

The Mind of a Heart

by R.L.WILSON

THIS STORY HAS ADULT CONTENT: OVER 18 ONLY, PLEASE!

This is the first Avengers story that I have ever written. It is also the first adult story that I have ever written. I hope you will excuse any errors I may have made. I readily admit that I know very little about Great Britain although I did spend 30 days there back in the dark ages (1977). For those brave enough or desperate enough to read this I hope it brings you some pleasure. I have enjoyed reading everything, well almost, everything I have found through the many web-sites. Please feel free to let me know what you think as I have several further ideas for stories, but depending on how this one is received, may change my mind!

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Chapter One

John Steed fought the return of his conscious mind, unwilling to surrender the peace and serenity that comes with blissful and contented slumber. After several attempts to slip back into that warm and wonderful place, without success, he gave up. His thoughts turned to the afternoon's events and brought a smile to his lips. After a gentle romp on a couple of his best horses, he and Christina had returned to the house for a light lunch and a stroll in the garden. It was lovely this time of year. All the flowers were in early bloom with renewed life. The sun accented their beauty with the promise of a heated energy that was most welcome after a cold and dreary winter. The cavalcade of colors seemed to brighten the very air itself and he was glad that he had hired Mr. Kendrick to renovate the neglected areas. His eyes gravitated to the trellises of yellow roses that were a prominent part of the display. Two rows of six, horseshoe shaped, white, wooden trellises marched their way to a small pond where migrating ducks often visited during their travels, while evenly spaced ornamental benches, provided a quiet respite to a weary and contemplative soul. Not for the first time, he wondered why he had insisted on including them and why they had had to be yellow. He always came back to the same conclusion, they had been her favorites. Perhaps even then he was still hoping ... He shook his mind from that path and turned his attention to the lovely woman before him. Christina had not protested when he suddenly put his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. -

———"John, your garden is beautiful," she said.

"Even more so now that you are in it," he told her. It was a bit sappy but she rewarded him with a light kiss. Her lips felt cool against his in the heat of the afternoon and he could feel the anticipation grow in his groin.

She left his embrace and walked out among the roses. "Did you choose the flowers yourself? It's a little unusual to find yellow roses in a gentleman's garden," she said. "In my experience most men seem to prefer red if they have any preference at all."

He moved to her, once more capturing her in his arms. "Let's not talk about the roses," he replied. He saw a questioning look cross her eyes and, not wanting to give it a chance to materialize, he changed the subject. "Did you enjoy the ride on Hunter?"

Christina hadn't known John Steed very long. They had gone out together quite a few times in the last month, but she didn't really know much more about him now than she did before. She knew that he seemed to be an extremely private individual. She still did not know what he did for a living. He worked for some form of the government, she knew, but in exactly what capacity, was anyone's guess. He had turned up at Lord Benchfield's estate and out bid her on quite a few bottles of rather rare, excellent claret and then promptly asked her back to his home to sample it. She had turned him down, naturally. She found him charming, however, with a smile bordering somewhere between mischievous and lascivious. He was tall, quite extraordinarily handsome with luscious waves of dark, brown hair and the most expressive gray eyes she had ever

encountered. He had walked away that day with her phone number and when he called two days later, she accepted his invitation to dinner.

She didn't kid herself. She knew by the end of the second date that he wanted her, knew that his ultimate goal was to have her end up in his bed. She didn't mind this. Halfway through that first dinner, she wanted him as well. It fitted her plans, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to make him work for it. The first two times he had seen her home had ended with a simple peck on the hand. The third they shared a long, lingering kiss. Their relationship progressed from there until she knew today would be the day. It was getting too hard to pull herself away from him and, frankly, she no longer wanted to. When he came to her among the roses she molded herself to his embrace.

Steed remembered the auction as well. Although he'd been interested in the wine, he did not believe it was worth the price he had ultimately paid. However, when he saw who he was bidding against, he couldn't resist. She was beautiful. Long, blonde hair swept luxuriously back from her oval face, a slim, well proportioned figure with shapely legs and breasts a man could spend a great deal of time exploring. He decided right then that he had to meet her and the wine would create the perfect opening.

After the final bid went to him, he introduced himself and smiled into her large, delectable, blue eyes.

"How do you do, Mr. Steed. It seems today was not my day," she said. "I'm sure you'll enjoy the wine."

"Just because I won the bid doesn't preclude us from both enjoying it, Miss . . . ?"

"Jaccabs, Christina Jaccabs," she informed him admiring the twinkle in his eyes. "I'm not so sure that would be a good idea, Mr. Steed."

"Just Steed," he corrected. "If you enjoy fine wine, Miss Jaccabs, then I don't see any reason why we shouldn't do so together. 'Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter'," he quoted Byron.

She found his smile very disarming. "I enjoy them very much, but I'm afraid I wasn't bidding for myself and the people I represent might look unfavorably upon their agent toasting their loss with the competition," she informed him. He stepped close to her and she had to look up into those wondrous eyes. She could smell the richness of his cologne. The effect was a little overwhelming and she caught herself leaning slightly closer to inhale a bit more.

His voice was secretive and slightly seductive as he said, "Then we must be sure not to tell them."

He paused and locked his eyes on her. Christina felt as though the temperature had risen twenty degrees and she heard herself falter, "Well . . . I . . ."

Steed, seeing that she had suddenly become uneasy, switched tactics. Stepping back he looked around the room before bending his head ever so slightly and continuing in a conspiratorial tone. "We could lock the doors, draw the curtains, post guards at the doors," his eyes moved to the ceiling as though reconsidering, "no, that wouldn't do," he ventured. "Best not to leave any witnesses."

She laughed and he could see her relax once again. "That's a very interesting suggestion, Mr . . . err . . . Steed, if not a bit premature, but I'm afraid I have a prior engagement."

Never one to give up easily he suggested, "Then perhaps I could phone you later and we could work out a more convenient plot . . . I mean schedule. Maybe over dinner?"

That boyish grin returned to light up his face and she felt herself melting. Oh, you're in dangerous waters, she told herself and was somewhat astonished to hear her own reply. "I think that might be possible," she said. She gave him her number and was a little surprised that he had not written it down.

"I look forward to the next time," he said and with a small bow, he turned in the direction of the auctioneer.

She watched him walk away and couldn't help admiring the way his three piece, tailored suit seemed to enhance the broad shoulders, trim waist. The way the bowler hat was set at a jaunty angle, as well as the aloof swagger of the umbrella and how the whole package fit together. Now that's a package I wouldn't mind taking delivery on, she thought.

Ministry business kept him busy. It was two days before he could make use of the phone number. He picked her up at her apartment and they had a lovely dinner and danced to the music of the house band. She was an accomplished dancer, following him around the floor with no trouble. By the time he escorted her back to her apartment he knew she would wind up in his bed or he in hers, so he was willing to play by her time schedule when she offered him her hand at the door. With the affectation of a magnificent bow, he kissed her hand, said goodnight and walked away with a contented look on his face.

That date was followed by others. He found that he enjoyed her company very much and discovered that, besides fine wine, they had many things in common. She was extensively read in classic literature. He couldn't help laughing when she confessed that her favorite book, ever since she was a child, was *The Scarlet Letter*. He also couldn't help being just a little bit intrigued. One evening after dinner and a show he was delighted when she accepted his invitation to go riding with him.

He noticed a mild look of surprise on her face as he pulled the Jaguar to a stop in front of his home. "We're going riding on your property," she stated with a knowing nod of her head.

The look was mostly feigned he guessed as he went around to open her door. He offered her his hand wrapping his arms around her waist as she exited the car. "Yes," he said, "do you mind?"

"No, but propriety dictates that I, at least, make a comment," she told him and leaned into him as he bent to kiss her. It was her that deepened the contact and she wondered what his reaction would be if she suggested skipping the horses and taking a ride of an entirely different nature. Steed was in excellent shape. She could feel the muscles under his riding jacket; feel the strength in his arms. The riding breeches outlined his thighs in well developed proportions and she had not failed to notice the apparently ample package concealed by the garments fly.

He felt her resistance disappear as her kiss became more urgent than usual. As they broke apart, he could see the hunger in her eyes. He wondered if he shouldn't lead her into the house instead of the barn, but he really did feel like a ride on the horses. There would be plenty of time afterwards for the other. Besides, he found anticipation to be a powerful aphrodisiac. He saw that his man Rogers had saddled their mounts.

Hunter was a three year old bay, fifteen hands high with a gentle disposition. Christina's lithe, lean body and blonde hair contrasted nicely against his dark coat. Bull's-eye, he had no idea why he was given such a name, a coffee colored gelding was a bit older at seven years with a broad chest, good legs and a strong heart. He was more than capable of keeping up with his younger counterpart.

That thought brought him back to the present. It was funny, he never thought about age, at least, not much. At fifty one he still looked in his early forties. His hair hadn't yet started to turn grey. His face was still well defined with only a few new added wrinkles. He worked out and kept his body in good shape. A field agent had to keep fit. But thinking back, he couldn't help wondering if maybe age had played a roll in . . . perhaps if he'd been younger . . . His mind ran from that dark alley. Lying in bed Steed pulled his arms up in front of him feeling his back and shoulder muscles stretch with that almost sensual response achieved with total relaxation. He let his thoughts drift back to the earlier scene in the garden and his question to her.

"Yes, I enjoyed Hunter very much," she answered. Although I'm not as an experienced a rider as you are, I'm afraid." She thought she saw a shadow pass over his eyes when she mentioned the roses, but she did not want to spoil a good day. Still, she couldn't help wondering what significance the unassuming flowers had that would cause such a reaction. "And before you ask, the lunch was wonderful," she cut off his next question. Her arms moved around his back and she felt him tighten his hold drawing her closer. "If you don't want to talk about the roses," she smiled up at him, "what do you want to do?" She saw the wanting return to his eyes.

His mouth returned to hers, by way of an answer. Her lips parted allowing him entry and he was just a little surprised when she bit his tongue playfully. One hand stroked his back while the other moved to his hair running the fingers through the soft brown strands. He smiled to himself confirming what he had known for most of his sexually active life, women loved his hair.

Christina marveled at the fine and feathery feel of it. It was almost like running her fingers through silken threads. He slid a hand into her own hair at the back of her head, lightly tickling her scalp. He was kissing her face, following the line of her jaw. Her left hand played with the back of his ear and she heard a soft moan escape him as her fingers brushed the nape of his neck. Her own moan followed his when his lips moved down and he pulled the top of her blouse away from her neck to place a trail of kisses from her shoulder to the top of her breast before his path was stopped by her bra. She felt her body respond to him, her excitement level rising and reached for the buttons of his shirt.

Her perfume penetrated his senses. Delicate and slightly sweet, it mixed with the lofty fragrance of the roses. Roses. That scent of memory and madness. He straightened. His hands captured hers on the third button. "Not here," he whispered.

It took a few seconds for his words to make contact with her brain. She didn't move when he tried to lead her to the house. Looking around she dropped her voice assuming the most seductive tone she could. "This is private property," she said licking his earlobe. "We're hidden from view and it's a lovely day." She let the significance of her statement hang in the air.

Steed brought her beautiful, blue eyes back into view. "Believe me," he told her, "making love outdoors is one of my favorite things to do, but not here."

It was definite this time. She hadn't imagined the shadow. However, in view of her state of arousal, she once again chose to ignore it. She acquiesced and let him lead her. "Perhaps we could sample some of that excellent wine," she suggested.

"That's a good idea," he agreed. As a matter of fact, there was already a bottle and two glasses on the table beside the bed. "We should drink a toast to the fulfilling of its destiny."

"Destiny?"

"But of course, my dear. Have you never heard 'a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou'?" he explained leading her up the slightly winding stairs and opening the door to reveal his king size bed.

She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his chest. "I don't need the bread and the wine can wait. All I need is thou." Her voice had taken on a husky quality.

Steed was ecstatic. Even though he had been fairly certain she would be a willing partner, he still thought some persuasion would be necessary. She began pulling her blouse from her riding breeches as she walked to the bed. He watched as she removed her boots and pants. She unhooked her bra revealing her ample breasts and climbed onto the bed on her knees. Leaving only her panties, she beckoned for him to join her.

He joined her on his knees as well the soles of his boots hanging off the edge. Working on his shirt, he was just pulling it free of his waistband when she reached out and unzipped his fly. He closed his eyes at the feel of her warm fingers on his erection as she drew him out. When he open them again, he watched as she lowered her head and took him into her mouth. Steed couldn't suppress a gasp. Her tongue moved along the underside of his penis like lava rolling down hill. He leaned back on his heels, his hands running into the golden strands of her hair. His touch was encouraging, not demanding. Steed was not a small man and although she was unable to take him all into her mouth, she made up for it by wrapping her fingers around the base of his shaft while the other hand squeezed and played with the fine hairs that covered his engorged balls.

He could feel her teeth gently rake upward and a soft nip at the top of the smooth, rounded head drove his excitement level higher and his hands gripped her shoulders. Cool air suddenly washed over his burning member as her mouth left him. He moaned.

"Take off the rest," she whispered, tugging at his pants. While he sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots, she kissed his neck and shoulders. When he was completely naked, she had him lay on his back and hovered over him. He reached for her breasts, but she stopped him. Her mouth returned to his groin and once again he felt the fire of her tongue as she licked and sucked him. She had released his hands and Steed noticed that no other part of her body touched his. It was as though she wanted minimal contact. All concentration was focused on her task and he had no intention of depriving her. He could feel himself rising to that ultimate goal. He began moving his hips in rhythm with her up and down sucking motion. As he felt himself begin to enter that state of lost control, his hands automatically reached for her head, but she pushed them away. He didn't try to stop the moan of pure pleasure that escaped as his orgasm shot through him like a geyser erupting from deep in the earth's core. She took all he had to offer continuing her ministrations and holding her position until he went flaccid.

Steed closed his eyes and tried to get his breathing under control reveling in the sure pleasure of total release. She broke her contact and waited. When his breathing slowed he felt her straddle his body. He opened his eyes as she leaned forward

presenting her, already, hard nipples to him. He accepted the gift with relish. His hands came up to grab her buttocks. He didn't know when she had removed her panties, but she certainly wasn't wearing them now.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and used the momentum of his body to flip her over on her back. His eyes took in the full view, his mind registering, with little interest, that she wasn't a natural blonde. His lips sought hers while his fingers traveled from her temple down her neck across her shoulder, momentarily caressing her breast before continuing lightly over her ribs and down the outside of her thigh. His hand reversed its course coming up the sensitive inner thigh to just below the wet, throbbing center of her world. Her right hand went to his chest, sought and found a small nipple. With a squeeze on the hardened nub she felt his tongue delve deep seeking hers and sucking it into his own. His fingers ran lightly through her curly, coarse pubic hair teasing and tickling until she spread her legs wide and thrust her hips up inviting him, begging him. By the time he ran a finger between the lips of her quivering mound, her head was thrashing so much he could no longer hold her mouth. She felt him turn his wonderfully talented mouth and tongue to her rock hard nipples, taking each successively biting, licking and sucking. She thought her mind would explode as he inserted two fingers into her while simultaneously rubbing her clitoris with his thumb.

She still had the presence of mind to marvel at Steed's powers of recuperation as she felt the pressure of his, once again, solid member against her hip. His lips left her aching nipples and moved down her sternum, over her abdomen. She clamped her eyes closed in anticipation as, without removing his fingers; he used his other hand to spread her labia and placed his lips over her clitoris.

He felt the climax take her, felt her muscles convulse around his fingers. This did not deter him as he continued to lick and play with her removing his fingers only to replace them with his tongue. As her orgasm diminished, he returned his fingers to her as quickly as he could. Christina rose from the bed almost to a sitting position. She grabbed his shoulders and practically growled at him. "I want you to live up to your name," she told him. She pulled his hand from her and turned over onto her stomach at the same time raising her buttocks off the bed and offering herself to him.

Steed rose to his knees and entered her from behind with a slow but steady motion. Her moan was guttural as she pushed back against him driving his penis in as far as she could take him.

She positioned herself so her nipples rubbed against the sheet with every thrust of his hips stimulating her further.

Steed felt the warmth consume him. He couldn't believe the ferociousness of her desire or how it affected him. He wanted to ride her. As he looked down at her smooth back and rounded hips, all he could think of was the animalistic act before him. Gone was any thought to her pleasure. Gone was that consideration for his partner. All that was left of him was the burning, urgent need to fulfill the growing madness inside him, to release the volcanic eruption his body was building. His thrusts became harder, faster, more dramatic. He desperately tried to hold on to that part of his mind that prevented him from forcing himself too deeply. He did not want to hurt her. Just as he thought he would lose all control, she began to buck against him with increasing speed. Their rhythm was wild and furious until Christina's head went to the mattress, her hands balled

up in the sheets. Steed's head snapped back straining the muscles of his neck as they both climaxed.

As the rush gradually subsided, he fell forward catching himself on hands and knees. Her back was warm and moist against his chest. When his breathing settled somewhat, he wrapped his arms around her waist and they both rolled to the side, his penis still buried inside her. This being only a temporary state, they both knew. It didn't take long for his member to turn flaccid and slip from her. Neither of them spoke and after a short time they both drifted into a contented sleep.

Steed's mind came back to the present once again. The shadows cast in the room by the afternoon sun told him it was probably later than he thought, but he wasn't hungry so it wasn't dinner time. He stretched again and ran his hand down the, now empty, side of the bed. He wished he hadn't recalled the previous events so vividly as another part of his body woke. He raised his head from the pillow and looked around the room. The clock read five thirty. He glanced at the closed bathroom door but couldn't tell if Christina was in there or not. He wondered if he could convince her to return to bed.

Reluctantly, he got out of bed and gently knocked at the bathroom door. When there was no reply, he looked around and noticed that Christina's clothes were gone from the floor where she had dropped them. He padded barefoot to the bedroom door and opened it enough to hear her moving around downstairs. The aroma of fresh coffee greeted him and he smiled to himself thinking it never seemed to take the women he brought home long to make themselves comfortable.

He decided on a quick shower. The warm water felt good after the heat, in more ways than one, of the day. He chose a light grey suit in keeping with the climate and went downstairs. He found Christina standing at the glass doors, coffee cup in hand, looking out into the garden. Steed walked up behind her and slipped his arms around her. He kissed the side of her head lingering in the soft strands of blonde hair.

"It really is a beautiful garden," she said again.

He pushed her hair from her ear and nuzzled her neck placing light kisses just behind her ear. "Thank you. Maybe you'll come back to visit it again," he said, softly.

She half turned bringing his lips to hers. "If I'm invited," she said.

"I don't think that will be a problem," he told her. "You know, it's still early, we could go back upstairs and then go out for a nice dinner later." Her kiss had encouraged him and reawakened his body. "Of course, we don't have to go upstairs at all." His hands slipped down to caress her buttocks pulling her hips into his groin.

One of her hands made its way between them and stroked his erect penis through the material of his pants. "That would be lovely," she said, "but I have to go to work."

"What? At this hour? That's indecent," he said in mock horror. He did not want her to go, especially considering what her hand was doing to him.

She laughed. "That's rich, John. Wasn't it you who left in the middle of our date last week and I believe it was midnight." She suddenly broke their embrace, walked to the drinks table and put down her coffee cup. Steed did not follow immediately as walking would have been the slightest bit uncomfortable at the time.

"Anyway," she continued, "while you were sleeping I contacted my office. I've been commissioned to appraise some pieces at an estate prior to a private auction. It's too big a job to turn down. The appraisal has to be tonight. The auction is tomorrow afternoon."

"Where is the job?" he asked. "I could give you a lift and we could get some dinner afterwards."

"Thanks, but it's up in London and it will probably take most of the night. I've already called for a taxi."

He didn't know why, but she seemed awfully eager to leave. Finally able to move he walked with her as she started to the front door.

She paused; her arms went around his neck as her lips sought his. She lingered and allowed him to deepen the kiss. Her mouth was warm and inviting. For a moment he thought she might have changed her mind about leaving. His hand found the end of her blouse and started up the inner side when she stopped him. "I really have to go, John."

"Alright." He released her and opened the door. A taxi was waiting and she pecked him on the cheek and walked out. "Call me," she said.

"You can count on that," he said to himself as the car pulled away. He went back inside looking at the now empty room. He retrieved her coffee cup and took it to the kitchen, washed it, removing the lipstick marks, and placed it on the drain board. He was just trying to decide whether to go out for dinner or have something simple at home when he heard a knock at the front door.

His smile was bright as he flung the door open. "I was hoping you'd change your mind," he said. The smile faded as he saw a man standing before him instead of Christina.

Chapter Two

"I beg your pardon," Steed said. "I thought you were someone else." The man's gaze focused down the drive where the taxi had disappeared. "'Yes,'" he smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant look even though the eyes were hidden behind dark glasses. "I bet you did."

The man was younger than Steed maybe eight or ten years not quite as tall, perhaps 5' 9" or 6", broad shouldered, but a little thicker through the waist. His hair was probably brown, but looked as though it had been bleached by the sun and the color faded. His suit was black; a bit extreme considering the temperature was well over 70 degrees. The tie was black over a white silk shirt. He looked very warm although he didn't appear to be sweating. "You're John Steed," he said as he stepped past Steed and entered the house.

It was not a question and his uninvited entry put Steed on edge. He closed the door and turned to the stranger. "I suppose I must be," he replied.

The man turned back to Steed, removed his glasses and looked him up and down. "Yes," he said with a slight trace of disgust evident in his tone. "You would be."

"Now that we've established who I am, perhaps you'd care to tell me who you are and what you mean by barging into my home." Steed's own voice was a sharp sword.

"You mean you don't know," he asked with an exaggerated sense of surprise.

Steed shook his head. "Is there some reason I should?" he asked.

"No, of course you wouldn't," he explained. "We've never really met have we?" He didn't wait for a reply. "And I doubt she kept any pictures around to remind herself."

Steed didn't like where this was going. It wasn't often that he encountered a jealous ex-boyfriend or lover of a woman he had spent time with, but he found it very tiresome when he did. Since Christina had just left and there was no scene, he wondered who this one belonged to. "Well, if the lady didn't care to remember you, I'm sure that I would care even less," he told him pointedly and opened the door. The implication was plain enough. He didn't feel like playing this particular game. Prepared to eject the man forcibly if necessary, he felt his heart stop at the stranger's next words.

"My name is Peter Peel. I believe you were acquainted with my wife." With that he turned from the entryway and headed further into the large house.

Steed could faintly hear the man speaking as a flood of memories, bad memories, came rushing into his mind. Glimpses of a tall, dark man not very defined in his mind as he watched Mrs. Peel walk out of his life on that fateful day. A day he had tried so long to wipe from his memory. He remembered her, the light yellow suit she had worn, the way her hair fell softly to her perfect shoulders, the big brown eyes he wanted to lose himself in forever and the gentle, almost whispery touch of her lips on his cheek. His fingers automatically went to his face as he recalled that touch. Yes, he remembered her. But, the man? He wasn't sure. His mind raced as he closed the door and followed the man into the main part of the house.

"This is nice," Peel was saying as he looked around the great room. "Real nice. She never mentioned it was this well appointed." He stopped near the drinks table, turned back to Steed and snapped his fingers. "But then she'd never been here had she? It was the Stable Mews flat back then wasn't it?"

Something in the way the man was speaking sent a chill down Steed's spine, but his mind couldn't pen it down just now. "If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Peel," that sounded so odd, "she's your ex-wife. So what is it you think I can do for you?" Steed asked standing in the doorway to the room. He wanted room to move, just in case.

Peel smiled that same emotionless smile, and spread his hands in an open gesture. "Right now I'd settle for a drink," he said indicating the decanters on the small table. "Do you mind?"

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be here long enough to warrant one," Steed told him, advancing into the room, "but help yourself."

Peel laughed lightly without any humor. "I can see where you might feel that way," he said. "And you're right; the correct expression would be ex-wife. I should have known she wouldn't have been able to resist passing on that bit of news. I guess she thought, or hoped you'd come running back," he shrugged. His brows came together in mock concentration. "I must admit I was surprised myself when you didn't." He laughed that hollow laugh again turning his back to Steed while he poured two brandies. He took a sip from one and held the other out to Steed.

Peel had no idea just how close he had come to doing just that when he had heard the news. He shook his head to the drink. He had no intention of drinking with the man or clouding his senses when he didn't know what was coming. "If you have something to say, Mr. Peel," Steed was getting quite annoyed, "then say it."

He brought the other drink over to the table next to the chair where Steed was standing before taking a seat on the sofa himself. "Please, call me Peter," he said. "After all, we have shared so much. And I'll call you Steed. Steed. That's what she called you wasn't it? Always Steed . . . in public anyway. You know, I got where I hated that name. Even

though I forbid her to speak it, I could still hear it in her voice sometimes, see it in her eyes. Tell me, what name did she call you in private? Was it John? Or Johnny? Or did she have some other, pet name she called you in those private little moments?" Peel could see the anger rise up on the face of the man in front of him. That face, finally in clear view. This was the face that had haunted him for the past ten years. This was the face that had taken the woman he loved from him if not in body then in spirit, and in soul. This was the face that had taken his perfect wife, his perfect life. How could this face even begin to understand the depth of anger that raged through him? How could this face have the nerve to get angry at him!

"I think it's time for you to leave," Steed said. He had no intentions of discussing Mrs. Peel or the time they had spent together with anyone let alone her ex-husband. Whatever she had or hadn't told her husband was her decision and not for him to second guess. As far as either one of them knew when they met, so many years ago now, Peter Peel was dead, killed when his plane went down in the jungle. Life had not only gone on, but had flourished until that terrible day when, like the legendary Phoenix, he had risen from the ashes and in turn brought Steed's life crashing down.

"I could do that," Peter said, "but then I wouldn't have accomplished my mission." He was enjoying himself. After all, he thought, Steed deserved what was coming. He deserved to suffer a little and Peter deserved to watch it happen, to be the instrument that delivered the delicious blow that would bring the misery to this man that he had lived with himself. "You know about missions don't you, Steed." He didn't need to wait for an answer. "Of course you do. What secret agent wouldn't. Why don't you have a seat," he suggested, "and I think you're going to want that drink." He waved at the empty chair with the hand holding his brandy. One look at Steed's face, however, told him to move on. "Suit yourself," he shrugged. "Don't say I didn't try. You see, I do have some feelings unlike, . . . what was it her employees used to call her . . . the ice queen, the abominable snow woman?"

Steed had had enough. He took a step toward Peter just as the man reached inside his coat pocket and withdrew a page from a newspaper and held it out to him. Steed stopped as a photograph in the top right corner caught his eye. It was a photo of Mrs. Peel, but it was the bold type headline that froze him in place. Only the presence of the man on the sofa kept him from falling to his knees. The headline read, Industrialist CEO Found Dead In Hotel Room, Apparent Victim Of Suicide. Now he knew what was wrong with the man's speech, what had caused the chill to run down his spine. Every time Peter referred to Mrs. Peel, it had been in the past tense.

Peter studied Steed's face. This was what he came for. He watched the color drain, watched the pain and devastation dawn like a spreading cancer. "I thought you might be interested in that," he said. "I felt sure she would want you to know." The sarcasm fairly dripped from him. "You know her, she was never one to miss a dramatic entrance. So I thought I'd give her one last opportunity. Call it a posthumous tribute to a grand drama queen."

But Steed was beyond hearing. Blood rushed in his ears as his hand searched for the chair to keep from falling. His eyes were clued to the words in front of him as he read.

DAVID REED

BECKON, GA. - Beckon police

were called to the Peach Grove Bed and Breakfast, a small Hotel 25 miles outside Atlanta, early this morning where they found the body of Emma Knight dead from a gunshot wound to the head. The body was discovered at 6:30am. this morning by Mrs. Springer owner of the Peach Grove who went into the room to clean.

Sgt. Bienvenu of the Beckon police said the body was found on the bed fully clothed except for her shoes which were on the floor. A weapon was found clutched in her right hand. The hotel room door was locked and there was no sign of foul play. No drugs were suspected.

Dr. Matt Falkner, acting Beckon coroner stated that an, as yet undetermined caliber, bullet entered the right temple somewhere between 11:30pm. the previous night and 1:00am. this morning and exited just below the left ear. The death is being treated as a suicide.

Miss. Knight was the CEO and principle shareholder of Knight Industries with offices in many cities around the world including Atlanta. She had been in the city for a week negotiating the takeover of Northshore Electronics.

Associates at Knight Industries Atlanta stated, although they hadn't known the CEO very well, that she had not appeared depressed or unhappy. Negotiations were reportedly going well.

Miss. Knight was from London, England also the headquarters of Knight Industries. Miss. Knight was divorced and had no children.

Test pilot Peter Peel, most noted for crashing in the Amazonian jungle and being presumed dead only to be found alive and well two years later and ex-husband of Miss. Knight was also in Atlanta at the time, but police have ruled him out as having anything to do with Miss. Knight's death. Mr. Peel was quite distraught, but stated that he was here to quietly reconcile with his wife and had been asked to act as a representative for the Knight family. The body will be flown back to England when released from the coroner.

Steed looked at the picture. Even in black and white the big beautiful eyes captured him and the smile, that wonderful, magnificent, playful smile . . .oh, God, how could the world exist without that smile. He clamped his eyes closed as tight as possible against the tears. His chest hurt. He was sure he wasn't breathing, sure he would never draw another breath and just as sure that he didn't want to. He desperately wanted the brandy

on the table next to him, but didn't trust his hands to hold it. He had to keep them in his lap to control their shaking.

It couldn't be true. He had to be having a nightmare. That was it, he thought. He was still in bed and this was just a bad dream. He had Emma on his mind because of the roses and when he opened his eyes everything would be back as it was. He risked opening his eyes and saw a tear drop onto the paper in his lap, that smile looked up at him and he knew it wasn't a dream. He became vaguely aware of someone else in the room.

Someone was speaking and he tried to focus on what they were saying.

". . . and that's why I came here today." It was Peter. "I wanted you to know that she finally succeeded in accomplishing what she set out to do when she was with you."

"What are you talking about?" he asked barely above a whisper. His voice was failing.

The words seemed to be jumbled together and senseless. He just wanted the man to shut up and go away.

"Suicide," he repeated. "That's what I'm talking about. After all, what is your job but an attempted suicide wrapped in the flag." There was real anger in his tone.

"Much as a test pilot" Steed rejoined.

"She wasn't trained for that and you knew it. But you're good at manipulation aren't you. From what I understand this wasn't the first time you conned a civilian into your world of cloak and dagger. Why is that? Could it be because you're so paranoid that you can't trust your own people? Did you need someone that would be loyal to you not the organization you work for or did you have another reason? Was it just a way of getting them into your bed? There's one big difference between what you do and being a test pilot, I don't take passengers." The flippancy was back.

That statement hit home. Peter was right. He had dragged Mrs. Peel into his world. And it had been, and still was, a dangerous one. Could he be right about the rest? Could she have been looking for a way to end her life? Had he missed some vital clue all those years ago? No, his mind screamed. He saw her smile, heard her laughter, saw the eagerness in her eyes, remembered the playful banter. No, his mind said again. Steed picked up the paper. "This isn't true," he said. "She wouldn't do this." He didn't care if the other man saw the tears running down his face. Something wasn't right. Emma had loved life. She'd grabbed onto it, fought hard for it, over come so much time after time. And he wondered just why the police had ruled Peter out of this travesty.

Peter did see the tears and it gave him enormous pleasure. The man of strength had his weaknesses. Just like superman had his kryptonite, Steed had Emma and he wasn't about to let the man forget it. "Oh, you know her that well, do you," he practically spat the words out.

"Yes," Steed answered, but he knew before the word was out that it wasn't the truth. For the truth was, he didn't know her, not any longer anyway. Was it possible that she had changed that much? If so, what could have happened to make Emma, his Emma, want to take her own life? He locked his eyes on Peel who did not know Steed well enough to interpret the fire of rage and suspicion that burned behind them.

Peter snorted. "Not lately I venture." He waved the comment off. "All I know," he continued, "is when I came back she was happy. She stopped all those dangerous stunts." Peter's face blurred in front of him as his mind once again flashed back in time. She had been happy that day. Her voice had that lilting quality to it, her eyes had sparkled and there seemed to be a bounce in her step. That's what had hurt the most, he remembered,

the idea that leaving what they had shared was so easy for her. Had it all been a game after all? But his mind also remembered her voice during that last phone call. When he called about the killings at the petrol station in France she'd sounded upbeat. She'd been expecting his call. She even told him about her divorce and didn't seem at all surprised when he told her he had known. How long ago was that now, he wondered. Almost a year? He had wanted to call her again when they returned to let her know that the mystery of the out of time Russian soldiers had been solved, but he hadn't. He'd even gone so far as to pickup the phone, but the thought of the inevitable goodbye stopped him from dialing. She hadn't contacted him either. Obviously she had moved on and he no longer had the right to interfere with her life, if he had ever had that right. She was happy. Yes, happy, that was the point wasn't it. He turned his attention back to Peel. "Right, she was so happy she divorced you," he reminded the man, doubt gone from his mind, about that at any rate.

Peel rebounded with fire. "That was a mistake. We were going to reconcile."

"Well we only have your word for that, don't we." Steed's voice was ice. "Tell me, why did she divorce you? You had the whole world walk back into your life and you threw her away."

"Much as you did, Steed," Peter shot back. "Is that what galls you? Or is it because you knew you couldn't hold her." He almost laughed as he saw something flash in Steed's eyes. "That's it isn't it! You knew no matter what you did, no matter how she cried out for you in bed you couldn't give her what she wanted. You tell me, Steed, when she was laying there under you panting and moaning, who were you thinking of, her or yourself?" Steed's hand reached out so fast even though Peter thought he was prepared for a reaction he couldn't stop it. Steed's fingers wrapped around his throat and pinned him against the wall. The fist of the other hand drew back like lightening.

