

Sweet Persuasion

by Errant Etta

Lord Prescott took another piece of chocolate from the box and carefully unwrapped it. He popped it into his mouth and held it on his tongue, savouring the delicate nuances of flavour as it melted. Methodically he folded and refolded the foil wrapper as the sweetness pervaded his mouth. Tucking the blue and yellow striped paper into his waistcoat pocket, he picked up the book he had been reading. Soon his mind began to wander. He was having trouble concentrating on the intricate plot of the mystery novel. He rose and walked across his bedroom to the bookcase. He placed the book on the top shelf after carefully marking the place with the folded wrapper he took from his waistcoat pocket. He removed his jacket and loosened his tie. His heart began to race and a cold sweat broke out on his face. He was unable to control the thoughts that whirled in his brain. The room began to recede and the furniture in it began to look tiny, like the furniture in a doll's house. He, however, became larger than life. He crossed back to the desk and with huge, ungainly fingers took a tiny gun from the upper right hand drawer. There seemed to be no way he could put his monstrously large finger through the tiny trigger guard, but miraculously he succeeded. Suddenly he stopped and looked around the room that seemed to grow smaller by the minute. He stood a moment, seeming to consider something. He put down the gun and took a pen and paper from the middle drawer. Hastily he scribbled a few words and laid the pen back on the desk. Taking up the gun he crossed the room and stood facing the bed. He smiled as he put the barrel against his temple. He never heard the sound of the gun as it fired.

The man, in his white tie and cashmere topcoat, and the woman, whose long teal skirts peeked from beneath her sable, looked down at the body sprawled across the bed. Steed began to move around the room picking up and replacing objects with his gloved fingers as he went. Mrs. Peel leaned over and peered intently at the blood-spattered face of the dead man.

“I really don’t see how this can be a thing we need to investigate Steed. It’s obviously a suicide. The note, the gun still clinched in his hand, the door locked from the inside. How could it have been anything but?” She moved back and tried to replace the lingering image of the dead man’s wide unseeing eyes with some more pleasant vision.

“That’s just the problem, Mrs. Peel, seven suicides of top government officials and business executives in as many weeks. You know what they say; life is a hard habit to break.” He ran his hand up and down the white silk scarf that hung around his neck. “Neither Lord Prescott here,” he gestured toward the dead man, “nor any of the others had any reason to want to end their lives, no problems, monetary, personal or otherwise, that we have been able to uncover. None had been depressed or ill, according to their families and friends, and all the suicide notes are uncannily similar.” He picked up the note from the top of the desk and read. “*I think I’ll find out what is waiting beyond. I always loved a mystery.*” That last phrase is the key. All of the notes contain that same thought. Always in those exact words.”

“An unusual suicide note to be sure, no mention of troubles or the apology to the family that’s sometimes found. Have the autopsies uncovered anything? An undisclosed medical condition? Any residue of drugs?” She looked at Steed’s back as he gazed out into the night his fingers drumming a tattoo on the windowpane.

“That’s another problem. The evidence of suicide was so overwhelming, on the face of it, in all the cases, and the families so dead set against autopsies being performed, that there haven’t been any.” He turned to face her.

“How can that be?” Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes widened as she faced him across the body. “I thought that autopsies were required when the death was unexpected or occurred under suspicious circumstances.” She followed him as he went to the door. He paused to let her precede him as they exited the room. Several people who were going to examine the scene and remove the body passed them in the hall. Some of the men turned to watch the couple in evening dress as they strolled toward the door.

“A common misconception. Death is usually unexpected,” he smiled at her, “and in cases of suicide it is generally left to the discretion of the investigator. In all the cases they chose to forgo the autopsy instead of getting into a protracted legal battle with the survivors. Wrangling in court with prominent people, recently bereaved, is not a popular or pleasant duty. No one wanted to take on the task when it seemed so evident that the deaths were self-inflicted. Only two occurred in the same jurisdiction and until the

Ministry cottoned on to the seeming spate of suicides, no one was looking into it at all. Each investigatory agency thought it was just an isolated case.”

Steed held the door for her as they exited the building and they walked across the drive to the Bentley. When they were underway Emma turned to him and said, “Is there anyway we could get hold of all the files on these cases? Perhaps, if we go over them ourselves we might find something that connects them.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged, but several agencies have already gone over them with a fine tooth comb. I know we’re good, Mrs. Peel, but I don’t know if we will be able to pull a rabbit out of the hat on this one.” He glanced at her profile and then returned his attention to the road. Emma took his top hat from his head and carefully examined the interior before turning to him with a smile. She took the mobile phone from the glove box and extended the receiver to him.

“What number should I dial, sir?” she asked, putting the top hat on her own head.

Steed laughed and still smiling gave her the number. He spoke with the Ministry. After making the request, he listened for a moment and handed the receiver back to her.

“They will be delivered to my flat by courier, shortly after we arrive by my estimation, if you have nothing else planned that is.”

“I’m sure what I had planned can wait, Steed.” She looked at him with a sidelong smile and laid her gloved hand on his thigh.

He glanced at her with a knowing look and returned his attention to the road.

When they entered the door of his flat he took her coat and draped it over the banister. Following her down the stairs Steed asked, "Would you pour me one too, Mrs. Peel?" and disappeared through the door to his bedroom.

"My pleasure" she called after him. She went to the drinks tray and poured a brandy for each of them. Stepping around the end of the couch she slipped off her shoes and curled up in its corner.

He returned dressed in a rollneck jumper and casual trousers. Taking the glass she held out to him, he took a sip as a knock sounded at the door. He took the stairs two at a time. Signing the proffered clipboard, he took possession of the box the man carried.

"Wasn't far wrong was I, Mrs. Peel?" he came to sit beside her on the sofa. He slit the seal on the box and removed six folders. "I imagine they haven't had time to gather the facts on tonight's victim."

"Victim?" She looked at him quizzically.

"Would body be a better choice? Or cadaver if you prefer."

"You might try Lord Prescott," a bite in her voice.

He ignored her rebuke and handed her three of the folders, taking three himself. They both settled back and began to leaf through the papers. A quiet shuffling was the only noise. He rose and retrieved the decanter refilling both their glasses and settled back, stretching out his long legs as he resumed his reading.

"Steed, have any of yours mentioned a box of chocolates?" Emma asked as she sat her empty glass on the table behind the sofa.

"Count on you to note any mention of your favourite delectable, but yes, now that you've pointed it out, a box of chocolates was mentioned in two of the reports. Only a box of sweets in the third, type not specified." He laid the files on the floor beside the sofa. "Are you thinking poison? Wouldn't that make the gunshot wound overkill?"

She pressed her lips together to suppress a smile and rolled her eyes. "*Do you think anyone would still be at tonight's scene? Could they look there?*"

"There was a box of chocolates there, missing three, I saw it on the table near the door."

"Why don't you ring and get them to check the box? Perhaps, see where it came from, if you didn't note that yourself."

"Just going to ring and check now." He replied as he rose and walked toward the tele-

phone. "I didn't recognize the brand. It wasn't Godiva or Cadbury's or any other that I'm familiar with." It continued to amaze him sometimes, how attuned they seemed to be and, then again, he would be flabbergasted at how differently their minds seemed to work. However they arrived at their separate conclusions, they did seem to compliment each other and it made their partnership a pleasant one. As he talked to the person in charge of the scene she took the files he had been examining and began to look through them. When he placed the receiver in the cradle he looked at his watch.

"They are going to inquire Mrs. Peel, but it is late, nearly two, and I don't think we will hear anything before morning. Is it too late for whatever you had planned? Would you like me to drive you home now?" Steed smiled down at her. The twinkle in his eye let her know that he was more than willing to play whatever game she had in mind or no game at all if that was what she preferred.

"Two A.M. is morning." She stated archly. "If you think it's too late then it might well be." She made no move to rise, but stretched her long legs the length of the couch, tucking her long skirts carefully around her, and settled back against the cushions. "But you might just give me one for the road."

"Brandy?" He asked and reached across her for the empty glass.

"Or whatever." She reached up and took the hand that was extended toward the glass. Her eyes met his. With a seductive smile she brought his hand to her mouth and began to nibble on the ball of his thumb. Her teeth and tongue gentle as she took the end of it into her mouth and began to suck. His middle finger stroked the curve of her jaw as he sat beside her on the edge of the sofa. She took his hand and placed it on her breast as she leaned toward him. Their lips met and for a long moment each savoured the sensations that slowly built. Her hands wandered across his body feeling the well-defined muscles that his clothing disguised. They slid down to his waist and up under the pullover to roam across his warm skin.

He thought, as he caressed her breasts through the fine silk of her blouse, that "whatever" was definitely nicer than a brandy. When he rose up to pull his jumper over his head he told her what he had been thinking.

"I never thought I'd hear you say anything was better than brandy, Steed." She raised one eyebrow and smiled playfully.

"Well, a really first rate Napoleon..." he said as her hand closed over the bulge in his trousers and squeezed a bit harder than necessary, "On second thought, my dear, nothing is better than this." He began to undo the buttons on her blouse.

"I'm certainly glad you think so." She looked up at him from under lowered lashes and reached up to brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

He rose from the couch, took her hand and pulled her to her feet. As he led her toward the bedroom door he said, "I also think we might be more comfortable in here, my dear."

"No sense of adventure?"

"We'll see about that, Mrs. Peel, but a definite urge for comfort, always."

They walked into the dimly lit bedroom. In a low voice Steed said, "Just take off your clothes and make yourself comfortable on the bed, my dear. I won't be a minute." He walked toward the door that led into the bathroom. She watched his broad shoulders, the play of the reflected light on his bare skin as he went through the door, wondering what he had in mind this time. She was just unzipping the skirt when he returned carrying a small basket.

"Not ready yet?" He asked.

"Ready for what?" She replied with a sceptical smile.

"No sense of adventure?" He threw her earlier words back at her as he pulled down the bedclothes and made a sweeping gesture toward the bed with his arm. "Just lie face down, Mrs. Peel. A pleasant experience awaits you. At least that's what the brochure says. *A sensual experience, enhanced by the specially prepared aromas of Jasmine, Sandalwood, and... something I have no idea how to pronounce essences that will stimulate, restore, and invigorate you as you smooth the fragrant oil on your skin or use it to scent your bath water.* I could go on, but I see you are now prepared." His eyes ran up and down her slender body. He took a cushion from the chair in the corner and the two pillows from the bed. "Place this under your chest please." He handed her a pillow. The other he placed under her lower legs so that her feet were elevated. He walked toward the head of the bed. "Now, we'll put this cushion under your forehead so that you can lie with your spine in the correct alignment. Comfy?"

"I'm not sure." She said smiling, her face toward the soft sheets muffling her voice. She heard the noise of a cap unscrewing and heard him rubbing his hands together. A sweet fragrance floated down to her. She wiggled about, settling herself and waiting for him to begin. His hands began to smooth the oil that he had warmed between his palms on to the warm skin of her back.

"You might want to move your hair off your neck, my dear." He said and she reached up to pull it to either side of her head. He continued to massage the oil into her back using long strokes to cover the entire area. He stepped back and removed his trousers, climbed up on the bed and knelt astride her thighs. Starting at her neck he began to concentrate on smaller areas as he progressed down her back. Occasionally the movements would

stop as he poured more oil into his hands and warmed it in his palms before beginning again.

“I’ll give you about two hours to stop that.” Emma said softly, the things his hands and fingers were doing causing her to relax and become drowsy. “This is not exactly what I had in mind but it is a very pleasant substitute.”

“A fortuitous gift from an old friend.” he said. She could not see the smiled response, but could hear it in his voice.

“What was this one’s name? Not Boofums, I hope.” Her voice gave no hint of the jealousy she tried to suppress, but her muscles tensed slightly and he smiled at her response.

“No. Jeffords. Knew him during the war. He settled in Australia in the fifties and has started a small business there. They make and market a line of this sort of thing. He sent me some samples to see what I thought.” His fingers began to knead alongside either side of her spine, beginning at the base of her skull and proceeding down slowly to the base of her spine. She began to relax again. His voice droned on in the background, a familiar, pleasant rumble that soothed her as much as his touch.

“He wants to see if there’s a market here. He sent several people samples to get our feedback and see if export might be profitable. I’m one of the guinea pigs. Do you like it?”

“Umm.” The muffled syllable was the only reply.

He moved farther down and began to oil and knead her buttocks. A very business-like procedure, never approaching the cleft between, his thumbs dug deeply and caused the tension she hadn’t realized was there to gradually subside. Moving himself to one side, he massaged each long thigh and paid special attention to the muscles in the backs of her calves. He took her right foot in his hands and ran his thumbs along both sides from heel to the tip of each toe. Small circles along the ball of her foot and thumbs running up the arch with sufficient pressure so that the normal ticklish response was overcome. Emma felt that if she became any more relaxed she would melt and ooze across the bed like an amoebae. Finished with the right foot, he began on the left and employed the same techniques that he had previously used so successfully.

She was dimly aware when he settled himself astride her buttocks and began to concentrate on her shoulders once more, that it was bare skin against bare skin. His strong hands gently but firmly dug into the muscles in her shoulders, the fingers finding and soothing the tension that had settled there. He continued to the deltoid muscles that capped her shoulders and the very top of her upper arms. His fingers seemed to know just how much pressure to apply to cause her to relax, but not so hard as to be painful. He worked the muscles of her upper arms and down to her forearms, giving attention to

all the smaller muscles, and gently smoothing the oil into her skin. The heat from his hands, her skin, and the friction of his movements warmed and released the volatile oils enveloping them both in the spicy, woody, floral fragrance.

“My turn now, my dear. Time to switch places.” He gave her bottom a final pat.

“No,” a slow, drawn out plea. “How can you ask that? I’m just this side of sleep, Steed.” Her voice was muffled.

“I’ll have to tell Jeffords that it definitely doesn’t deliver as advertised. *Invigorate, stimulate, and restore* the brochure said. At least move over.” He nudged her and she rolled on her side.

“Well, it looks as if it worked on the masseur if not the massaged.” She grinned at the erection that was level with her eyes. “Didn’t I hear the word sensual in the part you read?” She reached out and took his hand, brought it to her face. “Your hands do smell nice and so soft, like a baby’s bottom.” She placed a kiss in his unturned palm. “Perhaps, Jeffords could market it as a hand cream.” She pulled him down to lie beside her. She pressed herself the length of his body, his engorged penis pressed against her lower abdomen, and she could feel the heat that radiated from that blood filled organ. It moved slightly with each beat of his heart. “We’ll have to see what can be done to get you relaxed now. Otherwise it really wouldn’t be fair, would it?”

“Not fair at all, not cricket.” He began to run his hand along the curve of her hip. The oil seemed to have absorbed completely leaving her skin as smooth and soft as velvet. He was going to tell her that when she began to kiss the hollow at the base of his throat, the fingers of one hand stroking the back of his neck, and the thought slipped away. As the foreplay continued both thought, in the moments they thought at all, that there might be something to the advertised sensuality of this oil.

