving, she could perceive a decency in his countenance that had escaped her view before. Of a moment Steed glanced back at her and his grin was infectious.

“We have had a wonderful summer, haven’t we, Mrs. Peel,” Steed said. “A little rain, a great deal of sunshine; perfect to promote a bounty of blossoms. And nothing and nowhere beats the unparalleled beauty of our little green island at the height of its flowering.”

In any other man, Emma would have snorted at the showy words, believing them to be insincere utterances designed solely to impress her with their poetic pretensions. But looking at Mr. Steed as he spoke, even from beside him, she could see his eyes glow in a pure love and appreciation for Great Britain.

“Did you spend the whole summer in Britain, Mr. Steed?” she asked, figuring perhaps the mood was right to pry a little into his life.

“Just Steed, please,” he said, continuing their game. “And, unfortunately I did have to travel a little bit. Had to bring Aunt Freda home from the gaming tables at Monte Carlo again.” He leaned over toward her and lowered his voice, whispering, “Has a terrible problem with Baccarat, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, she just keeps winning. Has to wear disguises to gain entrance to the casinos, because she’s blacklisted from all of them. She was dressed as an Albanian professor when I finally caught up with her.”

Mrs. Peel decided enough was enough. “Are you always so flexible with the truth, Mr. Steed?”

“Mrs. Peel, a gentleman never lies. Well, rarely lies. That story of my aunt is true, except...well, except she was dressed as an Egyptian professor, but I

thought it best to protect her anonymity by disguising her disguise. After all, I hardly know you.”

“Ditto, Mr. Steed,” she replied. Exasperating, fascinating, irritating...Mrs. Peel’s mind ticked off adjectives.

“Shall we change the subject, since you have cast unfair aspersions against my sterling character? Tell me, when you ride, what type of horse do you prefer? One can tell so much about a person by their choice in horse flesh, don’t you agree?”

So they spoke about horses, then cars, and dogs. After they were ensconced at their table—Emma pleased with the authentic Tuscan décor, and impressed by the subtle yet very proficient service of the staff, who seemed to know Steed well—and had ordered (both the veal), their discourse touched upon the Greek islands and the pros and cons of Americans. Steed was delighted at their conversation, totally pleased at how much their views on all those issues seemed to be perfectly aligned. This had been a final, vital test for Mrs. Peel. Although Mrs. Gale had been a valuable asset as a partner, they had had a great deal of differences on many topics that had caused, at times, unnecessary stress and contention in their partnership. Steed knew that during the early years with Mrs. Gale he had still been too callous an agent, had still not fully reintegrated himself into a more civilized persona, had still not purged himself of the overt hardness and anger he had worn like a coat for the previous five years. Mrs. Gale, in her openness in expressing her contempt for his various immoral and unethical aspects and actions, had had a great influence in promoting his regeneration into the civilized gentleman he had originally been bred to be. For that Steed was eternally grateful to Mrs. Gale, but he realized he was now ready to be paired with a woman with whom he shared interests and views to have their partnership flow smoothly and without any acrimony. Mrs. Peel seemed to fit the bill exactly; even though they had not perfectly agreed on everything—cars, for example—they were easily able to respect and accept the other’s person views without becoming defensive or offensive. Mrs. Peel made him feel...comfortable. And, more and more he could not deny how much her attractiveness stirred him inside. Steed was sure he wanted her for a partner, and he felt he could bet his Bentley that she would agree to join him.

Finally, after the soup bowls were removed, Emma spoke, “Well, Mr. Steed we have had our soup. I was of the understanding that I would learn the reason for our little tete a tete tonight.”

Steed smiled as he sipped on his Burgundy, then put the glass down on the table. He leaned his arms on the table, and said, “I am a man of my word, Mrs. Peel. Let me tell you why I asked you to dinner.”

He took a deep breath and suddenly Mrs. Peel saw him become fully focused and serious. All trace of light-hearted conviviality was gone. She found herself leaning forward.