"Go on, do it," Peter gasp out with the little air he had. "It's what you've always wanted. Isn't it!"

Steed looked at the man. He saw the eyes bulged out, the lips beginning to turn blue and somewhere, deep inside himself, he realized that Peter was right. It was what he'd always wanted to do. He wanted to hurt this man, to hurt him as he'd been hurt. And he knew nothing he could do would measure up to the pain he felt then or now. Beating Peter might give him some temporary satisfaction, but it wouldn't change things.

He turned loose and didn't notice as Peter slumped slightly down the wall. Didn't care as the man began to cough and pull at his tie fighting for breath. Didn't care as the man stumbled on unsteady legs to hastily pour a large scotch. He didn't care about anything. Steed collapsed in a chair. He had no strength left.

Peter swallowed his drink, coughed a few more times and when he finally felt as though he was taking in enough oxygen, he risked it all again. "You know," he said somewhat weaker than before and making certain he was outside Steed's reach, "she never told me about the two of you. All she would say was that you were good friends. At least now you've confirmed what I've always suspected."

"Get out," Steed told him.

Steed didn't know when Peter left. Didn't know how long he sat there. He only knew that by the time he felt capable of reaching for his brandy without spilling it he could barely make out the outline of the glass in the darkness. He swallowed the burning liquid

in one gulp and immediately regretted it. Now he had to muster enough strength to get a refill. Instead of taking the empty glass to the bottle he brought the bottle to the table beside the chair.

After the fifth drink he pried himself from the chair again and went to the carved, white, relief insets along the wall. On the way his leg bumped into another table. Without light he had forgotten it was there. His subconscious registered that it should have hurt, but he felt nothing, no pain, no reflex. He knew that the brandy was numbing his body, but it hadn't numbed his mind or heart. It would take a great deal more before that happened. Fortunately, he had enough on hand to accomplish just that. He pushed one of the relief figures and a panel opened. He reached inside, found what he was looking for and returned to the chair. He swallowed another mouthful before turning on a small lamp and opening the book he had retrieved.

Page after page forced his heart to relive his memories. The pictures were taken at various times and places over several years. Mrs. Peel riding on the magnificent white stallion named Treason from his club. He recalled that none of the male members would ride him. They said he was too wild, too unpredictable, too untamed. He still remembered the mischievous look that she gave him as she not only rode him, but did it bareback. It was almost as though she formed an allegiance, an understanding with the animal. The club members stared at her in astonishment and he had felt certain they could see the pride shining from his eyes and feel the love that beat from his heart. She was dressed in white that day as they hadn't planned to ride. Her deep brown eyes shown like smoldering embers and her auburn hair blew in the breeze like the fine feathers of a proud eagle.

He remembered feeling jealous of the horse that could meld almost as one with that beautiful being in public, one magnificent creature so in tune with the other. Watching that horse he swore he detected a tightening of the muscles saw the nostrils flare, the tail stand perk and proud, the mane flowing back in the wind to match the rider's auburn fire. This creation of nature had no voice, but spoke in every way possible his feelings for the creation of a higher power that rode upon his strong and powerful back, glorified in this goddess that would dare to take him at the same time mocking the timid males who quaked at the sight of him and lusted for the temptress. As much as he wanted to climb up behind her and fly with her open spirit, shout to her and to the world how much he loved her, his voice was mute. Disgustedly mute. Even in their private moments he lacked the courage.

He poured another drink and prayed that the anesthetic would take his mind soon. He turned to the photo he'd been looking for. It was his favorite and he felt the sting of renewed tears as he came to it. They'd gone to Rome, a small treat after a long case. During a quiet walk in the moonlight they stopped beside a fountain. His brandy soaked mind couldn't recall the name at the moment, but it didn't matter. He remembered everything else. Although he was holding her hand, she was slightly ahead of him and then she turned and smiled at him with that private little smile she had just for him. That smile was brighter than the stars themselves, and though in public they tried to maintain there 'just good friends' demeanor, he couldn't resist pulling her to him and kissing her. She'd returned his kiss with a passion that melted him. When they finally broke apart a man approached them from out of the shadows. "Forgive me, sir, but the love for one another that is written on your faces out shown the fountain. I could not resist." With

that he placed a roll of film in Steed's hand and left. They had both been a little embarrassed at the time. It wasn't until they got back to London that he developed the film. You couldn't really see either face, just the kiss. He had adored it ever since. He put the book, still open to that photograph, on the coffee table, placed his head in his hands and openly wept.

He must have dozed off. When he woke sometime later, he was still in the chair, the big house was silent and misty, pre-sunrise shadows filtered throughout muting the single lamp. For a moment he was disoriented. It wasn't until he saw the photo album that the pain came crashing back over him dragging him under a sea of sorrow so deep and black light would burn like the fires of hell. The newspaper article caught his eye, but this time there was something ticking in the back of his mind. A voice was trying to get his attention through the curtain of pain. You're an agent, it kept saying. It's time you started to think like one.

He rubbed at his face and eyes willing himself to form a cohesive thought. Look at this as you would any other case, he told himself. The photograph swam into view and his stomach retched with crippling grief. He reached out and ran his finger over Emma's face once more before closing the book. He swallowed hard to keep the bile from escaping. You have to focus your mind somewhere else. Start with the first report, he heard a voice from his training days. Always start from the basic story. Examine it. Dissect it. Verify it. Never assume anything to be the truth until you have checked and double checked! Suddenly he felt a flicker of hope. He'd never stopped to think that the story could be fake. After all, the only proof he had was a page from a newspaper and Peter Peel's word. Neither one was sufficient enough to validate the other. Peter obviously had a grudge against him. What was it he had said? She never told me about the two of you. Could he have invented this as a way of getting information or a sick means of revenge? Newspapers could be forged. He had done it himself a few times. Steed unfolded the paper. The banner heading read 'Atlanta Daily News', but it didn't contain any contact information. Fortunately, that wasn't a problem.

Even though it was early morning, Steed picked up the bottle of brandy and refilled his glass. He downed it before walking, on unstable legs, to the telephone. He dialed a number and asked for overseas information. It didn't take him long to get the number he wanted and place the call to the newspaper in the United States. A completely listless male voice answered after a few rings and Steed grabbed for the paper to get the name of the reporter. The voice informed him that most of the reporters had gone home for the night, but he would connect him with the night editor.

"Editing, Wofford," a voice said.

Steed massaged a dull ache that was forming in his temple as he told himself that he had to ask the question even though his heart didn't want the answer. His mind had given him a ray of hope, but following it could extinguish the light forever. "Mr. Wofford, I'm looking for some information . . ."

"The next addition comes out at 5:00am. You can find it on most corners in the business district or I can hook you up with the subscription department," Wofford stated. His sarcasm was flat and tired.

Steed's knuckles turned white as he gripped the phone to keep the anger from his voice.

"The information I'm looking for concerns an article your paper published two days ago," he explained. "It was written by a Mr. David Reed and covered the . . .," Steed

paused. He couldn't bring himself to say the word death. "It was about Emma Knight, the CEO of Knight Industries." He heard the long sigh of boredom slip through the receiver. He wished he could reach through the phone line and grab the man.

"Knight . . . Knight . . ." Wofford repeated trying to recall. Why do people always assume you can instantly remember every word printed in the paper simply because you worked there, he wondered. "Yeah," he finally said, "I think I remember. Suicide, wasn't it. Some small place outside Atlanta. What about it?"

"I need to know if the story is true," Steed told him.

Wofford responded as though he were speaking to a mentally challenged child. "We're not in the habit of publishing stories that are untrue, sir."

"I can appreciate that," Steed said through clinched teeth. "What I want to know is if Mr. Reed actually saw the body. Who made the identification. Why was Peter Peel eliminated as a suspect and how I can get a copy of the autopsy." There was silence on the other end of the line. Steed could hear the man breathing so he knew the connection was still good. "Mr. Wofford, are you still there?" he asked.

"Yeeeah," the man finally said. "Just what did you say your connection with this Miss. Knight was, mister . . . I'm sorry, but I don't think I caught your name."

"My name is Steed. I'm a . . ." Red lights were going off in Steed's head. He couldn't tell this man that he was an agent with the ministry nor could he even hint that he was suspicious of the report. He had to remember that he was speaking to a newspaper reporter. The last thing he needed was to have a pack of news hounds sniffing around. At the same time he didn't think 'friend of the family' would garner him much cooperation. At the last minute he decided to use their own institution against them. "I'm a reporter with the London Times and we're thinking of doing an essay on the affects on Knight Industries," he told the man.

"Well I'm afraid I can't help you with your questions." Wofford's voice resumed its disinterested quality and Steed breathed a sign of relief. "I can tell you that it's not our policy to require the reporter to actually see the body, but that's about all. If you'll give me your number I'll see if I can contact Reed and have him call you," he offered.

Steed thanked him and left the number with a plea that Wofford contact Reed as quickly as possible. He told the man that the Times wanted to run the article in the next addition and that time was running out. The man assured him he would do his best. Steed knew that time was his enemy. He had to keep his mind active or risk slipping back into the depths of crushing despair. He needed a shower to clear his mind and figure out his next move.

The hot water failed to work its magic on his distraught mind or body. He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. The bloodshot eyes, uncombed hair and unshaven face didn't register. The eyes that stared back at him were hollow, twin pools reflecting the sorrow and pain from a dead heart. He reached for his razor, but dropped it again. For the first time that he could remember he had no interest in shaving, had no interest in his appearance at all. He opened the bathroom door to leave and ran straight into two lovely dark brown pools. The smile in Emma's eyes out shown the smile on the beautiful soft lips that he longed to touch, to taste, to feel pressed against his. "You know I like it when you have that ruff and tumble look, Steed, but the scent of your aftershave and the feel of your smooth skin on mine always drives me crazy," she whispered. She brought her hand to his face and he closed his eyes to the wonderful feel of her fingers running across

his cheek. He raised his hand to capture hers, to press her to him, tears of joy welling in his tired eyes. His heart jumped threatening to pull out of his chest, but stopped just as abruptly as he opened his eyes and once again saw only the empty room. She wasn't there. His mind had played the cruelest joke. Her words still echoed in his mind as he turned back and picked up his razor. She had always liked him clean shaven after all. He returned to the kitchen clean shaven and fully dressed in a dark blue suit. He was just putting some coffee on when the phone rang. "Steed," he said after running from the kitchen, jumping over the back of the sofa and grabbing the receiver.

"David Reed here, Mr. Steed," the voice on the other end said. "I got a message from my editor, said you wanted to talk to me about the Knight story."

Steed couldn't believe his good luck. He hadn't expected to hear from Reed so soon.

"That's true Mr. Reed. I was hoping to hear your account first hand. What can you tell me about this apparent suicide?"

"Well, sir, I'm a little curious about your use of the word 'apparent'. I can tell you that there is no doubt about the cause according to the Beckon police. If you are trying to infer that the story I wrote is anything but . . ."

"No, no, Mr. Reed," Steed cut in. "I can assure you that I have no question regarding your reporting. It's just that I happen to know the Knight family and I have had some acquaintance with Miss. Knight," he didn't see any harm in admitting that much after all if he were a reporter for the London Times it wouldn't be outside his sphere of knowledge. "The family was a little curious about Peter Peel's presence. Considering that he and Miss. Knight had been divorced for some time, and the fact that you stated he had been ruled out as having any involvement I was wondering how that determination was made. Was he questioned?"

"Of course we knew about the divorce over here, Mr. Steed. Believe it or not the ins and outs of British society do make it across the big pond. According to my notes, Peel was ruled out because first; there were no signs of foul play, second; he had an air tight alibi, he was dining with some retired Air Force colonial, and third; he wasn't even mentioned in the note she left. Apparently she made it quite . . ."

Steed's breath caught in his throat. "She left a note?" he asked. This was knew. Peter hadn't said anything about a note. "What did it say? Your article didn't say anything about a note."

"I left that out at the request of the police. Besides, I don't know what was in it. The police aren't exactly forthcoming with that sort of thing. Since they ruled it a suicide, there was no reason to follow-up on that aspect."

"Who made the identification of the body?"

"Ah . . ., if I remember correctly, it was Peter Peel," Reed said. "That's not unusual since he was here and the closest thing they had to a next of kin. And before you ask, I did not view the body. It had been removed by the time I got there and I really didn't see the need."

"Where can I get a copy of the autopsy and the note?"

"My guess is the police still have the note, but I suppose it's possible that Doctor Falkner might have a copy. You'd need to talk to him about the autopsy anyway. I have to tell you that it's against policy to hand over a copy, however. Dr. Falkner is a small town GP. He only sidelines as the coroner. You might be able to talk him into it if he's not entirely up on the law, but I wouldn't hold my breath. Your best bet would probably be

to get the family to make the request through their attorney.” There was silence on the line. “Is there anything else Mr. Steed?”

“Yes,” he said. “Can you tell me where the . . . body is now?”

“Ah . . .no, if it was released from the coroner then I suppose it went to some funeral home for processing or it could have been shipped by now for all I know. I’m sorry, but I really have to go. If you have any more questions I suggest you contact this Peter Peel. He seems to be handling everything. Good luck, Mr. Steed.”

Steed hung up the phone and considered trying to place a call to Dr. Falkner’s office, but a glance at the clock on his wall told him that would likely be unsuccessful. The time difference would put it well after 11:00pm. in Beckon. He returned to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of the freshly brewed coffee. On his way back he stopped long enough to add some brandy to the hot liquid before going to the garden doors. The sun was coming up and beginning to cast its warmth on the silvery dew drops that covered the roses, her roses. Like tiny drops of sunlight to light the heart. That’s what she had called them. That’s why she loved their yellow brilliance. He knew now why he had insisted on including them in the garden and why they had to be yellow. As he looked out at them now anger spread over him like the dew on the fine, timid flowers and his reserve shattered into just as many drops. Each bud, every petal reminded him of lost dreams of seeing that light in her heart. Without thinking he walked out to the gardener’s shed and picked up an axe. They were never intended to be a memorial, he thought. How could she do it? How could she take her own life? How could she break his heart, his mind, his soul again? How could she destroy any hope, any prayer, any fantasy, no matter how tiny, that he might have had. He knew these were selfish thoughts, but he didn’t care. With one powerful stroke he swung the axe back in front of the first trellis, but his arm froze as the sun took that moment to touch a sleeping bud and he watched as it slowly began to open. Tears came as his mind showed him another rose. “Look, Steed,” Emma was saying, she inhaled the wonderful fragrance, her face lit from within by the wonders of nature and from without by that magnificent smile, “look at how this tiny, delicate thing opens itself to the day ready for whatever the world has to offer. Isn’t it beautiful?” He remembered the delicate beauty, but he hadn’t been looking at the rose, only her. He put the axe down.

He returned to the house, drained his coffee and refilled the cup neglecting the coffee this time as he opened a new bottle of brandy. He picked up the phone again and, after making a reservation on a flight to Atlanta, he went upstairs and packed a small bag. In the study he opened the safe, took out his passport and a stack of US currency he kept for short notice trips, before climbing into his Jaguar and heading to London. It was time to get some help.

Whitehall was active even at this early hour. There was always training, briefings, debriefings, interrogations, investigations and of course endless communications going on. Steed made his way down the hall ignoring the various office doors, oblivious to the looks of people he passed. Most of his fellow agents and the administrative staff just watched as he passed and continued on their way. It was only a few that actually stopped and stared. John Steed was known throughout the department by name, by reputation and by sight, but few had ever seen him as he walked the familiar halls today. There was no bowler. He carried no umbrella, the tie was loose and crooked and the eyes red rimmed, bloodshot and ghostly. He spoke to no one just walked with deadly purpose to the lift at

the end of the hall. Few ventured into that upper level sanctum to which that shaft lead without summons or invitation. John Steed was one that could do so without question. The lift opened to a quiet outer office. Burt McQuay a high level, confidential clerk for the man in the inner office looked a little startled. "Mr. Steed," he said. "I didn't know Mother was expect . . ." Steed passed him by and opened the door marked private before he could finish.

Mother, the corpulent, wheelchair bound, ex-department head had risen in the Ministry over the years. He rarely dealt on field agent level anymore, but was always proud to consider Steed a friend and was generally glad to see him. His sea blue eyes snapped up at the intrusive entrance. His voice caught in mid-sentence, annoyance flamed but quickly dissolved when he saw who had entered and he dropped the phone he had been speaking into back onto its cradle without another word as he took in the state of his visitor. Rhonda, his statuesque, silent assistant, stared in wide eyed, open mouth astonishment and, if anyone looked closely, real concern at the man before them.

McQuay was on his heels. "I'm sorry, Mother, but Mr. Steed . . ." The big man waved him off and he closed the door gently.

Mother took in the disheveled appearance, the sleep starved eyes, he didn't even want to contemplate the cause of the redness, He could clearly make out the odor of alcohol. Something was terribly wrong. "Coffee," he said to Rhonda who immediately moved to comply. The phone that he had so abruptly hung up before rang. He grabbed at it. "Not now!" he growled and hung up again. "Steed," he motioned to a chair. "What is it, man?"

He took the chair with gratitude. Thankful that Mother hadn't eliminated what he considered extraneous furniture as he so often did in his headquarters. For a man eternally trapped inside a chair, the sight of empty seats was like stroking a raw nerve. Steed found he had no energy for standing. It took all of his will simply to move and he wasn't sure how long he could push his body to do it. Whatever force was left in his empty shell wanted nothing more than to retreat into a forgotten corner. "I'm going to the United States," he told his superior. "I have a flight out in a few hours." Rhonda appeared and handed him a cup and saucer. Steam rose from the strong, dark coffee. He accepted without notice. "I need you to help me locate . . .," he swallowed, hard. ". . . a body," he managed. He couldn't bring himself to say her name, but at the same time despised reducing her to an object.

Mother's mind automatically switched to all business. "Body? What body? Whose body?" he demanded. Though he was no longer involved in the day to day assignments of agents he still kept abreast of activities and an attack could mean anything from personal revenge to the first strike against the entire country.

Steed pulled the newspaper from his coat and tossed it on the desk. As the man picked it up Steed noticed the coffee he was holding for the first time. He stood, placed the cup on the desk and walked over to the drinks tray to the right of the big desk. Mother always kept a good supply.

It was clear that Steed had already had quite a bit to drink when he arrived which is why Mother had ordered the coffee. He saw Rhonda take a step behind Steed, but he caught the woman's eye and slowly shook his head holding up the paper so she could see the picture and headline. Rhonda's head lowered and she stepped back. Steed saw none of their exchange.

Mother knew the situation was worse than he had imagined. He was personally saddened by the loss of Mrs. Peel. He'd had a soft spot for the lady not only because she was a brilliant, imaginative, strong, trustworthy, if unofficial agent, but more importantly for the calming affect she had had on Steed. The agent had ranked as one of the department's best, but when he teamed with Mrs. Peel he'd truly come into his own. She seemed to smooth his ruff edges, to quiet some of his restlessness and reckless habits. They'd functioned as a most unique unit each supporting and inspiring the other. For this reason he had always lied when those higher up questioned the nature of the pair's relationship. 'They're just close friends' his official reports stated. Although few who spent any time around the two would believe it. The looks that passed between them, the communication at a glance, the way one seemed to come to life in the presence of the other and the almost unerring ability to maintain physical contact without ever touching when near one another left only marginal room for doubt and was enough to fuel the wagging tongues of many gossip hounds. However, he had always pointed out, to those who so crudely listened to such rampant nonsense, that their profession required them to deal in facts, not gossip. Until he was presented with positive proof to the contrary, he had seen no reason to break up a winning team and he had always reminded these self same superiors that Steed and Mrs. Peel had handled some of the Ministry's most difficult, not to mention bazaar, cases with success. It was for this reason he had always made certain that he was the one given the assignment to investigate whenever these annoying questions arose and had made sure that neither Steed nor the lady ever heard about them. Besides, he doubted Steed would have or could have given the lady up. That opinion was strongly supported when Peter Peel returned from the dead. The devastation that Steed suffered through when she walked out of his life was lengthy. With help of friends, work, time and Tara King he had appeared to make peace with it, but with Steed appearances could often be deceiving.

When the news of Mrs. Peel's divorce was made public, those that knew the two assumed there would be a reconciliation. When that failed to happen, curiosity ran wild for some time, but when the anticipated reunion failed to materialize it eventually faded away. He had wanted to ask Steed about the possibility himself, but it just wasn't the done thing. Despite what many may have thought, he too, had a heart and he thought he understood. He surmised, some might say romanticized, that Steed had loved her with a love so deep he probably didn't understand it himself and to risk that again would require overcoming his fear of losing her again. Fear was something that was foreign to Steed and he did not deal with it easily. Still, fear would have been preferable, Mother thought, to the pain and sorrow he carried today. This time Mother wondered if there was anything that could help his friend or if they would lose Steed completely. He placed the paper on his desk and wondered if maybe he should give Tara a . . ., his eyes caught the date. He picked the paper up again making sure he saw it properly. "Steed," he said. "This can't be right."

Steed swallowed a mouthful of brandy. "I know," he agreed. "She isn't the type." "No," Mother corrected. "I mean, I agree with that, but that's not what I'm talking about."

Steed sat on the edge of the desk and looked at the man waiting for him to clarify.

“This paper is dated two days ago,” Mother explained. “Do you really think someone of Mrs. Peel . . . er . . . Miss. Knight’s social standing could commit such a heinous act anywhere in the world and not have it picked up by the local press?”

Steed felt like he was sinking in mud. Mother was right. Why hadn’t he thought of that. He had even told Reed that he was doing a follow-up for the Times. Follow-up to what? What was happening to him? He had to think.

“Steed, I think you better tell me where and how you got this,” he said. He motioned for Rhonda to take the abandoned coffee away and she nodded at the look he passed to her disappearing through a concealed door at the other end of the room.

Steed related the story of Peter’s visit to his country home leaving out the vulgar nature of most of his comments. He then told Mother of his conversation with David Reed.

Mother’s eyebrows raised when Steed told him that Peter had failed to mention the note. “So you thought you’d go to this town in Georgia and find out things for yourself,”

Mother concluded.

“Yes.”

“It sounds to me like you don’t have enough information about anything yet. Why not wait until I’ve had a chance to look into this from this end?” he suggested, but he knew it was wasted breath. He wasn’t sure having Steed so far away in another country, even if it were a friendly one, was such a good idea in his condition. Right now he seemed somewhat controlled, no doubt do in part to the quantity of alcohol he had consumed, but Mother knew better than most what could happen when the grief slipped under the blunting effects of the distilled liquor and ignited the anger. Steed could be a very volatile man and this could be enough to make him snap.

Steed’s eyes held the other man. This is Emma they were saying. “I have to go,” he said. The other man nodded his understanding. Rhonda slipped back into the room and handed a note to her boss. He glanced at the words and looked at Steed. “It’s confirmed,” he told him. “Knight Industries, London have known for two days, but are not releasing the news or a statement at this time at the family’s request. I’m sorry, Steed.” He had secretly hoped that it had been a hoax perpetrated on the agent. “How they kept it from the press I don’t know. So what is it you want me to do? You said something about locating her body.” Mother noticed the, almost, imperceptible shiver that ran through Steed when he spoke those words.

Steed swallowed the rest of his drink. He needed the warmth it provided if only temporarily. “I don’t have time to wait to find out where . . .” he just couldn’t say it. “I want a second autopsy.”

Mother looked down at his desk and shuffled some papers before returning his eyes to his friend. He cleared his throat. “Of course I can find out where the body is,” he stated, “but, Steed, I can’t order an autopsy. I haven’t the authority.”

“What are you talking about, Mother. An agent dies . . .”

Mother held up his hand. “That’s just it, Steed,” he explained. “You know as well as I do that Mrs. Peel was never an official member of the department. Maybe if it had happened over here. If there was something suspicious or it hadn’t been so many years since her last involvement with a case . . .” his words trailed off and he looked at Steed almost apologetically, but firmly. “I can’t order an autopsy without the family’s consent. Have you spoken to any of her family outside of Peter Peel that is.”

“Peter Peel is not her family!” Steed snapped.

There was a moment of silence as Mother let him regain control. “Have you spoken to anyone?” he repeated.

“No.” The truth was he didn’t believe his appearance would be well received. He hadn’t seen or spoken to anyone in her family since that terrible day. It wouldn’t have been appropriate. To show up now . . . and if they did blame him for her . . . it just wasn’t something he considered.

“Steed,” Mother broke his train of thought. “I can’t arrange to have Purdy or Gambit pulled out of their current assignment. They’re too far undercover, but if you need any . . .”

“I don’t need that kind of help,” he told him. “And right now I’d just as soon not have to deal with that.”

“I understand. I might not be able to get that autopsy,” he said sympathetically, “but I may be able to delay things for awhile. At least until you find some answers. I can request a copy of the original autopsy and the police report. That should give us a copy of the note as well.”

Steed looked at his watch. “I’m hoping my trip will make that unnecessary,” he said. Mother eyed the man seriously. “Steed, while I have a great deal of personal latitude on this side of the ocean, I have very little on that side especially with small town authorities. When need be I rely on goodwill. You realize that anything you do over there will have no official status.” Steed nodded. “Be careful and keep me informed. We can’t make this an official inquiry - yet,” he stressed, “but I still have some resources I can put into play without getting us into too much trouble.”

“Thank you, Mother, but I really don’t know if there is anything to find. I just want answers.”

Rhonda appeared and wheeled Mother’s chair to follow as Steed opened the door to leave. They found the small outer office crammed with agents who parted to let Steed pass. When the lift doors closed Mother looked around at the group.

Michaels, a tall, older agent spoke first. “Mother,” he said, “I have some holiday time coming, if Steed needs any unofficial help . . .”

There was a chorus of voices from the group, each volunteering their time. Mother’s eyes went around the room, a soft glint in the steel blue that didn’t entirely disappear before he said sternly, “Eavesdropping is a talent that should be cultivated in an agent, but not in this office. I’m happy to know that the state of the nation is in such good order that we seem to have a bevy of free agents. Perhaps more training needs to be scheduled.” He turned back to enter his office before adding, “Thank you all.”

Chapter Three

The flight was long and uneventful. Steed tried to relax, but found his mind restless and unwilling to let his memories remain hidden behind doors that had been closed and locked for so many years. Aided by exhaustion and the quiet drone of the

engines his mind slipped back to a similar flight taken long ago. A return flight from Bermuda to London, one they had managed to catch just after completing a particularly trying case. Mrs. Peel had spent nearly forty-eight hours without sleep. Traveling through the night sky it was only natural that she dozed off soon after take off. Worn out, her dreamless sleep was so deep that she never realized that she eventually rested her head on his shoulder, her hand wrapped around his bicep. She was so beautiful. Her hair smelled of spring honeysuckle and although their relationship at the time was one of only friends, he couldn't resist placing a kiss so lightly on the top of her head he felt certain she wouldn't feel it. It was a stolen moment of pure selfishness, but he had already begun to feel the draw and power she would come to have over him. It shocked him when he heard her sigh and tighten her grip on his arm. The fire that ran through his body at her unconscious response had shocked him even more and he was thankful he had a magazine on his lap.

It was quite some time after that before he would taste of her tender and luscious lips. Secretly he had always remembered that stolen moment as their first kiss. Because she had been relaxed and comfortable enough with him that her subconscious had let her feelings for him tweak out from behind the playfulness they used as a wall between them. He had remained absolutely still during the rest of the flight afraid his slightest movement would cause her to change position and he wanted that contact for as long as possible. It was a memory he had never shared with her and one that he tried desperately to turn away from now as he felt the sorrow dragging him down into the pit again. Tears returned to his red, swollen, burning eyes and he rubbed at them to dissipate his obvious pain. It took some time, but he eventually drifted into fits of dozing.

After claiming his bag Steed rented a car and bought a map of the area. He estimated it wouldn't take much more than half an hour to get to Beckon once he cleared the city limits of Atlanta. Airport traffic was heavy, but once on the main hi-way he found he had managed to miss most of the morning rush hour. Rush hour times seemed to be universal in most civilized countries.

The southern United States could be beautiful in the spring and Georgia was no exception, but a cool front had moved in and brought with it a low hanging cloud bank. A steady drizzle fell casting the business district with its concrete structures in a cold, depressing light. The distant tree lines that began to show as he pushed further out appeared to stand in a mist shrouded, shadowy fog. Despite the sixty degree temperature he reached out and turned the car's heat on to drive away the gray chill the rain affected on him.

As he pulled off the hi-way he found himself on a winding, two lane road that lead through thick trees into the backwoods and hills. The redbud and dogwood trees were already in bloom, the latter's limbs weighted down by the rain drops until they drooped slightly downward, their white petals contrasting richly against the darkened, wet bark. The road had a hypnotic quality as it twisted and turned, curves not sharp enough to require braking enabled a steady and monotonous speed. More than once he caught himself jerking the wheel back to the right as an oncoming vehicle suddenly appeared. He had to remind himself to stay on the right anyway and being so very tired didn't help. He wondered why Mrs. Peel would choose to stay so far away from the city where her business was located. The travel time back and forth would have been exhaustive. Eventually the trees parted and he found himself driving down the main

street of Beckon. He stopped at a roadside diner for some coffee and to ask for directions to the bed and breakfast.

Steed's appearance, his tailored suit and bowler, caused a few heads to turn in the diner, but the curious whispers were kept to a minimum and he left the diner and started down the main road following the directions the waitress had given him. He noticed the local police department on his way and considered stopping there first, but decided he'd come back later after he had more information and could ask better questions. The Peach Grove wasn't too far from the diner, as it turned out nothing in the small town was too far. He turned onto the long, circular, gravel drive in front of the hotel's sign. The sound of the gravel crunching under the tires was a familiar one and reminded him of his home. The front of the hotel sat in among rows of, what looked like, magnolia trees. The expansive front entrance was also circular with three long, wide steps that lead up to an elegant hardwood porch on the lower level. Four white, carved pillars on either side of the steps supported a rounded balcony above. Vine covered brick walls stretched north and south away from the entry. Eight foot windows, dressed from the inside by delicate lace curtains, were evenly spaced on both sides. His footsteps echoed on the highly polished hardwood as he crossed and entered the lobby. A young girl, about seventeen years old, approached and stepped behind the reception desk as he put his bag down. "Welcome to the Peach Grove. My name is Margaret. How can I help you?"

She wasn't very tall. The counter she stood at came up almost to her shoulders. She had a pleasant if not pretty face with caramel colored eyes that smiled when she did. Her dark brown hair wasn't too short or too long and worn brushed back from her face. There was an indentation on either side of the bridge of her narrow nose. Obviously she had the need for glasses a great deal of the time and he wondered absently why she wasn't wearing them now. "John Steed," he said. "I'd like a room if you have one."

Margaret was at that age when the opposite sex was something that occupied most waking thoughts. She looked at the tall stranger. He was very handsome even if it did look like he hadn't slept in a week. She wondered if the lack was due to business or some wild time. She hoped it was the latter. She liked older men and although he was probably three times her age, his gray eyes fascinated her. His voice had a seductive quality when he wasn't even trying, and that accent! His hair was thick, dark and looked as soft as velvet. She wanted to touch it. She wished he would smile. "Of course, will you be staying with us long, Mr. Steed?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps only a few days."

"You're British, aren't you," she said as he filled out the registration card.

He slid the completed card across to her. It's time to go to work, he told himself and managed a smile that seemed to work on most women. She was just a child, but you never knew where your best information would come from. He saw his effort pay off as she tiptoed just enough to raise her breasts above the counter. For a moment he marveled that, at his age, he could still have that affect on someone that young. "It was my socks," he said taking the girl by complete surprise. "That's what gave me away, wasn't it."

Margaret giggled. "Actually, it was your hat. I don't think I've ever seen one of those except in the movies." His smile was like lightning at midnight on a moonless night. She was trying to remember which room she had neglected to put towels in that morning, a perfect excuse to visit a man's room.

“Tell me, Margaret, I’m not the only person from England that you’ve met recently am I?”

She selected the key to room 214 from the peg board behind her. “No, there was another fella about a week ago,” she told him. “But he didn’t stay here.”

Fella, Steed thought, now who could . . . “Was his name Peel by any chance?” he asked, leaning on the counter and placing his broad shoulders a bit closer to her.

Margaret could smell the hint of alcohol on his breath, but that didn’t surprise her. A lot of the men who checked in at the hotel were drinkers and frequently made passes at her as they swayed back to their rooms at night. She wondered if Steed was flirting with her. The scent of his cologne was better than the booze. “Yeah, that was his name,” she admitted. The smirk on her lips and the tone of her voice suggested she hadn’t cared much for him.

“You didn’t like him?”

“No. He was too smarmy,” she said.

Steed’s brows drew down as he tried to process that. “Smarmy? I’m sorry, I’m afraid I’m not too familiar with that expression.”

“Smarmy is like bad bologna before it molds,” she explained. “Slick and slimy with a sour odor.”

Steed couldn’t help but laugh. He had never heard such an outrageous description in his life and, when applied to Peter Peel, one so appropriately accurate. He wondered what Peter had done to garner such an opinion. He didn’t have to wonder long.

“I didn’t like the way he treated that lady,” Margaret volunteered. “She was British too.”

The smile left Steed’s face. “Mrs. Peel,” he said without thinking.

“Heaven forbid!” the girl responded and she saw his eyebrows raise. “That’s what the lady said when I made the mistake of callin’ her that,” she explained. “You see, I wasn’t here when she checked in. I was on a date.” She winked at him, got no response, shrugged her shoulders and continued. “I didn’t know that she checked in as . . . ah . . . Knight, I think it was. Yeah, Knight, that was it. Anyway, I overheard a conversation she and this fella’ had and the way he was talkin’ to her, kind of nasty and cruel,” she looked at Steed, “you know what I mean . . .”