Time seemed to slow and Emma was acutely aware of each place his hands touched. His mouth on hers, his tongue warm and soft as it entered her mouth, searching out her tongue and then retreating. His breath warm and moist on her skin as he trailed down her throat and found her breasts. She arched against him and her hands held his head as he teased and suckled first one nipple and then the other. She gave herself totally to the sensations he created, her trust in him, and her vulnerability to him, complete. She had never experienced this degree of physical openness with anyone else and it gave their love making a quality that was unique in her experience.

Who took charge or was the recipient didn’t seem to matter to either of them. They both tried to give and get the greatest pleasure possible. There was no power struggle between them. Each realized that they were equals but very different, and their differences, both physical and mental, complimented one another in a way that seemed to make them two halves of a whole.

When their lips, hands, tongues had explored each other thoroughly, visiting every secret favourite place that they had discovered gave them special pleasure, Emma was so ready for the final union her eyes begged him and her hands guided him. It felt so right, so incredibly good when the first thrill of his entry filled her that she almost went over the edge in that moment. Sensing it, he was still. She began to move and press him deeper. Small noises urged him to begin, to go with her to that place they had discovered together, where thought and time ceased to exist and there were only the two of them. She was addicted to the feelings she felt with him that she had never experienced with anyone else. She was able to lose herself, her conscious self, completely and felt no shame or fear that he would use the power he held over her in any harmful, hurtful way.

He began to thrust, slowly at first; her uninhibited response as she wrapped her arms and legs around him, her nails scratching his back and the soft guttural moans she breathed against his ear, caused him to quickly increase the pace. She kept the rhythm and called his name over and over as they strained together. The sounds and feelings of her heated response spurred him on, and the orgasms, almost simultaneous, left them nearly unaware of anything but their own enjoyment. Slowly they came back to the present and held each other closely.

Emma wondered if any other people were so attuned to one another. She realized there must be some who were as lucky, but decided, as she rubbed her cheek against his, that they were probably few and far between.

He rolled off her and rearranged himself to fit around her body as she rolled drowsily on her side. Pulling the covers up over them he murmured, "I think at least part of the advertisement must be true."

"Remind me to tell you about an article I read about the effects of olfactory stimuli on the limbic system. When my mind is functioning again." Her voice was soft.

"Umm.." He buried his face in her hair and his arm went round her possessively.

When she woke she snuggled for a moment against him. The memory of last night making her want to stay here beside him, but the pressure low in her pelvis insisting that she get up. She moved slowly from the warm nest and padded to the bathroom door. She glanced back at his sleeping form for a second before slipping through the door.

When she was finished in the bathroom she took the dressing gown from the hook on the door and went to the kitchen to brew coffee. Taking the files, she sat at the counter and looked through them while she waited. She noted that books were also on all the lists. Of course, she thought to herself, there were books in her bedroom and Steed had one or two on his bedside table. They were not unusual objects in any room in any flat. She wished, nevertheless, that the titles had been noted.

“Good morning,” Steed’s voice interrupted her thoughts, as he walked barefoot into the kitchen, his slim hips wrapped in a towel. “Up early, nose to the grindstone.” He leaned down to kiss her. His mouth tasted of peppermint. “I wondered where my dressing gown had got to,” he ran his fingers over the collar and let them linger a moment on her neck. “And coffee. An early morning angel.” He smiled as he took cups from the cupboard and milk from the refrigerator. “Would you like breakfast?”

Emma knew he rarely ate breakfast, not this early at any rate. “No, just coffee and you can drop me at my flat on your way down town.”

He raised his eyebrows in question and brushed his sleep-tousled hair from his forehead.

“I certainly couldn’t accompany you in what I wore to the party they called us from last night or this.” She looked down at the robe she had confiscated from the bath.

“I see what you mean. Just as well. I’ll call and let you know about the chocolates and I’ll get the autopsy and scene reports on our late friend from last night. You can check out the source. If they’ve managed to find out where it is the chocolates came from.” He poured coffee for two.

“I get to go to the Chocolatier’s?” She looked at him in disbelief and smiled sceptically. She started to question him further, but decided to leave well enough alone. She would certainly rather go to a place that made chocolate than read more reports.

“If you’d rather not,” he began.

“No, no. It’s fine. Anything to help.” She interrupted and as she began to drink her coffee wondered if he was being nice or if his devious mind was setting her up again. Much as she trusted him in bed, she had been taken advantage of, that was the nicest way she could think of to express it, by him in connection with investigations so often that her trust in that area was less than complete. He had been known to call her at a

moments notice to drop all her plans and come with him to some far-flung place. He had even used her as bait on occasion to trap some of the miscreants they had battled. That, however, while resented, was nothing to the few times that he had kept her in the dark completely. A time or two, that had nearly backfired on him and he had had to do some fast talking to get himself back in her good graces. It still rankled when she thought of it.

After he had dropped her at her flat, Steed proceeded to the Ministry. He gathered the file on Lord Prescott and found the note of the brand of chocolates that he had requested. The toxicology report was not back. He called Mrs. Peel's flat. On the sixth ring she answered.

"What took so long?" he asked.

"If you must know, I was in the bath." She sounded as if she were slightly out of breath. "I didn't want to drip all across the floor, so I took a second to dry my feet, at least, and wrap a towel around my hair."

"I can picture you now." He smiled to himself. "The store where the chocolates were bought, and apparently made as well, is Sweet Nothings, 27 Orkney. Do you know it?"

"No, but I will shortly. I've always wanted to go to a place where such a luscious treat was made. I can't think why I've never gone to one before. Perhaps they give free samples."

"You've never gone because once inside you knew you might never leave." She could hear the smile in his voice. "Try not to eat so much you get sick, Mrs. Peel."

"I have perfect self control, Steed" she put down the receiver a little harder than she needed to.

Steed called down to the Pathology lab and was informed that they were almost through with the autopsy. If he came down straight away the pathologist who had performed it would give him the preliminary report before he started the next autopsy of the day. Otherwise he would have to wait for the report to be typed by the stenography pool. He knew that might take a day or so and as much as he loathed it he went down to the grim room in the basement. It wasn't that he disliked seeing the dissection of a body, brutal as it might seem to the layman, or that he was in the least squeamish. It was the smell of the formaldehyde that stayed in his nostrils, hair, and seemed imbedded in his skin for days afterwards, no matter how he washed or cleaned, that made this a task he avoided if at all possible.

Dr. Nichols met him just inside the tiled room. Gray-green tiles covered the floor and walls, which were windowless. Bright lights shone down on the metal table in the centre of the room. A stainless steel tray, perforated in a way that reminded Steed of a colander, held the naked body of Lord Prescott. An assistant was stitching up the Y shaped incision that had opened the body from collarbones to pubis with heavy black sutures. The sound of the water that constantly sluiced through the base of the table and drained into a central drain underneath was the loudest sound.

Steed was grateful that it mostly masked the wet, sloppy sounds of a second technician at a sink against the wall who carefully sectioned the organs that had been removed and grossly examined by the doctor.

Dr. Nichols stripped off his gloves and said, "Let's just go into my office, Steed. You've missed all the interesting part." They entered the doctor's cramped office and he took a stack of files off a chair so that Steed could sit down. "Not that there was anything out of the ordinary at all except for the bullet entrance and exit wounds, and of course the path of the projectile and bone fragments through the old grey matter. Drink Steed?" He opened the lower drawer of his desk and removed a bottle and two glasses.

"None for me Doctor." Steed didn't think the smell that suffused the air would mix well with the amber liquid the doctor was pouring into a glass.

"Just what the doctor ordered. No? Well you don't mind if I?" He lifted his glass, the surface of the liquid rising and falling. "Have a chair."

"Not at all. If I had to smell this all day I would want to anaesthetise myself as well." Steed breathed as shallowly as possible in a vain effort to keep the fumes from going more deeply into his respiratory system than was absolutely necessary to maintain life. He sat in the metal chair across the cluttered desk from the pathologist.

"Oh, after a while you get used to it." The doctor took a swallow of his drink, "The formalin eventually deadens all the receptors cells in the nasal cavity and you don't mind at all." The doctor smiled and continued. "No problem at all to see the cause of death

here. What was all the hurry about the autopsy? Why all the tox screens? Seems a simple enough case of self inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Powder burns at the entrance wound and powder residue on the hand that held the gun. Very small entrance and massive exit. All the trauma you would expect from a bullet of that calibre. No unusual findings in any of the body systems. Just the things you would expect in a man of his age, slightly enlarged prostate, some atherosclerotic lesions in the cardiac vessels, nothing major, but in a few years could have been a problem. Liver, kidneys, everything fine grossly. Might pick something up in the sections under the microscope, but really nothing jumped out.”

“Was there anything in the stomach?” Steed asked.

“Yes, some residue that could have been chocolate. Saved it, of course, to run the usual tests, and also the ones that you fellows requested. But really, don’t you think poison is a little out there? I told you what caused the death. No question at all about it.”

“Could it have been something that made him shoot himself? Some drug that caused hallucinations, perhaps?”

“Bellows, up in section D, could give you more on that than I could. Don’t get too much of that sort of thing. Could be one of those hallucinogens that seem to be the rage these days, LSD or one of the others that the youngsters are using. Though the thought of Lord Prescott using one of them seems a little preposterous on the face of it.” He took another swallow of his drink.

“Thank you, doctor. If anything unexpected shows up, you will let me know?” Steed stood up. “Be assured, Steed. You’ll be the first.” He shook the hand Steed extended and rose to follow as Steed left. The doctor entered the double doors that led back into the grey-green room to a fresh body on the stainless steel table. Steed waited at the door to the lift and repeatedly pressed the button as if that could make the machinery operate faster and hasten his removal from this place and its nauseating smells.

As Emma looked in the mirror she wondered by what quirk of fate she had gotten the better of the two assignments this time. It seemed to her that it almost never happened. If there were two tracks to an investigation she always seemed to draw the short straw. She brushed her hair back off her forehead and wondered suspiciously what could be the drawback in a visit to a chocolate factory. There had to be one. All her experience with Steed told her that if he could, he would find a way to get her to do the things he didn't want to do. Turning the matter over and over in her mind she went out the door and crossed the pavement to the Lotus.

Pulling up outside 27 Orkney she found it wasn't a factory at all, but a neat Victorian cottage full of gingerbread ornamentation, painted a luscious shade of milk chocolate and trimmed in a variety of pastel shades. As she approached the door the aroma of chocolate surrounded her. She entered. The interior was the reverse of the colour scheme of the exterior. The walls were pastel and the trim and all the furniture shades of chocolate brown. A tiny little man holding a tray of scrumptious looking chocolates immediately met her. He was dressed in a brown suit that exactly matched the color of his eyes and the delicacies he held out to her.

"Try one my dear and you will never let a morsel of our competitors paltry offerings pass your lips again," he said in a high voice that matched his size. He put Emma in mind of one of the little elves that had peopled the books she read as a small child. "Don't bite into it, just let it melt on your tongue and savour the texture and taste."

She picked up one of the fat round mounds and was aware that the temperature of it was just below ninety-one degrees, the temperature at which chocolate melts. Before she could comment he continued.

"My name is Sweet, Barry Sweet. I am an owner of this fine establishment. Have you been with us before?" Emma shook her head and opened her mouth to speak. When he began again she shut it. "I thought not, I would surely have remembered. Everyday I meet all the customers, or potential customers, with our latest offerings. These were just made, only just set up. No wax, none at all in our enrobing chocolate. Each piece hand made and individually wrapped before being place in our boxes. Nestled together and kept at the optimum temperature at all times before being sold to our faithful customers. We are thinking of getting larger quarters. Once anyone tastes our wonderful chocolates, they are our customers for life. Never fear that as we grow we will take short cuts in our production methods. No. No, we would never abandon the time-honoured ways that we have spent our lives learning. They are one of the things that make our chocolates what they are. Another is using the purest ingredients that we are able to find. Time and distance are no obstacles at all, no none at all. We strive always to use only the very, very best and then by hand we mix them, using the recipes we have discovered through trial and error, to produce the mouthwatering, soul soothing creations you see before you." He gestured to the glass enclosed shelves stacked with boxes and boxes of chocolate.

Several times Emma had tried to respond but each time she opened her mouth Sweet continued as if he hadn't noticed, so rather than close it again after the latest attempt Emma put the chocolate in her mouth and following the little man's instructions let it melt. She had to admit it was the best chocolate she had ever tasted, bar none. The texture was creamy and smooth, the taste more than delicious. She decided she had no words to adequately describe the rich, sweet, delectable flavour that was more everything that was good about chocolate than any she could remember, with the possible exception of the first taste she had ever had at age three. Like all enjoyable firsts, it was one she would spend the rest of her life trying to match. But when the enrobing coat had dissolved on her tongue and centre of the morsel was exposed, there was the surprise of the new flavour mingling with the familiar taste of the chocolate. She did bite down then. She couldn't resist, and the chewy texture gave an additional burst of a flavour she didn't recognize, but knew she definitely wanted to taste again.

"Absolutely delicious. What is it?" She smiled at the little man in genuine delight. "I don't think I've ever tasted anything quite so... I don't know, definitely unique."

"A concoction of our own my dear. Well, actually not our own, one of nature's miracles found by a man in the hills of Mexico. A fruit that only grows there and the indigenous peoples have known of it for aeons. They consider it a gift from their gods and, I must say, it is a divine concoction indeed. Don't you agree?" Emma nodded her head and smiled. "We have begun to use it just recently and have had more orders than we can possibly fill. We have named it Theobroma. We had considered Comida de la dioses, the Spanish, but decided that was much too long. Theobroma, 'Food of the gods,' for it is ambrosia isn't it?" He offered her another.

"Of course we have all the usual flavours made by our competitors. Our variety of truffles is second to none. We can provide them separately or mixed, in packages large and small. We endeavour to please our customers in any way we can. We have wrapped the different flavours in different coloured papers. A list with the corresponding colour is included in every box. I know I always hate to bite into a piece and receive an unpleasant surprise. I will tell you, my dear," he learned in and whispered, "I have never been overly fond of the orange cream centres. It is so disconcerting to take one and then be forced by good manners to eat it." His voice rose back to a conversational volume. "That is one of the reasons we will supply you with individually packaged chocolates, direct to your specifications. Nothing is too much trouble. We only want to please and make the eating of our delicacies a wonderful gustatory experience for you. Now, would you like to sample some of the other wonderful flavours? We have seventy-six different ones at present and are experimenting all the time to come up with new ones. I will have to say though that I believe we have reached the peak of the chocolate mountain with this new one."

Emma cut in before this incredibly loquacious little man could continue. "A friend

gave me a sample of your Chocolate the other day. I'm sorry but I don't recall the colour of the wrapper and I don't know if I should try all seventy-six varieties trying to find it. Do you have a record of the purchases or deliveries you have made recently?"