“Let me preface my words by assuring you that what I am about to say must be kept entirely secret from any and all others. It is of the strictest confidence, and any mention of it to anyone may place you at risk of being arrested.” Emma’s eyebrows rose at that, but Steed went on before she could

speak. “I am an agent in a security organization in Great Britain. It is neither MI5 nor MI6, not part of the military, nor part of Scotland Yard. It is its own entity, entirely legal yet entirely top secret. We agents work both in and out of the country, on our own or in concert with those other organizations I just mentioned.” Steed paused to take a deep breath and Emma’s stomach flitted with anticipation for what he would say next.

“Mrs. Peel, I am inviting you to join our organization, teamed as my partner, to be called into service when and only when I decide you would aid me in my investigations. That might be regularly or infrequently. You would not ever be able to tell anyone anything about the organization, about me or any other agents you met, or about any of the work we did. The least penalty for breaking any of those rules is imprisonment on a charge of highest treason. If you accepted, you would be sent away for training for a few months—your innate education and skills preclude the necessity of the typical length of our agent’s training schedule. Your payment for services will be negotiated with you. Mrs. Peel, the work that we do in our organization is inevitably dangerous, frequently violent, and oftentimes brings us into contact with the worst and nastiest people. Yet, it is extremely adventurous and exciting work, which entails matching wits with villains, matching one’s strength and agility against their minions, figuring out codes and clues, and devising stratagems to overcome the schemes of any, well, criminal type person who we need to stop. Frankly, It is my opinion, and the opinion of the head of the organization, that you would be an invaluable asset to us. Your intelligence, athletic prowess, analytical powers, resiliency, strength of character, bespeak very well of you as an agent.” Steed paused as their dinners were brought out to them. Once the waiter had placed their meals down and departed, he sniffed his veal with his eyes closed, exhaled a long and loving “Aahhh” and then opened his eyes to stare into Mrs. Peel’s face.

“Well, Mrs. Peel, what do you say?” he asked as he delicately began cutting up the veal.

Mrs. Peel had listened to Steed talk with such concentration it seemed she had forgotten they were at a restaurant; everything but his clear grey, vivid eyes and his words had existed for her. Now, with the spell broken by the deliverance of their meal, she was able to quickly reflect on his forceful speech. An agent! Mr. Steed wanted her to become an agent of some very secret organization. To be teamed with him. Emma's head was awl with it all, but one thing she knew for sure—it was the most perfect thing for her to do at this point in her life. Some way to wake her back up, recharge her with an energy to try again in life, take her mind off her grief and disappointments, make use of her skills that had, up until now, always been so disjointed in their application. It also intrigued her to be let into the levels of security to which Steed was already privy. One point gave her pause—to be paired with Mr. Steed. Mrs. Peel had a feeling that could turn out to be quite a stroke of good luck—he was no doubt very high up in the organization and also no doubt very apt at his calling, and so she would probably be involved in important and thrilling adventures as soon as she was made active. But, he seemed to be a hard man to understand, a man whose nature seemed split between being overtly superfluous and yet equally private and

hidden—would that aid or harm them as partners? He must be unquestionably trustworthy to be the respected, high level agent he apparently was. Emma looked at him closely; could she trust him with her life? Then she realized with a chill that he was already offering to trust his life to her. That revelation stimulated and slightly unnerved her. It was, she realized, the chance of a lifetime to regain her life.

“I should be delighted to be an agent...Mr. Steed,” she said. “Thank you for the offer.”

Steed was surprised by the rapidity of her answer, and her tone of sincerity. Her firm declaration cemented to him her worth as a recruit to The Ministry.

“Just Steed, please, since we’re going to be partners, and all,” he replied, adding, “That’s wonderful. I shall report to The Ministry early tomorrow morning. Things shall move rather quickly now, Mrs. Peel, and don’t worry, all your questions will be fully answered. But, first, we must make haste on this delicious dinner. If we let the veal get cold, Guido will come at us with a butcher’s knife.”

They began to eat earnestly, and Mrs. Peel found the veal to be luscious, juicy, and full of flavor.

“How is it, Mrs. Peel?” Steed asked.

“It is delicious...Steed,” she said, figuring there was no loss of pride now. Steed smiled. He liked the sound of her saying “Steed”.

“Excellent, Mrs. Peel,” he said. “Excellent indeed.”

The End