“Smarmy,” he supplied.

“Yeah, exactly. Well I just figured she must be his wife. Who else would put up with that? You know it’s funny cause there for a minute . . .”

“Margaret!”

The voice came from behind Steed and the girl leaned close to whisper, “Cheese it, the cops.” Before Steed could respond, “Hello Gran, this is Mr. Steed. He’s checking in for a few days. Mr. Steed, this is my grandmother Mrs. Spencer. She owns The Peach Grove.”

Mrs. Spencer was an elderly woman somewhere between seventy and forever about the same height as her granddaughter thin and frail looking with paper thin skin, snow white hair and piercing blue eyes. She was the perfect picture of a southern, genteel, little old lady, right down to the shawl she had wrapped around her shoulders. “How do you do, Mr. Steed,” she said as she offered him her hand.

Steed took the hand and kissed the back politely in the truest southern tradition. This caused Margaret to giggle again which drew a look of annoyance from her grandmother.

“How do you do, Mrs. Spencer. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Did I hear you asking about one of our guests?”

“Yes, I was inquiring about Miss. Emma Knight.”

Mrs. Spencer looked from Steed back to Margaret with just a hint of suspicion showing in her eyes. “I don’t encourage idyll gossip, Mr. Steed.”

“Nor do I, dear lady,” he hastened to assure her. “Miss. Knight is . . . was an old friend of mine.”

She sighed deeply. “I see, in that case I suppose you’d better come with me.” She lead as they passed through a spacious common room. There were several comfortable sofas, numerous over stuffed chairs the arms of which were covered by dainty, lace doilies.

Two antique, roll top, writing desks adorned opposite ends of the room and a natural, stone fireplace sat inside the north wall. They exited onto a screened-in porch that over looked the south garden area. Mrs. Spencer took a seat at a white whicker table and motioned for him to join her. “I was about to have some tea. Won’t you join me?”

To his surprise a regular English teapot, cup and saucer sat waiting on the table.

Americans were so fond of iced tea he grimaced when she mentioned it.

“I so despise ice tea,” she said as if she’d read his mind. “It seems to have no flavor what-so-ever. I much prefer the old fashioned kind. Oh,” she said, standing. “We’ll need another cup. No, please, stay where you are,” she told him as he started to rise, but he stood anyway. “I’ll just be a moment.” She headed across the porch where he could see a cupboard with extra utensils and china. “Isn’t the garden coming along nicely. Of course, it will be even lovelier when the trees fill out properly.” She returned with the cup and poured for them both. “Do you prefer milk or lemon, Mr. Steed?”

“Mrs. Spencer,” he began while stirring his tea. It really did smell good. “I’d like to ask you some questions about what happened, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m terribly sorry for your friend’s passing, Mr. Steed.”

“Thank you.”

“Wasn’t my granddaughter able to answer your questions?”

Her face looked as innocent as the daisies in the garden, but something told him to exercise caution. “No, she simply remarked that I was the second Englishman she’d met recently. We didn’t get the chance to discuss Miss. Knight.”

Her blue eyes searched his. “Ah yes, that would have been Mr. Peel. Another nice young man.”

Evidently smarmy didn’t register with granny. His opinion of Margaret raised a few notches.

“Mr. Steed, I can appreciate your quest for answers about your friend. These things are never easy to understand or accept, but you really look done in. Wouldn’t you rather get some rest first. I find things often look better after a good rest.”

How could he tell her that nothing would ever look good again? “I’m fine. The tea is most refreshing,” he assured her. “Mrs. Spencer, what can you tell me about Miss. Knight’s stay here?”

“I’m afraid there isn’t much to tell. The lady stayed here about a week and to be honest with you, I asked her why she chose The Peach Grove. Not that I try to discourage any business, you understand, but we do seem a bit out of the way for what she wanted.” She thought for a moment as she refilled both their cups. “She said that it reminded her of some places back home that she used to visit with a friend.” Her eyes locked with his again. “Perhaps that was you.”

Steed replaced his cup on its saucer with both hands to keep his shaking hands from spilling the hot liquid. Could she have been thinking of him before . . .

“Anyway, she said it made her think of happier times.” She gazed off into the garden pretending not to notice the slight trembling in his hands.

“Did she seem to be depressed or was she outwardly upset about something before . . . that night?” he asked to bring the woman’s thoughts back.

“Not that I could tell at the time, but in view of what happened I suppose she must have been.”

A snide answer? Again her face was all innocence. “Was the hotel full at the time?”

“Not full, about half like it is now. It’s not quite the season. Schools up north are still in session and it’s still a bit too cool for swimming and boating and such.”

He picked up his cup to take a sip. “And no one heard the shot?” He watched her closely. Her eyes never left his. Was that a challenge he saw there, daring him to see a reaction?

“Apparently not,” she said. “I am not exactly young anymore, Mr. Steed. I’m afraid I’m a rather heavy sleeper and my hearing isn’t what it used to be.”

“What about the other guests?” She smiled. Her teeth were straight and white, but had a slight waxy appearance. Probably dentures, he thought.

“I wouldn’t know about that. You’d have to ask the police. All of the guests that were here at the time have moved on, I’m afraid. That type of event isn’t conducive to the hotel trade.”

“And Margaret?” he asked.

“My granddaughter wasn’t here at the time. She was in Atlanta attending a party that ran a bit late.” She shifted slightly as if suddenly uncomfortable. Her voice became just a tiny bit sharp. “Mr. Steed, I’m sure you can appreciate that this whole business is quite distressing for us. The Peach Grove enjoys a good reputation. While you have all my sympathies at your loss, I’d like to ask you not to involve Margaret in your hopeless quest.”

Was her reaction due to concern for the girl or something else? “I’m not ready to concede that it’s hopeless, Mrs. Spencer,” he said. “I can understand your concern.” But I don’t promise anything and Margaret hadn’t seemed shy about discussing it, he thought. “Did Mr. Peel visit her often?”

“A few times.”

“Did Miss. Knight seem to be upset by these visits?”

“On the contrary,” she told him a twinkle returning to her old eyes. “I think they cheered her no end. It’s not my habit to spy on my guests, but I remember they went out to dinner a few times and even had lunch here once. I didn’t eavesdrop, of course, but you couldn’t help seeing how they laughed and I saw them later that same night strolling through the garden holding hands. So few people bother to hold hands anymore, it’s rather a lost courting tradition. So it was quite romantic and I was very happy for them. The dear boy was nearly inconsolable when he heard. I can’t say’s I blame him. I thought they were on their way to something great. He told me they used to be married, you know. That’s what makes what happened so tragic. I say, Mr. Steed, are you sure you’re alright?”

Steed felt his head spinning, his stomach churned. He felt in danger of passing out. Something wasn’t right. The thought of Mrs. Peel laughing and . . . strolling . . . but

didn't Margaret say . . . He had to get to his room. He couldn't think straight. "Actually, Mrs. Spencer, perhaps jet lag is catching up with me. If you'll excuse me I think I'll just get some rest after all." He tried to stand, but his hand slipped off the chair arm and he fell back into his seat. Mrs. Spencer was calling for someone named Thomas. Her voice sounded far off and echoed as if she were speaking in a barrel. He barely recalled a man coming in from somewhere in the garden and helping him to his room before he collapsed on the bed.

Steed woke to a light tapping at the door. "Come in," he said as he struggled to sit up. He was still so very tired. The door opened cautiously and he saw Margaret poke her head around the end before opening it wide and pushing a wheeled cart inside.

"I thought you might want something to eat," she said. "Besides, I brought you some towels." She couldn't believe that he looked even more handsome than before. After helping him to his room Thomas had removed his jacket and tie and loosened his collar. In his shirt sleeves she could see that his body was well proportioned and looked strong. His wonderfully thick hair was tousled and one stray strand fell over his right brow. She smiled to herself as he ran his hand through it.

"Thank you," he said, "but I'm really not hungry."

"Oh, come on. You have to eat."

He looked at the cart. The bottom shelf was stacked with clean, white bath and hand towels as well as face cloths. The fact that he hadn't called for any meant she had known there weren't any when she gave him the room. A ruse to get into the room or an excuse to talk to him again? Either way he didn't mind. He was used to it. The top shelf of the cart held enough covered dishes to feed an army. "Even so, I couldn't possibly eat that much," he said.

She visibly blushed. "I thought maybe you wouldn't like eating alone."

He stifled a yawn. "You're right. How about you serve while I freshen up," he said taking the towels and retrieving his toiletries bag from his luggage that someone had brought up, Thomas presumably. He retreated to the bathroom. The girl could be heard moving things about as he used the toilet, ran water in the basin and washed his hands and face. The reflection in the mirror looked like hell. He shook his head as he wondered what the poor girl could possibly find to be enamored of. Looking a bit ruff there aren't we? He sighed. "Next to you everyone looks a bit ruff," he said to Mrs. Peel's reflection. "It has been a rather trying day, Mrs. Peel. Give a fellow a chance." He pulled out his razor before he realized what had just happened and he looked up to see only his own form in the mirror again. He shaved anyway.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked when he came back into the room.

It unnerved him to find out that he had actually spoken aloud. "No one," he told her.

"Just thinking out loud. What culinary delight are we dining on?" He changed the subject.

"It's nothing fancy and I wasn't sure what you'd like. I figured I couldn't go wrong with roast beef."

From the look of it, she thought of everything. The room's small table was spread with a lace tablecloth, the silverware was laid out in proper order, there was even a single candle. He had to admit that he felt a little guilty and wondered what her grandmother would say if she knew what this child was up to. The only saving grace was, for all her

pretense at seduction, Margaret seemed to be quite nervous. Words poured out at a speed that almost made him dizzy all over again.

"I hope you're not a vegetarian. I brought some red wine cause I know it's supposed to be red with meat and white with fish, but I'm not sure how good it is and I had to sneak it by the cook. If you are a vegetarian I guess you could just eat the vegetables. I also brought coffee just in case and strawberry shortcake for desert. It's kind of the house specialty."

He had to stop this. "Everything looks delicious," he said and pulled out her chair for her. He picked up the wine. It wasn't something he would have chosen, but she hadn't done bad. It was a sweet gesture on her part and even though he could really use a glass right now, he felt, in view of her age, that the coffee would be more appropriate. "I think we'll just put this aside for later. Coffee?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

"You know, Margaret, I was rather hoping we'd get the chance to talk again so you could finish your story from earlier. You were saying that something funny happened between Mr. Peel and Miss. Knight."

"I was?"

Steed swallowed a bite of the roast. It was very good and he was hungrier than he thought. He didn't try to remember the last time he had eaten. "Yes, you remember, when you accidentally overheard their conversation."

She chewed on a bit of carrot and tried to think back to what she had been saying. She liked the way he said 'accidentally'. "Oh yeah, I remember now. I just happened to be passing her room when I heard loud voices. I couldn't make out everything they were saying. After all, it wasn't as though I was trying to . . ."

Steed held up his hand. "Let me assure you, Miss. Margaret that I fully understand that anything you may have overheard was strictly as a result of your role as a hotel proprietor's granddaughter and employee." He saw her eyes flash with humor.

"Ah, gumbol!" she laughed. "Let's face it. I was snooping. I love to snoop. What else is there to do around here?" she shrugged. "I figure you must be a bit snoopy too or you wouldn't be asking." She winked at him and was rewarded with a moonless night smile. The light in her eyes did not last, however. "But this time, Mr. Steed I wish I hadn't been quite so nosey. That day I heard the lady say 'never' and then the man said 'you don't mean that' then she said 'with every fiber of my being'."

"And then?" he prodded as she stopped.

"They were getting closer to the door and I had to move, but I heard the man say 'do I always have to live in his damn shadow' and she said 'the only shadow is in your mind'. Then they came out the door and I had to duck into one of the rooms. When I looked out Miss. Knight was heading for the stairs and he was following her and she told him to 'please leave me alone'. That's when Mr. Smarmy grabbed a hold of her wrist."

Margaret held up both arms and grabbed one of her wrists hard to demonstrate. "He jerked her around and said . . ." Her voice trailed off as her eyes turned down and she pushed her food around absently. "Well it wasn't very nice, what he said."

Steed reached across and lifted her chin. "It's alright. I hate to ask you, but it could be important. Won't you please tell me what he said?"

She took a deep breath. "He said, 'you mean you'd rather live the rest of your life as one of his cast off whores than feel my . . . my,'" she closed her eyes as her face turned a deep

red, and said it quickly. “‘feel my cock inside you again’.” She went on without looking at him. “That’s when the funny bit happened. The lady started to move away from him again, but he was still holding her arm. She turned around so slowly, looked at him and her voice was kind of low but steady. She told him to let go of her arm and back off. I thought she was going to hit him and he must have thought so too cause I never saw anyone back up as fast and nervous as he did. Then she told him if he ever laid another hand on her he’d draw back a nub. I had to clamp a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud at the guy. I was really hoping she’d do it anyway just for the heck of it. Lord knows he deserved it.”

Steed had to force his jaw to unclench. The picture of what Margaret had just described angered him beyond words, but he didn’t have time to indulge in that right now. The Peter Peel that the girl described and the one her grandmother talked about were poles apart. The girl’s observance fit with the character of the Peter that showed up at his home, but why would the grandmother lie? Gaining control of his emotions he leaned in and half whispered, “I’ll let you in on a little secret.” He wanted to ease the embarrassment she felt from repeating Peter’s words. “She could have wiped the floor with him if she’d wanted.”

Margaret’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes. I’ve seen her do it on many occasions. She did it to me a couple of times.”

Skeptically, “Now you’re pulling my leg.”

Steed remembered trying to subdue Mrs. Peel when the giant space plant took control of her body and when that nut, Beresford turned her into a human cybernaut. “Believe me, I’m not. Miss. Knight could be a very formidable woman.”

A low whistle escaped the girl as she tried to picture that.

“Let me ask you another question, Margaret. Did Mr. Peel and Miss. Knight ever have dinner together or laugh over lunch or stroll through the garden hand in hand?”

The girl started laughing. “Not on this planet,” she told him. “I was here everyday except the day she checked in and I never saw anything like that. In fact, Miss. Knight usually didn’t get back here until after midnight. I fixed some sandwiches for her one night because she said her meeting ran so long she hadn’t had a chance to eat.”

“Did you ever mention any of this, the argument you heard or the late meetings to your grandmother?”

“No way!” she told him. “Gran always says I’m too nose-y when it comes to the guests, imagine that. If she knew I was staying up that late on the phone she wouldn’t let me use the car for a month.” She looked at him in a panic, suddenly afraid of what her effort to spend time with this man might have cost her. “You don’t have to tell her, do you?”

“I promise she’ll never hear it from me.”

They were silent for awhile as they both finished eating. Margaret packed up the dishes and sat watching him with the last of his coffee. “I guess I never told you that I’m sorry about your friend,” she finally said.

“Thank you.” He produced a flask from his bag and added some brandy to what remained of his coffee.

“That’s not going to help, you know,” she said softly.

“Can you let me see the room that she stayed in?”

“Yes,” she said a little disappointed. Why do men always think drinking is the answer to everything? She wished she hadn’t brought the wine. His mood had turned morose.

“But we’ll have to wait until Gran goes to sleep. She keeps the key with her cause it’s still closed off.” She got up and walked around the room. “It shouldn’t take long. She usually turns in about nine. I can get the key then.” She checked her hair in the dresser mirror and noticed a framed photograph sticking out of his luggage. Without asking she lifted it out and studied it. “She was younger here,” she said. Mrs. Peel’s face smiled out at her. “I don’t think I ever saw her smile like this when she was here.” He hadn’t complained about her handling the photo so she walked over and placed it on the table next to the bed. “She was very pretty. She really hadn’t changed much, had she?” Steed sat looking at the picture from across the room and sipping the brandy from his flask. “Yes, she was very beautiful and I’m sure she remained so, but I haven’t seen her for a number of years.”

Margaret might have been very young, but she saw everything in his soft, gray eyes as he looked at the picture, something undeniable. “And you loved her.” It was a statement. Steed said nothing and she went to take the cart out of the room. “I’ll come back when I get the key,” she told him. She had her back to him, but spoke before she opened the door. “You never told her, did you.” It wasn’t really a question and although she paused for a moment, she didn’t expect an answer.

After the girl left he moved to the telephone and placed a call to Mother’s office. As he waited to be connected he picked up the photograph. He was absently running his fingers over the two-dimensional image remembering the feel of her auburn hair against his cheek and bare chest as she slept in his arms. How he loved to pretend he was still asleep so she would nibble on his ear to wake him achieving more than just the opening of his eyes. Lost in the memory, he was jolted by the gruff voice.

“Mother.”

“Steed here, have you found out anything?”

“Yes, two things. The body left Atlanta this morning our time. It’s . . . she’s being flown via Knight Industries private jet. Should arrive tomorrow night after refueling in New York. There will be no public viewing and interment in the family mausoleum is set for the next day. Mortimer and Stone Morticians are handling the affair. Naturally it’s to be a private ceremony. No word on who’s to take over the company. They’ve set the reading of the will for the night after she’s interred. Word is her attorneys are trying to contact you.” Mother had to strain to hear his response.

“They can do that without me.” Steed thought he heard the man chuckle.

“That’s just it,” he said. “Apparently Miss. Knight made it one of her most enforceable conditions. Without you they can’t proceed. Rumor has it the family had no idea and aren’t too happy about it.” He was chuckling. “I always did like the lady’s nerve.” Steed wondered why on earth she would make such a stipulation. “Let them keep looking for me, Mother. What was the second thing you found?”

“Peter Peel seems to have dropped out of sight. I thought it might be prudent to keep an eye on him, but we’ve been unable to locate him.”

“Do you know if he’s mentioned in the will or not?”

“No idea, but if he believes that he is there are only two ways he can get it read. One, if you show up and two, if you are dead, unable to show up. Be careful. Have you found anything there?”

“Nothing important yet,” he told him. There didn’t seem to be much reason to go into the different descriptions of Peter. “I was going to speak to the doctor in the morning, but in

light of what you've told me a midnight visit to his office may prove faster. I want to be back there before it's too late. He hung up and called the airport. He was just completing his travel arrangements as Margaret knocked at the door. "Come in."

"I've got the key." She hadn't been sure about coming back. He didn't seem to be doing so well when she left, but she had given her word. She wanted to help him, wished she could get him to smile again, not for the same reason as before. She felt a bit ashamed of herself for that, but she hadn't known, didn't see how . . . lonely and miserable he was. "Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Steed?" There's really nothing to see, you know. It's just a room like all the others."

"Which way?" he asked.

She sighed and motioned for him to follow her. "It's 209 down the hall on the left. It has the balcony that overlooks the garden. The police had it closed off. They released it yesterday, but Gran still has it closed." She unlocked the door and gasp as she switched on the light. A large blood stain still covered the top portion of the bare mattress. Blood splatters were visible on the wall. A section of the carpeting had been cut out of the floor and removed. She felt a little sick and stumbled back into him repelled by the sights. He caught and steadied her. She had no idea the room hadn't been cleaned up. That must be why Gran kept the key, she thought. She glanced at Steed. The poor man's face was so sad she wanted to cry for him. She'd been touched by death at a very young age and she thought she knew something of what he was feeling as he stared at the stain. This was it. This is all that's left of a life that used to walk this earth. Her head hurt and the room swam slightly out of focus. No more laughs. No more smiles. No more hugs or bedtime stories or goodnight kisses. She remembered losing her parents in a tragic accident. She remembered too, the blood on the front seat of the car. She stared at the stain until she couldn't take the memories anymore. It made her angry. Her parents had been taken without any choice. A patch of black ice on an overpass and that was it. The lady had had a choice. And so had he. "You should have told her," she said softly and left the room.

Steed looked around the room, in the closet, in the desk and dresser drawers. He examined the bathroom, went out on the balcony. There was nothing, nothing but the evidence of the dull, dried blood that had once sustained such a vibrant life. He sat down on the end of the bed, his head in his hands.

Time passed without notice. The door opened and closed. The girl must have come back. When she didn't speak he finally looked up and froze. Mrs. Peel crossed from the doorway to the closet that was now filled with clothes. She selected a sweater and slipped it over her sleeveless blouse. She took a seat at the vanity, picked up a brush and started running it through her silky hair. He knew this couldn't be. Behind him the bed was made with fluffy pillows and a clean, lacy bedspread. No sign of blood. He looked back at her and a chill ran down his spine as she turned her deep, brown eyes on him.

"Oh Steed, there you are."

"You knew I'd come?" He heard himself answer.

"Well of course I knew you'd come. What a silly question." She had a quizzical look.

"Are you just going to sit there? You haven't forgotten our dinner date have you?"

He shook his head and approached her slowly. She remained sitting at the vanity smiling up at him. He reached out to her and the image faded. The room was once again as he had found it. He looked at the blood.

“Where’s the body?”

She was there again, at his side this time examining the stain. He knew he must be losing his stability, knew he needed to get a grip on his mind, but right now he didn’t care. Any connection with her was worth a little sanity and if he played along he might, just might, be able to keep her with him a little longer. “In New York,” he replied.

She let out a low whistle. “That’s a neat trick. Die here but have the body a thousand miles away. Was it the work of a diabolical mastermind?”

“The most diabolical,” he told her. “It was you.”

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You could be in trouble then.”

“Yes, I’ve never tried to out wit you, Mrs. Peel.”

“Don’t be silly, Steed. You can’t do it,” she laughed.

He smiled. “I’m not exactly stupid you know.”

“I never said you were, Mr. Steed,” Margaret said from the door.

Steed didn’t bother to look around the room. He knew Mrs. Peel would be gone.

Instead, he looked blankly at the girl.

“Don’t tell me,” she said. “Just thinking out loud, right?” They both exited the room and he waited as she locked the door. “You know, Mr. Steed, if I were you I think I’d stop thinking out loud so much. People might start to think you’re funny.”

“I’m not funny,” he told her. “Just British.”

She laughed at that. She’d managed to lock her past away in her heart once more and wished she could help him do the same. At least he was making jokes again even if she didn’t hear much humor in the words. Perhaps it was a first step.

“Margaret, can you tell me how to find Dr. Falkner’s office?” They returned to his room. He opened the bottle of wine and poured himself a glass.

“Sure, when you leave the hotel turn left and go back to Main Street. Make a right and follow that until you come to The Boneyard.” She looked up at him sharply, realizing how incredibly insensitive that must have sounded and hastened to explain. “It’s the name of a bar. Make another right and go down about two blocks and it’ll be on your left.” He said nothing, just stood staring into space. She thought about everything he had said that evening and everything she had heard. There was something about him, something he was hiding behind the carefully controlled pain and grief, something dark and . . . she couldn’t quite put her finger on it, a dangerousness and yet she didn’t fear him. Whatever he was planning she hoped he knew what he was doing. In his current condition she wasn’t so sure, but there was one thing she was sure of. She walked over and picked up the bottle of wine. “I don’t think you need this on top of whatever you had earlier if you’re going to be driving.”

He couldn’t help smiling at this brash, young lady. He liked her. Her strong character and insight reminded him of Mrs. Peel. He hoped she had a bright future ahead. Even though he took some exception to the comment, he made no move to recapture the bottle. “My dear Miss. Margaret,” he said. “I was merely inquiring so that I could pay the good doctor a visit tomorrow.”

“Right,” she said. “That would be just after your flight leaves, I believe.” She looked at him. “I told you I was nosy. By the way, I’d be careful. The cops patrol that area a lot because of the bar, but it closes at mid-night. It might also interest you to know that Doc. Falkner is an old fashioned old goat and too stubborn to put in an alarm system even though his office has been broken into a couple of times.”

Steed watched over the top of his glass in amazement.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's a small town." Before she left she paused, considered for a moment. "If you get caught I might be able to help you with a bail bondsman. I've been saving for my prom dress. I've got about \$200.00, it might be enough. Goodnight." Steed stared after her. He couldn't believe what she had just offered him.

"Haven't lost your touch with the ladies I see, Steed," Mrs. Peel said. She was back.

"She's just a child."

"Women from little children grow, and she's not all that little."

"You would know, Mrs. Peel. You would know." No one was there to notice that he didn't question her presence this time.

Steed found the doctor's office without any trouble. He noticed that The Boneyard was dark and quiet when he passed by. The only lights visible were two neon signs advertising Coors and Michelob on tap. The streets were empty and he looked for a place to leave his vehicle that wouldn't draw attention to it. As he circled he found an auto repair shop on the next block down that had more than several cars in the lot. Figuring one more wouldn't be that obvious he pulled in and parked between a school bus and another vehicle. The bus was between him and the road. Dressed for obscurity, he'd worn dark trousers and a black turtleneck. Not one person appeared as he walked back to the doctor's office. The building was small, one story but tiny windows at ground level suggested a cellar. Unfortunately, they were barred and too small for him to fit through. He considered testing the first level windows, but did not want to risk being seen from a neighboring home or passing car. In lieu of any other choices, he decided the back door would do fine. He didn't notice any outward signs of an alarm and hoped that Margaret's information was correct as he picked the door's primitive lock.

It clicked over without much effort. He stepped inside, waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and for any sound of an alarm. He found himself standing in a tiny hall. A sign on the door to his left read storage. The room to his right looked to be some kind of break room. Further along he came to a 'T' intersection. The right hall lead to connecting corridors with examination rooms, a small laboratory area, several bathrooms and out to reception. The left passage lead to a second storage door. This one was much larger and locked from the outside. It didn't take him long to get inside. The room was windowless. With the help of a small torch he discovered it contained medical records. The multitude of files weren't stored in cabinets, but slid into rows alphabetically like books on a shelf. Each shelf pulled out for easy access. He wondered if autopsy records would be filed with active patient records. Quickly, he found the K's and looked through the names. There were no patients by the name of Knight. He left the room and continued down the hall, coming to the last door, he stepped inside of what could only be the doctor's private office.

He made sure the blinds were closed before switching on the torch again keeping the small light cupped in his fingers emitted the least light possible. He found a large filing cabinet in one corner. The top drawer contained financial and business records, the second contained correspondence with various drug and supply companies. He was about to give up when he opened the third drawer. Only one file rested in the voluminous space. Stamped across the manila folder in red ink was the word 'Deceased'. He pulled it out and read the label, KNIGHT, EMMA 00159. As much as he wanted to open it there, he took the file and retreated back to the room with all the records he had found

earlier. With no windows he could turn on the lights and he needed light for what he had to do. Once inside he switched on the overhead, selected a shelf at waist level to use as a desk. He opened the file and the last vestiges of hope that he had clung to disappeared like wisps of smoke in the wind. Looking back at him was an image of Mrs. Peel he had hoped never to see in his life.

Her eyes were, thankfully, closed. Her face was pale and had that death tinted gray that he was all too familiar with. There were specks of what looked like blood on her right cheek, that beautiful high cheek bone that had rounded such a wonderful smile. He had to look away and breathe deeply for several seconds before he pulled out the mini-camera he had and looked down again. After snapping the picture he turned to the next page. The camera fell on top of the file and Steed ran, praying he would make it to one of the bathrooms down the hall. He found the toilet just as the nausea overwhelmed him divesting him of what remained of the roast beef in his stomach. Steed was by no means a squeamish man. He had seen death in all its forms including gunshot wounds, many inflicted by himself. He had seen them on friends, colleges, people that he loved and even on his own body more times than he cared to remember, but nothing could have prepared his mind, his heart for what he had just seen. He stayed kneeling at the toilet bowl until he had nothing left and the dry heaves took him.

At the sink he stood on weak legs, his knees threatening to buckle, splashed water on his face and rinsed his mouth. Just for a moment he put his forehead against the cool tile of the room's wall. He knew he had to go back and he knew the longer it took him to finish his job the greater the chance of being caught. He desperately wanted some water, his mouth felt so dry, but was afraid it would start his vomiting all over again. It took all he had to make himself return to the record room.

Breathing deeply he picked up the camera he hadn't realized he'd dropped and snapped the picture of the photograph it had been laying on. A profile image of the right side of Mrs. Peel's head revealed a gunshot wound to the temple. The gaping hole, about a half inch in diameter was surrounded by dark, dried blood that ran down, covered the side of her face and had soaked into her blouse. There was a distinct black stippling pattern around the wound left when the muzzle of a gun is held close to the skin. When fired, some of the unburned gunpowder is forced under the skin creating the marks. Steed wiped at his eyes. Tears made it impossible to focus through the small camera lens. He turned to the next page and grabbed the makeshift shelf as the room began to spin and his stomach lurched again. There was nothing left inside him and he gagged. The next image showed the back, left side, or rather, what was left of the area. It was evident that part of the base of the skull was missing along with a large patch of hair and even without being a doctor he could see gray matter protruding from the exit wound. That beautiful, magnificent mind that had saved his life more than once, that made him laugh and infinitely fascinated him was lost forever. There were other photos. He snapped the camera and moved through them as fast as he could without concentrating. He noticed there was no sign of the note. He buried his face in his arm as the nausea came again and he finished up by copying the written report before sitting on the floor to read it.

The report was pretty straightforward and didn't tell him much more than he already knew except that the caliber of the bullet was a thirty-eight. The bullet was recovered from the bed pillow. It looked like blood and tissue samples had been sent to a forensic lab in Atlanta and the results were apparently still pending. Concluding notes stated that

no unusual results were expected, the death was officially listed as a suicide, Dr. Falkner had signed the death certificate and the body was released to the Franklin Funeral Home. A copy of the report was forwarded to the Beckon police. The report mentioned x-rays were taken, but he didn't want or need to see them. He closed the file without looking at the photos again and returned it to the doctor's office. After making sure that everything was as he'd found it, he returned to his car and headed back to the hotel. He was sorry The Boneyard was closed now as he desperately needed a drink.

Steed's room key let him back into the hotel. It didn't have a bar, but he remembered Margaret saying she had to sneak the wine passed the cook so he headed through the dining room to find the kitchen. Maybe there was a wine cellar. He was surprised and greatly annoyed to discover Mrs. Spencer. It was nearly two in the morning and he didn't feel like talking to anyone.

"Good evening, Mr. Steed, or should I say morning. I'm surprised to see you up and about at this hour."

"I could say the same about you, madam," he said a bit sharper than he had intended. She studied him, but did not seem to take offense. "I sometimes have difficulty sleeping. No doubt you do too."

Fatigue dragged at him as her eyes searched his. Something was swimming behind those ancient blue eyes of hers, but the instincts that had always served him so well were lost to him now, gone in a flash of light, a puff of smoke, the explosion of a bullet that shattered his life. Gone was the drive, the enthusiasm for the game, he simply didn't care to play any longer so he opted for honesty. "Actually, Mrs. Spencer, I was hoping I might be able to find a drink, brandy or something else." He didn't mention wine not wanting to risk getting Margaret in trouble with her grandmother. And hadn't this woman said earlier today that she hadn't heard the shot because she was a heavy sleeper?

Her gaze continued for a moment before she rose and went to a cupboard. "I don't approve of such things, young man, but I do keep a little something around . . . for medicinal purposes, you understand." She pulled a fifth of Jack Daniels Black Label from a shelf. "From the look of you," she said. "I guess you qualify." She handed him the bottle. "Goodnight, Mr. Steed."

She left him standing there. He noticed that the seal was broken and wondered if the old lady was in the kitchen at that time of night for an entirely different reason. Perhaps she was having a little medicinal help herself. Whichever way it was, he didn't care. He took the bottle to his room, sat on the bed drinking the whisky and staring at the photograph of Mrs. Peel. He wanted to imprint this image on his mind to erase the earlier ones. By the time the bottle was three quarters empty he had succeeded in numbing his mind and body. He passed out.

Sleep. So tired. Something was tickling his face, playing with his hair. He swatted at it and drifted back into sleep. Shaking. Someone was shaking him. Speaking, calling his name softly. He couldn't make it out. Didn't want to. He pushed at the hand on his arm, but the annoyance continued. Fighting against his own body's exhaustion and Herculean effort to keep his mind deep in black sleep, he grudgingly managed a tentative grip on what was happening to him. "Steed," he heard. "Steed, wake up." The shaking again. "Go away," he mumbled. He tried to turn over but the hand stopped him. He felt a touch on his cheek, a familiar, gentle touch.

"Steed, wake up. It's me."

He pried his eyes open enough to see her sitting on the bed, hovering over him, her hand stroking his cheek and playing with his hair, she was smiling down at him.

"It's about time," she said.

A quiet groan escaped him, but not one of pleasure. "Mrs. Peel, it's time all good ghosts were in bed." He saw her eyebrows shoot up and she grinned mischievously.

"Well I'm trying," she said, "but you're not co-operating very much." She ran her hand down his chest. "What's all this ghost stuff?" Her hand slid up under the turtleneck he had fallen asleep in. "So that's it. They tried to convince you I was dead?" Her fingers found and rubbed over a small male nipple causing it to harden immediately.

Steed's eyes widened. "Mrs. Peel?" He reached out to her fully expecting her to dissolve away like last time. She didn't. "You're real?" he asked skeptically.

"What else would I be," she said, fingers tickling the curly hairs on his chest and following the fine trail down across his abdomen stopping at his belt. "I've missed you so much." Her voice was throaty and soft.

He pulled her to him. Her words were fire to his senses. Her touch brought his penis to a throbbing, rock hard erection. He couldn't believe she was here! She was here and she wanted him. "Emma," he whispered as joyous tears filled his eyes. He took her mouth with his. Her lips were sweet and inviting as she parted them his tongue found hers.

How badly he had wanted her, not just since this awful mess started, but for so many, many years. One of her hands slid through his hair and brushed the nape of his neck. She had not forgotten how that always drove him wild. The other hand pushed up his sweater and massaged his other nipple. He wanted to go slow, to make this miracle last, but he couldn't control his need. With one powerful movement he wrapped his arm around her waist the other supporting the back of her head he flipped her onto her back beside him. He broke their kiss and looked down into those deep brown eyes. "Emma, how?" He ran his lips over hers softly. "Where have you been?"