"But of course, dear lady." He beamed a smile at her, confident of securing the patronage another faithful customer. "It often happens that one satisfied customer will send someone here to try our wares. I will just go and get the records for this last quarter." His voice drifted back to Emma as he walked behind the counter. It was so tall and he so short that the top of his head was all she could see. "The word of mouth of our customers, or, perhaps I should say, taste of mouth is the best advertising we have found and that is one of the reasons we are considering expansion." A large ledger slid up over the edge of the counter and the face of Sweet followed it. Emma wondered if he had a stool in back he stood on to enable him to see across the counter. She restrained the urge to lean across and look to satisfy her curiosity.

"Now, what was the name of your friend?" He opened the ledger and looked at her. He put the tip of his finger to the corner of his mouth. "You have just a tiny smudge of chocolate just there, my dear."

Emma reached up and wiped the corner of her mouth. Unable to resist, she cleaned the delicious chocolate from her finger with the tip of her tongue. "Thank you." She smiled at him. "My friend is Lord Prescott."

"Ah, yes. He has become one of our best customers of late. He also was introduced to us by a friend." As he talked he flipped the pages. "Yes, here it is. The last delivery was only yesterday afternoon. A two-pound box equally divided between vanilla coconut, hazelnut delight, caramel surprise, and our latest, Theobroma. Not as adventurous as some, but a nice quartet. We can let you try them all or any of the others that take your fancy. The list is posted just there." He pointed to the wall to her right. "A legend to guide you through the maze of delights we concoct here at Sweet Nothings."

"Thank you. Might I try one of each?" She asked and turned to walk across and stand before the list he had pointed out. It was poster sized and just as on the legend of a map small variously coloured rectangles were lined up across from the printed names of the chocolate varieties made by Sweet Nothings. Grouped together were truffles, pralines, creams and liqueurs. These categories were further divided into chocolate, milk chocolate and white chocolate. Her mouth began to water in an almost Pavlovian response to the names and pictures that illustrated the varieties. She was almost startled when she saw the tray that Mr. Sweet carried enter her field of vision.

"Here you are Miss. . ." His voice rose in an unspoken question.

"Peel, Mrs. Emma Peel." She smiled at him and reached for the chocolates.

“Would you like to sit over here?” He gestured toward a chair near the window. A small table holding a ginger-jar lamp was beside it. “I could get some tea or milk. So many people drink milk with their chocolates, you know.”

“No, thank you for the offer. I do want to take a sampling of your,” she paused and her eyes ran around the room looking at the many sizes of boxes. “Is there one that includes every variety?” “Why, yes indeed. The Variety Sampler would be the very thing. But if you would rather, it would be no problem to make up any combination you prefer.”

“I thought it would be a way to get acquainted with all of them and then I could decide which are my favourites. I do want a small box of the Theobroma. I’m sure of that.” She smiled and her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

“I’m afraid it will have to be a very small box indeed. I told you that it has become one of our most popular varieties and we are working as fast as possible to fill the orders that are coming in. When we move to larger quarters, we hope to attract more members of our profession to work with us. We are trying hard to overcome the scarcity of the source of the flavouring. That will take some time I’m afraid. The plant on which the fruit grows is very picky about where and how it can be propagated and for now at least, we are having a difficult time obtaining all we get orders for.” He took a large gold box from one of the display cases and laid it on the counter. “I’ll just go back and see what’s available in the Theobroma. I’ll just be a moment, Mrs. Peel.”

Emma sat and carefully unwrapped the piece of vanilla coconut from its cream coloured paper. She savoured again the taste of the wonderful chocolate and then the familiar admixture of shredded coconut. The flakes crunched softly as she chewed. This was definitely going to be a nice task, tasting all the different chocolates made here. She hoped that she was wrong about the chocolate being involved in the deaths. There was really no reason to connect them, just the fact that some sort of Chocolate had been at all the scenes. Nothing to say it was all from Sweet Nothings. Mr. Sweet seemed a very pleasant, if slightly single-minded little man. Perhaps if chocolate had been her life’s work she would be the same. And she could definitely become a patron of this establishment.

Barry Sweet came back into the room with a small box. “Mrs. Peel, I do apologize. This is only a half-pound box, but it is really all I could let you have because of all our orders. I will be more than happy to add you to the list, if you like, and we will notify you when more comes available.” “How kind of you, Mr. Sweet.” She smiled at him. Sitting, her eyes were only slightly below his as he stood in front of her holding out the box. “You certainly have a convert in me. I believe you will do an amazing business when people learn of this new taste.”

“We have never been as sure of anything ourselves. We are trying desperately to grow the plant here or any place that will make it easier to obtain a larger supply. Just to

think, only a few months ago I was sometimes worried that this establishment would have to close its doors after over ninety years. And now, we are looking to expand. If you could just fill out this form for me, I will notify you immediately or we could even deliver if you would like.” He extended a small pink card and a pen.

“Really? You have had such growth just from this Theobroma?” She took the card and pen. As she began to write he continued.

“Oh, no, not just the Theobroma. I took on a new partner. He is the man who discovered Theobroma and he is really the driving force behind our phenomenal growth. Great business mind and a younger more forward thinking fellow altogether than I will ever be or ever was. He has instituted great changes here. I was sceptical at first, but you can see how well all his plans have worked out. It was he who thought of sending out introductory boxes to prominent people. Their response has been tremendous. Why, I never would have thought of anything like that at all. He is so much more familiar in the fields of marketing and promotion that I could ever hope to be. It was a red letter day when he came through that door believe me.”

Emma gathered her boxes after handing Mr. Sweet the card she had filled out. “Thank you so much Mr. Sweet. I know I will be seeing more of you.”

“My pleasure entirely. Here take one of our new brochures and kindly tell your friends about us if you would.” He handed her a bright blue paper and held the door as she left.

Emma knocked at the door of Steed's flat and when there was no answer let herself in. Holding the very large variety sampler with the small Theobroma box balanced on top she nearly tripped over the black plastic bag at the top of the stairs. She glanced at it curiously, stepping around it, as she descended the stairs into the room. Not like Steed at all to leave something so out of place. She smiled at the thought of him going through all the scene reports, something she would have normally done, and wondered what, if anything, more he had found. Sitting the boxes on the desk, she started toward the kitchen to see what she could pull together for a quick lunch to surprise him when he came in. She heard a faint noise through the bedroom door. Quietly she walked across the room and peered around the door, which was slightly ajar. It was still and silent, just as they had left it, but a light was on in the room beyond. She retreated to the fireplace and took the poker. Carefully she entered the bedroom and crept across to the bathroom door. She heard nothing. Taking a deep breath she flung the door wide and entered quickly, the poker held at the ready.

Steed was totally immersed in the tub his knees bent and his head underwater. The surface of the water was perfectly still. A single drop fell from the tap and the expanding ripples distorted the outline of his body as they travelled over the water. Her heart missed a beat as she thought of the body of the drowned man she'd discovered during the marriage-market murder-ring investigation. Emma dropped the poker as she knelt beside the tub. Reaching down she touched him. He exploded from the water, his violent reaction flinging her against the far wall. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub as Steed came to his feet.

"Ready to repel boarders Steed?" Emma drew up her feet to escape the water that spread across the floor. She began to laugh, more in response to the relief that washed over her than to the sight of him standing totally naked, his hair plastered to his forehead, water streaming down his face, his defensive stance relaxing slightly as he recognized her.

"I would appreciate it if you would make your presence known in future." He wiped the water from his eyes. "I am beginning to believe it could be possible to frighten a person into cardiac arrest." He pushed his hair back over his forehead and sat on the side of the tub. He began to smile as his pulse returned to normal. "Are you all right? I didn't cause damage did I?"

"I'm fine, just a little damp. And I agree about frightening someone to death. I did knock at the door, Steed, and didn't expect anyone to be here when there was no answer. I thought I heard something in here and came to investigate."

"Well armed, I see." He looked at the poker lying on the floor.

She ignored the jibe that was in his tone. "I nearly tripped over a black bag at the head of the stairs. It could have been a burglar's boodle." She stood and took a towel from the rack to soak up the water that had puddled on the floor.

“No. Those are the clothes I wore to the pathology lab this morning. I put them in the bag in a vain attempt to contain the fumes that have permeated the fabric. I hope the dry cleaners will be able to render them usable again. The suit is one of my favourites and I would hate to lose it.” He sat back in the water and began to scrub his skin with a lathered sponge.

“What fumes?” Emma’s brow furrowed. “Why were you in the lab?”

“To get a preliminary report from the pathologist.” He ducked his head under the water again and emerged sputtering. “Would have had to wait forever for a typed report. They are all backed up in the stenography pool, as usual, so I was forced to go and see him personally. The place reeks of formaldehyde fumes. I can never be around it that I don’t pay for days. Nothing smells or tastes right. It totally ruins the palate and the nose. The smell is horrendous and I can never get it off.” His voice rose and became that of a fretful child.

She smiled inwardly at his reaction. “Steed, it can’t possibly be that bad. I remember in an anatomy class we dissected foetal pigs and I’ll agree the smell is not pleasant, but I ate lunch right after that class and never suffered any ill effects. Don’t over react.”

“I am *not* over reacting. You wouldn’t call it over reaction if it affected your pleasure in the way it affects mine. My sense of smell is very acute and you know the sense of smell is all tied in with taste. Nothing tastes right for days.” His condescending tone put her teeth on edge.

“Anyone who can eat Stilton so ripe it practically moves couldn’t possibly complain about the way anything smells or tastes. It is absolutely revolting. Old trainers are nothing to the reek of it.” She tried to quell her rising irritation.

“It’s an *acquired* taste, Mrs. Peel. If you will just let me finish my bath I will be glad to discuss the merits of anything you wish. . .”

“I’m leaving.” She said, her eyes flashing, and did just that. The door closed with such force that the resulting reverberations ruffled the surface of the bath water.

Neither of them was aware of the stealthy opening of the door at the top of the stairs that led down into Steed's flat. Neither of them heard the soft footsteps of the man who crept softly to the topcoat slung carelessly over the banister railing. Their conversation and the splashing of the bathwater masked any muffled noise the intruder might have made. He turned back toward the door, his head cocked slightly listening for any indication that one of them might enter the room and discover his presence. He smiled slyly and left as silently as he had come. He heard the bathroom door bang shut as he reached the bottom of the outer stairs.

It wasn't what Steed had said so much as his tone that set her off. She went back through the bedroom and on into the kitchen. Pots and pans clanged as she began to brew coffee. Sometimes Steed could aggravate her to the point of making her lose her temper. She had struggled all her life with the tendency to fly off the handle when people did not behave in the manner she considered appropriate. She knew that everyone reacted differently to situations and tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, but Steed, more than most, could irritate her. His tendency to inflate small irritations into huge ones was one of the triggers. She never considered for a moment that her flare up could be in any way associated with the momentary terror she had felt when she saw his still body submerged in the bath.

He entered the room clad in the rollneck jumper and trousers that he had worn for such a short time the night before. He smiled the smile that she thought of as hers and she felt her temper recede a little. He acted as if nothing had happened and took two cups from the cupboard.

"What did you find out at the shop, Mrs. Peel? I see that you brought most of their inventory back with you."

"Those are samples of all the types of chocolates that they make and a new one they have just come out with, an exclusive new flavour, to quote Mr. Sweet."

"Mr. Sweet?" He looked at her questioningly.

"The owner of Sweet Nothings, Barry Sweet." She smiled at the memory of the little man. "I brought a brochure from the shop. Until recently it seems to have been struggling, but a new partner and his more advanced theories on advertising has caused a spurt of growth." She went into the other room and returned with the brochure.

Steed took it and began to read as she poured the coffee. "I assume this Ambrose Lowe is the new partner, name coming second?" he asked as he opened the folded blue paper.

"I really didn't look at it. Sweet's family has owned the business for years, at least

that's the impression he gave. I spoke to him for a while, well, he spoke to me. Hard to squeeze a word in, much less ask a question." She sipped the coffee. "Ambrose Lowe, the name rings a bell, but I can't think why just now."

"Did you know that chocolate was once thought to cure a variety of illnesses and prolong life?" He looked up as she sat the coffee cup in front of him. "Ah!" he raised an eyebrow and smiling read, "because of the aphrodisiac and magical qualities it was thought to possess, its use was restricted to the noble classes in the kingdoms of the Inca, Aztec and Maya."

"Funny how perceptions change. Now it just makes you fat, rots your teeth, and causes spots on your face. I think I like the old ideas better." She smiled at him. "The little man at the shop said the new partner, Lowe, had come up with the idea of sending samples to prominent people as a method of advertising the product."

"Like Jeffords. Must be the newest marketing strategy."

"I didn't realize you were such a *prominent* man, Steed." Mrs. Peel said with a smirk. "I certain circles. . . I am quite well known." He raised his eyebrow and laughed. Her smirk turned into a broad grin.

"Oily circles." She lifted her right eyebrow in answer and her grin transformed into the brilliant smile that never failed to make his heart skip a beat. She laughed with him.

They went through the door and settled on the couch. Steed continued to examine the brochure and Emma watched him over the brim of her cup.

"All our suicides were prominent men, all had chocolates at the scene, was it all Sweet Nothings chocolate? Were they recipients of these promotional gifts? Who was behind it? What do they have in common that would make them have a common enemy? We still don't know much more than when we started." Steed ruminated aloud. "We need to find out if there was a common factor outside their prominence."

"You're right. We don't even know if chocolate had anything to do with it at all. I was thinking of going back to Prescott's flat and poking around a bit more. Do you think it might be possible to visit the other scenes as well?"

"What do you hope to find?"

"I don't know exactly. Just an itch that I need to scratch."

"I'll call down town and see if I can get someone to work on the common factor thread. We can go to Lord Prescott's place together and then divide the other sites. See if we can cover them all this afternoon." He rose and went to the bedroom to change while

she looked at the files and listed the addresses of the remaining victims. When he came back into the room, dressed in the grey suit she liked so well, she handed him his list. "All these are fairly close together, on the same side of town at least, and mine are in the opposite direction. Fair enough?"

"What ever you decide, my dear." He took the paper, and after glancing at it, folded it and put it in the inner pocket of his jacket. "Ready?" He stood back as she ascended the stairs. Gentlemanly conduct to be sure, but it did provide a nice view of her trim figure and shapely legs. He smiled to himself as they left the room.

Emma wondered as they walked to their respective cars for the drive to Lord Prescott's just why Steed was being so accommodating. It was perplexing. She cast a sidelong glance at his profile. He opened the door of the Lotus for her and looked down as she settled herself in the drivers seat.

"I'll follow you. We can leave from Lord Prescott's and meet up here when we've finished." He cocked an eyebrow to see if the plan met with her approval.

In answer she turned the key of the Lotus and the engine roared to life. She pulled away leaving him standing on the pavement looking after her.