"Shsss," she put her fingers to his lips. "Later," she said. "There's plenty of time." She tugged at his sweater and he let her take it over his head. He kissed her neck, the sensitive spot below her ear, his lips trailing kisses along her jaw as his hand worked the buttons of her blouse.

Half undone, he pulled the cloth aside and placed feathery kisses on first one heaving breast and then the other while his thumb rubbed lightly over her right nipple through the lacy bra. He hooked one finger at the top and pulled the material down exposing the aroused flesh. She gasp as he took it in his mouth. Her hands ran over his bare shoulders and back one finding its way between them. A deep animal moan escaped him as she squeezed his penis. He couldn't wait any longer. He knew if she continued he'd come. His hunger burned. He ran his hand up the inner side of her thigh pushing her skirt up with it. He pulled her underwear down and off. His hand sought and found the soft pubic hair already wet with her own juices. "I have to have you now, Emma, he moaned turning over long enough to unzip his fly and free his engorged penis, but before he could move to her she sat up and pushed him to the mattress. She mounted him and he closed his eyes as she lowered herself on his staff. Inch by inch she took him with such deliberate slowness he had to grab the covers and grit his teeth to keep from exploding. She was so warm, so moist, so incredibly tight. He closed his eyes grabbing her hips to hold her immobile. He wanted to stay buried inside her forever.

"Steed," she whispered.

"Please, Emma, just a minute more," he begged.

"Steed."

He opened his eyes and screamed! He saw the open wound, the blood running down her face and neck, the pale, gray pallor.

He was still screaming as he woke. He couldn't breath, tried but couldn't get any air into his lungs. His body was shaking so violently he fell as he tried to make it to the window. On his knees he stuck his head out into the night sucking in great gulps of air. He prayed there was no one under the window as he became sick. It turned out he didn't have to worry as there was nothing in his system except the whiskey. When he could breath again he fell into the room and remained on the floor his back against the wall.

The room was empty. He reached up to his chest. He was still wearing the turtleneck. Unsteadily he made his way back to the bottle of whiskey. Not being able to bear the idea of touching the bed he sat in a chair beside the open window trembling, but not from the cool of the night air. Tears came as he waited for the sun to rise afraid to risk sleeping again.

The sky began to lighten about five thirty. The whiskey bottle remained on the table untouched. Dispite his mind telling him he wanted a drink his body simply couldn't stomach it. He'd left it sit. He showered and shaved grateful that his was the only face he saw in the mirror this time. He had just finished dressing and packing up his things when he heard a knock at the door. It was Margaret again with another tray.

"I've got coffee, juice, toast and eggs," she told him with a too bright smile. "I hope you realize that not everyone gets this special treatment." Truth was, she was worried about him and wanted to see how he was doing.

The coffee was a welcome gift and he even managed a few pieces of toast. "Margaret, I have to leave," he said. "Can you fix up my bill?"

"I already have. I knew you were leaving today, remember?"

He looked a little embarrassed. "I don't, actually," he admitted. "But there's one thing I do remember." He took out his wallet and removed five one hundred dollar bills. "You said something about a prom dress. I want you to take this." He held the bills out to her. Her eyes took in the notes and widened, but she backed away from them. "I can't take that," she said. "I was just kidding before. I didn't really do anything special. I just wanted to see how you were. I just wanted to be a friend."

Steed took her hand in his and pressed the notes into her palm. "I know that, Margaret," he said. "You've done more for me than you know and you are a friend, a good friend." He looked at her young face, such a remarkable personality contained within. "Tell me, is there a special young man taking you to this dance?" She nodded. "Then take this and dazzle him, Margaret. Make him understand that he is with the most beautiful and wondrous woman there, if he doesn't already."

She could see his eyes filled with unshed tears. He picked up his bag and left. She didn't follow. Inexplicably saddened, she had no desire to see him leave forever. For the first time she wondered what could have happened between he and Miss. Knight, a woman he loved so very much, that they hadn't seen each other in years. Had she chosen Peel over him? She shook her head. What a foolish woman.

Steed turned his rental into the parking lot of the police department, an even smaller building than the doctor's office. The middle-aged woman behind the desk wasn't wearing a uniform, but seemed to function as a receptionist and radio dispatcher. After

explaining his purpose she placed a call to an inner office and he was directed down the hall.

He was greeted by a tall man, gray hair and mustache, his tan colored uniform fit rather poorly do to the considerable pot belly the man sported. His epaulets displayed the rank of captain and the sign on his desk identified him as Captain Desikan.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Steed?"

"I'm looking for anything you can tell me about the death of Emma Knight. In particular, is there anything to indicate that it was something other than a suicide?" Steed explained that he was a friend and the information was strictly for his own peace of mind.

Desikan seemed to consider for a moment. He drew a long breath and evidently decided to have some pity on him. "I'm afraid not," he said at last. "It was pretty straight forward. The ballistics report confirmed that the weapon found was, indeed, the one used. There were no other prints found on it except the victim's. No one was seen entering or leaving and no evidence was found that anyone else had been in the room. Gunpowder residue was found on the right hand consistent with having fired a weapon and then there was the note."

"Yes," Steed said. "Do you have the note?"

"No. That was bagged and sent to the forensic lab in Atlanta. It's standard procedure," he explained. "They'll check it for prints and compare the handwriting. I think they sent for samples of the lady's writing from Knight Industries there."

"Do you have a copy?" he asked, hopefully.

"No. That would be in the file, but Sgt. Bienvenu has that as, technically, the case is still open until we get all the test results back. Even if I did, Mr. Steed, I'm sure you can understand that I couldn't release that information without the family's consent."

Steed started to thank him for his help when an idea struck him. "What about her personal affects?" he asked.

"They were examined. We didn't find anything out of the ordinary so they were released to . . . her ex-husband, as I recall. All except the clothing she was wearing at the time. That was bagged and kept as evidence until the case is closed. Is there anything else?"

"Just one thing, Captain." He didn't seem to have as much trouble concentrating this morning. "Does it strike you at all funny that a woman of Mrs. Spencer's advanced years would go into a room to clean?"

A trace of a knowing grin appeared on the captain's face. "Yes, Mr. Steed, it did.

Especially when I spoke to the staff and none could remember her ever having done so before. As I said, the case is still open."

Chapter Four

Steed didn't remember the aircraft achieving wheels up. He was asleep before take off. There were no dreams to haunt him this time and the stewardess woke him as they pulled up to the terminal at Heathrow. Once again he retrieved his bag and found his Jaguar in the parking lot. Since he had business in London he drove to his Stable Mews apartment, he'd held onto it after purchasing the house. Business often kept him in the city and he'd found the arrangement convenient. When he was truthful with himself he admitted that he kept the apartment because it held sentimental value for him.

He carried his bag up the spiral staircase to the bedroom. He didn't allow his eyes or thoughts to linger on the large bed that they had shared so many happy moments in. He showered, dressed comfortably and descended the stairs. The brandy looked good and he poured a generous portion before sitting in the red leather chair. He was not looking forward to what he had to do next. Putting it off a few minutes wouldn't hurt a thing, besides he couldn't help wondering about his encounter in Beckon. Why would the elderly Mrs. Spencer try to convince him that the relationship between Peter and Emma had been a happy one when, if Margaret was to be believed, it was far from it. What reason could she have had for entering that room if not to clean. Could it have been because she knew what she'd find? As far as he knew there was no connection between the Spencer woman and Mrs. Peel. Then there were so many missing years that he knew nothing about. He'd have to ask Mother to check on it.

He poured another double brandy and carried it with him to the darkroom. Mixing the chemicals necessary to develop the tiny camera's film he felt himself begin to shake. He didn't want to see those images again. The Ministry could develop it, but he couldn't stomach the idea of the photos being bandied about. Mother would see that they were kept quiet and filed away with Mrs. Peel's inactive record.

The prints were left to dry as he returned to the front room. He considered more brandy, but had had quite a bit already.

"What happened to the champagne?"

He jumped at the sound, but didn't need to look to know who was behind him. "Mrs. Peel, I do wish you'd stop doing that."

"Which, sneaking up on you or reading your mind?"

"Both," he said finally looking at her standing in front of the fireplace. He breathed a sigh of relief. There was no sign of the head wound. "Mrs. Peel, why do you insist on haunting me?"

A twinkle came to her eyes. "Maybe it's because you never told me if you believe in ghosts," she laughed. "Do you believe now?" He didn't answer. "Steed, how can you deny your own senses?"

"Because the littlest things affect them, a slight disorder of the stomach, a bit of bad beef, a blot of mustard, fragment of an underdone potato."

"Ah, Dickens. Are you sure you want to quote Ebenezer Scrooge? Remember what happened to him."

"Turned out to be a decent sort of chap, as I recall."

"Yes, but he was visited by three ghosts, well four if you count Marley," she shrugged.

"I think you have enough to handle with one."

Steed laughed and noticed a white envelope on the mantle above her shoulder. He hadn't seen it before. The cleaning woman must have put it there.

"Steed, it's not very flattering to be ignored. Are you listening?"

"Always, Mrs. Peel," he told her as he picked up the letter. There was no post mark. He had had all his mail sent out to his home when he moved. He wasn't aware anyone knew he still had the apartment, but this had to have been slipped under the door. The return address identified it as having come from Mrs. Peel's solicitors. "What's this?" he asked. She sat down in the chair, one leg draped over the arm. "I'm supposed to be a ghost, Steed. I don't work for Her Majesty's Postal Service. It's sort of against the rules to moonlight, if you'll forgive the pun. We're supposed to make you shiver, not deliver."

“Droll, Mrs. Peel. Very droll.” The letter was a request that he contact their office without delay concerning an urgent matter in regard to the estate of Miss. Emma Knight. He left the letter. He wasn’t interested. It could wait. He went upstairs to change. Looking through his closet he chose a black suit, it would be expected, but she had followed him or appeared, he didn’t really know which. He stopped paying attention. “Not black, Steed,” she said. “Wear the dark blue. I always loved the way that color brought out your eyes. Especially when you wore it with an electric blue tie.” “Ghosts are supposed to be seen not heard and they most certainly are not supposed to comment on a gentleman’s wardrobe.” But he took out the blue suit as she stood there and grinned. He started to unbutton his shirt when he looked up at her. The grin was still there and he suddenly felt very self-conscious. “Do you mind?” he asked. She laughed, that whole hearted laugh that he loved to hear. “Why Steed, don’t be silly,” she said. “I’m just a ghost. Besides, I’ve seen it all before, remember.” “Maybe so,” he told her, “but that was a long time ago.” He watched the laughter in her eyes change to wanting as she walked over to him. She never needed to resort to exaggerated hip swaying. The simple act of walking across the room was always enough to arouse him. Standing so close to her he felt drawn to the twin pools of dark desire. His head inclined automatically to bring his lips to hers. Slowly, unsure, but wanting their touch so much, he closed his eyes to savor the contact. As he did his mind flashed back to the night before. “No!” His eyes sprang open and she was gone. He shivered. London in the wee hours was quite different from Beckon, Georgia. Although traffic was lighter than in the daytime, it was still a bustling city. It was easy to pilot the Jag through the streets. The night was cool and crisp. Beyond the lights of the city he could make out the stars in a clear sky. The moon hung low in the west, its sardonic gaze taking everything in with no interest at all. He parked behind the Mortimer and Stone building and let himself in with the help of a lock pick. He hated funeral homes. That made him perfectly normal, of course. No one liked them except the morticians and, let’s face it, he’d always thought they had to be a bit ghoulish to do that type of work. The air felt colder inside than it had out. For some odd reason the melodic music was left on. Who did they expect would hear it, he wondered. Or perhaps even they couldn’t stand the idea of deathly silence. Muted lighting made it easy for him to maneuver unimpeded. He bypassed the office and shuddered as he came to a door marked prep room. Pushing through double swinging doors at the end of the corridor, he emerged in what appeared to be the main section of the building. There were five rooms, or chambers, off this line. A slot beside the door to the first chamber on his left had no name. It was empty. The next door read ‘Adams’ and he moved down one. This door was marked ‘Knight’.

The room was small. Six rows of chairs, three deep, were lined along a central isle. The room was dark except for two single lights that illuminated the pearl colored coffin at the end of the room. Slight yellow tinting served to diffuse the harsh white light. No doubt to help disguise the pasty skin of the deceased. No matter the skill of the mortician, living flesh could never be duplicated with make-up. The casket rested on two supports on top of a small raised dais. The lid was closed. The walk down that isle took a lifetime and no time.

Steed sat down in the front row placing his bowler on the seat next to him. He needed to calm himself, breathing was becoming difficult. His mind went back in years. He had done this to her once. To foil a group of murderers disguised as a marriage bureau.

Undercover he'd been tasked with killing her and to make it appear that he carried out his assignment he had placed her in a casket. He remembered how peaceful she'd looked then. He'd thought she'd fallen asleep and he remembered what he'd said to her. If only . . . He stood, moved to the coffin and raised the lid. The world stopped.

No sound. No blood running through his body. A heart that stopped didn't pump blood. His chest didn't rise and fall rhythmically. Lungs that couldn't get air had no need to function. Emma, his Emma, so beautiful lay before him. Her auburn hair stood out against the white satin that lined the inside of the casket. It was shorter than the last time he'd seen her. An image that was forever imprinted on his mind. Her lips were full and still looked so soft. The hands that were so gentle yet could be so strong lay resting over her heart between her perfect breasts. How many times had he lain beside her watching her sleep thanking God for the miracle that was Emma and the further miracle that she was with him, that she wanted him. "There's a spider on your nose." That's what he said to her all those years ago as she lay in a different coffin. Her reaction was immediate then almost jumping out of her skin. This time there was no reaction. He reached out and touched her cheek. His hand jerked back, so cold. "Why Emma?" he whispered. "Why would you leave me forever like this? Why couldn't you talk to me? Why, Emma, why?"

His knees gave way and he sat on the dais' small step, the back of his head resting against the cold box. "I loved you so much," he said. He thought he had no tears left, but they came, flowing uninterrupted until he could feel the wetness on his shirt collar. His eyes fell on a cross hanging at the back of the room and suddenly he was filled with anger. "God, you saved me from so many situations that I should have died in, pulled me back from the brink of death, healed me when I had no right to survive, was that just so you could torture me in this way now! Haven't I given enough? Haven't I been through enough? Did you have to take my reason to live. My soul is gone. Take the body. Take me now, God! I don't care how. Let me be with Emma, please!"

The streaks on his face and neck dried and eventually he stood. He looked at the solemn figure, bent and lightly touched his lips to hers. "Sleep well, my heart." He removed the yellow rosebud from his lapel and placed it in her hand before closing the casket and leaving. Steed returned to his apartment and collapsed on the sofa, brandy once again aided his sleep.

Someone was trying to drill through his skull. The pain was tremendous. He grabbed at his temples as the drill started again. Someone was trying to kill him and he wished they'd get on with it. As he woke he realized the sound was that of the door buzzer. He struggled to his feet to open it and put an end to the infernal noise and made the wish again. His stomach churned a, not so gentle, reminder that he hadn't eaten recently. He needed coffee. He opened the door and would have slammed it shut again if it wasn't for the pain it would have caused. "Why are you pushing the buzzer, Mrs. Peel," he asked and immediately regretted it. The echo in his head was like the bells at St. Mary! "Well hello to you too, Steed," she said. "The door was locked."

The effort it would have taken to get to the kitchen seemed too great so he returned to the sofa. "Since when do you let that stop you? You never seemed to have any trouble getting in before."

"That was a long time ago. My breaking and entering skills are a little rusty." She looked him over, noticed the brandy bottle. "A little hung over, are we?"

Steed closed his eyes. Maybe if he ignored her she'd go away. He had stopped worrying about his sanity, it was slipping, possibly beyond recovery, and he never thought he would ever want to rid himself of her, but somehow he had to. While at first he had been happy to see her, under whatever circumstances, now her image served to keep the pain alive and fresh. He simply wanted to sleep. He must have dozed off. She was shaking him, why was she always shaking him. She held out a cup of coffee that looked and smelled wonderful. Skeptical, he reached for it expecting it to disappear, but found it solid and the liquid cooled to just the right temperature. She must have added an ice cube to cool it. Obliging ghost, he thought. She watched him empty the first and refilled the cup.

"Now that your eyes are open," she said. "Aren't you at all glad to see me after all these years?"

"Don't exaggerate, Mrs. Peel."

She sat down next to him, one arm on the back of the sofa. "I've never been prone to exaggeration, Steed. I've always left that to you," she said, confusion evident in her voice. "And will you stop calling me Mrs. Peel. I told you sometime ago that I changed my name back to Knight. I know it's a hard habit for you to break, but I do wish you'd try."

Despite himself, he felt the room grow a little warmer. She was good, but then, she always had been. She could act any role he put her in and make it convincing. That's part of what made her such a good partner. He studied her over the coffee cup. "Nice try, Mrs. Peel," he snorted. "I must say the coffee was a nice touch though. I didn't know ethereal spirits could perform such earthly tasks. If you can cook too it might be worth having a ghost around."

The soft brown eyes stared at him as though he were the apparition. Finally, "Steed, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know I might have fallen for the name change gambit, but then if I were a ghost I'd use that too and since you and it are both in my head, it's not all that impressive."

"How much of that have you had?" she asked indicating the brandy, a look of consternation on her face. "I'm a ghost, am I," she said anger in her voice now. "Not real, a figment of your imagination, a spectral presence."

"Call it what you will," he shrugged, "but, yes."

His chin slammed onto his chest and pain shot through him like a hammer strike as the hand that had been resting on the sofa slapped him in the back of the head. "Would a ghost do that?" she asked.

"I don't know," he groaned, brushing sloshed coffee off the front of his suit. "But I wouldn't suggest doing it again."

"Or what?" she laughed. "If I'm truly a ghost what are you going to do? You can't have it both ways. Either I'm real and might have some reason to fear retaliation or I'm a ghost in which case threats are totally irrelevant." He said nothing. "Steed, what can I do to make you believe that I'm not a ghost?" She laid her hand on his thigh, a perfectly natural gesture given their past relationship and their current proximity.

He put the cup down on the table. "I'm not buying it, Mrs. Peel, so you may as well give up and go ply your ghostly talents elsewhere. Please take your hand off my leg," he said. All trace of anger disappeared as she sighed and persisted. "Tell me this," she said. "If, as you say, I've been here before as a ghost, did I need to ring the doorbell to get in?"

Her hand didn't move. "And you used to love it when I touched you like this." She looked down and he saw that mischievous smile he remembered so well flash across her face. "Your mind may not believe I'm real, but your body certainly does."

It was true. As much as he told his body not to react he could feel himself beginning to harden. Her hand moved up and lightly brushed over his erection while the other found the nape of his neck.

"Steed, believe me, I'm as real as I can be."

Undeterred by the throbbing in his groin he didn't move to touch her. His mind raced through what she'd said and done since he opened the door. The bell, the coffee, would a ghost really make coffee? The name change, he'd been fooled before, but . . . could it be true this time? Would a ghost have that ridiculous sense of humor to hit him in the head? He wanted to believe.

"I guess I'll have to convince you the hard way," she said. Her hand moved to his belt unfastened it, unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers. She pulled his briefs up and over his erection. At the same time she slipped off the sofa and knelt in front of him. Steed's jaw clenched involuntarily in anticipation as he watched her. Fire exploded in his head as her tongue ran up the underside of his shaft.

"Still don't believe?" she asked looking up at him.

He didn't answer. He couldn't. His state of arousal so great he couldn't form the words. He watched as she licked a drop of sperm from the sensitive tip of his engorged penis before opening her mouth and taking him inside. The pain in his head disappeared as sweet pleasure washed over his entire body. "Emma," he cried out. She licked him, kissed him, sucked him, his hips beginning to move in rhythm with her motion. She continued, bringing him closer and closer to that ultimate climax. He was on the edge, could feel that moment of complete senseless release. He reached out to her, wrapped his hands in her hair . . . her hair, too late he realized what had happened. Her hair was long, past her shoulders. It should have been . . .

He woke screaming with no sound. He could hear the scream in his mind, but his vocal cords must be paralyzed. His heart was beating so hard his chest hurt, felt as though a heavy weight was sitting on him, couldn't move. The room was swimming out of focus. A heart attack, it had to be. He sat there on the sofa waiting, praying for the end. It never came. Instead his heartbeat slowed, he began to breathe and when he could move again he ran up the stairs. Cloths and all he stood under the cold water of the shower. The icy tendrils soaked his hair cooling the fever, damping the fire in his head. He shook from the horror. He shook from the cold that soaked through his clothing, but most frightening, he shook from the bone chilling fear that he was truly losing his mind. Reality, fantasy and terrifying nightmares merged into one until they robbed him of the ability to distinguish one from the other. To lose his life was nothing to him. As far as he was concerned he'd lost that in a hotel room in Georgia. Death of the empty shell he occupied was something he prayed for, but to lose cognitive reason, to become a walking vegetable . . . not even a sterile heart could withstand that. He turned his face into the frigid water. It wouldn't come to that, he thought. He wouldn't let it. Before that happened he'd . . . He shut the water off and stripped out of his wet cloths, leaving them in the shower.

After dressing and picking up the report from the darkroom he called Mother's office to let him know he had returned from the United States and was on his way in. As he slid

into his car he found Mrs. Peel sitting in the passenger seat. With growing concern and anxiety he noted that her appearances were becoming more and more frequent. A significant tremble developed in his hands as he started the car.

“Where are we going,” she asked as he slipped the powerful engine into drive.

He risked a glance in her direction. This one’s not real, he told himself even though the apparition had now adopted the more modern hair style that he’d seen in the newspaper. There is no way she would have known this was your car, his mind told him. Mrs. Peel had only known the Bentley, he argued, pleased with himself for reasoning it out. But hadn’t she always had ways of finding things out when it came to you, his thoughts echoed back at him. How many times had she found you and pulled you out of the fire without seeming to have any information at all? Are you sure she’s not real? I’m sure! I have to be, his mind fought back against his own traitorous thoughts. He heard the sound of hollow laughter as they strove to confuse him. “Whitehall,” he heard his voice answer if by rote.

“Oh, good,” she said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Mother.”

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence. The early spring weather seemed to have receded back into the cool, almost cold, remnants of winter. “Why are we here,” she asked as they made their way down the hall to the elevator.

“To see if Mother has found out anything. Unless you’d like to supply some answers yourself,” he said.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Steed,” Peggy Chapman asked as she stepped around a corner. She was, after all, an information technician, but she wasn’t aware that he had requested anything from her department.

Steed tipped his bowler at her. “Good morning, Miss. Chapman,” he said. “I’m afraid I wasn’t speaking to you, my dear. I was speaking to Mrs. Peel.”

The woman looked up and down the hall and saw no one. She had heard that he could be a bit odd, but . . . “Yes, sir, of course you were.” She watched him step onto the elevator.

Two pairs of eyes looked up as the door to Mother’s office opened and both pairs took on a quizzical expression as the man on the other side appeared to pause as if waiting for someone to precede him into the room. “Good morning, Mother,” Steed said.

The large man hesitated, not sure what to make of what he’d just seen, then decided to put it down to his own imagination. “Steed,” he acknowledged and waved his hand in the direction of the other set of eyes. “This is Doctor Rice. I asked him here to take a look at that report.” This was true, but what he didn’t mention was he had also asked the doctor to be present to observe Steed.

Doctor Phillip Rice was tall and lean. His snow white hair belied his age and made him appear older than his years. A general practitioner as well as a surgeon he had received plenty of experience during the war serving with a medical detachment assigned under General Montgomery at the beginning of the invasion of North Africa until the German surrender. Finding civilian life somewhat limiting, he went back to school and received his degree in psychology. It was this triple medical specialty that attracted the Ministry to him. He had accepted their offer to work for them without hesitation although he still managed a private practice. It was in this capacity that he had cause to meet Miss. Knight, and after Mother’s summons had made a point of acquainting himself with her

Ministry file. He shook Steed's hand and retired to a quiet corner of the room to examine the report while the other two talked.

"Well, Steed did you find out anything from your trip," Mother asked.

"Only more questions," he told him. "Do you think you could check and see if there is any previous connection between this Spencer woman that owns the bed and breakfast and either Emma or Peter Peel?"

"You have reason to believe there could be?"

Steed shrugged. "I'm not sure. The story she tells and the one her granddaughter tells are completely opposite."

"Perhaps they're just different perspectives," he suggested. Or perhaps you're hearing what you want to hear, he thought. "You know how I-witness statements are."

Steed shook his head. "Not this time. There's too big a difference and her staff doesn't exactly back up her explanation for entering Mrs. Peel's room that morning."

Mother looked at his friend. The shadow of pain was still evident, the bags under his eyes gave testimony to his lack of sleep and he seemed to have developed a nervous habit. His eyes kept shifting to the left as though he were watching someone trying to creep up on him. Was he becoming paranoid? Was Steed grasping at straws and given what he had discovered himself, was he grasping with him? Steed had always possessed an unerring ability to find the smallest clue in a case when everyone else saw nothing, but this time his emotions were, without a doubt, clouding his judgment. The question was, how long should he indulge him? "You think she might have pulled the trigger," he asked bluntly.

"Possible," Steed admitted, "but I don't think so. What do you think?"

"I can't see it personally," Mrs. Peel agreed. "But she may know who did."

Mother started to answer, then noticed that Steed was, once again, looking to his left and appeared to be waiting for something.

"That's a good point," Steed continued turning back to him. "She could have let someone else in who did."

The hair on the back of Mother's neck stood up as he stared at his friend. "Steed, are you feeling alright? Would you like a drink?"

"I feel fine," he replied. The expression on his face one of utter normalcy. "And it's 8:00 in the morning, that's a bit early even for you."

Mother ignored the obvious insult. "So it is," he said, still confused by what he'd seen.

"Tell me what you've found," Steed said.

Mother glanced at Dr. Rice to see if he had noticed Steed's behavior, but the good doctor was absorbed in the report he was reading. "We still haven't located Peter." He had taken the offer of Steed's fellow agents who wanted to help in an unofficial capacity.

"I've got people at his apartment and at her solicitor's. If we can't pick up his trail there we're certain to catch him at the service. Even though it's closed to the public I imagine he'll be there since the family had him handle everything else. That brings up another interesting point. We've discovered that he did not fly back on the Knight Industries plane nor on a commercial flight. Apparently he flew a friend's private plane. It's still sitting in a hanger at Heathrow. It's registered to a Robert Clift, Colonel, USAF, Retired." This time there was no mistaking the action as Steed's head jerked left.

"The same Colonel that he was having dinner with at the time," Mrs. Peel offered. "Isn't that a coincidence?"

“That’s what I was thinking,” he said.

“You were thinking what? And who are you talking to,” Mother asked.

“That this is probably the same Colonel that provided Peter’s alibi. Now why did he fly back alone? You’d think he’d want to accompany . . .”

“Gentleman,” Doctor Rice broke in. “I hate to interrupt, but there are several things on this postmortem that I find very odd.” The two stared at him as if they’d forgotten he was in the room. “For instance,” he continued. “It lists Miss. Knight’s blood type as A negative when, in fact, it was A positive.”

“Couldn’t that be a simple typographical error, Doctor,” Mother asked. It seemed a rather minor point, but then the minor points were beginning to accumulate, he thought. “It could,” Rice agreed. “I made that mistake myself, or rather, my office did. We sent out a statement about her surgery which listed her as A negative. As soon as we discovered the error we sent her a letter of correction.”

“What surgery?” Steed asked of the empty space to his left, but it was Rice who answered. If he noticed anything unusual he failed to mention it.

“Her appendectomy,” he told him.

“She hasn’t had an appendectomy,” Steed told him. Mother made note of the use of present tense.

“She most certainly did,” Doctor Rice informed him. “I performed the surgery myself about a year ago. I was the surgeon on call the night they brought her in. She was very lucky. Another ten minutes and it would have burst. I called in a plastic surgeon to minimize the scar. That’s the other thing about this report,” he explained. “There’s no mention of her missing appendix or the scar.”

“You had surgery and didn’t tell me,” Steed asked.

She shrugged. “It wasn’t important.”

“It is to me. I would have been there,” he mumbled.

Both men stared. It hit Mother that Steed obviously thought he was talking to Mrs. Peel. Did he actually see her in the room with them, he wondered. A cold chill ran down his spine. Dr. Rice opened his mouth to speak, but Mother, not wanting to discuss this in front of Steed, cut him off. “Maybe this, Doctor Falkner simply overlooked it,” he suggested.

Rice slowly turned his attention back to Mother. “Anything’s possible, but blood typing, previous surgeries and scarring are pretty basic stuff. Everything else looks to have been done straight down the line. So why would he miss something that’s so elemental?”

“That’s an interesting question.” Mother waited to see if Steed would add anything, but he seemed to be caught up in his own thoughts. “Well I guess we don’t have any choice but to keep looking,” he said. “I’m having that plane checked before it leaves our jurisdiction. Doctor, perhaps this laboratory in Atlanta can answer some of your questions.” He looked over at Steed still sitting in his chair staring into space. “But before you leave, Doctor Rice, I’d like to speak to you about another matter.”

The doctor’s eyebrows shot up. “I bet you do,” he mumbled. If Steed heard he gave no indication.

“Steed,” Mother asked. “What’s your next move?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. He had been sitting there trying to answer that very question for himself and did not want to admit that he was having some trouble with clarity and focus. Mother was already looking at him in a strange manner.

Mother saw the doubt and confusion flash across the normally razor sharp gray eyes. Steed was in trouble and he knew it. "Why not go home and get some rest," he suggested. "Get a fresh start tomorrow. Go to the solicitor's and let them read the will. You never know, there might be something in it. There has to be some reason she wanted you there."

"Well, Doctor, what do you think," Mother asked after Steed was gone.

"Definitely under a great deal of stress, perhaps some slight cognitive difficulty. The hallucinations, if that's what they are, are unusual, but not totally unheard of. People deal with grief in many different ways. He simply isn't ready to accept Miss. Knight's death so his mind creates her image to keep her alive. I understand they hadn't seen each other in some years." Mother nodded. "So there are probably some unresolved issues there. My guess is once he finishes this case, be it suicide or something else, these manifestations will disappear. Right now I'm more concerned with the state of his physical health. He obviously hasn't gotten much rest lately and I'm a little curious about the dilation of his pupils." He passed Mother a significant look.

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. "Don't be ridiculous, Doctor. The only drug Steed uses is a good vintage," he told him. He pushed a button on his desk and summoned McQuay.

"Yes, Mother," the clerk asked.

"Remove Steed's name from the active service list. Place him on personal leave."

"Reduce his clearance?"

"No," Mother said. "I don't want to do anything that might hinder his ability to find the answers he needs," he explained to Dr. Rice. "Yet," he added.

Chapter Five

Steed opened the door to his apartment to find Peter Peel sitting on the sofa. He turned around quickly, but his spectral companion was gone again. He wondered if Mother had anyone watching the place. “How did you get in here?”

The man smiled, reached into his jacket and tossed an object in Steed’s direction. “I had a key,” he said. Steed made no attempt to catch it and it bounced on the rug. “Emma had it. She thought she’d had it hidden away, but I found it a long time ago. I figured it might come in handy one day so I had it copied.” She never told him what the key was for, but he had suspected. At the time he thought he might use it to catch her sneaking back to Steed. Of course, he had been naive back then. Hotels would be much easier and safer. He knew, he’d used a number of them himself and Emma had never known. “This is very nice,” he said looking around the flat. “Not as opulent as the house, but still, very cozy. I guessed you’d still have the place, so many happy memories for you. An intimate little breakfast after a night of passion, or maybe a quickie in the morning,” he winked.

Steed felt the anger and hatred building, rapidly reaching a point beyond his control. Anger at the constant string of filth that rolled out of his mouth, anger at his lack of respect for the woman he was supposed to have loved so much and hatred, hatred at his return from the dead, hatred of his presence, his very life. It should have been him in that cold box. But he was right about one thing, he did have happy memories of many nights of passion spent upstairs. He was wrong about the mornings, however. There had never been anything quick about making love to her. He remembered the way Emma had teased him, asking who he had been dreaming about to wake up so aroused, before smothering him with kisses. He never told her that the simple act of opening his eyes and seeing her there beside him, feeling the touch of her soft, smooth skin against his was enough to cause an immediate, rock hard erection that throbbed with a heat that nearly drove him out of his mind. I never dreamed of anyone but you, Emma, he thought. You fulfilled all my dreams.

“You know,” Peter said drawing his attention back to the man. “I really should thank you. Emma was much better in bed after I came back from the jungle. Especially on those nights when I’d hear her moaning in her sleep, softly calling out your name. All

I had to do was whisper ever so softly in her ear, 'I'm here Emma, my love,' and she was like a wild animal," he laughed.

Steed placed his bowler and umbrella on the coffee table and slowly sat down in the large, overstuffed chair. His eyes, cold as blue steel never left the man. He suddenly felt a calmness descend as though his mind had made that final click into total don't-give-a-shitness. "Let me tell you something, Peter that I want you to thoroughly understand. If I find out that you had anything to do with Mrs. Peel's death I'll kill you."

"Threats, Steed," Peter scoffed.

A dangerous smile crossed Steed's lips. "No," he told him. The voice was calm, quiet, steady. "Not a threat, a guarantee. A cold blooded, without a hesitation killing. I'll kill you as assuredly as I'd kill a rabid animal." Steed felt no guilt, no shame, only the hint of a long buried, brutal, personality trait peeking through the cracks in the framework of the man he had worked so hard to become. Rather than push it down, slam it behind locked doors, he relished it, drew on it. That was the man he needed at the moment, a man who didn't need to question his reality, but simply react to it.

"And spend the rest of your life in prison? I doubt, even you, have enough pull to get away with murder."

"I've been in many prisons," he said. "And there's one thing about Her Majesty's, you're not tortured. Just three meals and a cot, it could be worse. Besides, I don't think it would come to that. As you know, we're trained to disappear and I have many years of experience in both disappearing and killing."

Peter felt ice crystals form up and down his spine. He believed what Steed said, but it didn't matter. It was evident just from looking that he was sliding down hill pretty fast. He judged a few more pushes would be all it would take before Steed cracked. "And what about you, Steed," he asked. "What if it turns out it was you and not me? What will you do to yourself?" Again he reached into his jacket, slowly, and withdrew a piece of paper. He toyed with it, running his fingers along the folded edges creasing them. "Did you enjoy your reunion last night? Did you really think I wouldn't find out about your nocturnal visit to the mortuary?"

Steed showed no reaction, but wondered if Peter was watching him or the mortuary. "I can't imagine you'd think I'd care," he said.

Peter stood. "Well here's something I think you do care about. In fact, I think you've been looking very hard for it. It's a copy of the note she left." He dropped the paper on the table and made sure he walked around the opposite end from where Steed sat being careful to stay well out of his reach as he headed for the door. "The mortician really did a good job on her, don't you think," he said. "She finally lived up to her image as the ice queen." His laughter faded as he walked out and down the stairs.

Steed stared at the white paper lying before him. Now that he had it, he was afraid to touch it, feared the knowledge of her final thoughts. He turned to the comfort of his brandy, downed two and poured a third before retaking his seat and reaching for the folded paper. He read.

I'm tired.

Coping is no longer worth the effort.

Challenges have long since slipped behind the moon.

It seems I have spent most of my life learning to deal with loss.

My mother at such an early stage in her life.
 My father so few years after.
 God rest their souls.
 Then there was the loss of my husband.
 The one loss I thought I could never bare.
 It wasn't until he returned to me and I to him that I realized I had
 suffered the most insurmountable loss of my life.
 Lonely while alone is a terrible pain, but lonely while not alone is
 killing to the heart and spirit.
 Divorce can cure one, but not relieve the other.
 After so long I could no longer whether the loss of my heart, soul,
 spirit-the love of my life.
 To know that I brought it on myself, that I had no one to blame but
 myself, to know that I will never again feel that touch, know that
 laughter, experience that shear and total happiness is beyond my abilities.
 With that loss, my life is a small price.
 Death is a gift to the weary, a respite from the darkest pain.
 I will always love you and kiss your gentle lips with the warmth of each
 sunrise.

Steed read the note again and the last line for a third. He gently placed the paper on the table before burying his head in his hands. "Emma, my Emma," he cried. Why hadn't he realized how alone she would feel after leaving Peter. Why had he been so stubborn, so self centered? Why hadn't he checked on her, gone to her, begged her to come back? Peter was right, it was his fault. It was a fault of omission, a lack of courage, his inability to swallow his pride. There was nothing he could do. He had made the mistake of his life and it had cost him Emma. What was he to do now, he wondered. What was it he had told Peter? He was a very efficient killer. He found himself at his desk and automatically opened the top left drawer. He stared down at the 38 Smith & Wesson, reached out and ran his fingers along the cold steel, as cold as her cheek.

"Mr. Steed?"

Steed turned to find an elderly, portly man of average height, a small patch of gray visible just above and behind his ears, otherwise the scalp was devoid of hair. A large, dark birthmark was noticeable on the upper left side of the bald head. The man was standing in the doorway, left open by Peter's exit. He carried a small wooden box about two foot square. "Yes," Steed answered.

"My name is Myron Fordyce of Fordyce, Wheems and Smythe Solicitors. I'm the senior partner in the firm that represents the estate of the late Emma Knight," he explained. "May I come in?"

Steed motioned the man to a seat and ran his hand through his hair as he walked over to close the door. He really didn't need this now, but it looked like it was unavoidable. The man placed his strange package on the table. Steed reached out and removed the note that was now lying next to the box as he took a seat on the sofa. "What can I do for you, Mr. Fordyce?"

“My office has sent you several letters, Mr. Steed asking that you contact us as soon as possible.”

“So I understand,” Steed sighed. “But I have to tell you that if you’re waiting for me to show up so you can read Mrs. Peel’s Will, you could be waiting a long time.” What the hell was in this Will that they were in such a hurry to dispose of it, he wondered. His thoughts were interrupted by a surprising laugh from Fordyce. At least he guessed it was a laugh. It sounded more like a grunt.

“Frankly, Mr. Steed, your presence isn’t necessary,” he said. “That was an incorrect rumor that was started after my office sent out the first letter. My apologies if the indiscretion of my staff has caused you any inconvenience.” Fordyce appraised the man he saw before him. Now that they were face to face he wondered about the sanity of his client. From her previous description he would have never guessed this was the same man. His face was pale, the eyes blood shot, dark circles hung underneath as though he’d been in a fist fight and lost. His hair was unkempt and the shadow of whiskers was present, but the suit he wore was impeccable. The apartment appeared neat and tidy, the furnishings obviously expensive. “According to instructions dictated by Miss. Knight, in accordance with her final requests, I was to deliver this package to you upon her demise.”

Steed examined the box. There was nothing extraordinary about it. It was plain, wooden, no writing, no labels, nothing to indicate what was inside. “What’s in it?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” the man told him and stood to leave. “I can only tell you that it was her fervent wish that you have it. I can also tell you that it might be prudent for you to attend the reading of the Will, but if you choose not to, any pertinent information will be communicated through correspondence. My condolences on your loss. Good night, Mr. Steed.” With those curt and utterly unemotional words, Fordyce let himself out.

Steed went to the kitchen and found a screwdriver in the utility drawer. The box’s lid pried off easily enough. He reached inside and pulled out the contents. Soft, honey gold, rounded ears, stubby arms and legs, big brown eyes set to either side of a furry snout like nose stared back at him eliciting a flood of memories. A dinner party that ran into the wee hours of the morning, they’d both had a little too much to drink and decided to walk back to his Westminster apartment. Passing through the park they’d come upon a small carnival just setting up for the weekend activities. Always eager to make a bob or two the carney didn’t object to a little pre-opening business. She purchased a balloon as a gift for him. “To help raise your spirits,” she told him. “I never need outside assistance in raising anything when you’re around, Mrs. Peel,” he replied. She had not failed to notice the wanton look in his eyes. Not to be out done, he’d moved to the booth with the shooting gallery. Tiny ducks moving along a circular track presented the challenge of dispatching ten in a row. Prizes for success hung on the walls of the booth for the choosing. He picked up the pellet gun and, without seeming to aim, took down the first ten. She’d yawned as if unimpressed, but the game operator seemed more so, especially considering the apparent inebriated state of the customer. “What’s your pleasure, Mrs. Peel,” Steed asked. She locked her amazing dark eyes with his. “Someone I can hold close all through the night that makes me feel warm and satisfied,” she whispered in a sultry voice. He forgot the rest of the world, stepping close to her, desire burning in his gaze, stopping just short of kissing her as she pointed to the stuffed bear, a mischievous smile on her beautiful face. He’d tried playfully to ditch the thing several times as they

walked on. “Steed, I do believe you’re jealous of Jake,” she teased. “Mrs. Peel, I refuse to acknowledge a cotton wool, stuffed rag as a rival for anyone’s affections. And I thought all such creatures had names like ‘Fluffy’ or ‘Brownny’.”

“Don’t be ridicules, Steed,” she told him. “Those names have no dignity what-so-ever. No. Jake is a nice, masculine name, like John.” He remembered she’d patted him on the butt as if to emphasize her point.

Steed stared at the glaring reminder of their happy time. He had no idea she’d kept the thing through the years. He looked in the box again, but found nothing else. He could detect a hint of her perfume still clinging to the toy’s fur. Had she really held him tight? He sat down with the bear in his lap fingering a soft, furry ear as his mind drifted. ‘I will always love you and kiss your gentle lips with the warmth of each sunrise’ rang in his memory. It was some time later that the growling of his stomach forced his mind back. He had to eat. “Come on, Jake, let’s go for a ride.” He took the bear with him placing it on the passenger seat beside him. As he reached for the ignition he thought about the amount of brandy he’d consumed and changed his mind. Jake sat in silence, abandoned to the chill of the afternoon as the dark figure hailed a taxi at the end of the road.

Steed paid off the driver and entered the small restaurant. It had always been one of their favorites. The food wasn’t fancy, but good. They had visited the place many times when food was necessary, but they both had another hunger. It was convenient and fast as well as being centrally located between both their apartments. He hadn’t been there since shortly after Mrs. Peel left.

He was seated by someone he didn’t know and the waiter appeared quickly to take his order.

“This place hasn’t changed much.”

She was there, seated next to him. He should have guessed she’d show up here. Then again, maybe he had.

“I wonder if they still do that lobster dish that I loved so much,” she said.

“I’m sure they do,” Steed said. “Would you like me to order it for you?”

“No thank you, I’m slimming,” she told him.

Steed smiled at the notion. “My dear, you look as beautiful as ever.” The curious glances from near by tables went unnoticed. The waiter appeared again and poured a glass of wine. At Steed’s nod he left the bottle and moved on.

“Wine on top of all that brandy, Steed? Someone’s going to be hung over in the morning. You’re not as young as you used to be, you know.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Peel. Haven’t lost any of your qualities of flattery, I see.”

“I’m simply stating the facts, Steed. Just the . . .”

“John?”

He looked up straight into questioning blue eyes. “Christina,” he said standing. “What are you doing here?”

She’d seen him as soon as she entered the restaurant. It was difficult not to notice as he sat there carrying on a conversation with himself. She couldn’t make out what he was saying, but patrons around his table were beginning to leave, some in, what looked to be, the middle of their meal. As she approached she was appalled at how drastically his appearance had changed in such a short period. “I had some work in the neighborhood so I thought I’d drop in for a bite. May I join you?”

Steed glanced at Mrs. Peel sitting there with her 'I can't wait to see how you explain this' grin on her face. "Well actually, Christina, I . . ." He wanted to say no, that he preferred to be alone, but she was already taking a seat and he didn't wish to cause a scene. ". . . I'd be delighted," he finished. She was lovely, but somehow not as beautiful as he remembered. Her blond hair was still long and silky, but not quite as luxurious as the deep auburn strands sitting beside him. The blue eyes seemed to have a shallowness about them, unlike the rich brown pools and the smile, while bright was not as compelling as the slight smirk on the other's tender lips.

"Who were you speaking to when I arrived," Cristina asked.

"Who is she?" Mrs. Peel asked.

Steed's head was beginning ache. "Christina Jaccabs, we met about a month ago," he answered.

"Yes," Christina said, "that's right." She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. "John, are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, John," Mrs. Peel echoed quizzically. "Are you?"

He shot Emma a pleading look. "I'm fine," he told Christina.

"I called your home yesterday," she said. "I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the riding." She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Both of them."

He knew it was foolish, but he felt himself flush slightly and couldn't help feeling a bit guilty, as though he had betrayed someone. That's ridicules, he thought. Even if Emma hadn't been a ghost, it had been over ten years since they had seen one another, since they had shared an intimate relationship or any relationship at all.

"And did you enjoy it as well?" Mrs. Peel asked.

"Please," he said closing his eyes. He was much too weary to match wits with two women. He just wanted to be left alone to eat in peace. Somehow he had to get rid of Christina and hope Mrs. Peel would choose this as one of the times to disappear.

"Christina," Steed began as he opened his eyes. To his great delight he saw that Mrs. Peel's chair was now empty, but his relief was short lived as he heard a third and all too familiar voice.

"Well, well," Peter said. "Imagine finding you here and with such a beautiful young lady, no less. I guess you're not too heartbroken after all." He sat down without being asked.

"Go away, Peter," Steed said through clenched teeth. "I'm not in the mood to put up with you."

"John!" Christina said incredulously.

Peter simply smiled at her. "Don't worry, my dear, I can assure you that he only despises me because I remind him of someone he'd just as soon forget." He picked up her hand in his. "I don't think we've been introduced," he said. "I'm Peter Peel, the husband of one of his . . . previous encounters." He kissed the back of her hand. "Hasn't he told you about his greatest conquest?" She said nothing. "No?" Peter asked. "Well I'm not really surprised."

"I'm warning you," Steed said.

"Yes, yes," Peter said waving Steed off and turning back to Christina. "I'm going, but before I do I'd just like to tell you to be very careful. This man will use you up and throw you away, just as sure as a leaf falls in winter you'll hit the ground and he'll step on you and keep moving."

In no more than a blink of an eye, Steed hauled Peter up by his lapels and hit him knocking him over his chair and into the empty table beyond. Christina stared in open mouthed horror at the unconscious Peter as Steed pulled a hand full of bills from his wallet and dropped them on the table. "I'm sorry, Christina," he said. "Please forgive me, but I'm not really myself today. I'll call you." He left her sitting at the table. The restaurant staff cleared his path and rushed to the man on the floor once Steed was gone. Steed didn't hail a taxi, preferring to walk back to his apartment. The air was turning colder now that the sun had set and he tried to clear his head. One thing was already clear, he'd have to fight against the lethargy he seemed to slip in and out of. The confusion and general muddle mindedness was something he wasn't used to. Something continued to pull at the back of his mind, but every time he thought he'd grasp it, he slid backwards.

It was late when he returned to his flat. He switched on the small desk lamp and collapsed on the sofa. His stomach still growled its hungry message. He'd left the restaurant without eating, but he was simply too tired to think about it. He was asleep almost before his head touched the sofa arm.

Chapter Six

Steed was still sleeping when the dark figure opened the back door that lead to the garage and slipped into the apartment. Silence greeted the stranger as they paused to listen and wait for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Memory alone could have guided the intruder, but caution was well warranted. As eyes began to focus again, they made out the tiny kitchen, the spiral staircase that lead up to the loft style bedroom, the small dining area was just beyond the stairs and then the entry to the living room. The figure debated climbing the stairs. After all, at this hour if the owner were home, bed would be the logical place to find them. However, a light was visible in the living area and the shadowy figure advanced, quickly peeking around the entryway and pulling back. Seeing only the lone man on the sofa, the figure entered the room and stood over the still form.

How was it possible to look so bad and so good all at the same time. He looked like he'd been run through a wringer and hung up to dry. The uncharacteristic whiskers, dark circles and puffy eyes testified to something very serious having occurred, but the face, in repose, had always had that quality that made him look like a young boy, especially with that unruly lock of hair falling over the right side of his forehead. The hair, still so thick and dark, a hand reached out unconsciously to push the strand back in place. The hand trembled and the body suddenly felt weak. Sitting down on the coffee table she looked around. To be back in this place, to be back in his presence, just seeing him this close sent a thrill through her body.

What would she do when those sparkling gray eyes opened and looked at her with that intensity he was so capable of? What would she do when he smiled that smile that made her melt inside? A frightening thought suddenly occurred to her. What would she do if she saw none of that, but only anger and hurt? Was she doing the right thing? She had already caused him so much pain. Could she really reawaken that? She could leave, try to handle it on her own. He'd never know she had been there, but even as she thought it she knew she couldn't. It was too late. Like it or not he was involved and once again it was because of her that he would suffer. She could only hope that in time he could forgive her and not hate. She took a deep breath. "Steed," she said quietly. There was no response. "Steed, wake up," she tried again a bit louder this time, still nothing. He must really be exhausted, she thought. She reached out to gently shake him. It happened so fast it shocked her. She remembered him being fast, but the speed he generated was incredible. The grip he locked on her wrist was painful.

"I've told you before not to touch me," he said.

“I’m sorry,” she gasp. The eyes were cold. Something flashed across them, but disappeared in an instant. Was it fear? For a moment she froze, uncertain what to do. Doubt crept into her mind. This wasn’t the same Steed she had known and loved so many years ago. Years, that was it. The realization that she had no idea what he had been through in that time. Had he changed that much? “You’re hurting me,” she finally said. He released his hold. She wanted to ask him when he had told her about touching him, but was afraid the tears that came to her eyes would spill out. She was prepared for anger, indifference, even hatred, but cruelty wasn’t Steed.

“Now go away and let me sleep,” he told her and rolled over turning his back to her. Her heart wanted to do just that. The fear of rejection that she had lived with, that had paralyzed her for so long was now a reality. The pain of certain knowledge was physical, but her mind told her she couldn’t run away. No matter what his feelings toward her were she couldn’t abandon him to whatever trap Peter was playing. She was responsible. Emma moved behind the sofa, put her head down as close as she could. “Steed, you can’t go back to sleep,” she said. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Yes, go and when you come back you can tell me all about your travels,” he yawned. “Damn it, Steed you always were a stubborn . . . look, they know I’ve escaped. This will probably be the first place they check. We’ve got to go!” She slapped the back of the sofa to get his attention.

Steed opened one eye and looked at her. He didn’t know what she was up to this time, but it was evident from her expression that she wasn’t going to give up. He pulled himself to a sitting position. “Alright, Mrs. Peel,” he said. “I’m up. Now what is it you want?”

“I told you,” she said, exasperation in her voice. “We have to get out of here until we figure out what to do.”

He yawned again. “If I take you to wherever it is you want to go will you let me sleep then?”

“Yes,” she sighed, glad she finally got him moving even if it was slowly. “You can sleep all you like. I promise.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Just give me a minute to wake up.”

“Are you sure,” she asked. He nodded. She eyed him suspiciously, poured him a brandy and handed it to him. “Here, maybe this will help. I’m going upstairs to pack a few things for you. Don’t go back to sleep, Steed.”

“I won’t,” he said into the mouth of the glass as he drank the liquor.

She went up the stairs. She didn’t want to look around, to remember other times, happy times, but being in his bedroom made her long to step back in time, to laugh, to feel again, to love and be loved. That time will never come again, she told herself. Thankful that Steed was a creature of habit she knew exactly where to find what she needed including the shaving kit he kept for just such rushed occasions. Finished with her packing she went down stairs and found Steed stretched out on the sofa once again sound asleep. “Steed!” she yelled. “I told you not to go back to sleep.” Frustrated at his lack of response, she again went behind the sofa. “Alright,” she warned him. “If you want it the hard way, so be it.” She placed her palms against the top of the sofa and, bracing her feet against the wall below the bay windows, she shoved with all her might. It had the desired affect as the sofa tipped and she heard his body hit the floor. She walked around and stood looking down at him, hands on hips. “Now look, Steed,” she said. “I don’t know

what this aversion to touching you is about, we can talk about that later, but I'm willing to abide by it as long as you get going. Otherwise, I'm going to drag you out of here and if we fight then we fight, but in your current condition I wouldn't count too much on winning. One way or the other you're leaving."

He slowly got to his feet. She walked over to the desk, opened the top left drawer and picked up the 38. "Are you going to shoot me," he asked.

"Don't tempt me," she said. "I've packed your bag. Is your car in the garage?" He picked up the bag and lead the way. She was surprised as he unlocked the door to the big, green Jaguar. "This is nice," she said. "What happened to the Bentley?"

"It met up with another, all too real, ghost from my past," he explained. Her eyebrows shot up. "It's a long story."

"Well, hello, Jake," she said picking the bear up from the passenger seat where Steed had left it. "What are you doing here?"

Steed said nothing as he started the car and pulled out of the garage.

Emma held the stuffed animal in her lap lovingly. "Steed, how did you get Jake?" she asked.

"You ought to know, Mrs. Peel you had him delivered."

Quizzically, "I had him . . ."

"By the indomitable Mr. Fordyce. Quite a remarkable character," Steed went on.

"Completely forgettable."

"But you weren't supposed to get Jake unless . . ." A sudden, horrible realization came to her. The things that Peter had said, the pictures he had shown her began to make sense.

"Steed," she said softly, placing her hand on his shoulder. He shrugged her off and she dropped it back to her lap. "I don't know how, but Peter managed to convince you that I was dead didn't he?" And if Fordyce delivered Jake then he wasn't the only one. She wondered about her family, her friends, her business and the effect it was having on them. Her life would be in turmoil, but right now her world was more important and he was sitting next to her caught up in a nightmare of Peter's design.

He laughed, but it wasn't pleasant. "You really must get some new material, my dear. You already used that one, but I do admire the ex-husband angle, gives it just enough of a twist to keep it fresh."

His derisive laughter sent a chill up her spine, but his response made no sense. "I don't understand."

"I have to hand it to you though," he said. "You get better each time, but then you always were adaptable, weren't you."

Something was terribly wrong. She had seen Steed in many mood stages, from confused to angry, but she had never known him to be openly, emotionally cruel. Could it be that believing she was dead had relieved him of the pain she had caused, allowed him too finally and completely rid himself of her and the memory of her betrayal? As much as she had wanted to see him over the years, especially after the divorce made that possible, she had feared what might happen and it now appeared her fears were warranted. He could not forgive her and she had no right to expect anything else. She blinked against the sting of tears. She couldn't afford to think about that now. His safety was the priority. Which reminded her, "Where are we going?" she asked.

"My country home."

“No,” she told him. “We can’t go there. Peter knows about it. That’ll be the second place they’ll check. We have to go somewhere no one knows about.”

He risked a glance at her. He couldn’t seem to help himself. She was so beautiful. Even if she was there as a new round of mental torture he still loved looking at her. Let’s face it, he thought, if you have to lose your mind, there are less pleasant ways of doing it. As long as he didn’t allow her to touch him maybe he could avoid the horror of reality.

“You certainly are demanding,” he quipped. “Are you sure this is necessary?”

“Better safe than sorry,” she told him. She’d seen him look over at her and for a split second she thought she’d seen the old Steed behind the tired eyes. Her spirits jumped a notch. It felt good to be sitting beside him again as they drove through the night. It wasn’t the same as riding in the old Bentley, but considering the temperature had dropped radically, and she could see tiny snowflakes in the headlights, she was grateful for the luxury car’s heater. She hadn’t felt completely warm in a long time. She studied him as they drove on in silence. The hands on the steering wheel were strong and yet she knew they possessed such gentleness. She squirmed in her seat as her body remembered their touch. The shoulders were broad and powerful. His body was still well defined even in the tailored suit. She longed to see the muscular arms and chest, the diamond shaped patch of hair between the nipples and the trail that she loved to follow down across the flat abdomen to the . . . Even in his fifties he was just as handsome as he had been in his forties. Time hadn’t seemed to touch him much and the things he could do to her. She had to stop herself. The response from her own body was becoming uncomfortable. You haven’t seen him in ten years, she reminded herself and he can’t even bare to have you touch him. Hatred was a strong and heavy obstacle to overcome.

Snow was beginning to collect on the streets as he pulled the car onto a hard packed dirt road. They’d left the city a while back and she had no idea where he was going, but trusted him to have a place in mind. Steed had always seemed to have places, supplies, cash tucked away for emergencies. After what seemed like a couple of miles he pulled up and stopped the car beside a rustic, and she did mean rustic, cabin set deep into tall, full cedar trees. The snow looked heavier, the flakes larger in the moonlight. With the engine shut off the silence and beauty of the scene was powerful. Steed climbed out of the car and leaned against it, a faraway gaze in the gray eyes as he took in the cabin. He seemed impervious to the cold. Emma, although shivering from what felt like a bone deep chill, was thrown further into the icy depths by the sadness she witnessed on his handsome face. She wondered what significance the log building held for him. Steed couldn’t stop his mind from racing back in time. The cabin hadn’t changed, the trees had grown a bit, but the peace and serenity of the setting was just as he’d remembered it. Tucked away from the world, that’s the way he thought of it and the reason he had purchased it more than ten years ago. It was to be a Christmas gift for Mrs. Peel. A place where they could spend the holiday together, no separate rooms, away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. A Christmas fantasy, just the two of them, a few deer that roamed the parcel of land and perhaps a couple of horses to pull a winter sleigh was an idea he’d had long ago. The fantasy had never come to fruition, however as Peter’s reappearance had turned his dream into a nightmare. He never spent any time here finding the memory too lonely. He certainly never envisioned returning here under these circumstances.

Normally there would have been a caretaker, but Steed knew the man was visiting relatives in Scotland. There appeared to be an ample supply of chopped wood stacked at the back and he hoped the rest of the facilities were as well stocked. He reached above the door and found the key. Emma felt the first twinge of encouragement as he let the door swing open, and waited for her to precede him inside. At least he was acknowledging her presence. It was cold. Apparently the idea of central heating hadn't made it to this neck of the woods. Steed saw her shiver. "I didn't think ghosts were supposed to be affected by the weather," he joked. He felt a bit foolish doing it, but he removed his suit coat and draped it across her shoulders. He fully expected it to fall to the floor when she disappeared. Neither one happened, instead she simply thanked him. He looked around. A small mud room to the right of the entryway contained facilities for storing one's coat, wellies, etc. The washroom, complete with bath, was just off of that. The main room consisted of a stone fireplace on the right wall, a sofa in front and two rocking chairs, one to either side. A small dining table sat in the space behind the sofa and in the far left corner, a tiny kitchenette. A door in the upper right corner of the room lead to the bedroom. Steed noticed some wood stacked next to the fireplace. He stowed his bag behind the sofa and moved to it. "Let's see if a fire will warm you up any," he said.

Emma slipped her arms into his coat and wrapped them around her chest. She could smell his cologne and a faint warmth lingered from his body. It felt very good. She set Jake up on the back of the sofa like a watch dog, or in this case, a watch bear. "I'll see if there's anything to eat." She hadn't said anything in the car, but she had heard his stomach growling. "When's the last time you had something?" she asked. Steed stopped loading the fireplace to consider. "I don't remember," he told her. "A couple of days ago, I think. But you needn't bother, Mrs. Peel. I'm not really that hungry."

She laughed. "Steed, that's a lie." She found some cans of vegetable soup and set about warming it up. "Your stomach has been complaining ever since we left the apartment." She was right, of course. What he had meant to say was, although he was hungry, he didn't feel much like eating. He got the fire started and watched to ensure that it wasn't going to die out before sitting on the sofa. He rested his head on the back and watched her. She had his jacket pulled tight around her holding it in place with one arm while the other stirred the pot of whatever she was heating. It swallowed her. He envied the jacket. The black pants she was wearing fit her beautifully and he could see that her legs were still very shapely. Those thighs, so soft and smooth, yet strong when wrapped around his back were well defined. Her waist was trim, the stomach flat and firm like he imagined the breasts, so perfectly proportioned to the rest of the body with nipples that stood pert and hard with a single touch. He wished she would turn around so he could see her sweet, tender lips. "And kiss your gentle lips with the warmth of each sunrise," he said more to himself than to her, but he saw her head snap around and the deep brown eyes lock on his.

"Where did you hear that?"

Steed sighed. He was so tired he'd almost dropped off. Her sharp reaction jolted him back. "Did you mean it?" he asked softly.

She turned back to the stove, turned the fire off and moved the, now heated soup, to another burner before looking back. He was still watching her, waiting for an answer.

He must have been to my apartment, she thought. Had he read her journal? He must have, but that would mean “Yes, I meant it,” she said finally and started looking for a bowl. She couldn’t bare to see his reaction.

Steed felt a lightness in his chest before his mind slammed the truth home. She’s not real, it screamed and laughed at the same time. What answer did you expect?

Emma found a tray and brought the soup to him. “I couldn’t find any crackers, I’m afraid,” she said.

“This is fine, thank you.” He noticed the tray was shaking somewhat as she handed it to him. She took a seat on the rug in front of the fire and pulled her legs up to wrap her arms, hidden by the sleeves of his jacket, around her knees. “Don’t tell me you’re still cold,” he said. She shrugged. “Well that fire should take care of it.”

“The trouble with a fire is it only warms one side at a time,” she told him. “I can’t seem to get warm enough lately. I think it’s a side affect of the drug they used.”

Despite any real desire, the soup tasted good, but the spoon stopped halfway to his lips at those words. “What drug?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she told him. “But whatever it was, they had to inject it.” She slid his coat off and pulled up her sleeves.

Steed saw the dark, purple bruises on the inside of her arms. He could also see the traces of yellow, the sign of old bruising. His mind raced. This was something new.

She dropped her sleeves and pulled the coat back on. “I know you’re tired, Steed, but I’d like to tell you everything that I can. He nodded.

“A little over a week ago I flew to Atlanta. Knight had been working on the acquisition of a company called Northshore Electronics and I went there to facilitate the takeover. It isn’t necessary to go into how or why, but I didn’t want to stay in the city so I chose a small Bed and Breakfast in a town outside Atlanta.”

Steed wanted to tell her that he knew all about The Peach Grove, but decided to remain silent and see where his mind would lead her.

“I’d only been there a few days when I opened the door to my room and found Peter standing there. I hadn’t seen or heard from him in over a year, but there he was.” She noticed that Steed seemed awfully interested in his soup when she mentioned Peter. However, she couldn’t see how he could possibly eat it with his jaw clenched the way it was. “There’s no need to go into detail,” she continued. “He said he wanted a reconciliation. I told him it would never happen. He persisted a few times and suffice it to say we did not part on the best of terms. I finally told him to leave me alone. It was the next day, or rather the next night, that things started to get strange.

I have to tell you that a lot of it is fuzzy,” she admitted. “And some of it I’m not sure if it’s real or something I imagined. It’s very confusing. The last clear thing I remember is going back to the hotel. It was late and I was surprised to run into the owner, Mrs.

Spencer because if I saw anyone at that time of the night it was usually her granddaughter, Margaret. We spoke for a few minutes and she thought I looked tired, which I was. She suggested that I have a bath and she would bring a cup of tea to my room. I took her up on her offer and the tea was waiting beside the bed when I stepped out of the bath.” She scratched at her lovely head. “This is where things get a bit unfocused. The only thing I can think of is, she must have drugged it because I don’t remember much of anything after that.” She rubbed the muscles at the back of her neck.

“I know this is going to sound strange, but I get glimpses of someone . . . fixing my

makeup . . . and flashes, bright flashes of light . . . like from a camera. Then there's . . . nothing until I'm tied to a seat in an airplane," she paused and chewed on her lower lip. Steed found it hard to swallow when he saw that. That habit had always made her look so vulnerable.

"At least I think it was an airplane." She shook her head and laughed lightly. "Of course it was, I mean, I got back here somehow, but I don't think it was a commercial flight. It was smaller and there weren't any other passengers. I never saw anyone else. Everything's a blank from that point until I woke up in a windowless room completely sealed off except for a small sliding panel in the door. I don't know how long I'd been there, but at regular intervals the panel would open and food was shoved in. The room beyond was dark and I couldn't make out who was there nor could I hear any voices. If the number of meals was any indication, I had been there about a day and a half when the panel opened and I saw Peter, again.

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She remembered waking to a room completely devoid of any furnishings, markings or indicators of where she might be. The only creature comfort, if it could be classified as such, was a solid metal shelf with a thin mattress laying on top of it. There were no windows, the walls, ceiling and floor were made of the same stainless steel as the makeshift cot and for some odd reason painted white. The only breaks were a heavy hinged door with what appeared to be a moveable slot that opened from the other side and a fist sized drain in the middle of the floor. The room reminded her of the inside of a walk-in, industrial sized freezer. A light source was provided by a large overhead bulb enclosed in the twelve foot ceiling by a hatch work pattern of crossed steel plates. There were no switches and even the locking mechanism on this side of the door was a dummy plate. No chance of picking it even if she had something to use. She had no idea how long she'd been there or who had brought her to this place. She tried to force the door panel open with no success. With no other choice, she lay down and waited.

Roused from a light sleep by the sound of a lock being thrown, she moved to the door, but it was only the slot opening. A tray was slipped through the hole with a sandwich and coffee, not knowing if the food was drugged, she left it. The bruises on her arms were testament enough to her captor's willingness to use drugs. By the time the third meal was pushed through she was very hungry. Passing the time was difficult and she couldn't help thinking about how long it had been since she'd been in this type of situation. Ten years was a long time and she knew she couldn't count on a miraculous rescue this time. When the door finally opened she was truly surprised to see Peter step through.

"I must apologize for the accommodations, my dear," he said, a sickly grin on his face. "But my research shows that, in the past, you were entirely too good at finding your way out of these sort of things to allow anything else."

"Peter, what the hell are you doing? Let me out of here."

"You know you really should have taken me up on my offer of reconciliation, Emma. We could have avoided all this," he scoffed.

She moved toward him, but stopped at the sound of a pump shotgun being cycled. She looked at the door. A tall, blond, blue eyed woman stood just outside, the barrel

aimed directly at her. Emma backed up and sat down on the cot. “Do you honestly believe this will induce me to come back to you?”

He laughed. “My dear Emma,” he said. “That is no longer of interest to me. True, it would have made things a bit sweeter, but it’s almost as much fun this way.”

Emma had no idea what he was talking about. “What, Peter?”

“Yes, I suppose it is a bit confusing for you, but before I get to that let me tell you that you taught me a great deal all those years ago with your little adulterous affair. For instance, I learned that it’s much better, much more satisfying to destroy from within rather than simple outward destruction.”

She leaned her head against the cool wall. This was an old argument and one she had no intentions of going through again.

“You destroyed my life, Emma, or rather you destroyed what could have been my life. All that time in that God forsaken jungle, all I dreamed of was what it would be like when I returned, how my life would be perfect, the perfect life, the perfect wife. With your social connections and what I had given for ‘Queen and Country’ I could have gone far, maybe even into parliament, but you shattered that dream.”

“That’s just it, Peter,” she said, her voice sounding tired. “It was just a dream. The person you envisioned never existed. I was never that person and never could be. You just couldn’t accept that.”