At Prescott's home they proceeded down the hall to the door of the bedroom. Steed opened the door and they ducked under the yellow tape stretched across the opening marking it as a scene of investigation. Steed began to roam about the room. Emma immediately went to the bookshelves and quickly scanned the titles, an eclectic selection. Histories, biographies, and mystery novels seemed to dominate, with a few volumes on natural sciences, economics and gardening interspersed. She began at the top shelf and took down the mystery at the right hand end of the row. A new one that she had seen reviewed in a recent edition of the Times. She had been meaning to pick up a copy when she was next at the booksellers. A folded piece of paper had been used as a bookmark. She opened the novel to the page that had been marked. She turned to find Steed bent over the open drawers of the desk.

"Steed," she crossed to stand beside him holding the book, "this paper is a wrapper from Sweet Nothings. From that new flavour. The one that Lowe discovered, and this book is authored by a man called A. T. Lowe." She opened the book to look at the back flap of the dust jacket. A small picture of the author accompanied the obligatory basic information about him. "Newly returned to England from a trip to Central America it says. The same man? Possibly why the name sounded familiar, I read a review just the other day."

Steed looked over her shoulder. "His face strikes a cord. Nothing to do with a book." He tapped his chin in concentration, searching the files in his mind. "Can't place it. I'll check with the Ministry and what they have on him." He picked up the phone. "No dial tone. They certainly worked fast in disconnecting it."

"The book was published by Grayson and Son's. I have a friend who's an editor there. I think," she smiled at Steed and lifted her eyebrow, "instead of going to the other scenes, I'll go pay her a visit." She tucked the book under her arm and turned toward the door.

"And I shall proceed to Whitehall and see if anyone there had a better memory than I about this Lowe." He followed her out the door.

Emma walked through the inner door into Sheila's office. Her friend and editor greeted her with a smile and motioned her to a chair as she continued to listen to the person on the other end of the phone she held to her ear. She rolled her eyes toward heaven.

"I know, I know, Carlton, really great authors are never appreciated in their lifetimes, but sometimes one gets lucky and I think this time it might be you. The book will sell. I know it will. Just let me worry about the details. I need you to promise me that you will have the galleys reviewed by the weekend." She glanced at Emma and crossed her eyes so that Emma had to stifle a snicker. "If you keep making revisions we won't be able to have it out for the summer." She was quiet for a moment. "Yes, I understand, but I'm telling you it is absolutely fabulous just as it is. The reader will be able to understand exactly what you meant. You have to give them a little credit, why else would they buy the book in the first place. It doesn't have any pictures after all." She laughed. "Just please, for me, get me the galleys by Friday night, the latest. I'll talk to you later. Someone just came in that I must speak with." After a short pause she hung up the phone.

"Thank you for saving me." She laughed. "What brings you down? Have you written something?"

"No, not this time. I need to know if you are familiar with A. T. Lowe." She held up the book she had brought from Prescott's.

"He's not one of mine, but I have met him. Something of a strange bird, but what author isn't, present company excepted of course. You know I'm jealous of anyone who can get something published."

"I read a review of his book. I don't seem to recall a mention that he was a first time author. Has he published other books? I don't recall the listing of previous works by, either."

"I know he has and that we published some of them, but as I said, he's not one of mine. Let me call Franklin." She picked up the phone and Emma sat back and surveyed the room. Stacks of books and manuscripts on the credenza were the only sign in the room of any disorder. Sheila's taste was evident in the colour scheme and paintings and prints that adorned the walls. Emma thought it would be a nice job to have. Getting to be the first to read and perhaps discover a great new author. She wondered if wading through tons of less than great, or even good, material and dealing with the famous insecurities and foibles of talented people would be worth the rewards. Sheila finished her phone conversation and interrupted her thoughts.

"Franklin will be in in a few minutes. He said his office doesn't have any empty chairs. All full of things he hasn't read yet. He's had his hands full with one of his clients. Something about not appreciating his editing skills. I practically had to hang up on him to get him off the phone. Sometimes, just between you and me, I don't think he was cut out to be an

editor. Too nice by half and too sympathetic to the author's feelings to make them change their creations. Even to make them more readable and understandable. You have to be ruthless to be a good editor and Franklin is simply too nice and too polite to be ruthless."

"It would be a change though. A nice, polite editor who cares about the tender sensibilities of the creative genius." Emma smiled wryly and they both laughed.

"I'll get us coffee while we wait, or tea. Is that nice and polite enough for you?" Sheila rose and went to the door. She stopped and looked at Emma, waiting for her usual sharp response.

"Tea please, thank you. Have I made my point? If you are nice, people are generally nice in return. I think I may like Franklin so much I might have to change editors." She smiled again as Sheila rolled her large expressive eyes and watched her as she went out the door.

Sheila returned with a tea tray and an extremely tall, gangly man in tow. Franklin was disconcerting to the person of average height. It was apparent that he had heard every tall joke imaginable. As a result, he moved with a stooped gait and disconnected look on his face in an effort to prevent perfect strangers from approaching him to comment on his view of the weather up there. Emma could identify with the differences in attitude that most people displayed in their dealings with anyone out of the ordinary. She empathized with the thin fellow whose hand engulfed her own in a firm handshake that was surprisingly gentle. She imagined he had also heard all the comments possible on the size of his hands and feet. She smiled into his deep-set dark eyes and liked him immediately. Not only because she could empathize with him, but because the look in those eyes told her that he too recognized a simpatico person behind the cool, disdainful face she showed to the world.

"So happy to make your acquaintance Mrs. Peel. I'm told you're interested in Ambrose Lowe." His voice, rumbling and soft seemed to fit him much better than the obviously expensive but ill tailored jacket. He took the tea cup Sheila offered and folded himself into the empty chair across from Emma.

"Yes, I am." Emma started to elaborate but was stopped when Sheila offered her a biscuit and crossed to sit behind her desk. Franklin began to talk and as he did Emma was glad she had not had to embroider the truth to get the information she sought. It had worried her that she was not able to use a cover with these people who were known to her and left her feeling strangely like she was being deceitful by not telling them exactly the reasons for her interest.

"Well, Lowe's a different sort of fellow and not everyone warms to him. I like him though and he is an editor's dream. The things he brings are always so nearly complete they need almost no editing at all. But if you do, perhaps, point out the need to change

a word or two, here or there, he will fight you tooth and nail. He says one word can change the meaning of what he wants to convey entirely and there are certain passages he will not let be altered by so much as a comma. I can tell you there was something of a bru-ha-ha after the last book came out. We had to recall an entire printing because of one typographical error made by the printers. We weren't able to get every copy back as some had already been sold and he was livid. Swore that he would change publishing houses, generally caused a great hue and cry about gathering all the misprinted books in circulation. That, of course made them collectors items right off the bat and to make matters worse some of the copies were the ones we had used in the new advertising campaign."

Emma's ears pricked at that. "Tell me Mr. Franklin, do you mean the new practice of sending out advance copies to prominent persons?"

"Why, yes. A new promotional gimmick the sales and marketing chaps have asked us to try. They say we are lagging behind the newest trends. I feel that the loyal readers would buy an author's books no matter what. For new authors, perhaps it will prove useful, but for those who have an established following I feel it is an unnecessary practice, but then I have never been too keen on some of the newer techniques used to manipulate the market place."

"Don't get Franklin started on the evil machinations of the advertising industry, Emma. He has been known to go on at great length." Shelia inserted the comment with a smile, but Emma could tell she had heard Franklin's theories before and was trying to avoid a repeat performance of the monologue he had become known for in their office.

Franklin ducked his head like a small boy who had been called on the carpet and smiled a shy smile that was startling. It transformed his plain, narrow face into one that was appealingly handsome.

Emma beamed her patented, brilliant smile back at him and said, "Some people might be very interested to hear what Franklin thinks, Sheila." The remark, directed at Sheila on the face of it, caused Franklin to turn red in the face and his smile widened.

"Actually, they are not really my thoughts at all," he protested, "but, oddly enough, ones I picked up from Ambrose Lowe and I find that I agree with him."

"Not the same man we have been talking about, surely." Emma curiosity was peeked.

"Yes, he not only writes novels, he has written and published on a wide variety of topics. Not something that many of our authors do, present company excepted, of course. The fact that he crosses from fiction to non-fiction is something that makes him unique, in this publishing house anyway. He is a most intriguing man." He had leaned forward in his chair during his defense of the man and now settled his long body back into the recesses of the chair.

“I have never really talked to him at any length,” Shelia interjected, “but I find I am unable to appreciate his genius when I look into those strange eyes. He gives me the creeps.” She laughed nervously.

Emma ignored her friend and asked Franklin, “Was he the man who authored “The Effects of Olfactory Stimuli on the Limbic System”?”

“Yes, that was one of the things not many people read. We didn’t publish that of course, it was in some scientific periodical, but that exactly underscores what I’ve been trying to say. He embraces and explains very satisfactorily such a wide variety of things and though not a lot of it is his own research, he seems to have a knack for tapping the most obscure sources and correlating facts drawn from many different disciplines into theories that boggle the mind. I find him a very,” he paused searching for a word, “unique man.”

“I think I would like to meet him.” Emma smiled again at the gangly man across from her. “Do you think it might be possible?”

“I could see what I might be able to arrange.” Franklin was becoming smitten. “I’ll,” he tore his eyes from Emma’s smile and glanced at Sheila, “let Shelia know.”

“That would be lovely, Sheila will know how to get in touch with me. Thank you so much for your time.” Emma held the hand he extended as he unfolded himself from the chair. “It was lovely to meet you Mr. Franklin.

Sheila turned to her as he closed the door. “Emma, you should be ashamed. Twisting the poor man around your little finger that way.”

Emma looked at her with wide-eyed innocence as if she had no idea what she was talking about.

“You know,” Sheila continued smiling at Emma, “ you will probably be able to meet Lowe at the party we are having for all our authors at the weekend. You are coming aren’t you?”

“I’d really not thought about it.”

“Well do, and bring that lovely Steed with you.”

Emma careened around the corner and parked in the drive in front of her building. She raced up her flat and began to rummage through the stack of magazines in the bookshelf behind the couch. She found the periodical and flipped through the pages searching for the article she had read. She was about to fly out the door again when she noticed the red light on her answering machine blinking. She rewound the tape and listened.

“Mrs. Peel. I tried to catch you at Grayson’s, but Miss Barnes said you’d left. I found some rather interesting facts about our Mr. Lowe and accepted an invitation on your behalf to a party Saturday night extended by Miss Barnes. She said she had mentioned it to you but you had “hemmed and hawed”. Meet me at Emile’s for dinner. The reservations are for eight.”

Emma glanced at her watch. Almost six. She had not realized it was so late. She laid the magazine down on the table and went through her bedroom door.

Steed strolled up and down the pavement in front of the restaurant. His stomach growled hungrily. He rummaged in the deep pockets of his topcoat and found a single piece of chocolate. It’s wrapping was lightly covered with lint. Using his teeth, instead of taking off his gloves, he furtively unwrapped it and popped it into his mouth. Crumpling the wrapper and stuffing it back into his pocket he wondered when the bonbon had been placed there. He didn’t remember doing it. Perhaps Mrs. Peel had slipped it in at some point the last time they had been out when he had been wearing the coat. She was always commandeering the use of his pockets since most of her clothing was without them and she rarely carried a purse. A light dusting of snow swirled about his feet and a few flakes settled on the toes of his highly polished shoes. His breath plumed up before him and a shiver ran up his spine. Devilishly cold so early in the winter. He turned up the collar of his coat and pulled his head down into it trying to warm his ears. He was just beginning to contemplate entering without her and waiting in the bar when the Lotus pulled up to the kerb. The doorman approached to open her door and hand her out, but Steed was there before him. He took the keys from her and handed them to the waiting doorman. He slipped a note into the man’s gloved hand and gave instructions for the Elan to be parked beside his Bentley. He doorman smiled as he held the door for them to enter.

Steed helped her off with her coat and shrugged out of his own, handing them to the attendant along with his ubiquitous umbrella and bowler. He did not ask about her interview at Grayson’s, but complimented her on her gown as they waited for the maitre-de to lead them to their table. Steed looked out across the small room. It was filled as usual. Chez Emile was a small restaurant, fairly new by London standards, but he had become enamoured with the fine cuisine and small but excellent cellar the establishment was known for. They dined here quite often and were known to the staff who seemed to go out of their way to make their evenings here special. The chef had even created a dish, in honour of the lady he said, tiny medallions of venison, marinated in a wine and herbs that were a closely guarded secret of the kitchen. The result was an exquisite

marriage of flavours that represented an attempt at domestication with a hint of the wild underneath. It suited her, Steed thought.

Steed watched the heads turn as they followed the black clad maitre-de to the table he had specified when he called for the reservation, on the far side of the room, and away from the flow of traffic to and from the kitchens. He saw several faces that were familiar and nodded politely, but his expression was meant to send the signal that he would not be holding open house at his table tonight. He caught slightly raised eyebrows and knowing smiles from those who were acquainted with both him and Mrs. Peel. It seemed that, try as they might, they were unable, either of them, to keep the feelings that they had for one another private. Steed had tried mightily to control his actions in public. He would not want it to be known that she might be used as a pawn by some of the more reprehensible of his opponents, or that her reputation be sullied when it came right down to it. He realized, however, that more than once he had caught himself standing much too close or putting a proprietary hand where it should never have been if their relationship was as advertised. She was as guilty as he and though he should have regretted that the charade was seen through, he couldn't find it in himself not to be proud that he and this beautiful creature were linked in the minds of those that knew them.

He listened as she told him of her excursion to Grayson and Sons. Part of his mind filed the information and correlated it with the facts he had gathered down in Whitehall that afternoon. Another part watched her face, the smile that played at the corner of her lips, the sparkling intelligence in her deep brown eyes and the constant changing of expression that animated her loveliness. He watched her hair seem to catch and reflect all the dim light in the room, glinting as she tossed back the mane that constantly fell across her cheeks. He watched her slim elegant hands as one slender graceful finger idly traced a pattern in the moisture on her wine glass. The rest of the room faded into obscurity as he focused solely on the woman across from him. The tip of her tongue darted out to remove a ruby drop of wine from her lower lip. All his attention focused on her lips, the delicate curve of the lower lip, the satin smoothness of that tender skin, red and shining in the candlelight. A light film of moisture glistened where her tongue had touched. His heartbeat sped up and he began to feel uncomfortably warm. Her mouth moved and he was startled when he didn't hear her words. The mouth came closer and the lips tightened in an expression of concern.

"Steed?" he could tell that was the word her lips formed, but he heard no sound at all, just a soft buzzing noise that filled his ears. This was very strange, he thought, very strange indeed, but he was not at all distressed. On the contrary, he was enjoying the experience immensely. The altered state of consciousness, all his attention focused on one thing, her face. There was no room for anything else. No room for anything so mundane as concern. Concern for anything at all. He floated, disconnected from the world, the only anchor her face.