The irrationality shown through his eyes, “That’s what you like to tell yourself,” he continued. “It lets you out of any responsibility, excuses everything that you did, but no one changes that much in two years, my dear, not without outside influence. You made me look like a fool. People were laughing at me behind my back. All the whispers about how you must have come back to me out of pity and wondering how often you slipped away to see your lover. The divorce just added grist to the rumor mill. You took away my dignity and with it the small shred I had left of my life. I’ve been thinking about that a lot. You’re familiar with the saying ‘what’s good for the goose is good for the gander’? Well I decided that I would take from you what you took from me, but then a delicious idea struck me. Sticking with the goose analogy, what if I killed two birds with one stone? That’s when things started to crystallize, as if it were meant to be.” He laughed again, a disturbing, almost hysterical, laugh that chilled her to the bone. “You know, Emma, I have to admit that I was really counting on a reaction from your . . . well shall we say close friend, but I thought I’d have to push a little harder. I was truly pleased with just how easy it was. It didn’t take much at all. The poor sap must have actually loved you. And we all know what happens to men who dare to love you, don’t we.”

Emma’s stomach turned over. He couldn’t be talking about . . . “Peter, you know none of this is true.” She hoped the uneasiness didn’t show in her voice. “I tried to make our marriage work even when you were sneaking out to hotels with other women.” That made him blink. “Oh yes,” she said. “I knew about them, but I was willing to overlook that as your way of trying to punish me for infractions you thought I’d committed.”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard a word. “The funny part is, I don’t even have to do it. He’s doing it for me. Tell me, Emma, have you ever seen a man collapse from the inside out? It’s fascinating!” There was a soft chuckle from the blond that drew his attention. He smiled and looked back at Emma. “The two of you have a lot in common,” he explained. “She spent the afternoon at your lover’s country estate. You’ll be happy to

know that he's still up to his old tricks. She can testify to that, right?" he addressed the woman.

"He's very handsome isn't he," she told Emma. "And very good, I can't believe the way he . . ."

"That's enough!" Peter interrupted. "I don't need the details."

Neither do I, Emma thought. For a moment she almost thought she saw the woman lick her lips. She knew the woman's statement shouldn't bother her, but it did. The thought, let alone the mental picture, of Steed with another woman was something she tried very hard to wipe from her mind. "Peter, whatever problem that you imagine exists between us, Steed has nothing to do with it. They told me you were dead."

"That's were your wrong," Peter told her. "Steed has everything to do with it if for no other reason than by hurting him I hurt you and by hurting you, I hurt him. It's a win-win situation." She could still hear him laughing as he closed the door.

She was let out occasionally to use the bathroom, always under close guard of course, and food was offered at regular intervals. It wasn't until the next day that Peter reappeared, again the shotgun was present. He tossed a syringe on the cot. "Getting too close to you is never a good idea so, my dear, I'm afraid you're going to have to administer that yourself. Don't be too alarmed," he said. "It's just something to make you a bit more manageable. You've had it before and as you can see you came out of it just fine. Now it's time to get you ready for the show."

"What show?" The syringe went untouched.

"That's not for you to worry about, but believe me, it will be one of your finest performances."

"Do you really think I'm going to inject myself with that?" she asked nodding at the needle. He laughed. She was getting really sick of that laugh.

"Well, I was hoping you'd be more cooperative, but I was prepared for your stubborn streak." He motioned for the woman to follow him out of the room and closed the door. The sliding panel opened and a small canister was dropped in. She heard the hiss of gas being released, but there was nothing she could do. Everything went black.

When she woke some time later, she had no idea what had happened, only that she was very cold. She had never felt so cold in her life and estimated she was on the verge of hypothermia. She was closed inside the sterile room again. A blanket lay over her. It had little effect. It was, judging once again by meals served, late the next day when the panel slid open again and she saw Peter on the other side. She didn't bother to get up.

"I've got a little treat for you, darling," he said.

She couldn't see the grin on his face, but she could hear it in his voice. A small bag was pushed through the hole.

"Come, come," he said wagging the object at her. She remained seated. "Everyone visits the concession stand before the movie starts." He dropped the bag and popcorn spilled out onto the floor. "You must be getting a bit board by now so I arranged an entertainment for you."

She could hear movement behind the door. Her cell went dark an instant before the projector started and she had to squint as the light hit her in the eyes. Grudgingly, she moved to the opposite wall. The projection was being shown on the wall over her cot and she waited for the images to appear. Emma felt her heart jump as the figure appeared.

There was no mistaking the tailored suit, the hand made silk shirt and the deep blue tie that set off the gray eyes, the dark brown, still full head of hair, her breath caught. But it was the eyes that made her heart ache in her chest. The focus was close in. She couldn't tell where he was at. He appeared to be speaking, but there was no sound. She wished she could read lips, but as she looked closer she was glad that she could not. It didn't take an interpreter to see the tears that ran down his face. His head was leaning back against something and his gaze was directly into the camera almost as if he knew it was there. She knew that couldn't have been, for Steed would never make such an emotional display and she wondered what could possibly be causing him so much pain. As she continued to watch, her own tears rolling down her cheeks, her heart stopped as she made out so clearly, so undeniably only one word from those warm and wonderful lips – Emma! The film flicked off and the image disappeared from the wall, but not from her mind, her heart, her soul. Somehow she was the cause of the deep, bottomless pain in those expressive, gray eyes. Though Peter was the messenger, she had no doubt she was the instrument and now he was back at the small window, laughing, taunting her. “I've got a further update for you, Emma. I've been to that apartment the two of you shared. You didn't tell me it was so . . . cozy. It seems your lover isn't holding up so well. Poor fellow, he's really looking bad and what with talking to himself in public and brawling in a restaurant,” he rubbed his chin. “I think there can be little doubt that Steed is losing his grip.”

It was then she realized that he couldn't see her from his position. She prayed that, just this once, her judgment was true. With the swiftness of a jungle cat she twisted her body away from the wall and slammed her hand through the opening. She felt her palm connect with soft flesh and gristle and heard the howl of pain. She looked through the, now clear, opening and felt great satisfaction as she saw Peter holding his nose unable to staunch the blood that ran through his fingers. The woman was holding his shoulders as he bent forward, blood dripping on the floor. She saw the tears running from his eyes as he looked up and caught her watching him. She couldn't help laughing, trying to return that same maniacal laughter of his.

“You bitch!” he spat at her and rushed the door. The woman grabbed him before he could open it. Emma hoped that he was mad enough to come through anyway as neither of them had the shotgun, but he stopped.

“You don't have time for that,” the woman told him. “You've got to get some ice on that before your eyes swell shut.”

Peter was breathing hard, through his mouth, of course. Emma was certain she had managed to break his nose. “Forget the ice,” he shouted at the woman. “Get me to a doctor!”

The panel closed and Emma lay back down, her back to the door. She was happy to learn that Steed still had the apartment. That would make things easier since she didn't know where his country home was. She waited until there were no more sounds from the other side before she let her own tears fall, not for the broken nose, but for the beautiful gray eyes.

It was some time before the door opened again. Emma had drifted off to sleep wrapped in the blanket wishing it was Steed's arms. Peter stepped in and tossed another syringe on the cot. “Don't worry,” he told her, “this will be the last time.”

She was gratified to see the bandage over his nose and that he now sported twin black eyes. Despite this, he seemed to have recovered his sadistic mood. She paid no attention to the hypodermic, trying not to let Peter know that she was actually glad to see it. With nothing better to do she had the time to consider how to get out. Her plan was risky, but the only way and at least one more round with the drug was essential. But she thought she'd give him one last chance. "Peter," she addressed him. "You have to stop this. Stop it before it goes too far. You can't kill a Ministry agent and get away with it, especially one as highly placed as Steed."

He leaned against the door frame as if bored with the whole project. "I've told you, my dear that I don't have to kill him. He's taking care of that for me. Now be a good little ex-wife and take your medicine. Or do we have to do it the hard way again?"

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She noticed that Steed had stopped eating. The bowl was empty. "Would you like some more soup?" she asked as she rose to take the tray.

"No thank you. I'm quite full."

"There's not a lot left to tell you, Steed," she continued as she took the tray to the kitchen. "That I escaped is obvious. It took me some time to make it to your apartment. Now we need to figure out what to do from here." There was no response. "Do you have any ideas?" Still no response. "Steed . . . ?" She went around the sofa. He was sound asleep. She couldn't help smiling at him, but wondered what she was supposed to do with him now. She couldn't carry him and she didn't want to wake him again, she had given her word after all. For the first time since they arrived, she entered the cabin's bedroom. A large brass bed occupied the main space and she noticed the room had its own fireplace that was laid and just waiting to be lit. The bed was made up with a big, down filled comforter with a lighter blanket underneath. She pulled both off and carried them back to the sofa. She hesitated a moment thinking about the 'no touching' rule, but decided he was being ridiculous. Still, in light of his previous reaction she was cautious. He couldn't rest very well sitting in that position all night. She sat down on the floor and slowly picked up one foot to remove his shoe. When he made no sound or movement she took off the other one. Thankful that he had been sitting in the middle of the sofa, all she had to do was gently lower his head and shoulders at one end. Again there was no reaction. Only total exhaustion would render Steed oblivious to someone touching him, she knew. She lifted his feet and legs and arranged them so that he was now fully stretched out, but as she looked down at him she contemplated the most difficult task. Slowly and with great care she reached out and loosened his tie. She covered him with the warm comforter. "Sleep well, Steed," she whispered and once again moved that recalcitrant lock of hair.

Retrieving his bag from behind the sofa she returned to the bedroom. When she packed for him she had deliberately chosen two pairs of his pajamas. She took one pair out and changed. They were large for her, but not having anything else, they would have to do. She kept his coat. Back in the main room a more thorough search of the kitchen cabinets resulted in the delightful discovery of several bottles of blended whiskey. Pouring herself a generous portion, she turned off the cabin lights casting the room in flickering shadows of firelight. She sat in a rocker and sipped her drink until the fire

burned low and exhaustion began to catch up with her as well. After placing more wood on the fire, she wished she could get rid of her chill; she took his coat off and laid it over the back of the chair. As she did something fell from the breast pocket. She picked it up and was shocked to read the report of her own suicide and the copy of the note that Steed had quoted from earlier. So that's how Peter did it. The handwritten note was simply a page from her private journal, written at a time when she was feeling particularly sorry for herself, but put it together with the newspaper article and it could easily be construed as a suicide note. She looked over at the sleeping form and thought about everything he had said, his reactions, his seeming disbelief, she thought about Peter's taunts about driving Steed over the edge. Was it possible that Steed thought . . . that he didn't believe she was . . . real? Oh, Steed, she thought as tears ran down her face. Why can't I stop causing you pain? She replaced the papers and sat for awhile longer trying to figure out how to make him believe again before swallowing the rest of her whiskey. Not wanting to leave him on his own she took the light blanket and curled up on the rug in front of the fire. It didn't take long for her to surrender to sleep.

Steed's eyes opened a few hours later, his bladder reeking havoc with his desire to sleep. Disoriented, it took him a few seconds to realize where he was. He threw off the comforter and made his way to the bathroom. A decided chill had settled in the room and he picked his way back through the darkened room to add wood to the glowing embers. It wasn't until he almost tripped over her that he noticed the sleeper. She was still there. He hadn't expected that. More confused than ever he quietly added wood. As a small flame flickered to life he could take in the complete scene. She was curled in a fetal position and he could just make out that she was shivering slightly. It was obvious that she had chosen the lighter blanket while affording him the comfort and warmth of the heavier one. That floor couldn't be very comfortable either.

Knowing that the bedroom also had a fireplace, he went back and started the fire, retrieved the comforter from the other room, folded it onto the end of the bed and went back. Standing over the sleeping figure he fought with himself. His mind did not want to risk the possible results of physical contact, but his heart couldn't simply leave her there, cold and alone. With a resigned sigh he bent and scooped Emma into his arms blanket and all. She stirred only slightly in her sleep and rested her head on his shoulder. Steed did his best to ignore the heat from her body. How could she possibly be cold with that much heat. He also tried to ignore the excitement his body felt from holding her in his arms again. He carried her to the bedroom and gently laid her on the bed. He reached for the comforter and pulled it up over her. As he looked down at her angelic face he brushed back the few hairs that had fallen across it running his fingers through the silken strands. "Sleep well, my . . ." he choked on the words as his mind flashed back. That had been the last thing he said as she lay in that coffin.

In the living room he found the whiskey and poured a drink before settling on the sofa. His mind ran through the story she told, at least the parts he could remember before he fell asleep. Was it possible that his imagination had concocted the tale? It was a pretty fair bet. Peter had shown up three times in as many days and hadn't he been hoping and praying that she was only being held somewhere? It was only natural that his mind would create a story along those lines. He drained his glass and stared at the rug where she had been lying. She seemed so real, so warm, so soft he wanted to believe, wanted her so desperately, to fill the void in his heart. Maybe he should simply give in. Go to

her now, hold her in his arms, and delight in her presence, sooth his soul until the inevitable happened. Perhaps that was the only way to end this version of the nightmare, but thoughts of those ghastly images that always brought him crashing back to reality was more than he could stand. If avoiding them meant living in a dream world for a while longer then so be it. He went to the bedroom, banked the fire, saw that Emma's shakes had calmed before returning to the living room and stretching out on the sofa. He drifted off to sleep fantasizing how their reunion at the cabin should have gone.

Chapter Seven

After having failed to locate Emma on foot, Peter and Christina returned to the warehouse and began emptying the small space they'd occupied. "Shouldn't we keep looking?" she asked.

"No," Peter told her. "If we haven't found her by now she's slipped away somehow. Probably stole a car."

Christina thought about it. This wasn't what she'd signed on for. A little misdirection, some 'afternoon delight' with a handsome and accomplished lover, a wee bit of kidnapping was one thing and if Steed ended up taking his own life, well that was his problem. She wasn't responsible for a weak character, but Peter had assured her that they'd be on the beach in Argentina long before anyone suspected anything and they wouldn't be able to prove it if they did. "What do you plan to do now?"

"Exactly what I planned from the start," he said climbing into the van. She hesitated. "Come on."

"Look," she told him, "you can give me my share of the money and drop me at the airport. I don't want to be anywhere around when she makes it to the authorities."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "This doesn't change anything. Now get in."

"No," she said backing away from the van. "This is where I get off."

Peter climbed back out of the van and took her arm. He didn't have time for this and he needed her to complete his plans. "She's not going to the authorities," he explained. "At least not the ones you're thinking about. I know exactly where she's headed." Christina tried to back further away unconvinced by his words. He tightened his hold on her and tried again. "Getting to Steed is going to be her fist priority. We know where he is. We can intercept her at his apartment."

“And then what?” she asked. “The minute she tells him what’s going on, he’ll be looking for both of us.” She tried to pull loose. “No, it’s time to cut our losses and get the hell out of here. I don’t have any desire to spend the rest of my life in jail. If you don’t want to go then just give me my money and I’ll send you a post card.”

Peter reached behind him and pulled a gun from his waist. “You’ll go when I say you can. You haven’t fulfilled your contract yet,” he told her, “and until you do, you don’t get a nickel, but you could end up with some lead.”

She was treated to the same malicious grin he had used on the Knight woman and she finally realized that his actions had nothing to do with the money at all. He truly wanted to hurt his ex-wife and this man Steed. “Get in the van,” he said again and this time she had no doubt that he meant it.

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Mother was just leaving his office for the day when one of the multiple phones on the desk rang. Rhonda picked it up automatically and handed it to her boss. “Mother,” the man growled. He was listening intently when McQuay came through the door closely followed by Dr. Rice. “Why am I just finding this out?” The large man shouted into the phone and after a pause, “That’s no excuse!” He hung up the phone. “Yes, Doctor?” “I’ve had an interesting conversation with that lab in Atlanta,” he said. “The typing was correct which means it couldn’t possibly have been Miss. Knight’s blood. When I found that out I tried to contact this Doctor Falkner and it seems he’s on an extended holiday in Spain.”

Mother looked to Rhonda. “Get me Steed,” he told her, “and then I want the forensic team.” He turned back to Rice. “That’s not all. I just heard that they matched some of the prints they took from that plane at Heathrow to her as well.”

“So who did the Knight Industries plane fly back?”

“I don’t know,” Mother said, “but whoever or whatever it was, it was not Emma Knight.”

Rhonda handed him a phone. “Mother here. Who is this?” It was forensics. “Good, listen, I want a team to Steed’s apartment and another one at his home. If he’s not there, break in. Check? . . . Check everything! Once again he looked to his tall, silent assistant who was listening on another line with a second held to her ear. “Steed?” She shook her head.

“Alright, contact land records. Find out if he owns or rents any other property. Put out an alert to all agents, all departments. I want Steed! Make sure you give them a description of his vehicles. Contact surveillance and find out if we have a tracking device in his car.” He was trundling around his desk, the wheelchair bound equivalent of pacing. “While we’re about it, let’s put out an alert for Miss. Knight as well. Find out where she’s living and put an agent on the knight building. Also,” he continued without taking a breath, “put out a pick-up order on Peter Peel. Tell them I want him found and I want him found now! Impound that plane and find out if he has a vehicle registered to him. Make sure we have agents checking all outbound flights, rail stations, ship yards, etc. Contact communications and tell them if they hear from Steed or Mrs. Peel . . . er . . . Knight, I’m to be informed immediately. Locate our agent closest to Atlanta and have them pay this Spencer woman a visit. I’ll bet she’s involved in this right up to her eyeteeth. Contact our office in Spain and see if they can locate this doctor . . . what’s-his-

name.” Rhonda waited to see if he had finished until he looked up at her. “Well,” he growled, “what are you waiting for?” She rolled her eyes and exited through the inner door. “Doctor,” Mother said. “You may as well stick around. Your services may be required.”

Dr. Rice watched Mother’s issuing of instructions with amazement. This was the first time he’d seen the man so mentally tuned to his profession and he was very happy that he was not the man’s assistant. “I hope the weather doesn’t slow things down. It’s starting to snow,” was all he could think to say.”

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Snow was beginning to fall as Peter pulled up outside Steed’s apartment. He could just make out a light in what he knew to be the living room. There was no light from the loft bedroom, but if Steed were there he could be asleep. He sat for awhile observing the area. There was no movement. Christina had been silent during the drive, but he had kept the gun in his hand anyway. He used it now to motion for her to get out of the van. He wanted to check the garage for Steed’s car, but didn’t trust her to remain on her own. He grabbed a small package as well as a tire iron from the back of the van before making his way around to the garage stopping now and then to watch and listen. At the door, he pried it open and they stepped inside. Steed’s space was empty. Not knowing if Emma had beat him there or if she were waiting in the apartment for Steed to return, he made his way up to the back entrance wishing he had kept the key. He pried the door, but found the place empty. He made a quick trip to the drinks table where he opened the contents of the package and placed the small bottles on the shelf before leaving.

“So now what?” Christina asked as they returned to the van. “Do we go out to the country?”

He thought for a moment. As far as he knew, Emma didn’t know where Steed’s country home was located, but if she caught up with Steed here he could have taken her there.

“Yes,” he said putting the car in gear. He didn’t notice the unmarked van that pulled up as he was leaving or the men with their equipment that climbed out.

The drive out to Hertfordshire seemed to take forever, but Christina didn’t really mind, it gave her time to think. She needed to get out of this. The only question was whether to try and stick with this idiot long enough to get her money or cut her losses and walk away. Killing was something that should be done quick and clean. It should never be an emotional thing. Insanity was dangerous to play with, almost as dangerous as revenge. It was her experience that people who sought revenge often found the actual ending to be less than satisfying and, as a result, tried to drag it out in order to achieve the gratification they had fantasized. This could lead to carelessness. She seldom entered into this type of arrangement, but the money had been too tempting. Now things had changed. If he were correct and the lady hadn’t reported to the authorities and if they did find her along with Steed, it might be beneficial to take care of everything at once. After all, a woman and her lover murdered by a jealous ex-husband who turns the gun on himself was not only a workable, but a plausible scenario. The fact that the lady died twice in the last week was something the police could work out on their own. The only people that knew of her involvement were the three of them. She crossed her feet under the vehicles dash and felt the comforting hardness of the 9mm strapped to her ankle.

The snow was getting heavier and accumulating at an alarming rate. She estimated there was at least three inches on the ground already and it wasn't showing any signs of stopping. They arrived at the house and with a bit more caution than they used at the apartment, preformed the same search, unfortunately, with the same results. Steed and Emma were no where to be seen nor was there any evidence to suggest they had been there recently. Christina reached for a drink as Peter sat in the great room trying to figure out what to do next. He looked up just in time to see what she was doing. "Not the Brandy!" he warned her.

She set the decanter down and selected the Scotch. "Thanks," she said without much conviction. "I forgot."

"Pour me a large one, will you?"

She frowned. "Of course, that's what I'm here for, to be your cocktail waitress." As she brought him the drink and took a seat, she noticed a book of photos on the coffee table and picked it up. "This is nice," she said. She passed the photos along to him.

Peter examined the opened page. It wasn't really necessary to see the faces to tell who the lovers were in front of the fountain. He flipped through a few more. It wasn't clear when or where they had been taken, but the love and adoration in Emma's eyes as she looked at Steed was something he had never seen when she looked at him. Rage flared as he turned page after page until he slammed the book closed and flung it across the room. It hit the decorated panels along the wall and caused one to open slightly. Peter reached inside and pulled out more photographs, some cards, birthday, Christmas, etc., as well as airline ticket stubs to Paris, Rome and Vienna. So, that explained some of the pictures, but what interested him the most was the deed to a piece of property tied up with a red ribbon. A small card attached to the ribbon was addressed by hand and read Happy Christmas, Emma – John. He tore off the wrapping and found the place wasn't too far from them, perhaps forty-five minutes to an hour. "Come on," he said, "we have to go." He shoved everything back into the recess, extracted a small vile from his pocket and placed it in one of the drawers of the writing desk before leaving.

The snow was really getting thick now and the van slid as it exited Steed's long drive. The windshield wipers were having trouble keeping up and their speed was reduced to almost a crawl. Peter was having difficult telling which side of the road he was on and by the time he hit the hairpin curve it was too late to adjust for the on coming truck. He jerked the wheel and sent the small van into a spin. The driver did not slow down or look back as the van came to a rest in the shallow ditch at the side of the road. Snow compacted creating a tight wedge against the door making it hard for Peter to climb out. There was no visible damage, but the passenger side tires were buried deep. He scanned the surrounding area, but there was nothing he could use to help provide leverage or traction. As far as he could see everything was white. He climbed back inside, slid over the back of the seat and reached into the bed of the van. He pulled out two blankets, tossed one to Christina in the front and settled down in the back seat. "Might as well relax," he told her. "It looks like we'll be here for awhile." His only comfort was that if Emma and Steed were at the remote location identified by the papers he'd found, they were as trapped as he was.

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Mother was still pacing, or wheeling, as McQuay came in with the first reports from the orchestra of agents and departments he had mobilized. "The plane at Heathrow has been seized. So far there has been no sign of Peel, Steed or Miss. Knight. Vehicle registration shows nothing under the name Peter Peel. However, going by a hunch I had the agents at the airport check and found a van rented to a Robert Clift, USAF, Retired on the same day that Peel returned from the United States. I have already put out a description and tag number," he told the man before he could ask. "Surveillance did place a tracking device in each of Steed's vehicles, but . . ."

"But what?" the man demanded, knocking the ash from the cigar he neglected to remove first as McQuay wavered.

"It would appear that Steed found out about them and . . . you know Steed. They located one on the hour hand of Big Ben, another on a tour bus that runs from London to Edinburgh and the last . . . well . . ."

"Yes, yes where was the last?"

"Hidden in the left nipple tassel of a stripper named Yevette."

Mother's eyes widened as the cigar fell from his mouth and rolled down over his large belly coming to rest on the top of his shoe. "Steed," he said with a slight touch of awe as he watched Rhonda pick up the odorous torpedo and place it in an ashtray. "Now I wonder how he got that there?" he mused.

"Where, Mother?" McQuay asked.

"Uh, Big Ben," he answered after a glance at the tall blond.

Chapter Eight

The world filtered back into Emma's mind as she felt a slight pressure on her stomach. She lay perfectly still. For the first few seconds she thought she was still confined in her cell. As she slowly opened her eyes she took in the now cold fireplace, reality wafted back, and a wonderful reality it was. She was no longer lying on the hard floor, but in a soft bed. There was an arm under her head and another draped across her abdomen. Even through the pajamas she could feel the warmth of his body pressed against hers. The thrill that ran through her was unbelievable. Her heart beat so fast and so hard she was afraid it would wake him. From the rhythm of his breathing she guessed he was not yet awake. She wanted nothing more than to turn to him, to wake him as she had on so many past occasions. To tickle his ear, run her fingers through his soft hair stopping to play with the short, thick mane at the nape of his neck, to feel his arousal grow as he pretended to sleep would light her heart. To feel his lips on hers igniting the fires of an inferno, his touch on her skin fueling the flames to incineration point, to feel him inside her, both of them building to that all encompassing eruption . . . she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to slow her breathing. She could feel the moistness her thoughts had brought to her and chastised her own mind for running into an area she had no business going to and marveled at her inability to stop her body from snuggling ever so gently closer to his. As it did her heart nearly jumped out of her chest as her buttocks came in contact with the unmistakable hardness of a familiar state of morning arousal. With deliberate slowness she moved her arm to cover the one around her waist, her fingers stroked the tiny, soft hairs along the forearm.

Steed couldn't keep himself from tightening the hold he had on the beautiful woman he held in his arms. He had no recollection of moving to the bedroom and slipping into her bed. He had never walked in his sleep before, but he was experiencing a lot of things lately that he'd never done before. Waking to find her still there, in his embrace, with no nightmares had shocked him. Not for the first time he allowed the thought to flash in his head that maybe, just maybe he was wrong this time. Maybe she was real. The warmth of her body drifted through her clothing. He wanted to feel her soft, smooth skin against his and couldn't help slipping an arm under her pajama top and around her slim waist. The beautiful, silky auburn hair had the fragrance of a bright spring morning after a gentle rain. He moved closer to inhale the essence of her.

Without thinking he found himself rising slightly to press his lips to the sensitive

spot below her ear, but stopped as he sensed her wake. She didn't move, but he thought he detected a quickening of her breath. The idea that his presence could still have that affect on her brought him to a state of immediate arousal. As his groin throbbed hard and demanding he wished he could be sure, but as he felt her hand on his arm his mind panicked, he found himself suddenly withdrawing and turning over putting his back to her. His heart wasn't prepared to take the chance.

Emma's heart sank and tears came to her eyes as he turned away from her. She knew he wasn't sleeping, but didn't trust her voice to question his sudden withdrawal. She climbed out of the bed, grabbed her clothes and went in search of the bathroom. The tears fell unabashed as she dressed. What did you expect, she asked herself. He probably wasn't even thinking about you this morning. Waking up, it could have been anyone. Could have even been the blond. She splashed her face with cold water, folded her pajamas and returned to the front room. She found the coffee and started a pot before going to the fireplace and relighting the fire. The wood was running low. She remembered seeing the stacked piles as they came in last night. Reluctantly, for she wasn't in the mood at the moment to have anything to do with him, she picked up Steed's coat and went to the door. She had to let it go. She was there to do a job and that was it. Steed, of all people, could respect that. After all, it was he that always put the job above everything else. He had moved on with his life and she hadn't been a part of it for a very long time. She had had to do the same. It had taken her years to stop thinking of him every day, to stop longing for him every night, but she had managed to place that part of her life in the past. She knew that seeing him again would be difficult just as she knew that when this was over she would have to say goodbye again. Now was the time to steel herself for that inevitable conclusion. She had to stop thinking of him in terms of what used to be. What was it Peter had said? 'The poor sap must have actually loved you.' Loved - past tense, that was the key. Maybe he had, it was hard to be certain for he had never put voice to those feelings just as she had never let slip how much a part of her soul, her heart, her total being he had been. While time had not erased her feelings, it had allowed her to deal with them, she hoped. She told herself she was prepared to do her job and move on. What she wasn't prepared for was the eighteen inches of snow that had fallen during the night. She looked out at the solid blanket of white snow untouched by man or animal, no sound permeated the pristine architecture of Mother Nature's world. It was a beautiful sight and she wished they were there under different circumstances. She looked down at her shoes. They were not meant for trudging in the snow and Steed's coat, while helpful, was not intended for winter weather. Hey ho, she thought. I'm going to get very cold and very wet, but not for as long as you will if you don't get the wood, she told herself.

Steed stayed in bed after she left its warm confines until his body returned to normal and his heartbeat slowed. He found a pair of slacks and a warm pullover sweater in his bag and changed his clothes. He stepped into the living room and breathed a sigh of both relief and disappointment, relief because she was gone, this materialization had come to an end and disappointment because she was gone. He had survived his own diabolical mind this time. His head did seem a bit clearer this morning, but at the same time it saddened him to think that he might finally be beginning to adjust to her loss. Was this the first step to letting go? He felt the dark pit engulf him. The aroma of fresh coffee reached out and drew him back and he glanced into the tiny kitchen. Now when

did I start that, he wondered and when had he lit the fire that was blazing to life in front of the sofa? It was then that the door opened and a pile of wood with someone attached to it walked through. His heart leapt at the sight before his mind had the opportunity to object. "Mrs. Peel, what are you doing?" he asked as he rushed forward to help her. "You should have left that for me."

He stacked the wood as she moved in front of the fire rapidly rubbing her arms. "Ittt's a ddeal," she told him through chattering teeth.

He almost laughed. "Here we just get you warmed up and you go and freeze yourself again."

"Nnnot quite, bbbut close," she said. "We hhhave a problem, Sssteed."

"What, another one?"

"It snowed eighteen inches while we were asleep."

"So I see," he said looking down at her feet. The snow that had clung to her was starting to melt turning her shoes and pant legs from the knees down very wet. He went to the door and looked outside. As far as he could see everything was white unbroken except for her footprints or rather, foot holes as it was too deep to leave prints. His car was lost, buried in a snow drift. He closed the door against the cold, went to the bathroom and came back with a towel draped over his shoulder. In the kitchen he poured a cup of the hot coffee, brought it to her, pulled one of the rockers to the fire for her to sit in. He knelt in front of her, brushed the remaining snow from her before removing her shoe. He used the towel to dry her foot, pushing her pant leg up so he could dry her leg before doing the same to the other.

Emma sipped her coffee and watched him. His actions were so unexpected that she didn't know what to say. She wanted to reach out and run her fingers through his hair, to touch his handsome face, apparently the 'no touching' rule didn't apply to him. She hadn't forgotten his reaction to her touch such a short time ago so she did nothing. However, she couldn't seem to stop her body from responding to the warm touch of his hands as he rubbed the towel along her leg she felt the stirrings deep inside. The broad shoulders were even more prominent under the dark blue pullover. She couldn't help picturing the muscular chest she knew lay hidden underneath. Her eyes darted to the dark liquid in her cup and she fought to control a blush as he suddenly looked up at her.

"Mrs. Peel," he said, standing. "You're not dressed nearly warm enough." Without warning he pulled the sweater over his head. She felt her face grow very warm as she faced that chest. The patch of soft, curly hairs that she remembered so well with the light trail leading down . . . "Here, put this on," he said as he slipped his coat off her. If he noticed her red cheeks, she hoped he attributed them to the cold.

She watched him retreat to the bedroom. The muscles of his strong back moved ever so slightly. He must have had cologne in his shaving kit for his sweater smelled too good to be a lingering effect from the previous day. It did feel much warmer than the suit coat had. She kicked herself for not packing properly, but she was in a hurry and had no idea that the weather would change so drastically or that they would be trapped in the woods. The cabin's refrigerator contained enough to see them through a few days anyway, including a loaf of bread. No doubt placed there by the owner to stay fresh until his return. She wondered who did own the place.

Steed retrieved the shirt he had hung in the closet noting that the sweater had begun to get a little too warm as he dried her soft, smooth skin. He could see that she had

not lost any strength in those legs. The muscles of the calves were firm tapering up to the wonderfully solid thighs so strong when wrapped around his back and leading to that most glorious patch of . . . he shook the imagine from his mind as he straightened the sheets and covers on the bed. He had to sit down for a moment and think. What was it she had said? She thought she had been on a small airplane. Didn't Mother say that Peter had flown back by private plane? But then what had Knight Industries flown back? Was she on Peter's flight or was his mind simply filling in the blanks? The flashes of light that she talked about really could have been a camera. The photographs that he had seen could have been faked by the right person, he supposed, but the body in the coffin . . . that had been real enough, hadn't it? Hypothermia? He supposed it was possible to deliberately induce the state, but risky. He hadn't checked for a pulse that night. Was it possible that . . . "Steed, would you like something to eat?" He heard her call out. "I don't eat breakfast, Mrs. Peel," he answered automatically as he re-entered the front room.

"I'm aware of that," she said, a little offended that he thought she could have forgotten. "But you didn't have much to eat yesterday so I thought you might be hungry."

He poured himself some coffee and watched as she sliced bread. "I'm not, actually. I guess old habits die hard."

"How about humoring me and having some toast then." She held up two jars. "It looks like we have orange marmalade or peach preserves. He acquiesced and joined her. They ate in silence much as in the old days when they would have toast and coffee and share the morning paper, except there was no paper and the silence grew uneasy. "We're trapped here until the snow begins to melt." It wasn't a question, but he nodded.

"Crews will begin clearing the main roads, but they won't come this far in," he confirmed. "I'm afraid my car isn't built for these types of conditions. Now if we had the Bentley it might be different. She has a heavier frame, larger tires and sits higher off the road. But the good news is, if we can't get out, no one can get in, at least not for a while anyway."

She swallowed and looked at him across the table. So you believe me, she thought, about that at least. As he set his coffee cup down she noticed his hand was trembling. She had only seen that happen once before, but that was a result of outside influence. Her heart had gone out to him then as it did now, but she had to stay professional. "Your hands are shaking, Steed," she said without preamble.

He immediately dropped his hands to the table. An embarrassed smile crossed his face. "Just a little," he admitted and tried to blow it off. There was no sense in trying to deny it. "That's what comes from being in your presence again, Mrs. Peel." He saw the attempt at humor have no affect on her.

"How long has that been going on?" she asked, an idea was forming in her mind brought on by the memory of the past.

"A couple of days," he told her. There was something behind the dark eyes. "It's nothing." How could he tell her that he couldn't control the trimmers? They weren't constant, but they were irritating. He contributed then to overwork and heavy brandy consumption. "I haven't had my morning champagne yet, that's all." Still there was no laugh, not even a smile.

"Do you think I'm dead?"

Deflection was one of his better talents and he didn't want to talk about this now. Steed moved to the cabin window. "How did you escape, Mrs. Peel?"

"Because of those papers you have in your coat pocket?"

Unfortunately, she was very familiar with his techniques and not easily derailed. He had forgotten about the papers. Of course she would have seen them. "I think I must have fallen asleep before you finished your story last night."

"You did," she said, her eyes never leaving him. "Am I alive? Am I real, sitting here at this moment, Steed or is there some reason you don't want to answer my question?"

Steed watched as the sun broke through the overcast sky and shown down on the brilliant snow catching the frozen crystals and sparkling like millions of diamond chips come to earth. He didn't want to look back at her. It was obvious she was waiting for an answer. How could he tell her that there wasn't a reason, but many? He couldn't tell her he had been expecting this conversation as the beginning of the end. That no matter which way he answered it would only be a prelude to the end of this current manifestation. How could he tell her that his mind was becoming more sophisticated in its ability to fool him? Most of all, how could he tell her that he simply didn't know? If he lied and she wasn't real it would only be the impetus she needed to laugh at his attempt and if she was . . . well, there was a time when she knew him well enough to read it in his eyes. A lie once told could never be taken back. He wasn't ready to risk it and he wasn't ready to let her go. The snow would melt all too soon and he would have to leave, but until then he liked having her with him in this place. "It must have been very difficult from the way you described that cell and the precautions that they took. Did you take them by surprise?" Her sigh was audible. All right, Steed, she thought if that's the way you want it I won't push. "In a manner of speaking," she said. She remembered that after Peter threatened to use the gas . . .

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She locked her eyes with her ex-husband's just long enough, she hoped, to give the impression of considered resistance. Then sighed and picked up the syringe. Sitting on the cot, sideways to the door and Peter, she raised her foot and rested her left elbow on her knee. In plain view she inserted the needle and slowly pushed the plunger home. As she removed the needle she bent her arm up to stem the slight trickle of blood that escaped. She threw the syringe at him like a dart more to watch him jump than with the thought of doing any real damage. This time it was her that laughed as her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped to the mattress.

"All right," Peter said to the blond. "Let's get her on the gurney."

The woman put the shotgun down and wheeled the bed into the room. "Why didn't we have her get on this thing before she took the drug?" she complained.

"Stop grumbling and lift her shoulders," he instructed. They maneuvered Emma onto the gurney and pushed it out of the makeshift cell. "Go get the van," he told her. "We won't be coming back here so I want to make sure we haven't left anything behind."

"What about her?" she asked retrieving the shotgun.

"She'll be out cold for hours, you know that. Now go on."

Emma waited until all sound had disappeared before risking opening her eyes. She had to act fast if she was to make her escape. She didn't know how long it would take for the

drug to kick in or whether it would at all. By injecting the solution just under the skin instead of into the blood stream she had hoped it wouldn't put her out right away, she'd been right. The only question now was whether her system could fight off a much slower absorption rate.

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“It didn't take long for them to discover their mistake and come after me. I used the warehouses for as much cover as I could until I came across an unlocked door. I found a ladder that lead to the roof and crossed over several by jumping from one rooftop to another. When I felt I had a safe enough distance I dropped back to the surface and found a car that someone was foolish enough to leave unlocked. I'm afraid I stole it.” She looked up and thought she detected a grin on his face. “I didn't get very far, about ten miles, when the drug kicked in. I ditched the car incase the police came looking for it. Two streets over I found a moving van that had somebody's furniture loaded in the back. I knew I'd be vulnerable while asleep so I climbed in and found a sofa in the very back. Hidden under the protective cover I had to risk it until the drug wore off. I fell asleep. When I woke up the van was moving. I waited for them to come to a red signal and slipped out. Luckily their direction had taken me closer to your flat. As always, getting in was never a problem and the rest you know.”

Emma cleared the breakfast things as Steed continued to stare out the window. She had settled on the sofa watching the fire before he spoke again.

“Christina.”

He said it so softly she didn't know if he was actually speaking to her or to himself. “I beg your pardon?”

He joined her, sitting at the opposite end. “The blond,” he said, “it sounds like Christina. She's tall, blond, blue eyed . . .”

“And buxom?”

“Very,” he said, failing to notice her smirk. “I met her by chance, or so I thought, about a month ago at an auction. She was at my house the first time Peter showed up. She left just beforehand and I thought at the time that she seemed awfully eager to leave.”

“A condition that's foreign to you, I'm sure,” Emma mumbled. His eyes were locked in a far away gaze, but met hers with remarkable clarity and just a hint of puzzlement at her comment. “You must have been further out of it last night than I thought. You evidently don't remember me telling you that the, uh . . . lady said the two of you . . . that you,” she couldn't bring herself to say it. “. . . well, that you were good friends.”

He was still looking at her with an odd intensity that raised goose-bumps on her skin.

“No, we weren't good friends, Mrs. Peel” he used the same inflection, “we just had sex.”

Her mouth dropped open and both eyebrows climbed her forehead, but he went on before she could think of something to say.

“Peter must have been planning this for some time.”

“Obviously.”

“But why?”

“Oh, why not!” she groaned, standing to pace in front of the fire. She was so sick of this discussion. Most people divorce, call each other names, fight over possessions, become the center of gossip among their friends for a few months and then disappear into

obscurity. What she wouldn't give to be 'most people' for a while. "He hates me. He hates you."

Steed's concentration never wavered. "I know that," he said calmly. "But why now? It's been ten years since we've seen each other . . ."

"He never believed that," she interrupted.

"I wish he were right," Steed said.

Emma's head snapped around so fast she felt a muscle in her neck pull. "What?"

But Steed continued without further exploration of that avenue. "You've been divorced for over a year. It doesn't make sense." His eyes followed her. "Something must have triggered this sudden interest, something big."

She was still reeling from his admission. "I can't imagine what," she offered. "As you say, it's been a long time."

Steed considered. Thinking back over the past few days. There had to be something that they were missing. As he leaned back his head bumped into something soft and Jake tumbled from the back of the sofa into his lap. "What about your Will?" he asked as he set the little fella' on his knee and absently pulled at his ears. "Is there anything in it that would interest Peter?"

Emma sat back down and gently took the stuffed bear from his lap before Steed succeeded in removing an ear. "No," she said. "I rewrote my Will after the divorce."

"Tell me about the divorce."

She stroked the fur between Jake's ears and thought how it reminded her of the soft hair at the back of Steed's head. She didn't feel comfortable discussing the legal ending of her marriage with him. "It wasn't exactly amicable," she told him, "but it wasn't an all out battle either."

"In what way?"

Why was he pursuing this? Why couldn't he accept her statement and move on? The truth was she wasn't very proud of what she had done to get that part of her life over. She wished Steed would stop looking at her. "Peter was fighting the end," she explained. "He kept delaying signing the final papers. I got tired of going back and forth and just wanted it over with." She took a deep breath and let the sigh slip out. "So I bribed him." From the look on her face and her hesitation Steed wasn't sure he wanted to ask his next question. Could Peter have been cruel enough to demand . . . her body? He felt his stomach turn. "With what?" he asked anyway.

"Two thousand shares of Knight stock."

Steed released the breath he'd been holding with a little chuckle. "Is that all," he said. It was the wrong thing to say. Her indignation rose like the barometer before a Nor'easter. "What do you mean, is that all! It was an admission, a defeat . . . after everything he put me through . . . to have to pay him off was humiliating. If I'd been stronger I'd have never agreed to anything that contemptuous, but at least I was strong enough to . . ." she stopped in mid rant and sat bolt upright.

"What?" Steed asked. "You were strong enough to what?"

Her face turned ashen as the full relevance of what she was about to tell him became clear. "It was a condition of the divorce," she went on, more slowly. "He got the stock, but if he ever decided to sell them, I have the first option of purchase."

"That doesn't sound so unusual."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. The option is to purchase at the market value at the time we were married."

"Which was?"

"About twenty eight or twenty nine pounds per share."

"So he stood to make about fifty nine thousand pounds. That's a nice chunk of change and what if you weren't around to sell them to?"

"He would be free to sell to anyone at current market price."

Steed inched closer to her as her face turned even paler. She looked as though she might pass out at any moment. "Let's see," he said, looking up at the ceiling. "Knight stock stands at ninety pounds per share, so that would be . . ." he whistled. "180,000 pounds. I think we may have found our motive."

"It's worse than you think," she told him, amazed at his knowledge of Knight stock.

"With the acquisition of Northshore Electronics the stock would split which would give him four thousand shares at ninety pounds which brings it somewhere in the neighborhood of 360,000 pounds, give or take for taxes."

Steed's eyes widened. "That's a nice neighborhood, but of course if he were found culpable in your death he could lose everything, hence the suicide."

She nodded, "And I suppose he decided to use what he guessed was our past relationship as the motive for that. After a short time he would probably make a statement along the lines, 'Depressed over the loss of . . .'" she stopped as she saw his gray eyes flash.

"Well, you get the idea. I'm sure it suited his perverse sense of humor to use the same situation to drive you crazy at the same time." The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she wished she could reach out and pull them back. She saw the darkness cloud his eyes. She had presumed too much. If he were frustrated and confused it was because he hadn't solved the case not because Peter had planted a story in a newspaper. Steed would be saddened of course, just as he always was by the loss of an old friend, companion or ex-co-worker, but he would quickly put his feelings in the past and move forward as he always did. Devastation wasn't his way and she was nothing more than a member of that elite historical group, someone from the past. She had to move on, she kept telling herself.

Steed's mind jerked as he realized what she had said. He had been talking to her as if she were the genuine article. He had momentarily forgotten. Why would she make the statement about driving him crazy? He hadn't once thought about her being real or not. And the things she had told him, his mind wouldn't have know any of that. Only Emma would have . . . The temperature of the room rose drastically. His breathing increased until he felt as if he was almost gasping for air, he felt dizzy, his heart pounded so hard his chest hurt. He had to get out of there. He had to think. She was watching him, concern in her eyes, biting her lower lip.

"I think I'd better go dig my car out. With the sun shining the way it is, it won't be long before we can get out of here." He found a shovel and broom in the mud room as well as a pair of old, work gloves on a shelf. He was headed for the door when she stopped him. "Steed." She crossed her arms in front of her and pulled the sweater off over her head. She shook her hair back into place and he noticed how her breasts bounced enticingly under her thin blouse. "Put this back on. It will help keep you warm."

He shook his head. “No, Mrs. Peel. You keep it.” I have enough thoughts to keep me warm and besides, he thought, I rather like the idea of you wearing it. It’s almost as if I were holding you.

Chapter Nine

Steed spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon outside the cabin. It wasn’t that the job took that long, but he made frequent trips indoors to warm up, especially once he’d cleared the vehicle’s trunk and remembered the bottle of emergency brandy he kept there. It went a long way toward warming him against the cold. Even Mrs. Peel found a chill or two to chase away, but after the first sip or two she didn’t much care for the affect it had on her stomach. Probably didn’t mix well with whatever drug was still left in her system, she thought. She stuck with the whiskey. When he had finished clearing the car and a good portion of the inlet drive, he carried enough wood to supply both fireplaces for the rest of the day and night.

Emma found the cabin's small freezer to be fairly well stocked and selected a whole chicken to bake for their dinner. Potatoes and carrots from the refrigerator's crisper seemed relatively fresh. She put the bird in the oven just after Steed went out, since it was frozen it would take longer to cook. By the time he finished and had washed up he found her sitting at the table peeling potatoes. The aroma from the tiny kitchen was heavenly. He poured himself another touch of brandy and joined her. She smiled as he picked up a potato and started to peel. Steed thought again of his fantasy Christmas in the little cabin in the woods. The tree decorated in the corner, the lights dull by comparison to the smile on her face. Her deep brown eyes darker and warmer than the brandy they would toast the holiday with, the soft music playing in the back ground wouldn't compare to the depth of feeling in her angelic laughter, with the fire warming them both as they held each other.

" . . . Steed?"

"Yes, Mrs. Peel?" he said as he realized she had been speaking to him.

"Are you alright?" she asked. His lack of response was odd and something about his eyes seemed a little off, she thought.

Steed's focus slowly returned to her eyes. "I wanted to come and see you after you left Peter," he said out of the blue.

She met his eyes. His statement took her by surprise and it was a heartbeat or two before she could respond. "So why didn't you?"

He picked up a carrot and bit the end off, chewing to give himself time, not sure why he had brought the subject up at all. He swallowed. "At first it wouldn't have been appropriate and then . . ."

"And then . . . what?" she prompted, afraid of what his answer would be, but needing to hear it just the same.

"Then I wasn't sure how you would take it, that you would want to hear from me. It had been a long time. You had a different life that, apart from the divorce, was flourishing. That life didn't include me and the more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that it probably never could. At least, that's the excuse I used. The truth was, I didn't have the strength to look into your eyes and risk seeing . . . rejection."

Emma dropped her eyes as she felt the tears well up. She didn't want to cry in front of him, but one escaped her rapid blinking and slowly rolled down her cheek.

He saw the tear and was truly surprised. Surely he had been right. After all, she hadn't made any effort to contact him. "Why are you crying, Mrs. Peel?"

She wiped her face with the back of her hand. "I'm not crying," she said. "It's the onions."

"You're not peeling onions."

"But I was thinking about them," she stated. "Steed, how could you possibly think that I would . . ."

He picked up another potato. "Well, it was sort of born out when I worked up enough courage to phone you over that incident in France and yet you still made no effort in return."

"That's not fair," she said. "How was I to know when you returned from that mission?" That wasn't exactly a social call. Besides, you made it fairly clear how you felt." She saw his brow crease, but rushed on before he could stop her. "You told me that I would always be Mrs. Peel to you. How was I to interpret that? No matter what I did, no matter

what happened, you would never be able to think of me as anything other than Peter's wife. I had walked away from you, from us. You just confirmed what I knew to be true. I was a part of your past, a part that could be visited but never recaptured. When Peter and I first split I wanted nothing more than to call you, see you, but what in the world could I say? I'm ready to trade up? Makes it sound like I was trading for a new car." "Well," he grinned at her with that look that always tickled her. "I wouldn't say new, more like an old classic." He saw her return his grin despite the seriousness of their conversation and he wanted to widen it. "There may be a few dings and dents here and there and the paint may be fading somewhat." He ran his hand through his thick hair. "There's no spare tire," she offered falling into the game.

"And only one owner," he added.

She laughed. "It isn't the number of owners you have to worry about," she said. "It's the number of test drives."

He tossed a carrot at her.

Dinner was filling and wonderful and after cleaning up, Steed poured himself another brandy. Emma declined a drink and decided on a hot bath instead. He stirred the fire and stretched his legs out toward it as he sat on the rug leaning his back against the sofa. After her bath and a change back into her pajamas she settled down beside him, not touching, but close, her knees bent, arms folded on top. She leaned forward resting her chin on her arms. Each was lost in their own thoughts watching the fire as it snapped and popped. Steed didn't know why, but the events of the day seemed to confuse him more than clarify his thoughts. He was still amazed that Emma hadn't disappeared. Still, his time alone, outside had crystallized one thought in his mind. "We're wrong, you know," he said breaking the silence.

She had moved closer to the fire. Her back was to him and she answered without turning. "I know." It didn't really surprise him that she knew without asking what he was referring to. Nor did it surprise him that she had figured it out on her own.

"If it were just the money Peter would be long gone by now," she said. "And if he only wanted me he would have killed me in Atlanta. He wants us both." She shivered, couldn't look at him. "I'm sorry, Steed. No matter what I do I can't seem to stop causing you pain."

He saw her shaking, wanted to tell her that the only pain was being without her. "Are you still cold?" he asked instead.

"From the pit of my soul," she whispered.

Steed raised himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the sofa. He moved over slightly and told her to scoot back a little. With ease he lowered himself behind her, his legs stretched out cradling her between them. As he leaned back against the sofa he pulled her to him. The heat from his chest felt good against her back and she lowered her legs to contact his longer ones.

"Mrs. Pe . . .," he remembered what she had said earlier about his use of that name. He wished he could go back and change that. To think that she had misinterpreted what he had meant to be an endearment had upset him greatly. To further think that something spoken so innocently might have kept her away from him for one moment tore at him. Of course, he should have known. For her to have gone through the divorce only to be told that she would always be connected to Peter in his mind was an insensitive remark on his part. He had hurt her. The last thing in the world he ever wanted to do, but he had

done it anyway. And she was apologizing to him! “Emma,” he started again, “it isn’t your fault. You’re not responsible for what Peter does. You never were.” Emma, oh God. The last time he had called her that . . . “He’s trying to kill you, Steed,” she said turning to catch him in the corner of her eye. She leaned forward away from that muscular chest. The memory of lying spooned together in his bed was too strong and she felt her body begin to respond to him. She didn’t want to experience him turning away from her as he had that morning.

Damp hair and soap scrubbed skin fresh from the bath intoxicated him. As she turned her head back to the fire her hair fell away from her neck and he couldn’t help admiring the deep, auburn tendrils highlighting the smooth, alabaster skin. The feel of her body pressed against his ignited a fire deep inside him that threatened to raise the temperature far beyond the one in front of them. When she broke the contact he almost moaned in protest. How many times could he do this? How many times could he resist . . . She’s done nothing to prove that she’s anymore real than the last one, his mind told him. Are you prepared to take that chance?

“Steed, did you hear wha . . .” The shock that ran up her spine as she felt his lips brush her neck below her ear was indescribable. The touch was so light she wasn’t certain it hadn’t been an accident, but her breath caught in her chest as he continued to place tender kisses along her neck and the outside of her ear. She turned in to him automatically as he pressed his lips to the side of her head. His arms slipped around her waist and pulled her closer to him. She closed her eyes and slowly released her breath. “Steed,” she whispered, unable to give any volume to her voice as desire engulfed her body. She raised her hand to caress his cheek, but dropped it again afraid of driving him away. Steed’s left hand came up to entwine in her hair as his lips found the nape of her neck. She didn’t think it was possible, but the arm around her waist drew her even closer and she could feel the hard evidence of his arousal pressed against her. Emma felt lightheaded as he nibbled on her earlobe. She wanted so desperately to touch him. “Steed?” She moaned, this time she was close to breaking his rule.

“Humm?” he mumbled against her shoulder.

“Can I touch you now?” she asked softly, her breathing uneven and heavy.

“Yes, please,” he whispered, his breath warm against her skin making her tingle.

She turned so that both her legs were now over his left thigh and melted into him. Her lips found his, her arms went around his neck and Emma heard the birds sing. As her lips parted allowing him entry and his tongue found hers she sank into a world she had longed to find for over ten years. He laid her back across his lap almost as though he were dipping her in a dance of long practice. His right arm cradled her head while the left hand ran over her shoulder, down her side, pausing for a moment on the outer side of her breast before traveling over her hip and along her thigh. She felt as though she were floating and only his strong embrace kept her anchored to this earth. His warm, sensuous mouth became hungry, searching hers, tickling the roof of her mouth, his tongue delving, seeking to touch her very soul. As his hand traversed her calf and reversed its course on the inside of her leg she shuddered at the sudden aching, burning need between her thighs. She slid further down trying to hurry his touch to that most private, most yearning part of her. A tiny cry escaped her as his hand left her body at the knee.

Steed felt the passion in her kiss as she turned to him and wrapped her arms around him. Her fingers brushed the nape of his neck and sent his desire beyond the

breaking point. His mind still tugged at his consciousness, but the taste of her sweet lips, the fire of her kiss pushed those thoughts behind secured doors. Her touch, her heat, the small gasp he heard as his lips left hers, kissing her eyes, the tip of her nose, those beautifully high cheekbones, felt different this time, so real, so strong, so devastatingly, wonderfully exquisite. He could feel her body's reaction to him. She slid further down in his lap, her leg pressed against his throbbing erection and it was all he could do to keep from exploding right then. He wanted her so badly for so long he tried to stop himself from slipping into irrationality, but how do you pull back from total bliss? He knew he couldn't, knew he didn't want to and surrendered as the earth fell away and heaven drew him in. His left arm moved under her legs and from his position flat on the floor he lifted her bring his legs underneath him rising to his knees and laying her gently on the rug in front of him. He looked down into her molten, brown pools, saw the reflection of his desire matched only by her own and searched their depths for any sign of hesitation as his fingers found the buttons of the silk pajamas she wore. She quickly removed any question, any shred of doubt he might have had with a chorus so strong, so welcoming it thundered through him like storm clouds in a midnight sky. "Yes, Steed. Please. I've wanted you so much," she said. He could feel the heat of her hands as she reached for his shirt.

Her hands trembled as she fumbled with the buttons. One hand slipped to the bulge under his fly and traced the outline of his erection, so familiar and yet somehow larger and harder than her memories over the years. Her words seemed to push him over the edge as he tore at the silk pajama top. Fire swept through her body burning away the mist of loneliness and longing that had invaded the core of her life since her irretrievable decision to walk out of his. She wanted to capture those expressive lips again and drew him to her. Her heart soared as he cupped her breast and ran his thumb across her already taught nipple. Her gasp broke the kiss and she felt in danger of hyperventilating as he slowly moved to capture that sensitive peek between his lips. As hot as his mouth and tongue felt against hers, they were cool as he took her breast.

He wanted to touch, to kiss, to taste every inch of her body, to relish again the energy, the fire that dwelled within the beauty. It wasn't a matter of simply making love to her or with her, he wanted, needed to capture the heart that owned his breath, his blood, his passion for living, his life. He wanted to take his time, to go gently, languidly, easy, to bask in the gift she was giving him. The last thing he wanted was to transmit his frantic, almost animalistic desire to enter her, but as his hand slipped under the elastic of her pajama bottoms and into that curly, auburn mound, it was obvious that she was as anxious for the joining as he. Normally he would bring her to orgasm at least once, maybe even twice using his fingers and mouth before seeking the ultimate pleasure himself, but as he pulled the pajamas down and off, she opened his fly and wrapped her warm, soft fingers around his penis.

He knew his usual level of control was lost. It had been too long, too many broken dreams, a decade of loneliness, wanting and regret. He couldn't suppress a gasp as she stroked him – hard, her fingers spreading the early semen over his throbbing manhood. He was sure she had no idea what she was doing to him, how close he was, how often he had dreamed of this moment, how many times he had drank himself to sleep to overcome her memory. There could be no more waiting. He pushed his trousers and briefs down his thighs; there was no time for removing his clothes. As much as he longed to

feel her naked body against his, there would have to be time for that later. He positioned himself between her soft, smooth thighs. He watched the fire in her eyes as the blunt head of his penis made contact with the opening of her vagina.

She expected him to take her slowly, to draw out the moment of immense pleasure achieved with complete and final fulfillment, but to her utter delight she underestimated his stage of arousal. She glorified in the electric shock that racked her body as he plunged deep inside her. The feel of him so large, so hard, so hot buried in the deepest recesses of her body after so long was enough to send her into an orgasm so wild and uninhibited that she didn't think it possible to surpass, but as she saw his eyes slam shut, his jaw clench, his fingers locked into fist sized balls of rug, she knew he was riding the wave, straining to maintain control.

Sweat popped out on his forehead and rolled down his back underneath his shirt. He felt the orgasm take her, felt the contractions of muscles as she squeezed his shaft, massaging him inside her hot, moist tunnel and he wanted nothing more than to let go, but he willed himself to hold on. As desperate as he was to fill her with everything that he was, he wanted to bring her as much pleasure as possible, to prove to her that he was more than an animal, that he had some possession of self. He rode on the sea of warmth that her body released until he felt it ebb and then slowly, oh so slowly, began to move.

Thrusting deep after each meticulous withdrawal and holding at the apex with the tip of his penis just barely inside her seemed to bring her back to a heightened sense of arousal. She began to counter his move, to raise her hips to keep him inside her for as long as possible. Surprised by the suddenness of her returning desire, she felt what, just a moment before, she thought impossible begin to build again from the depths of her very soul.

Like the whispery breeze at the beginning of a late summer storm she felt the stirring tickle beyond the wall of conscious thought, felt the rise in pressure as the front moved closer. She felt the increased heat that brought perspiration to the surface of her skin, felt the lightening strike the distant ground as he drove deeper the sound of his barely controlled ecstasy like the low rumble of thunder trapped between heavy clouds ready to release their pent up moisture and a sun parched earth. Electricity spiraled from the eye of the storm lighting the way between heaven and earth as emotion, hunger and desire swirled within her to such a crescendo that she thought she would be consumed by the energy and the power this man had over her body. Just as she thought the pressure could go no higher, as she watched the muscles of his neck stand out like deep rooted trees, the veins pulse like mighty rivers, she felt the warmth wash over and through her as together they let go the torrent of rain that flooded and filled the empty places in her spirit and her heart.

Steed knew he had lost control. Knew there was no power short of a miracle that could stop him from exploding. With one, last, powerful thrust his body surrendered to her with an orgasm so strong and so lasting he felt as though all of his fluid, his very life essence was flowing from him to her shaking the very bones that held him together. He wanted to shout, to cry out the joy he felt as he detected her orgasm start almost simultaneously. His body remained ridged as he continued to erupt into her over and over before collapsing in total exhaustion.

He hugged her as closely as possible with his head nuzzled against her neck while he waited for his breathing to slow and his voice to return. He could hear her breath, ragged

and heavy; feel her heart beat against his chest. He found them both comforting and couldn't resist kissing her ear, whispering her name over and over. It took some time for his senses to regain control, but as they did, reality, and with it, fear began to filter back to him. The nightmare hadn't come. The horror of her shattered visage hadn't pulled him back from the dream, but he still had to open his eyes. Perhaps, he thought, if he kept them closed he could remain forever locked in the memory of having made love to her, surround himself with the bliss to cushion himself against what he had come to believe if not accept.

Emma welcomed his weight, adored the feel of his muscular body pressed against hers as he whispered in her ear his words making her blood boil anew. Despite being sated only moments before, the memory of being without him for so long inflamed her waning desire. Her fingers went to the back of his head as he tickled her ear with his slowing breath and feathery kisses. She couldn't stop them from furrowing through the short, thick, fine hairs so soft to the touch. Her hand froze as she felt him tense. Was this it? Was this the moment he would choose to push her away, to decide that he had made a terrible mistake after all? She closed her eyes to the possibility. She didn't wish to see his eyes. She heard the sickening thud, felt Steed's body jar against hers before opening her eyes to find herself staring into the wild, insane eyes of her ex-husband.

Peter was standing over her, the butt of a shotgun poised above Steed's unconscious body. Emma tried to move, to react fast enough to counter the threat, but without Steed's help it was like trying to move a dead weight and she found herself looking into the business end of the loaded weapon.

"Isn't this a lovely sight," Peter hissed. The gun was too high up to make a grab for and he moved even further back as he saw her focus on it. "Not exactly the position you hope to catch your wife in."

Emma knew Peter wouldn't have shown up alone and she quickly scanned the room. She located the woman standing at her feet. She looked from the woman back to her ex-husband. "Tea anyone?" she asked as she managed to roll Steed onto his back. More so for him than for herself she hated that he was laying there so exposed and just for the moment she was glad that he was not conscious.

It was not the response he was looking for, but Peter had gotten used to that. He had not been able to fathom Emma's reactions, attitudes or general responses ever since his return. She had been so different from the woman he had left behind, so much more confident, self assured. He hadn't liked it then and didn't like it now. Seeing her in the throws of passion with any other man was enough to send his anger skyrocketing, but especially this man. It was almost more than he could bear. How desperately he wanted to pull the trigger as he watched them. The only thing that stopped him was the thought that if there was an eternity, they might spend it locked into a lover's embrace. He'd be damned if he'd give them that pleasure. He wasn't so far gone that he didn't realize that catching them unaware was his best advantage either. Emma alone was difficult to handle, but the two of them together was simply courting trouble even if Steed was under the influence. "Stop!" he said and reinforced his words with the shotgun as Emma moved to cover Steed. "Back up," he told her. She scooted across the rug to the sofa. "Get dressed," he told her as he kicked her pajama bottoms and underwear to her. "Get him ready," he said to Christina nodding at Steed without taking his eyes off Emma. "I bet you're wondering how I found you in this nice, little hideaway."

She was, but wasn't going to ask since it was irrelevant. He was here. That was what she had to deal with and it was obvious he was dying to tell her anyway. She was more interested in what was happening to Steed. Only half listening to what Peter was saying, she watched the woman pull his briefs up, but not before she ran her hand over his flaccid penis. She caught the slight grin that appeared on her face. Despite their situation it did not stop Emma from feeling angry. Women going after Steed while he was conscious was one thing, it happened all the time in the past, but taking advantage of him while he was unconscious was another. However, she didn't want to give Peter anymore to feed on. So she clenched her teeth and held her tongue.

“. . . hide it better.”

She realized she had missed what he was saying. “What did you say?” she asked.

Peter glanced in Steed's direction, but not in time to see what was so distracting. “I said, the next time your lover decides to give you a Christmas present this size he should learn to hide it better.” At her look of confusion he let his eyes roam around the room indicating the structure. “You didn't know?” She shook her head. He threw a card at her. “This was tied to the deed. It's what enabled me to find you.”

She picked up the card and read the words written in Steed's handwriting. “Happy Christmas, Emma – John”. Emma remembered the look of sadness she had seen on Steed's face when they had arrived at the cabin and now she thought she understood. He must have planned this place all those years ago before they knew their time together would end. She blinked very quickly and looked back at Steed. She did not want Peter to see the tears that came to her eyes.

Peter saw that Christina had Steed dressed. His pants were up, his shoes were on and his shirt was buttoned although it was not tucked into his pants. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, glass vile. “Don't forget this,” he said and tossed it to the woman.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked. “He's had the brandy.” She indicated the partially empty bottle on the table.

“Just follow the plan,” he said.

Emma could see that it was about a sixteenth of an inch in diameter with a small rubber stopper at each end. She watched as Christina removed both stoppers. She started toward the woman as she saw her kneel over Steed and place one end at his nostril and blow through the other end. Steed came up off the floor, eyes wide and coughing, Peter struck him again with the butt of the gun.

Peter turned back to her the gun trained on Steed's head. “Move and I'll blow it off,” he said.

“What are you doing to him?”

He laughed. “Don't worry, my dear. It's just something to . . . help him along his way. And someone as smart as you ought to know that ingesting it through the nasal passages assures quick absorption by the body and doesn't leave any needle marks.”

Emma put it together, the drug, the brandy. Peter had been to Steed's home, to his apartment, he had access to his car. “You've been drugging him all along, haven't you?” “Technically he's been doing it himself. Get his keys and move his car closer to the door,” he told Christina. “Then get the van. We'll need to take both.” She took the keys and left.

Emma sat down on the sofa absently pulling Jake into her lap as she studied Peter. He took a seat in one of the rockers. "If you're thinking of throwing that at me," he said, "Think again." Once again he lowered the barrel to Steed. "I guarantee I can pull the trigger before you make it across the room and at this range he wouldn't stand a chance." He was right, of course. If it were just herself she could risk it, but she wouldn't risk Steed. She would have to wait and hope for a better opening. They heard the approach of the second vehicle. The sound of snow crunching under its tires seemed amplified in the silence. Peter stood and motioned for her to do the same.

"I'd like to have you unconscious as well for this journey," he said, "but you've proven yourself very good at fooling us about that one. Besides, I really need you awake when we arrive." Christina came in and he handed the shotgun off to her. "If she does anything remotely suspicious," he instructed, "don't hesitate, but make sure you kill Steed first. You take his feet," he told Emma.

Christina took the shotgun and considered ending this now, but things seemed to be back on track. She'd just see how this played out. They carried Steed and placed him in the passenger side of his own car. Peter retrieved the gun. "Your turn," he said and Christina opened the rear of the van and pulled out the gurney.

"Wait," Emma said. She looked over at Steed. "He wouldn't go out like that. He'd always wear his coat. At least give him that dignity."

Peter smirked. "A last request?" he asked. He knew she was right and if he wanted the stage to look correct leaving it behind would be a serious mistake, but couldn't resist the jab. "Alright, get it."

He followed her and stood at the door as she went to the sofa where Steed had laid it. Her back was to him and he didn't see her slip the stuffed bear inside. She prayed he wouldn't notice as she bundled the jacket in her arms. She threw the jacket and its small cargo into the back before, once again, being strapped to the gurney and loaded into the back of the van. "You drive the Jag," he told Christina. "I'll stay with Emma. Just follow me."

Chapter Ten

The heavy clouds that had dropped their frozen wonderland over the country side had given way to clear starry skies the moon hanging full and high like a benign silent witness as the two vehicles made their way along the mostly deserted roadway. The nondescript van leading the elegant Jaguar was solid on both sides leaving only small windows in the rear for Emma to see out. She could make out the headlights of Steed's car keeping a close tail on the van, but she was unable to determine what direction they were traveling made doubly hard by the fact that she was unfamiliar with the area the cabin had been in. She thought, from the way she felt Peter turn when they left the dirt road, that they were headed back toward London. That would make sense. Whatever Peter had planned she doubted that he would know anymore about the rural area than she did. He would retreat to familiar and comfortable surroundings. She had to admit that she was at a loss to understand what he could be up to. If he wanted them dead, why hadn't he killed them where they were? It might take awhile, but eventually their bodies would have been discovered and the delay would have given him the time he needed to affect his escape.