“Steed?” She whispered urgently. He seemed to be sinking in the chair. His normally erect posture slumped and his hands slid from his lap to hang limply at his sides. She rose and came to stand beside him shielding him from the stares of fellow patrons. His eyes followed her, but otherwise there was no sign that he was aware of anything that was happening. She touched his face. It was cold and clammy. Nervous fingers began to loosen his tie and collar. She looked around the room and saw Charles, the maitre-de, heading toward them. He, at least, seemed to know there was something wrong in this corner of the room and she was grateful. She met his eyes and he walked a little faster toward their table. Steed’s breathing was shallow and rapid. She found the carotid artery in his neck. His pulse bounded and was so rapid that she could barely count it. Charles was beside her. He lifted his arm and two young men in waiter’s dress closed in on the table in the corner. They lifted Steed between them and carried him through the door behind and to the left of their table. A door she hadn’t noticed, so cleverly did the mural on that wall camouflage it.

They laid Steed on the couch. During the journey the only movement he had made was to turn his head so that he could keep her in view. She knelt beside him and began to loosen his belt. All she could think of to do in this totally unexpected situation. Loosen any constricting clothing. And elevate the legs. She lifted his feet and placed a cushion from the back of the couch beneath them. Keep the patient warm. She looked for a blanket and Steed’s topcoat was placed in her hands. She tucked it around him and again felt his pulse. She heard Charles giving directions to the young men and they left the room. Charles picked up the phone and began to dial. She turned to watch as he spoke into the telephone ordering an ambulance. She felt Steed take her hand and she turned back. The grip loosened, but still she held his hand. His eyes never left her face. She didn’t recall that he had even blinked since this strange episode began. She reached out and closed his eyelids.

“Mrs. Peel,” the voice was deep and croaking. He turned his head to escape her hand.

“Steed, can you hear me?” She took her fingers from his eyelids and they popped open. He smiled.

“Yes, my dear.” His voice was more nearly normal. “Where are we?” He looked around the room.

“Charles’ office I think.” Her fingers went once more to the pulse at his wrist. Not nearly as bounding and though rapid, much slower, the pulse that she felt, than it had been earlier. “What happened?”

Charles came to stand behind her, “The ambulance should be here in just a few minutes. What more can I do Mrs. Peel?”

“What ambulance?” Steed rose up, kicking the pillow from beneath his legs.

“Why, the one I just called sir. I thought you might be having a heart attack.” The tall man backed up a step.

“Call them back. Tell them it was a false alarm. No ambulance needed here.” He ran his hand through his hair, took the topcoat from his lap and laid it beside him on the couch. He began to buckle his belt.

“Steed, you did...there was definitely some kind of episode. You need to see a doctor. Someone needs to check you out.” Emma looked down at him, her eyes full of concern.

“Yes, something did happen. I will see someone tomorrow if it pleases you, but now I am starving and would like to complete dinner. No, not complete. I don’t believe we had even begun.” He stood and buttoned his collar, tightened his tie, tugged at his jacket sleeves and straightened the hem so that the ruffled cloth settled in place across his broad shoulders. He offered her his arm. “Shall we, Mrs. Peel?”

She looked at him with an arched eyebrow. “I really think...”

“Nothing whatsoever to trouble yourself about, Mrs. Peel. I’ll have the whole thing looked into tomorrow.” His eyes told her that they would continue the discussion privately. She acquiesced and took his arm.

As Steed helped her on with her coat she turned to him. "I will not allow you to drive, Steed. We'll leave the Bentley here for tonight and I'll take you home. I still wish you would let me take you to a doctor's tonight."

"No need. I'm perfectly fine." He turned to make arrangements for the car to be brought round. He stood slightly behind her as they waited. He was more than glad to let her drive. Despite his protestations to the contrary he was still a bit light headed. His full stomach seemed to be taking more than its fair share of the blood supply tonight. He meekly followed her to the car and folded himself into the passenger's seat. "I didn't want to tell you this inside, but I think it was something I et."

"We hadn't even started Steed. Don't you remember? We had ordered, but nothing but the wine had arrived. You had only taken a sip." She glanced at him and then back to the roadway dimly lit by her headlamps.

He rummaged in the deep pockets of the topcoat and drew out a small ball of colored foil. "While I was waiting, I had a snack. Turn here. Take us to the Ministry. Perhaps they will be able to find a trace of whatever might be on this."

"It's from a Theobroma." She furrowed her brow. "But I ate one at the store and another at your flat. Nothing happened to me."

"I found this one in my pocket while I was waiting for you to arrive. I thought you might have left it there." He glanced at her and she shook her head. He shrugged. "Didn't think that it could have been anything else. I didn't notice a peculiar taste or odour, but then my palate will not be right for a few more days after this morning's escapade in the pathology lab."

The corner of Emma's mouth turned up in a lopsided grin. "I wasn't at all sure that Sweet Nothings had anything to do with those deaths." She said. "I was afraid it was a wild goose chase I had sent us on. But when I found the article," she paused and looked at Steed, "you didn't hear anything I told you about that did you?" She pulled to a smooth stop in front of the granite steps of the building that housed the Ministry.

"If I did my brain was, if not completely out of commission, then not hitting on all cylinders. It certainly didn't compute, as they say." He opened his door and walked around to open her's. "Tell me now, again." He said as they mounted the steps.

She began to tell of the article that Lowe had published, his research into the effects of olfactory stimuli on the primitive centres in the brain. He had been frustrated in his efforts to further his study because it would involve using human subjects. If they knew what was going on, it was believed that it would nullify any conclusions drawn. While using uninformed subjects was frowned on by the research community as unethical. His research into the subject had been brought to a rather abrupt and bitter end. He had

gone off the Central America to do research into other fields. At least that was what had been put about.

“I wonder now if that was true.” She said as she followed him through the maze of corridors. “How do you keep from getting lost? Will anyone be here this late?”

“The Ministry never sleeps, Mrs. Peel. Always vigilant. There’s bound to be someone here who can help or at least someone who will call a person with the expertise we need. Always prepared, or is that the Boy Scouts? Should be us, whether it is or not.”

They came to a grey door. Steed leaned against the handle and the metallic noise of the latch opening reverberated in the empty corridor. He approached a white-coated figure bent over a microscope.

“Jennings,” he clapped the fellow on the shoulder.

“Umm, just a moment. Be with you in a tick.” The man’s eyes never left the eye-pieces of the instrument but his hand waved above the desk motioning them back. They stood back obediently and Emma’s eyes wandered around the room. Steed could almost see her salivating at the thought of all this advanced equipment and the fun she could have if let loose here. He smiled at her. She didn’t notice. Her eyes jumped from one machine to the next.

Jennings rose up from the microscope and lowered thick lenses from the top of his head down over his eyes. He made a few notes on the yellow pad beside him and turned to them. “Steed? How can I help you today?”

“It’s night actually. This is Mrs. Peel.” He looked from Jennings to Emma.

Jennings blinked behind his glasses and extended his hand toward Mrs. Peel. “Night? Really? Hadn’t noticed. No windows here, you know. I have been. . .”

“Just needed you to look at something for us.” Steed interrupted. He knew that Jennings could go on for hours about the esoteric qualities of anything at all if you let him get started. He drew the wrapper from his from his pocket. “Could you check on any strange substances that might be present on this if you will? Some sort of hallucinogen, perhaps. It was wrapped around what was thought to be a simple chocolate. I believe it had a few, rather unusual properties.”

“What sort of properties?” The man blinked behind his glasses and drew on a pair of latex gloves from a paper wrapper, several of which were stacked on the corner of the counter that held his microscope.

“I can’t say exactly. In my case, all my attention seemed to focus on one point to

the exclusion of everything else. We do believe that it might have played at least a part in several suicides.”

Jennings took the wrapper and unfolded it very carefully, being especially cautious about touching the inner surface. He squinted at it, bringing his eyes very close.

“Physically,” Emma said startling him out of his examination, “there was a bounding tachycardia. I had no way to check, but I’m sure the blood pressure was elevated and yet there was a pallor and diaphoresis that would usually belong with a low pressure. Total non-response to verbal stimuli, almost as if he didn’t hear.”

“I didn’t.” Steed interjected. “I could see your mouth move, but there was no sound at all. No peripheral vision and no sense of touch, smell, nothing. Very strange, but at the time I didn’t seem to notice anything unusual at all.” He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“His eyes stayed open,” Emma continued, “and I can’t say for sure that he blinked once in what must have been several minutes. Only when I physically closed his lids did he make any movement or seem aware of anything. No, wait, he did turn his head to follow me as we took him to Charles’ office, and grasped my hand when I turned away, but that was all.” She looked at Steed with a curious expression as if asking what his focal point had been. He looked away and studied Jennings movements intently.

The Ministry scientist was carefully inserting the foil into a beaker containing a clear liquid. “This may take a while Steed. I will start with the gas chromatograph and if there are no conclusive findings I will move on from there. Hopefully since the foil was balled up tightly there will be some traces we can pick up, but there was nothing visible to the naked eye. We can only hope. I will let you know what I find, if I find anything. Morning probably, you did say it was evening now?”

Steed and Mrs. Peel stood and watched for a few moments, then left. The man seemed totally unaware of their existence as he hunched over the lab bench swirling the beaker and making notes on the scrawl filled yellow pad.

“Well?” Emma said archly as they were making their way through the darkened street toward Stable Mews.

“Well, I’ve been thinking,” Steed ignored the question she was really asking. “We are fairly sure that the chocolate triggered these actions. But, we don’t know the method used for getting the victims to focus on the mystery of *beyond* that was in the suicide notes. And, we have no clue as to motive. None of the men had one thing that was common to all.” He furrowed his brow.

“We know Prescott was reading the new mystery that had just been published. Have you found if the others were? I still don’t see how. . . Wait. Franklin said there was a typo in that book and Lowe was extremely upset about it.”

“Who’s Franklin?” He looked at her silhouette, almost black in the dim lights from the dials on the fascia panel.

“I told you. Oh, you didn’t hear that either?”

“Apparently not.”

“He’s Lowe’s editor at Grayson and Sons. *And*,” She emphasized the word, “That printing was the one they sent out copies of to their list of prominent men for the new advertising campaign.”

“You mean it was all one grand error? All the printer’s fault?” He said incredulously.

“I have no idea. But it could explain why only *those* men were affected in that particularly fatal way.”

“Triggered by something they read while under the influence of what ever was in the chocolate. Pretty far-fetched, wouldn’t you say?”

They drove in silence for a moment, each turning the problem round and round in their minds looking for a possible answer.

“You aren’t on Grayson’s prominent person’s list?”

He raised an eyebrow and smiled wryly, “Not that I know of. I’ve never been the recipient of one of their books. Could you get a list from your friend?” Before she could reply he continued. “But why was that chocolate in *my* pocket? Was that an error as well?”

Emma exhaled explosively, “No, but I feel an urge to visit Mr. Ambrose Lowe and confront him right now.”

“Patience, my dear. It is a bit late to be standing on a complete stranger’s doorstep. Tomorrow we may have a more complete answer and tomorrow evening we will no doubt be formally introduced to your fellow author.”

“It’s just as well. I might forget to be pleasant if I met him the way I feel right now.”

“I heard some interesting things this afternoon myself that somehow seem to have been lost in the shuffle this evening. Some of the branches of this government have been keeping a rather keen eye of Mr., or rather Dr. Lowe, doctorates in Chemistry and Botany, as well as being something of an authority on physiology of the central nervous system. I’m surprised you never met him, my dear. A bit older than you, but he seems to travel in the same exalted circles of higher learning. But that is not the reason that we’ve been keeping our beady eyes on him. He has been traveling in and out of some communist strongholds in several Central American countries of late. Our colleagues in the CIA have compiled quite a dossier on Lowe and I was able to persuade them to share the wealth.”

“But if he just was there in his capacity as a botanist, he did just discover this Theobroma fruit, why was he under suspicion?”

“Not suspicion, Mrs. Peel. Surveillance. We keep an eye on a great many innocent people who just happen to wander in and out of hotspots. Gives us something to justify our huge chunk of the governmental budget, and does catch the occasional diabolical mastermind.” Steed smiled cynically into the darkness.

Emma laughed as she pulled up beside the kerb outside his flat.

Steed wavered slightly as he exited the car. Emma hurried around to his side.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t take you to a hospital, or at least back to the Ministry so someone at the institution that never sleeps could check you out.” She held his arm.

He straightened and looked at her with an amused and slightly sheepish grin. “Really, Mrs. Peel. My boot slipped on a cobble. I am perfectly fine.” The sheepish nature of the smile faded and was replaced by a wicked gleam in his eye. “You might, however, help an old man up the steep and narrow stairs. Wouldn’t want to find me crumpled in a heap in the morning, having slipped because of my compromised state and tumbled helplessly to lie at the foot of the stairs, broken and in pain.”

She dropped his arm and looked at him with a raised eyebrow and a tolerant smile. “Why I worry about you I’ll never know. I think I’ll just go home and get a good night’s sleep.” She stepped away from him.

“I’ll tell you what my point of focus was.” He said in a coaxing voice as he closed the gap between them. He let the smile she thought of as hers play on his lips and she could see the gleam in his eyes change almost imperceptibly in the dim light from the street lamp.

“In that case, in the interest of furthering scientific inquiry, I’ll come up. . . for a bit.”

Steed walked very close behind her, his hand on her elbow as they entered the door. Emma could almost hear the gears whirling in his head, the heat of his body and the scent that was his alone reaching out to make her very aware of his nearness. He seemed to be able to turn whatever it was that was so dangerously distracting to her on and off at will. At times he was almost asexual, a pleasant companion and friend. And then suddenly she would be so aware of the animal attraction that her attention would be totally ensnared by him to the exclusion of almost anything else. She allowed herself to move even closer so that her body brushed against his. It was the beginning movement of what she recognized as the seduction symphony she had played so often with him. He would occasionally rearrange the score, and she wondered what the next note would be tonight.

He slipped the key into the lock and as soon as the door was closed behind them Steed walked her back against the wall across from the door. Not even allowing her time to completely remove her coat, he pressed his body the length of hers, the familiar outline of him evident even through the layers of clothing that separated them. One muscular thigh slipped between hers, pressing against her vulva, the intimate gesture effectively pinning her against the wall, making her aware of the strength usually hidden by his gentle manner. His grey eyes smoldered as he brought a finger up to slowly trace her lower lip.

“This,” he turned his finger so that his smooth nail slid across the delicate, slightly moist, tender skin. “This was my focal point.” His finger trailed slowly beneath her chin. His eyes didn’t meet hers, but concentrated on her mouth. He tilted her head so that he could kiss her more easily. His hands slid down inside her open coat and around her body to cup her buttocks, holding her more tightly against him. His mouth closed over hers.