Whatever Peter had planned the key was not to panic or at least not to let him see just how panicked she was inside. It had been too long since she had been in this type of situation and even then she had Steed as back-up. True, there had been times when he had had to rely on her, but at the moment she couldn't think of one. That train of thought wasn't getting her anywhere. Know your enemy, she thought. Reason it out. Reason! How do you reason with someone who's out of his mind? Perhaps the woman might be the way to go. Peter might be bent on some sick idea of revenge, but as far as she knew there was no connection between the woman and either Steed, apart from their sexual interlude, or herself. Christina didn't appear to her to have any romantic involvement with Peter so there was no motive there. The only thing left was a financial interest. If that were the case, maybe there was a chance after all.

They must have passed into the outskirts of the city as streaks of light began to filter through the back of the van in a slow strobing pattern. At least she'd been right about that. It didn't take long until she felt the van slow and turn off the road. Through the two small windows at her feet she could just make out a wrought iron archway as they passed underneath. She couldn't catch the entire thing, but she did manage to make out the letters; Y. R. E. T. E. M. E. C. D. N. A. L. A quick reversal gave her . . . land Cemetery. It seemed familiar. She ran it through her memory, . . . land . . . land, it

clicked into place. Woodland Cemetery. Her family mausoleum was located there. It was where her mother and father were interred and presumably where she would end up when she . . . She didn't like the sinking feeling that came to her with that thought. She saw the headlights of the Jag go out and she could guess the distance from the road to the Knight family resting place.

The van came to a halt and she heard the driver's door open and close. The Jag pulled to a stop behind and cut its engine. Peter opened the double doors and waited for Christina. The woman climbed inside and released Emma while he stood guard. With the headlights out Emma could see that Steed was still out cold and she noticed that Peter had traded the shotgun for a much smaller handgun.

"Get him out," he said to the two of them.

Emma stood her ground. "It's not too late to stop this," she tried.

Peter swung his arm out pointing the 45 at Steed's unconscious form through the windshield. "Do what you're told or it very well could be too late for anything."

She could see that he was not in the mood for debate. She opened the car door and leaned in. Steed, while very fit was a large man. Over six feet, with broad shoulders and long legs, he had been a handful to get in the car, but at least she had had Peter to help. It would be much more difficult with herself and Christina. Emma shook his shoulders. "Steed," she said softly, "Steed, wake up." Not only did she want to get his assistance in moving, but she also wanted to gauge his response. She received neither. "Come on, Steed, you've got to get moving." She slapped his cheek gently.

Impatient, Peter came around the door. He grabbed Christina by the arm and pulled her away from the car. "Take this," he told her and handed the 45 over. By-passing Emma, he reached inside the car and pulled the man out by his shirt sleeve. Limp and unconscious Steed hit the ground face first. Emma winced at the impact grateful for the cushioning effect the snow provided, the hard packed gravel underneath would have torn the skin off Steed's face. Without turning him over Peter grabbed him by the collar and dragged him free of the car. He looked over at Emma and for the first time she was able to see the strength of his emotions. Hatred, revulsion, anger and hurt shown clearly as if from the depths of his soul completely obscuring any rational thought, his mind and heart consumed by them. There appeared to be nothing left of the kind, gentle man she had fallen in love with and married over fifteen years ago. Once again she realized that that man had truly perished in the jungle and only a stranger in his body had returned. She had grieved for her loss along time ago. Now she couldn't help grieving for his, for the loss of his humanity and his failure to recognize it. "If you don't want me to drag him by his feet, smacking his pretty-boy face on whatever I come across, I suggest you give me a hand," he said.

"Where are you taking him?"

"I think you know the answer to that, Emma."

He was right, of course. It was difficult to see in the darkness from their distance, but she could just make out the stonework of the family mausoleum. She took Steed by the arm and helped lift him until they were both supporting his body under the arms. A spark of relief fired inside her as she saw Steed's eyelids begin to move, if only slightly. The snow must have begun to revive him. His feet stumbled along with them as they carried him further into the cemetery. Fresh flowers, wreaths and living plants piled alongside the mausoleum, half covered by snow like some bizarre, forgotten winter garden

surprised her until she remembered the newspaper article reporting her death. She hadn't known Peter's deception had gone this far. It was then his words came back to her with chilling effect. "I'm taking you home." Of course, if he killed her here and dumped her body in the crypt, who would be the wiser? After all, it was where she was supposed to be, but what of Steed? It seemed it wouldn't be long before she got her answer.

Peter stopped about twenty yards from the mausoleum and turned Steed loose. Emma did her best to ease his body to the ground. Despite the earlier indications of waking he still seemed oblivious to the activity taking place before him. Peter pulled a length of rope from his pocket. "Turn around," he told her, "hands behind your back."

"What are you going to do with Steed?" she asked.

He started tying her hands together. "I'm going to see just how far he's willing to go for you. I'm going to offer him the opportunity to fulfill his wish."

"What wish?"

After securing her hands he pulled her to a position off of Steed's left before going to Christina and taking the gun. "Go back to the van and get ready," he told her.

The woman's patience appeared to be running thin and she seemed to be a bit edgy. Emma wondered if it was being in the cemetery or just the exposure of the open area. "This is ridiculous and unnecessary. Why not kill them now and get out of here?" she asked, her voice showing her uneasiness. She didn't like this. The more delays the greater the chance of something going wrong. Peter was becoming erratic, he wasn't looking at the big picture and there was something about the calmness of the Knight woman that unnerved her. A woman in her position should be hysterical, begging and pleading for her life and yet there was none of this. It was almost as if she had every confidence of coming out of this alive. Either she was very experienced in this type of situation or she truly did have ice water in her veins. Whichever one it was, Christina wanted to get this over with.

"No!" Peter said. "We've come this far. We're too close to give up now. Just do as we rehearsed. And hurry up. I need to bring him round while he's still under."

Emma could see the conflict on the woman's face, but with the weapon back in Peter's hands now was not the time to try and drive a wedge between them. She would have to wait and hope for another opportunity.

Peter made sure he was well out of the reach of both Emma and Steed just in case he misjudged the drug's effect. From everything he'd been able to learn about the man, Steed wasn't someone to take chances with and he had no doubt that his ex-wife could be just as dangerous. "While we wait for Christina to transform herself," he said to Emma, "I'd be delighted to answer your question. Of course you wouldn't have any recollection, although you were there at the time, but apparently the sight of your beautiful body stretched out in the lovely coffin I selected for you drove Steed to a sudden religious conversion. So much so that he begged God to, let me see if I can recall the exact words. 'Take me now, God! I don't care how. Let me be with Emma, please.' It was very touching. You do remember the little movie I showed you."

So that was it. Emma couldn't help looking at Steed lying unconscious in the snow, his face toward her. He had always looked like a mischievous young boy when asleep. Time hadn't erased that quality. As she took in the rumpled hair, the very slight five o'clock shadow evident against the white snow, she fought the threat of tears that sprang to her eyes. The thought of him even considering something like that was more than she

could bear. How could he have asked such a thing of God? How could she have left such a man? After ten years and what she had done to him he still . . .

“Now don’t you find that telling?” Peter asked, but it really wasn’t a question he expected an answer to. “What was it you did to engender such devotion, Emma? It couldn’t be that you were the only one to satisfy him sexually, unless he’s not the man of the world he’s purported to be. You’re not that good. So what is it? What quality did you share with him that was obviously lacking in our relationship?”

“Perhaps you get what you give, Peter,” she replied. She realized that baiting a man with a gun wasn’t always the wisest thing to do, but angry men tended to become careless.

“Perhaps it was the fact that Steed always gave me the freedom to be whatever I wanted or needed to be. Perhaps it was nothing I did, but rather something that he did. He gave of himself, a concept you’ve never been able to embrace.”

“I gave you my name! That’s more than he was willing to do. You were my wife,” he spat, “that was what you were supposed to be first and foremost! That’s what you vowed to be. You seemed to forget that.”

“There has to be room for growth or all you’re left with is a one dimensional character not a vibrant human being. You still don’t understand that.” Emma jumped as Peter fired a shot in Steed’s direction without warning.

“But I suppose he could,” he said.

Christina came running back almost falling in the slick snow. “What the hell was that?” She quickly took in the scene. “Are you out of your mind?” she gasp. “That shot could have been heard by anyone.”

“Relax,” he told her. “There’s no one around for miles. Are you sure you know what to do? This is your last chance to ask any questions before I bring him round. I don’t want any slip ups.”

“I’m sure,” she practically spit at him. “Let’s just do it.”

Emma saw her hand over another weapon. It looked familiar, like the one Steed had given her a long time ago. With Christina’s return she was beginning to get an inkling of what Peter had in store. The woman’s blond hair was now covered by a short, auburn colored wig cut in the same style as her own. Her makeup resembled Emma’s, or at least it would have if she’d had any left. The woman was even wearing a one piece jump or “catsuit” as Steed always referred to them. It appeared to be an exact copy of one she used to have. She had gotten rid of the suits after returning to Peter. He never approved of the formfitting outfits.

Peter approached her. “I’m afraid I can’t rely on you to keep silent during this little charade and since this is strictly for your benefit I’d hate for you to miss anything.” He produced a roll of gauze and a strip of surgical tape. “Open up,” he said and when she hesitated he placed the barrel of the 45 under her chin.

This was Emma’s chance. She didn’t like the odds, but it was the only time he had gotten this close while he was the one holding the weapon. Emma opened her mouth and as he moved to place the gag she kneed him in the groin as hard as she could. Pain shot through him like a hot poker. The automatic response took him as he grabbed his testicles and collapsed to his knees dropping the 45. Emma knew he had at least one revolver in his pocket, but was less concerned about it as she kicked the 45 away from him. Her leg came back and she hit him flatfooted in the chest knocking him over backward in the snow. She turned to make a run at the woman just as a shot rang out at

her feet. She saw the weapon in Christina's hand and one pant leg raised, stuck on an ankle holster. She froze. With her hands tied behind her back there was nothing she could do. Even if she could make it to the 45 she wouldn't be able to pick it up.

"That was a nice try, Miss Knight," Christina said, "but you didn't really think I would leave myself in an untenable position, did you?"

Emma's voice was calm as she answered, "Well, I did have some hope."

"And now you don't."

Peter was still moaning on the ground, but as Emma continued to watch the woman he kicked out with his left foot catching her behind the knees. She went down on her back. He rolled coming up and over her as he struck out with his fist. Emma took two blows to the face. The first caught her on the mouth and split her lower lip. The coppery taste of blood flooded her senses. She managed to deflect the second keeping him from breaking her nose, but took the impact on her right eye. He drew back for a third time and she rolled. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back.

"You bitch!"

"Enough!" Christina yelled. "We don't have time for this."

Peter's breathing was hard and ragged and for a moment Emma thought he would continue his assault, but instead he pulled her to a sitting position and retrieved the tape placing it over her mouth. "Your actions are going to make this all the sweeter," he growled at her. "And never think for one minute that I'm not going to take great pleasure in finishing it."

Christina moved to stand in front of the mausoleum as Peter went to Steed and rolled him onto his stomach. Standing over his body he grabbed Steed under the arms and pulled him up until he was on his knees sitting on the backs of his own legs. Peter began to slap Steed's face. "Wake up," he said. "Come on we've got a nice little surprise for you." Peter took a handful of snow and roughly rubbed it into Steed's face. "Wake up damn it!" More snow. "Emma's waiting for you, Steed. You've got to open your eyes."

Peter's voice dropped.

Emma could see Steed trying to open his eyes. His head lulled to the side and back up. He swallowed several times as if something were caught in his throat. Peter let go of Steed's collar. He withdrew the revolver from his pocket and she watched him remove five of the six bullets. He spun the chamber until the remaining round was ready to fire. Sitting in the snow in Steed's pajamas was excruciatingly cold, but despite this she felt ice creep up her spine as she witnessed Peter reach down and place the revolver in Steed's hand.

"Steed." It was Christina's turn. Her voice was low, seductive and even Emma had to admit it sounded a lot like her. "I'm waiting for you, Steed. I need you. Why haven't you come to me?"

Emma saw his lips move, trying to form what looked like her name. His eyes were opening for short periods of time, but his head was still weaving. Behind the tape she pushed her tongue against the split lip trying to keep the blood flowing enough to loosen the adhesive. She had to speak, to make noise, anything to break the trance like atmosphere the woman was creating. It was the only chance she had. She could only hope that in his current condition, Steed could recognize the difference before it was too late.

“Emma?” Steed mumbled. His eyes opened, although they were half hooded, and stared at the woman’s image. “Where are you?” His voice was weak, distant.

“You know where I am, Steed.”

Steed nodded unsteadily. “At the cabin,” he said.

“No, John,” Christina almost whispered.

Emma watched to see if the use of his first name would impact on him. She rarely used his Christian name and then only in the most intimate of circumstances. There was no reaction. It was clear that Steed was too far gone for that to sink in.

“You know that can’t be true,” the woman continued. “How could I be at the cabin? You know I died in Atlanta.”

Steed’s head fell back, the muscles of his neck stood out and a low, agonizing moan escaped him. “No,” he cried. His breathing ragged, labored.

“I couldn’t wait any longer,” she went on, pushing him further. “I was so lonely, so miserable. I didn’t want to live without you, Steed. You didn’t want me any longer.”

“That’s not true,” he answered. “That could never be true. I loved you. I’ve always loved you. Only you, Emma. My love, my heart. I need you. Please, don’t say that. How could you say that? How could you think that? Because I didn’t say anything. Because I let you go. It was all my fault. I was to blame.”

Emma’s heart broke as she listened to those beautiful words and watched as tears ran down his handsome face. What she wouldn’t have given to hear those words under different circumstances. He had never told her that he loved her. She had thought she knew, thought that having him say it was unnecessary when he showed her so plainly, but then he had let her walk away. He hadn’t said a thing except, “Thanks”. She had written it off, telling herself that that was all he was capable of. She hadn’t wanted to admit, even to herself, how much it had hurt. To be honest with herself, she couldn’t decide whether his words would have changed things at the time or not. Looking back, it was easy to think that it would have, but then . . . well, things were different. She had done what she thought she had to. She walked out on a man she loved deeply because society said she shouldn’t. It was her husband she was duty bound to love and she had tried hard to convince herself they were right.

“How can you say you loved me?” Christina asked. “You let me walk away.”

Damn, Emma thought. Peter had certainly briefed her well.

“There was no choice,” Steed told her. You had a choice, his mind screamed at him. But you couldn’t make it.

“You turned me away.”

Steed sounded pained, almost pleading. Emma had never heard him so anguished. The pain she felt for him was evidenced by the release of her own unchecked tears. She redoubled her effort on the tape. She wanted to move, to stand, to do anything to put an end to this, but she knew the woman still had a gun. If she got herself shot Steed wouldn’t stand a chance. She forced herself to remain calm.

“I could never turn you away. I loved you too much, beyond reason, hope, life.” But you didn’t realize it until it was too late. The laughter inside his head was hideously unrelenting.

One edge of the tape gave way. Peter was concentrating on Steed. Emma worked frantically to push it away from her mouth. She brought her knee up. If she could just manage to push it loose she’d be able to speak.

“If that were true you’d come to me now, Steed. You’d put an end to my loneliness, my pain.”

Steed tried to move, tried to get his body to respond, but his limbs felt as though they weighed ten stone each. He wanted to go, to be with Emma. It was all he had ever wanted. There wasn’t a day went by that he hadn’t missed her. Her laughter, her intelligence, her wit, even when she was angry or frustrated with him, he loved her.

“How?” he asked. “I can’t . . .”

This was the opening Christina had been looking for. “You know how,” she told him. “You’ve always known the way. Just look in your hand.”

“My . . .” Steed looked down and for the first time realized he was holding a revolver. Its steel framework stood out against the brilliant snow. The grip rested comfortably in his palm.

Christina saw the confusion and hesitation cross his face in the moonlight. Even with all the drugs in his system his natural instincts to survive were strong. She needed to push harder, not give him the chance to slip from the state of mind she had drawn him to.

“You asked God to help you. He’s provided the means, Steed, but the decision has to be yours. Only you know what’s truly in your heart. If you love me, you’ll come to me now. We can be together for eternity. Please, Steed. I have to leave soon and I won’t be able to see you again. I’ll have to leave you.”

“No, don’t leave me,” he whispered the words he should have said years ago, the words he had regretted never voicing. Was she right? Was God showing him the way?

Emma couldn’t believe it as she watched him actually raise the gun to his temple. With one final push against her knee the tape came loose. “Steed!” she yelled. “Stop. She’s not Emma.”

Steed’s head turned as if in slow motion. Emma shook her head and fought to get to her feet. “She’s not your Emma, Steed. It’s all fake. They’re trying to get you to kill yourself.”

“Steed,” Christina wasn’t going to give up. “Look at me.” His eyes came back to her.

“What’s wrong? Is your mind playing tricks on you again? You know it has before.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Emma begged. He hadn’t lowered the gun and it scared her. “I would never ask you to take your own life, Steed, you know that. How could I? I couldn’t bear to lose you. I love you.”

“I’m waiting, Steed,” the woman said again, but her voice was breaking from that seductive cadence.

Emma had to convince him. “Steed, I brought Jake with me. You remember Jake. He was at the cabin with us.”

“Alright,” Christina said, “I’ve had enough of this.”

To Emma it seemed as though everything happened at once. She saw the woman’s hand come out from behind her, saw the barrel of the gun come up at her and heard the shot. She braced herself for the impact, but instead of the blinding pain she anticipated, she watched as Christina fell, red snow flakes dotted the white. She looked over at Steed, saw the smoke rise from the barrel of the revolver that was now pointed at where the woman had been standing. She saw Peter step to Steed’s side. He brought the 45 to Steed’s head.

Emma moved faster than she ever had in her life, but she knew it wouldn’t be fast enough. The sounds were so close together that it wasn’t until afterwards that Emma

realized there had been two. She saw Peter thrown back against the stone mausoleum as he pulled the trigger. The 45 dropped from his hand to land among the cut flowers and plants as he slowly slid down the surface of the stone building. Blood seeped from a wound in his chest.

Emma fell to her knees at Steed's side. He lay face down. She could see blood running into the snow, but with her hands still tied behind her she couldn't move him. She tried desperately to nudge him over with her leg. "Steed?" she cried. "Steed can you hear me?" A pair of boots appeared in her line of sight and she looked up into the blue eyes of Mother's statuesque assistant. Rhonda stood above her still holding the rifle that must have taken Peter down. Without a word she reached down and gently turned Steed over. She placed two fingers against the carotid artery in his neck. Emma stared into her eyes afraid to ask the question that burned into her mind. Rhonda gave a simple, curt nod, but to Emma it was like a trumpet from the highest mountain. A tall man with white hair appeared and began examining Steed's head. The man seemed familiar, but Emma couldn't concentrate on anything, but Steed. Blood was pouring from his injured scalp at what looked like an alarming rate. The man opened a bag that she hadn't noticed before and started pulling out bandaging. Rhonda was behind her untying her hands.

"Are you injured, Miss Knight?" the man asked.

He must be a doctor, she thought. "How is Steed?" she asked ignoring his question. She didn't want him wasting time on her.

He pulled a pen light from his coat pocket and eased the gauze from Steed's head to examine the wound. "We need to get him to a hospital."

Chapter Eleven

Antiseptic. That aseptic, pungent, sweetly acidic aroma that assaulted the nasal passages inflamed an already sensitive system adding woodwinds to the percussionists already playing out their steady staccato in his head. The hum of lowered voices brought up the string section while the beep . . . beep . . . beep beat a harmonious rhythm. Put them all together and there was no mistaking the conclusion. He was in the hospital – again! The symphony in his head raged while he decided whether or not to open his eyes. If he kept them closed perhaps the interval would occur before the brass section trumpeted out their entry into the fray.

"Steed!"

Too late. The tuba fired its opening volley.

"Steed, open your eyes," Mother said from somewhere to his right. That wasn't encouraging for a number of reasons. For one, the man's voice spiked his headache causing him to grit his teeth against wincing. Second, if Mother was at his bedside it couldn't be good. The man didn't venture out of his safety zone for frivolous reasons. The funny thing was he couldn't remember being injured. He seemed to remember his last case was completed successfully with no injuries. Purdey and Gambit had gone off on another assignment and he had been left with some free time.

Free time, let's see . . . he had . . . he had what? Why couldn't he pull it up? What did he usually do? Concentrate . . . he'd gone to his club a few times, yes . . . that

felt right. He'd gone to a party at . . . no, not a party . . . an auction. Yes . . . that was right. That was where he had met Christina. Christina? Why did that bring a sinking feeling to the pit of his stomach? She had come to his home. They had gone riding and after . . . His mind flashed like the shutter on a camera. Still pictures developed. Christina . . . Peter Peel . . . at his door . . . in his home . . . newspaper, suicide, the air was getting thick. Headshot . . . autopsy . . . coffin . . . Emma! Throat closed, couldn't breathe, his eyes shot open in time to see the oxygen mask being placed over his mouth and nose.

"Mr. Steed, you're going to be alright. You're just having a panic attack. You need to calm down." The white haired man spoke gently while he checked the mask's fit and glanced at the machinery. "I'm Doctor Rice," he said as he checked Steed's pulse. "We met in Mother's office. Do you remember?"

He didn't, but he didn't care. What he could remember was crushing him alive. The man didn't seem to notice.

"If you can't," he went on, "I wouldn't worry about it. With the level of narcotics in your system I wouldn't be surprised if you couldn't remember your own name. Just relax. Take slow, steady breaths. I don't want to have to sedate you again. Everything should come back to you with time."

Steed tried to concentrate on breathing, tried to convince his mind that his body wasn't starving for air. What did this man mean, 'It would all come back to him'? How could he make him understand that he didn't want to remember any more? Emma was dead! He closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, but was still ragged. By the time he opened them again Doctor Rice had moved and his eyes fell on Mother. The large man looked very pale, his eyes twice the size they should have been. He looked like he was going to be sick at any moment. No wonder he stayed away from hospitals, he really wasn't very good at this sort of thing.

". . . r . . . eel," Steed tried to speak, but his voice was muffled by the mask and his throat was closed so tight he couldn't swallow.

Mother's expression changed as he noticed Steed's eyes on him. Once more he assumed the no nonsense, unemotional façade that every agent was familiar with. "He's two floors up still in intensive care," he told Steed. "If he pulls through, which it looks like he will, he'll be placed under arrest."

"No," Steed shook his head and immediately regretted it as the pain picked up in tempo. His body felt weak and sluggish as he raised his hand to remove the mask. "Mrs. Peel," he corrected.

"Mrs. Peel?" Steed nodded. "She's fine," Mother said. "Oh, she has a few bumps and bruises and she may still be wrapped up in several blankets, but for the most part she's fine."

"What?" Steed asked. What is this man talking about? How could she be . . . he'd seen her dead! At least, he thought he did.

Mother looked at the doctor. "He really doesn't remember."

"It will pass," Rice assured them both.

Mother rolled his wheelchair as close to the bed as possible and stared into Steed's eyes. He finally understood the source of the man's anxiety. "Listen to me, Steed. Mrs. Peel is alive and well. She saved your life." Mother searched the gray eyes unsure if the message had gotten through. "Do you understand?" he asked. But he

needn't have worried. The grin that spread over the man's face as he closed his eyes and sighed said it all.

The symphony playing the nightmare rhapsody in Steed's head moved to his heart and the music was straight from the God's themselves as angels sang in the heavenly choir. Mrs. Peel was alive! He didn't know how, but it didn't matter. She was alive. He wanted to shout it from the mountain top.

"If she hadn't taken that ridiculous stuffed bear along for the ride we might never have found you in that graveyard, which reminds me, we'll discuss what you did with your tracking devices later. You're just lucky that surveillance noticed an obscure reference to Mrs. Peel while they were checking the records. When they checked it out they found an active tracking unit so we took a chance. What I want to know is just why you put a tracking device in a stuffed toy?"

More flashes. Jake . . . the little stuffed bear . . . he had Jake in his lap, but where had he been? The graveyard reference meant nothing to him, but he did remember bugging the bear. It was a long time ago.

"Ah, hummm," Mother cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Peel used to carry the thing in her car," Steed explained. His voice was rough, each word felt as if he were dragging it across the Sahara. He needed water. "I used it to track her so I could surprise her with messages in out of the way places telling her she was needed. She never figured it out and it worked until she stopped taking Jake with her. Things got a little more difficult after that."

The look on Mother's face was a cross between incredulous and infuriated. "You used to what?" He held up his hand before Steed could answer. "Never mind," he said. "I don't want to know. But I think it's safe to say that the lady figured it out at some point."

"Maybe that one, but not the others. Is she here?" Steed asked ignoring the frown on his superior's face. He was feeling better and had no doubt that seeing her would aid his recovery no end. However, he wasn't prepared for the look that passed between Doctor Rice and Mother. "Mother?"

"No," the man sighed. "She was checked for injuries, of course and released. She did stay until we learned that you were going to be alright . . ."

His words trailed off. "But?" Steed prompted. Why was there always a but?

"But she left afterwards," Mother told him, "and we haven't been able to contact her since."

Steed's spirits fell and even though it felt as though he hadn't eaten in a long while, he had to force himself to eat. Doctor Rice told him the 45 that Peter fired had creased his scalp, but not penetrated the skull and explained that the drugs in his system had lead to hallucinations, but with time he should be able to sort out the truth. Mother told him that the forensic team had found the powerful drugs in almost every consumable in both his residences, but curiously enough not in the Scotch. They had found bottles and vials of narcotics as well. Also that they had discovered quite a number of people involved in Peter's plot including the doctor that certified Mrs. Peel's autopsy, the woman that ran the bed and breakfast, although her granddaughter was not implicated. Mrs. Spencer had admitted drugging both him and Miss. Knight. The morticians here in London were paid for their co-operation. Mother walked lightly around Christina's demise only telling him that she was killed at the scene, but not that he had shot her.

That was something he could discover on his own, or not. Apparently, from what they had been able to piece together, the idea was to use the fake suicide in conjunction with the drugs to drive Steed over the edge. When his body was discovered it would be reported that he took his own life over the loss of a . . . Mother hesitated here . . . a dear friend, he finished.

Peter was cruel enough that he wanted Emma to witness this event before disposing of her body in the mausoleum. No one would think to check it since she was supposed to be have been interred there already.

Mother ended by telling him that his vehicle was parked outside the hospital. Doctor Rice told him it could take several months for the last traces of the drugs to leave his system and that he could suffer from flash backs, but they should decrease in time. The stitches in his head could be removed in ten days to two weeks. If he continued to improve, with no problems, he would be released in two days. After finishing the soup and tea that was brought to him, Steed settled down to rest.

Mother and Dr. Rice left together. Rhonda was waiting outside the room and took over control of the wheelchair.

“Mother,” Dr. Rice said as he walked along with the pair.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“You lied.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“I don’t like lying to my patients.”

“Then it’s a good thing you weren’t the one doing it.” He looked up at the doctor but saw no trace of malice. “Do you drink twenty year old Scotch, Doctor?”

“When I have the chance.”

“Then follow me and you can watch this little drama unfold.”

Once they were safely hidden inside Mother’s mobile command post, drinks carefully nestled in hand Dr. Rice couldn’t hold his curiosity any longer. “But how do you know he’ll do it?” he asked. The van was parked at the far side of the hospital parking lot facing the front entrance.

“Because I have the benefit of past experience, the counsel of someone who knows him very well and because of what you told him.”

“What I told him?”

Mother sighed as if he were speaking to an errant child. “You told him he could be released in two days, right?” The doctor nodded. “Put that together with the knowledge that his car is parked outside and, well . . . it’s a fairly safe bet.”

Rice handed his empty glass off to the tall, silent blond who refilled it without question. “But wouldn’t he be more likely to use the rear entrance? I would.”

“Of course you would. But Steed knows that’s what we’d be expecting him to do so he’ll use the front.”

Dr. Rice’s brow furrowed as he took a sip of the, really excellent, Scotch. “But if Steed knows you know, wouldn’t he know that you’d watch the front?”

“Of course,” Mother chuckled. “That’s precisely why he’ll do it anyway.”

Rice shook his head wondering if the Scotch was affecting him already and how the Ministry ever kept anything straight.”

It took about an hour before Rhonda tapped her boss on the shoulder. Mother picked up a pair of binoculars and handed another to the doctor. They both watched as

the, slightly less than elegantly dressed, man emerged from the front entrance. It took no time at all for the man to locate the Jaguar and there was only the merest hint of a grin on his face as he paused and looked in the direction of the van before climbing in and driving off. Mother spoke into the phone Rhonda handed him. "He's on his way . . . yes, just as we thought . . . good luck . . . and welcome back."

As Steed drove through the clear, warm night he enjoyed the smell of Spring once again abundantly alive and marveled at how quickly things had changed. One moment warm and wonderful, the next cold and dreary, it reminded him of his life. At one time so warm, so magnificent, so much fun that each day was like a new adventure and each night a gift from the heavens above. Then in the blink of an eye everything changed throwing his life into the chilling cold of an early frost with no hint of a thaw. Gone was the fun, gone was the light that brought his smile, gone was the sun that warmed his heart, gone was the center of his life, his world. The stars seemed dull and listless the moon, though full, was shadowed by the clouds that welled within his soul.

Steed hung his bowler on the hat rack and placed his ever present brolley in the stand inside the door. He reached for the light switch and stopped. The big house was bathed in moonlight casting black and gray shadows in every empty room. Once more he drew a correlation. Like the house, from the outside his life appeared large. He had a multitude of friends, he walked in high social circles, he was wealthy enough, he traveled the world, his job was exciting and challenging, but at the end of the day, when the lights went out he was alone standing in the middle of shadowy memories and dark, hidden corners.

Steed gave himself a mental shake and headed for the drinks tray. All he needed was a stiff drink. He'd been through this before and he'd made it. He could do it again, but even as he reached for the brandy he knew he was lying to himself. He'd never gotten over her and he never would. The bottle was empty and he remembered that forensics had taken everything away. Damn, he felt tired, tired and old.

His legs felt heavy as he climbed the stairs to his bedroom. Maybe after he rested awhile he'd take a trip, somewhere that would take his mind off of . . . he remembered the last trip they had taken together. He'd surprised her for her birthday. He could still hear her saying . . . "Steed, there you are." He froze, his hand on his tie. No, he thought, that wasn't what she said. He turned and saw the outline of the figure in his bed and a very beautiful figure it was. As if time stood still, the face turned to him and he could see the reflection of moonlight in the deep, dark eyes. The stars, no longer dull and listless, sparkled with brilliant light and suffused the room with warmth. "Tough day at the office?" she asked through a yawn. Steed almost laughed. Only she could think of such a blatantly ridiculous question at such a time. "No more than . . .", what was it Dr. Rice had said, there could be flash backs . . . "usual," he finished slightly stunned. Was that it? Was this a flash back of his imagination?

"Then take your clothes off and come to bed," she said. "It's been lonely here without you."

He sat down on the side of the bed, unable to take his off her. At close range he could see the area around her right eye was discolored and her lower lip was a little swollen and a cut was still healing. Keep quiet, his mind told him, if you question it she could disappear! "Mrs. P . . . ah, Emma," he stammered. After all, she was lying in his bed. It was hardly a time for formality. "I . . ." She brought her right arm out from

under the blanket and as it fell away her shoulders and upper chest were exposed. It was obvious to him that she was naked under the covers. He felt the pain of an immediate erection as it pressed against his zipper. What was he going to say? Are you real? She sat up. The covers dropped to her waist. The light reflected off her smooth, creamy, white breasts and Steed's breath caught in his throat. She reached for him and he clenched his teeth in anticipation of her touch. He was afraid he'd lose it. She gently fingered the bandage on his head.

"Oh, Steed," she cried, "I'm sorry they had to shave your beautiful hair."

She let her fingers drift through the thick, short hairs at the nape of his neck and he couldn't suppress a moan of complete pleasure. Phantom or not she was driving him crazy. His groin throbbed with the threat of an impending explosion. It was difficult to keep his eyes from being drawn to her already taught nipples looking so delicious and inviting. So many years he had dreamed of her being here, in this position, of being back in his life, of being back in her. "It's all right," he told her. "I'll just have to keep my bowler on for awhile."

"Well, I did advise it," she reminded him.

He did laugh at that. "So you did, Mrs. P . . . Emma." Why did he keep fumbling over her name? Something in the back of his mind wouldn't let him call her Mrs. Peel and he wondered why. "So you did. I love you." Now where did that come from? The words came out without any conscious thought, without any conscious decision. Who cares, his mind screamed at him. It's true and about time!

The smile that lit her face was like a midnight sun. "I know," she said. "You told me."

The rush of blood drummed through his ears and his mind turned over. "I did?" he asked. He wished he could remember what had taken place in the last few days. He had a feeling that whatever it was, it was very important.

"Yes," she whispered in his ear as she softly kissed his neck and nibbled on his earlobe. "But it's always nice to hear again." Her hands came up to his chest feeling the muscles under his fine, silk shirt. "And I love you too. Now are you going to take off these cloths and prove that old saying that actions speak louder than words or do you want to discuss it some more?"

He wasn't sure how or when it had happened, but there were two things he was sure of, one, however she had gotten here he was never going to let her go again and two, his cloths could wait. "Later, for both" he said. His heart wanted to explode. His groin wanted to explode. All the dark corners of his life suddenly filled with sunlight as he wrapped his arms around his world, took her sweet, soft lips with his and laid her back onto his bed. This big, empty house was about to become a home, filled with love and happiness and a spirit that was beyond the imagination.

END