Emma was more than willing to play this game. She melted into the kiss, one hand sliding up to his hair and the other running across the soft cashmere that covered his shoulders. They kissed and caressed like two teenagers against the side of the house under a parental window, silently and urgently. Their open coats surrounded them, their hands moving under layers to try and find bare flesh. She slid back and forth against his thigh, the wetness of her response flooding through to soak her underwear. Steed remained still, letting her set the pace, as his hands began to wander up and down her back. She could feel the hard evidence of his maleness, hot against her belly. She arched her spine to meld herself as closely to him as possible. She could feel the heat radiating through their clothing and she felt as if she were enveloped in black velvet, light-headed,

a soft roar filled her ears. His mouth, warm and insistent, left hers for a moment and he whispered against her ear. "There might be something to the aphrodisiac effects." His voice was husky, "I've never wanted you more." His hands came round to caress her breasts. He pulled back slightly and looked at her flushed face. She was breathing quickly.

"What happened to the urge for comfort?" She smiled into his eyes, her words breathy and not at all as even as she wanted them to be.

"Some things take precedence." One hand left her breast and made its way between them. Sliding over the smooth silk of her dress it came to rest just over her pubis. He held her eyes with his for just a moment watching her excitement build as his fingers found her clitoris through the damp material of her skirts. His dark head lowered and his lips touched hers again.

Emma's hands slid down to his chest. She wanted to touch him, feel his skin, smooth and soft, over the hard muscles of his body. She tugged at his waistcoat and pulled his shirttail from his trousers. A multitude of buttons frustrated her efforts. She pushed her hands against his chest and he pulled back, a question in his eyes. She slipped sideways and tried to take his hand and lead him down the stairs. He smiled down at her and his hands began to gather the fabric of her skirt, crumpling the material 'til it was bunched around her waist. His mouth came back to hers and she was again lost in the feelings he could call up. She was not quite sure how it happened, but she could feel his erection naked against her. His coat and hers were crumpled around their feet as his hands went to her thighs and brought them up around his waist. She was held in place against the wall by his body. The blunt head of his penis found her entrance. She gasped as she felt him fill her. No coherent thoughts invaded her mind, only fleeting flashes of rationality. She rode the waves of feeling. The growing fire fueled by his touch, his ragged breathing in her ears, his mouth, hot against her skin, his need, as great as her own to reach to final crest. Her orgasm peaked and receded and peaked again as he plunged recklessly, urgently into her. She heard his voice, harsh and quiet as he called out her name. She felt the heat as he emptied his semen deep into her body, the final thrusts, quick and hard. They sank to the floor together.

She felt the world become solid again, his head hot and heavy against her breast. She smoothed his damp hair back and kissed his temple, smiling softly. She loved these tender moments when they floated together, times, not quite of this world, shared and quiet. The reality of their situation began to creep in slowly. She was really very uncomfortable and she wondered if this dress would ever be wearable again. When he began to shift beneath her, trying to straighten out his bent legs, she laughed softly and they began to untangle themselves. He stood, somewhat shakily and drew his trousers up over his naked buttocks. She gathered their coats and handed them to him as she straightened her skirt.

"If this keeps on, Steed, I shall really have to bring at least a few things here. I wonder what the neighbours think, my leaving in the same thing I wore the evening before, and

definitely the worse for wear.” She brushed fruitlessly at the moist, wrinkled fabric.

“I have very discreet neighbours. They would never presume.” He followed her down the stairs and tossed their coats on the couch as they passed. “But do feel free. I have a drawer at your flat. Reciprocity is surely merited.”

“I promise no tights on the shower rod.” She said as they passed through the bedroom door.

Beside the bed they came together again, kissing and touching before they almost simultaneously began to shed their clothes. When they were naked, their clothes in a heap beside the bed, they tumbled to the mattress, limbs intertwined. Emma thought briefly, while she was still able to think, that it was unfair, this hold he had over her. She was beginning to believe that she held the same power over him, but tonight she wondered if whatever had been in the chocolate really could have been a contributing factor in the precipitous display at the head of the stairs. She wanted, needed him to declare his feelings when they were fully clothed, not in the heat of the moment. Her thoughts distracted her but Steed captured her full attention with his artful and exacting exploitation of the things that caused her to lose herself in sensations. She became excruciatingly aware of every touch of his hands as he played softly over the skin of her lower abdomen and skirted the place she wanted him desperately to visit, to run his fingers over the velvet of her inner thighs. All the while his mouth did exquisitely delicate things to her nipples causing waves of electric tingles to course from them down to the meeting of her thighs. He seemed to know things she never knew herself until he called forth the waiting blossoming of passion that seemed to divide her conscious mind from her body, allowing only the primal forces that he awakened to envelope her totally.

In the beginning when he had performed his magic she was afraid of the response of her body. The thought of being so susceptible to the actions of another person had left her confused and slightly ashamed of the uninhibited response over which she seemed to have no control. Emma was an independent spirit and she had been fearful of being so vulnerable, so dependent on another person. The physical response that he could call forth had shocked her to her core. She fought the need that built with each time they made love until finally she realized that he would not use the hold he seemed to have over her in any way that was hurtful to her. After that epiphany she reconciled herself to the loss of control and simply accepted the situation. This freed her to enjoy herself and she recognized that her enjoyment seemed to be a large part of his. The higher he could take her the more he seemed to want to take her higher still. A never-ending progression that fed on itself. She found she wanted, needed to give back the same sort of disconnection from reason, total immersion in sensation to him. She experimented, trying different things until she would hit on the combinations that seemed to cause the same sort of separation of mind and body in him that he could bring about for her. She varied the methods and when she thought of different ones, she would implement her fantasies and note his response. She revelled in her new found power and the more pleas-

ure she could give him, the farther away she could take him, the more she wanted to give.

Sometimes as they lay in the after glow, their heart beats slowing, their breathing becoming more regular, those moments when he would murmur to her in that quiet voice she never heard at any other time, she would wonder how this could possibly last. If it got any better she thought she would not be able to tolerate the pleasure that could sometimes be very close to pain, but if it lost any of the splendour she would be devastated by that as well. A conundrum she would push aside as she floated beside him. Just accept what was and be thankful for it. The future would come and she would let it take care of itself.

Emma packed a small unobtrusive weekend case filled with the things she thought she would absolutely need if, no when, she stayed overnight at Steed's flat. It was happening more and more lately when they were working on an investigation. It seemed to her that when they were not, he more often stayed at her flat. Something about being available if the Ministry needed to contact him? She wondered. Smiling to herself she thought that that would be exactly like him. He would never come right out and tell her, he would just manipulate the situation so that it would unfold as he wished. More and more she had come to know that the face he showed the world, the not-a-care- in-the-world gentleman, wrapped up in pursuing his own pleasure, was a mask that hid a very quick, if conniving mind.

She was surprised when, not long after her return from dropping Steed to collect his Bentley, in the midst of her packing, Franklin appeared on her doorstep. He was loaded down with books and periodicals containing articles by A. T. Lowe. She invited him in and served coffee while he shyly offered the printed material as a way to understand the mind of the enigmatic author. She was touched and somewhat mystified by the gesture. The mystery began to become clear as he swallowed convulsively and hesitantly asked her if she would attend Grayson's function with him that evening.

"I know it's rather late to be asking, but since we were only introduced yesterday, I..." He paused and swallowed hard again.

"Franklin," she smiled and her voice seemed to caress the name. "I'm flattered, but"

"I knew there would be a but." He said. She could see the hope wink out in his deep-set eyes.

"No, it's just I've already asked someone." She did feel sorry for this nice man, but what could she say to make him feel more at ease? "I would be happy to go with you, but I am sort of..." Emma hesitated this time. She was sort of what? There had never been anything said about exclusivity in her relationship with Steed, it had just evolved, an unspoken agreement. They had become a matched pair of bookends. All their acquaint-

ances knew that, like as not, when they invited one, the other would come as well. For a while both had received invitations, but, eventually, only one was sent. Who received it was a matter of who knew the host better. She smiled inwardly, not wanting to hurt Franklin's feelings. Steed's concern that they keep their relationship secret had certainly come to nothing over time. She might just as well come out with it. "I'm involved with someone now." It sounded strange to her ears, but it was a relief to finally say it out loud.

"I should have known." He smiled down at her. "Still, might I be able to have a dance this evening, and of course meet the lucky fellow?"

Emma panicked for just a second. Please don't let him say anything about this to Steed. "I'd love to dance with you Franklin." She said, totally ignoring the remainder of the question.

The rest of his visit went smoothly and Emma found that the more she talked with Franklin the less his gangly appearance seemed to dominate her view of him. He was truly an engaging, intelligent person. Though she wasn't given to matchmaking she began to wonder just which of her acquaintances she might introduce to this nice man. If one could just get past the first impression he gave, he was really quite pleasant. They had discussed various topics for a while, everything from publishing to anthropology, and found they shared many of the same ideas. When she let him out the door she knew that she would definitely be thinking about just who would do nicely with Franklin. Not that everyone was suited to life with a partner. After Peter's death she had thought that she would remain single, if not forever, then for a very long time. Now, she was enmeshed in a relationship she had neither sought nor ever thought possible in her wildest dreams. Still, though she was uncertain of her exact standing with Steed, she felt that this was one pairing destined to be long lived. She hated the confusion that hovered around her when she thought of their relationship. Being unsure of herself was disconcerting. Being unsure of his feelings for her, even more so.

She pushed her musings on the state of her personal life aside and began to go through the stack of printed materials Franklin had brought. Time slipped away as she became engrossed. It was several hours later when she uncurled her cramped legs and glanced at the clock. Slightly shocked she tossed the magazine she had been studying aside and dashed for the bathroom. She smiled to herself. She had always had the ability to lose herself in the printed page and this was not the first time she had almost been late for an important appointment because of it. Tonight though she would be able to tell Steed at least a part of the reason that the chocolate had not affected her and had affected him. Her smile turned into a self-satisfied grin as she began to run her bath water and take off her clothes.

Steed pressed the doorbell with a gloved finger and waited for the expected response. He swung his umbrella jauntily, listening for the sound of footsteps on the other side of the door. Jennings had called just a while ago and he would now be able to share the reason that the chocolate had affected him and not Mrs. Peel. His lips curled up in a smile as he heard the snick of the latch release.

“Just fix yourself a drink, Steed. I’ll be a minute longer.” Emma’s voice came through the bedroom door.

“You seem very sure of who is at your doorstep, Mrs. Peel. Don’t you think it might be wise to make certain your visitor is who you think it is before releasing the lock?” Steed removed his bowler and gloves, placed the gloves in the hat, and laid both, along with the umbrella, on the table beside the door. He removed his topcoat and laid it casually over the back of the sofa. “Shall I make you one too?” He addressed the open door as he walked toward the drinks tray.

“Please, and I may need a little assistance with this zip in a moment, as well.” Emma appeared in the doorway with arms behind her back. “I seem to have got it caught and can’t see to get it loose.” She walked across and turned her back to him.

Steed lowered one eyebrow and studied the zipper. “Hum. Back up toward the light. Seems to be a bit of material here, just where it shouldn’t be. These can be very dangerous things. Ask any small boy.” He worked the tab of the zipper up and down.

“I’d think that bigger boys would be in more danger.” Emma said wryly.

“No, by the age of ten most have learned to be extremely careful. Now when I was a boy, buttons were more the thing and, unfortunately, I learned rather late the intricacies of zips.”

Emma craned her neck to look back over her shoulder at him. “Terrible accident was it?” Her grin was smug. “No lasting damage it seems.”

“I won’t go into detail, but as a result I took a special course.” He chuckled and then his face became a picture of concentration, brow furrowed, lips pressed together. One more tug and the teeth of the zipper closed smoothly. “Ahh,” his breath came out in a sigh and his face relaxed into a smile. “And I learned to deal with snags like this in short order. Makes me a very handy person to have around in cases like this.”

“Well, you men have the advantage of being able to see what you are working on. Try doing it behind your back, at the level of your shoulder blades and see how easy it is.” Emma shrugged her shoulders and smoothed the material of the dress over her flanks. She took the glass that Steed had poured for her and turned to tell him what she had found.

“Testosterone” they spoke simultaneously. The triumphant smiles they both wore turned to ones of surprise. “How did you. . .” both began at once.

“Franklin” explained Emma, as Steed said. “Jennings.”

He laughed and continued as Mrs. Peel raised one eyebrow and gestured, giving him the floor. “I’m glad no one was here to listen in on that strange exchange. Might think the worst. But Jennings called not long before I left the flat. The man has been at it since we left him last night. No telling how long he had been working before. No life at all outside the lab, I’ll wager, but how would Franklin know? That was the editor chap, am I right?”

“Yes, but he didn’t tell me himself. He dropped by this morning with an arm load of things that Lowe has published.” Her eyes directed Steed’s gaze to the stack on the sofa. “And he took the opportunity to ask me to the function this evening.” She studied the face of the man standing in front of her. A slight tightening of the jaw and a deepening of the crease between his eyebrows made her face soften with the beginning of a smile. Her fingers touched Steed’s lapel for an instant. “I told him I had asked someone already, but I did promise him a dance.” She turned with a triumphant feeling that was only slightly evident in her carriage and smiled brightly to herself with her back to Steed as she retrieved the last of the periodicals she had been reading. She wiped the smile from her face as she turned back to him.

“Seems as well as being a botanist, Lowe is something of an amateur anthropologist as well. A lot of information here concerning the rites associated with the use of the Theobroma fruit by the indigenous population.” She sat and motioned with her head for Steed to join her. He brought his drink and sat beside her on the sofa. “It’s used primarily as an aide to increase the rapidity of the younger men’s assimilation into adulthood. Makes them very susceptible to the indoctrination that is required to learn all the complicated rituals that have to be done perfectly in order for the gods to smile on the tribe. Anecdotally its’ influences are particularly effective with males from puberty through young adulthood, and then very gradually it gets less effective. In females there seems to be very little effect until after the childbearing years have passed and then there is a slight increase, but never as great in females as males. The only thing I could think of that would fit those criteria was testosterone, although it could be the absence of oestrogens now that I think about it. But all the victims being men, it is a common factor. Somehow, though, I can’t think that it was just a regular chocolate that would have caused that reaction. How could they put something in the marketplace that would cause that sort of reaction in half the population?” Her expression gave him the floor.

“Nothing as complicated an explanation as that from Jennings. He said he went through three sets of tests before he was satisfied that contamination of the wrapper wasn’t contributing to the findings.” He raised his eyebrows and grinned wickedly. “Just how he

thinks the contamination might have occurred is anyone's guess. When the results of the electron microscope confirmed the initial identification, he decided he had enough to call and let me know. Seems the molecular structure of the substance is a mirror image of the human hormone testosterone. Never seen anything like it before he said. Thinks it somehow connects or combines with those molecules in the bloodstream and from there it gets rather esoteric and basically incomprehensible." Steed raised his eyebrows and gave a shrug. "He would not be pinned down on how that could affect a person. Said that many years of testing would have to be done before anything definite could be ascertained. I told him years were not available if this was really behind these men committing suicide. He wouldn't be pushed. So, I'll hazard a guess that this paper of Lowe's does more to explain what is going on than we will ever get from Jennings." He sat his glass on the table. "Still don't see how it could cause perfectly happy men to commit suicide. The thought never crossed my mind last night. And you are right, it couldn't be just one of the run of the mill Theobroma chocolates that did that, though think of the fortune you could make if it affected everyone as it did me. The ultimate aphrodisiac."

"Only if your partner lived through the initial fright of the episode, or what ever you call it that took place at Emile's." She took the last sip of her drink.

"Well, every rose has to have a thorn, Mrs. Peel." He said with a grin, stood up and sat his empty glass on the table. "Ready to go and meet this paragon?"

"And I can introduce you to Franklin." Emma said brightly. "He really is a very nice man." She cast a covert glance at Steed as she went into her bedroom to get her wrap. Her voice floated back to Steed who narrowed his eyes. "He is very tall and quite an interesting conversationalist. Sheila says he is too nice to be an editor. Not ruthless enough, she says. He does seem..." The crease between Steed's eyebrows deepened.

They paused a moment at the head of the stairs. Music floated up to them, counterpoint to the murmur of voices and laughter coming from the closely packed throng in evening dress. Emma scanned the crowd from this high vantage point trying to pick out the face from the dust jacket, while Steed's eyes looked for the tall, gangly figure that Emma had described during the ride over. It was easy to pick Franklin out in the crowd and Steed's grey eyes narrowed as he followed the figure across the room.

"I don't see him." Emma said.

Steed gave a slight start and looked at her blankly. "Lowe." He said as it dawned on him who exactly she meant. "Perhaps he is waiting to make a fashionably late entrance. I do see the Franklin chap, at least I think it's him from your description, tallest man in the room." Her eyes followed the direction of his gaze and she nodded, her lips curling up into a smile. Steed tried to soften the tightening of his features he knew was betraying his response to the smile as it broadened. He cleared his throat and brought a hand up to his mouth in an effort to cover his discomfort at the thought of her finding another man attractive. Personally he thought that aside from his height there seemed nothing at all to recommend him and excessive height could have its drawbacks. "Perhaps he can tell us Lowe's whereabouts." Just as well to meet it head on he thought.

"Good idea." Said Mrs. Peel as she proceeded to lead the way down the stairs. What was she getting herself into? Did she really want to let these two meet? With her in the middle? She began to regret the build up she had given Franklin in the car on the way here. What might Franklin say innocently, and what, exactly, would be Steed's reaction if it happened to slip that she had said they were involved? Well, they were involved, no matter how much they tried to skirt around the fact. Her mine raced around in circles and she felt Steed's hand cup her elbow as he guided her through the crush. Franklin saw them before she had a chance to think about it further. Weaving his way through the throng near the tables he smiled the shy smile that transformed his features.

"Mrs. Peel." His voice held the smile that was on his face. He glanced at Steed and Emma made the introductions.

"Franklin, I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your first name." She looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"I never use it," his voice came down to her as he bent closer to be heard above the noise without having to shout. "Everyone just calls me Franklin. I have no idea what my parents were thinking when they inflicted my given name on me and I try not to think of it unless it is absolutely necessary." He laughed.

Emma's smile rewarded him, and she felt Steed's grip tighten slightly on her arm. "This is John Steed. You two have something in common. He usually goes by his surname as well, though there is nothing at all wrong with John. Franklin, Steed. Steed, Franklin."

She finished and was relieved when the two shook hands and smiled half-heartedly at each other, mumbling pleased to meet you and sizing each other up.

Steed beamed a false smile at Franklin and proceeded to say, "Mrs. Peel showed me the stack of reading matter you brought by this morning. It's made me want to meet this Lowe fellow. They, *we*, seem to share a lot of the same interests." He stood back a bit from Franklin and his grasp on Emma's elbow brought her closer to him and increased her distance from the tall fellow opposite them.

Franklin straightened to his full height so that Steed had to look up a bit to meet his eyes. "He should be around here somewhere. I'll see if I can find him so that you two can talk." His demeanour had changed ever so slightly as he stared down into Steed's eyes. "Then Mrs. Peel might give me the dance she promised." He turned to scan the crowd.

Emma thought that he certainly could use his size to good effect when the occasion warranted, a very different side to him than she had seen before. She would have thought a bit about the dynamics of male aggressive displays in pairing relationships, but Franklin's voice and Steed's pressing his chest against her shoulder called her back to the present.

"There he is, over in the corner. Shall I take you over now and introduce you, Steed?" He addressed Steed, but his eyes sought Emma's.

"If you would be so kind." Steed's voice was cold in Emma's ear as she nodded to Franklin and the three began to make their way across the room.

Emma found it hard to recognize the man that Franklin approached as the same one she had seen pictured on the book jacket. It had obviously been a picture taken many years before. The thick, bushy head of hair he had sported had receded almost entirely, leaving just a ruff above his ears. He also wore thick horn rimmed glasses and was a bit plumper and more stooped than the picture portrayed. The baldhead was shiny in the bright lights of the room and the evidence of a fading tan, probably a result of his time in the tropics, left him looking in need of a good wash. They stood quietly to one side and listened as he talked to the group around him.

"The book just sort of wrote itself. A very strange sort of feeling, almost like I was receiving the text and was merely the instrument that set it to paper." He laughed, but the sound was not engaging. He turned toward Franklin and nodded to him, as though he were giving him leave to speak. "Franklin," he said and then turned his gaze to the couple that was just to the side and a little behind Franklin. When Emma met his gaze a shiver ran up her spine. Steed's grip tightened on her elbow. The man's eyes were such a light shade of blue that they almost looked colourless. That and the magnification of them by the thick lenses of the glasses made them very eerie. Emma thought of Sheila's remark about his strange eyes giving her the creeps. They were certainly arresting, she

would say that at least. Like looking into the blank eyes of a cartoon character.

Franklin introduced them and after exchanging nods they remained on the edge of the group and listened to the conversation that was almost a soliloquy by Lowe. Every now and again someone made a comment or asked a question that would send him off again. Steed's hand released her elbow and slid across her back to rest possessively on her left shoulder and bring her into the protective circle of his arm. Franklin edged around and stood at her left side. Emma felt sandwiched between the two of them and began to be just a little angry at the male display, even though she had thought, before it started, that it would be fun. Now she wasn't quite sure. She definitely resented the fact that she was being treated as the prize in a contest.

Franklin edged closer to Mrs. Peel and bent down so that his mouth was close to her ear. "If you'd like, we could go and have that dance now." He pulled back so that he could look at her for her response. Emma felt Steed begin to stroke her shoulder with his index finger. It was more than she could take. She brought the heel of her shoe down, not quite forcefully, on his toe to make her displeasure known and stepped away from him causing his hand to slide off her shoulder. Taking Franklin's offered arm, she glanced back over her shoulder as she and Franklin made their way toward the room where the dancing was taking place. Steed was looking after them, but when he saw her turn he immediately turned his attention back to Lowe. Emma recognized the look that now masked his face; one that he donned when he was engrossed in the middle of a case. Bland and innocuous, the better not to scare off the quarry, but she could recognize the snake ready to strike, even if no one else could. She resented that she was not beside him. She turned to Franklin and smiled brightly.

Steed wiggled his toes inside his shoe and watched her as she left with Franklin. He was successful in keeping a scowl from his face, but could not keep the confusion and jealousy that boiled in his brain under control. What was she playing at? The signals that he received from her were decidedly mixed. She glanced toward him and before she could catch his eye, he mentally shook himself and turned his attention back to Lowe as he monopolized the conversation. He waited patiently edging closer. When an opening presented itself he said, "Oh, are you talking about your latest novel? Please don't give the plot away, I just got a copy today and haven't read it yet." Lowe turned to look at him.

"Steed, am I right?" The smile on his face seemed strained. Whether it was from being interrupted or for some other reason wasn't clear. "Are you an author too?"

"Oh, no. I could never be that clever, but the lady I came with is a client of Grayson's." Steed's manner was mild.

"Mrs. Peel, was it? I've read some of her things. Brilliant woman. I can't think that she would be in the company of anyone who wasn't clever." His eyes seemed to get even lighter when he looked you in the eye.

“You know how it is. Some people like to surround themselves with lesser lights. Makes theirs seem all the brighter still.”

“I shouldn’t have thought that at all.” Lowe made a face that expressed disbelief. Whether at the implied slight of Mrs. Peel or the self-deprecation carried in the previous remark, wasn’t clear. “Have you read any of my previous books?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure. This one was a bequest from a friend. He left his entire library to me. A lot of titles there that you’ve authored it seems. Lord Prescott was quite the fan of yours.” Steed watched the other man closely at the mention of Prescott’s name and thought he saw a slight tick just below his left eye. Otherwise he might as well have commented on the weather. One of the other men expressed regret at Lord Prescott’s passing and there was a general murmur of agreement. A lady standing to the side delicately brought up the hints of suicide that had been circulating. Steed continued to keep his attention on Lowe while seeming to follow the conversation. He cautiously followed as Lowe backed out of the circle and made his way through the crowd and toward a door at the far end of the room. Steed snatched a glass from a passing waiter and turned his back as Lowe stopped to survey the room before grasping the doorknob and slipping out. Steed glanced about for a moment trying to get a glimpse of Mrs. Peel. He didn’t see her and turned to follow Lowe.

Dancing with Franklin was an unusual experience for Emma. Rarely did she dance with a partner who was so much taller than she. Her view was restricted and in order to see anything but the front of Franklin's shirt she had to turn her head to one side or the other. She was accustomed to being able to keep an eye on the activity in a room by looking over her partner's shoulder, but in this instance there was no way she could keep an eye on the crowd in the far room through the archway. No way that she could watch and see if Steed should happen to need her assistance. Luckily for her the music, when combined with the noise of the crowd, restricted conversation and she was able to go over in her mind the occurrences of the last few moments while turning her head from side to side occasionally to see if she could spy Steed or Lowe.

Emma realized that she had caused the confrontation, civilized though it was, and she knew that she should be able to live with the consequences. It only proved that Steed did harbor feelings for her. Just what sort of feelings she needed to hear from him. And as silly as she thought it was, in essence she had acted like a teenager, still she had become angry at the way the men had postured. Much of the anger was self-directed. The remainder was aimed at Steed. They had to somehow get this settled between them. She hated the ambiguous state of their, what? What did you call what they had together? If he only would just come out and say how he felt, maybe she wouldn't have needed to set him up this way. But what if his feelings weren't the same as hers? Did she want to go on if what she felt was not reciprocated? The insecurity was beginning to impact almost everything she did. She thought sheepishly of what Franklin must think of them. She had told him they were involved and if Steed hadn't been sending off such threatening vibes she was sure that he would never have acted, or reacted, even in the mild way that he had. He had said nothing, but she could feel the stiffness that said he didn't want to be in the middle of this strange couple. The music ended and as he walked her off the floor she thought she caught a glimpse of a familiar back disappearing through a door on the far side of the next room. She smiled her thanks to Franklin and turned to make her way toward the just closed door. Sheila's voice intercepted her.

"Emma," she called, "Just a moment, here is someone I want you to meet." She indicated a couple behind her.

Emma smiled, nodded, and proceeded on her way as if she hadn't heard.

Sheila shrugged and snared Franklin instead.

Steed opened the door and looked cautiously around, nothing, just an empty room with a door in the opposite wall, no windows. He stepped in and crossed to the door. Locked. He jiggled the handle.

“Just a moment.” The disembodied voice of Lowe.

It dawned on Steed that he had pursued his quarry to the gent’s. He stepped back shaking his head and without answering, retreated across the room. His attention had been divided and he knew from experience that it could be very dangerous in his line of work. This time it had only led to what could have been an embarrassing situation, but if it occurred again, the consequences could be much more serious. He simply had to get the state of his relationship with Emma onto some kind of solid ground. This was not the time for him to be making an adolescent idiot of himself over his worry that his feelings were not returned in kind. He had known that working with her might be the biggest mistake he had ever made. He was still mulling things over in his mind when the door to the room he had left opened. Noise from all the people gathered there flowed in. Mrs. Peel’s face appeared around the edge of the panel. She opened her mouth to speak but he quickly motioned for her to be silent by putting a finger to his lips. She stepped back as he came toward the door. Taking her arm he closed the door and guided her toward an empty corner of the room.

“Enjoy your dance?” He asked with just a hint of tightness in his voice.

“Where’s Lowe?” She asked, ignoring his question.

“Attending a call of nature, I assume. I wasn’t going to follow him and make certain.” He looked at her and decided that if he was going to be able to concentrate on the job at hand then they really needed to set a few things straight between them. “Come out on the balcony, Mrs. Peel.”

“Steed, it’s freezing out there and what about Lowe?”

“Lowe isn’t going anywhere in the next few moments and we need to talk.” His grip on her arm tightened slightly and he opened the French doors that led outside.

She went with him; he really gave her little choice. She shivered in the chilly wind even in that first instant as he closed the doors behind them. He stood facing her, her back to the doors so that he shielded her from the worst of the wind.

“I am aware that now might not be the most appropriate time, but if I am going to be able to concentrate on the job at hand I need to get a few things straight.” She opened her mouth to reply and he shook his head. “No, let me finish. Just what are you playing at?” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his breath rising in a cloud before his face. Her face was in shadow, but he could see enough to tell that she was

listening with the concentration that was her hallmark. The dark smudges that hid her eyes were fastened onto his eyes. She shivered slightly.

“What do you mean?” Her voice was defiant.

“If you are going to play that game, perhaps we had better just go back inside.” He turned and opened the door, waiting patiently for her to enter first.

Steed saw Lowe as they walked across the room and without telegraphing his intention to Emma in anyway left her standing and made his way toward him. He refused to look behind him to see if she would follow.

“Lowe, I was wondering if we might talk. I have a few questions that I think you might be able to answer.” He said in a mild voice as he reached the older man’s side.

“What questions might they be, Steed?”

“I have a friend who says that you are something of an authority on all things botanical. I happen to be very interested myself in starting an arboretum at my place down in the country. Just a bit of this and that, specimens from all over. Not the usual things, something a bit different. Thought you might be able to guide me. You know, tell me what might do well and where.” He paused for a moment to give the man a chance to respond and when he didn’t, resumed. “I’m given to understand that you have discovered some new species recently. I had thought that all that sort of thing had been finished in our father’s time, but happily I was mistaken. I wondered if, perhaps, I could presume to get one of the new ones you found to plant at my place. Do you think it could be arranged? I had been talking to Lord Prescott about it not too long before..” He stopped and tried to look uncomfortable. “Well, you can see that now I’m without anyone to give me advice.”

“Well, I am a botanist but that’s not the sort of thing I usually do. I could give you the names of some others, fellows who specialize in laying out something like you have in mind. As for the other, I’ll consider it.”

“Could you? I would appreciate it. I tell you what. Why don’t we meet, say for lunch tomorrow? It is so crowded here and then you could tell me all about the last trip you made. My club lays on a fairly good spread or anywhere you’d like. I ring you in the morning, shall I? I can get the number I’m sure, don’t bother.” He said as Lowe began to fumble for his wallet. “I really must be getting on now.” He glanced around and saw Mrs. Peel standing off to the side watching him while standing beside Sheila. He tilted his head in her direction and shrugged his shoulders as he smiled at Lowe. “You know how it is.” He clapped Lowe on the back and turned away.

After telling Mrs. Peel of his arrangements to meet Lowe the following afternoon Steed was silent for the remainder of the drive to her flat. He parked the Bentley and vaulted the door to walk around and hand her from the car. As she opened the outer door of the building he turned to leave. She touched his sleeve. He looked at her and said nothing.

“Look, I’m sorry. It was a stupid, childish thing to do.” There was a snap in her words. He wasn’t sure if it was directed at him or at herself. He said nothing.

“I had no idea you would react this way. I didn’t think it through.” She waited for a response. “What more can I say?” He only looked at her. “Steed, come up and let’s talk this out.” He nodded and followed her up to the top floor of the building.

They entered the flat and he took her coat and hung it on the rack near the entry. He shed his outer coat and it joined hers on the rack. His bowler, umbrella and gloves he laid on the table just inside the door. She crossed and began to pour drinks for both of them from the decanter on the drinks tray. He walked slowly toward her and took the glass that she held out to him. Looking around the room as if he’d never seen it before, he finally went to the sofa and sat down stiffly at one end. He took a sip of the brandy and then without thinking gulped the whole glass down. His eyes darted around to glance at her and then glued themselves to the empty glass, cradled in both hands. Her skirts came into his line of vision. He lifted his gaze to meet hers as she poured more brandy in his glass, then lowered his eyes again.

“If it’s that difficult for you, Steed, we can just forget the whole thing. I’m sorry I started it. It was silly and childish.” She stopped and he sensed that she was looking down at him. He knew that she was waiting, but it took a moment for him to collect his thoughts.

“No, I, we need to do this.” He took her hand and pulled her down to sit beside him. “I . . . When . . . Do you remember the night of the Italian dinner?”

She smiled. “How could I forget?”

“I came with the express purpose of breaking it off between us.”

“I know.”

“Stop interrupting me! Please, Emma.” He looked into her eyes. “I said then that I didn’t want you to be hurt,” Steed paused and took a deep breath, “and later when you wanted to work with me and we argued about that . . . and I said I didn’t want you exposed to the dangers that could, would happen. All I said then was true, but there was more to it than that.” He looked away for a moment and then met her eyes again. “I was afraid I would be hurt, and I’m afraid of that tonight. I don’t handle this kind of fear well.” She seemed as if she might respond and he squeezed her hand so that she would remain silent. He stood abruptly and went to the window to look out into the

night. His voice was soft and she had to strain to hear. "I have always avoided getting emotionally attached to anyone. Early on, a million years ago when I was young, I lost too many friends, people I cared for deeply, to want that to happen again. Not just the war, earlier when members of my family died. . . I had a hard time dealing with the loss. So I made a rule not to care for anyone too much again. It was too painful when they left. But you came along and," He turned to look at her, her head was bowed and all he could see was a curtain of her hair. "I knew almost from the first that you would have the power to cause that sort of hurt for me again. So when I saw that you wanted to continue, I told myself that it would be you that was hurt. Inside I knew though, that if we kept on. . . it would be me. It frightened me." He paused again. "But I wanted to be with you. You made me feel. . . different about myself, in a way that I liked, so I tried to ignore it. I thought that it wouldn't be long before the newness, the excitement, would wear off and you would go about your own life. You remember, you said you didn't want any strings, didn't want to do what was expected of you, but wanted to suit yourself and no one else. So, I told myself that it couldn't last long and. . . that I wouldn't let it get serious. But, I couldn't seem to stop it. And now I don't know what to do." He stopped abruptly. "Look, if that time has arrived, if you're ready for it to end. . . let's make the break, swift and clean." He tried to laugh but the sound was more like a sob. "It will heal more swiftly than a gradual tearing."

. . . He waited what seemed like an eternity for an answer. He found he could not simply stand and wait, so he walked across the room, for no apparent reason and then returned to stand by the window and look out into the night. He had decided that if she said nothing in the next moment, he would have to leave, salvaging what dignity he could, when finally her voice called him back to chance a glance toward the sofa where she still sat.

"Does this mean that you love me?"

Her head was still bowed and he could not see her face. The question brought a look of disbelief to his face.

"What have I just spent the last few minutes saying?"

"I listened very carefully and the word love never passed your lips." She looked up then and her dark eyes seemed to penetrate his soul.

"For a person who is supposedly bright, Mrs. Peel, you can sometimes be very obtuse." He stood very still. It was nearly impossible for him to understand that she hadn't been aware of how he felt. "How could you not know? Haven't I made drastic changes in the way I live my life? Did you not think it was so that we could be together? That I've not broken every rule in the book by working with someone I'm involved with on a personal level?" He did not say that he had placed himself, not to mention the outcome of some of their cases, in jeopardy on more than one occasion to put her safety first. By God, he had even become monogamous. Though he still appreciated a beautiful

woman when he saw one. What more was expected? His disbelief was evident on his face.

“But, you never told me.” Defensive anger flared in her eyes. “How was I to know that this was not the way you treat all the women you take to your bed?”

“You underestimate yourself, Emma.” He smiled down at her. “And you overestimate me.” “I’ve heard all the rumours.” She began.

“That’s what the majority of them are, rumours.” He cut her off. “If you need a spoken assurance, then, Emma Peel, I love you.” He ran the words together, hurrying them out into the world. She beamed a smile at him. “It’s your turn now.” He said as he returned her smile, but he was very aware of his heart thumping in his chest as he awaited her response.

She stood and walked toward him, stopping a few feet away before she said, “I love you, too, but... I still reserve the right to be my own person.” She watched him intently.

He laughed; this time the sound was full of joy. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He took a step forward. “And how do you suggest we seal the bargain?”

“We could open a bottle of really nice champagne.” She said flippantly stepping closer still, “or” she spit into her hand and extended it toward him, “shake hands like gentlemen.”

Steed laughed again, spit into his palm and took her hand. “I wonder how such an atrocious custom started?” he asked as he drew her closer. “I think there is a more appropriate method.” His eyes were dark as he pulled her to him. She melted into his arms. When the kiss ended and they surfaced for air she chuckled softly.

“Is that why you gave me the chocolatier’s and you took the morgue?”

“To be honest, I had no idea that a visit to Dr. Nichols’ domain would be necessary.” He smiled into her eyes. “Shouldn’t have admitted that, should I? Just let you believe it was a sacrifice made on the altar of love.”

“Honesty is the best policy and to prove it you are going to be rewarded.” She turned away and walked across to the bedroom door. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder with a sly smile. “Coming?”

Emma slowly became aware of her surroundings. She felt the weight of Steed's arm across her shoulders. His even breathing stirred the hair that had fallen across her cheek. She shifted slightly so that she could look at him as he slept. Her movement caused him to stir and turn to lie on his back. How many nights had they slept in the same bed? Not that many, yet. She smiled to herself, remembering last night. It was as if they had tried to make up for the things that had been left unsaid for so long. At one point his running dialogue detailing everything he loved about her had been so distracting that she had cried out "enough" and his laughter had been more distracting still. Their lovemaking had been, not more exciting, but sweeter now that she didn't have to wonder.

They had lain together talking after their fires had been banked. The embers smouldered, waiting for the right conditions to flame up again. He had questioned her closely about this Franklin chap. She had smiled, but refrained from teasing him. Her fingers wander idly across his chest as she explained her empathy for the tall man who didn't seem at ease with most people. She'd asked Steed who he thought might do for such a nice man. He had responded with a laugh and refused to be drawn into her matchmaking plans.

"Don't you think it would be nice if everyone could find someone to love?" she'd asked.

"Let them find their own." His had reached out to clasp hers and brought it to his lips. "I've found mine." And the fire had blazed up again.

Remembering, her smile widened until she thought it might just split her face. She rolled close and breathed in the smell of him. Pillowed her head on his shoulder and contemplated just what might happen when he waked. She hoped it wouldn't be too long. Her hand began to wander down his abdomen. She might just have to help the sunlight that was peeking through the curtains. She could tell the instant he wakened, felt all his muscles tense just before his hand shot down and trapped hers against his belly.

"You are a single minded woman, my love." His voice was husky as it reached her ears. "Are you sure it's me you love, or is it him?" His gaze indicated his erect penis.

"You're first, but he comes a close second." Her smile and flashing eyes teased him. They laughed together and tumbled around the bed playfully before coming together, seeking the pleasure that each found in the other's embrace.

“He invited us to his place,” Steed said as he placed the receiver back in the cradle. He smiled wryly at Emma, reaching out to take her hand, stroking the backs of her fingers with his thumb. “But somehow I didn’t think I would feel comfortable partaking of anything he might serve. We’re to meet him at Emile’s for a late lunch. We don’t have a lot of time since we have to go by my place for fresh clothes. Unless you would rather meet me there?” He raised one eyebrow in question.

“I’ll go with you. I can drop the bag I packed, and, listen, tell me if I’m presuming too much, but I think I can make a little room for more than your spare razor here.” She stopped and looked at him trying to judge if she had gone too far.

“We do seem to be spending quite a bit of time together. It would be convenient if we didn’t have to race back and forth so much.” He smiled and reached out to touch her. “Let’s make a pact. You say whatever you want and I will too. No need to waste energy worrying over how things will be taken. Takes too much time away from much more pleasant pursuits.” His free hand began to wander down her naked side.

“Steed, you said we didn’t have a lot of time.” She wiggled away from him and stood beside the bed. “Besides, I think I need a little respite. A little chaffed I think.”

He looked at her with mock concern, “Would a kiss make it all better? I’d be happy to volunteer my services.”

She struck out at his shoulder. “Your services are the cause.” Laughing she walked toward the bathroom door. He watched the swing of her hips as she left.

They entered Emile's and found that Lowe was waiting for them. They shared a light meal, excellent wine and pleasant conversation. Emma began to wonder if all the different parts of the puzzle they had so painstakingly pieced together had an alternate solution. He seemed just the sort of man Franklin had said he was, intelligent, articulate, interesting, despite the strange eyes. Over coffee Lowe said that he hoped they didn't mind but he had made arrangements for them to meet one of the men he had spoken to Steed about last evening, a Mr. Winfred. They could follow him to his place if they liked or he would be glad to drive them and bring them back when they had met him. They could see the sort of thing he was capable of by looking at the grounds of his home. Steed settled the bill and they all walked out to stand on the pavement together. Emma looked at Steed trying to get a sense of what was going on in his mind as he talked to Lowe while waiting for the cars to be brought round. Steed chatted with the man about some rain forest species of plant. She had no idea he was even interested in botany. The cars were brought round and when they were settled following Lowe she told him as much.

"I am a many sided and complex figure, my dear." He said with a grin. "I'm sure there are many things that you will have the joy of discovering in the future. Always keep a little back, adds to the mystery."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Really, though, do you think we could be mistaken in all this? He seems so nice, and what on earth could his motive be?"

"Sometimes warped minds don't have motives that are readily evident to sane people. Could be that's why I've excelled in this particular field." He glanced at her and then back at the road.

"Oh, dear! Have I fallen for a mysterious maniac?" She smiled and thought how much easier she felt around him now that things were out in the open.

"That could be another one of the mysteries." He raised his eyebrow in a leer and then winked at her.

The road was becoming less travelled and the countryside less inhabited. Emma had thought she was familiar with most of the byways in this general area, but found that she was mistaken. She couldn't remember being down this particular road before. They turned between great stone pillars into a tree-lined lane. Lowe's car slowed and Steed in turn, braked the Bentley. They crept over the road as it became more winding and rutted. At least a mile in and the woods on either side of the lane began to take on a more open aspect, the brown bracken and undergrowth cleared. After a bit, neatly manicured rides were seen, winding through the trees. Magnificent specimen plantings of a variety of trees, widely spaced for effect, were interspersed with great curving flowerbeds, mostly dormant this time of year, and backed by complimentary shrubs, the mandatory evergreen Rhododendrons, as well as deciduous varieties, their naked branches stark and skeletal.

“Someone must be a plantsman of the first water.” Steed looked around them. “Beautiful, I can’t think it isn’t on the list of private gardens open to the public on a limited basis at least.”

They passed a huge evergreen, its’ pendulous branches almost sweeping the ground, its’ spread immense. Before them was a large, sprawling house, spread out, long rather than tall, nestled into the woods that cradled it on either side. The drive circled round and they followed Lowe as he drove up before the great door.

“Just follow my lead, my dear. If this Winfred we’re going to meet is mixed up in all this, we may have to divide in order to conquer.” Steed said as he set the handbrake. “We’ll have to consider the odds.” Emma nodded her assent.

As they emerged from the car Lowe walked up to them. “Winfred must be out in the grounds or he would have come to the door when he heard us drive up. He wasn’t quite sure when to expect us. We’ll just go in, shall we, and see if someone inside knows where he is.” He turned and they followed him up the steps.

Lowe lifted the brass knocker and they waited, looking back at the view across the lawn. Even under overcast skies it was a breath-taking prospect. The huge door swung open and the butler, an older man, ushered them inside. Lowe talked with him for a moment while Steed and Mrs. Peel stood back and looked around the entry hall. The butler nodded and with a gesture indicating that they should follow, led the way to a door at the right, underneath the great staircase.

“If you would just wait in here, I will go and see if Mr. Winfred is available.”

“Thank you, Jenkins.” Lowe said to the man’s back, for he had turned on his heel and left them.

They entered the room. It was huge, book lined, fully two stories high, with a catwalk at the level of the second story. A small spiral staircase tucked in a corner gave access to the catwalk. The shelves contained as many books as Emma had ever seen together in one place outside a Library. The smell of old leather and paper permeated the air. She slowly turned and looked up at the volumes, restraining the curiosity that built. She would have loved to take her time and examine all the titles. As it was she looked at Steed and found that he was watching her with a small smile and a raised eyebrow. He leaned close and muttered softly in her ear.

“Well, now I know how to hold your attention, should the need ever arise, I’ll just amass a huge library.”

She shot him a questioning look.

“Only in one other circumstance have I seen that bemused, ravenous look in your eye.” His own eyes gleamed wickedly and she turned her back to hide her smile.

He turned to speak to Lowe. “Just who have we come to meet? I must say that I was impressed with what I saw on the approach. I can never hope to match it in my lifetime. Some of the specimen trees here must be at least two hundred years old.”

He was interrupted by a voice from above on the catwalk. Franklin appeared and looked down on the trio below. “Some much older than that. The place has been in the hands of my family for quite a few generations and we have all had a weakness for gardening, some on a grand scale. Welcome to my home.” He walked toward the corner stairs and disappeared for a moment. In that instant when he was not visible Steed flashed a follow-my-lead-look to Emma. She acknowledged it with an almost imperceptible nod.

Franklin’s long legs came into view and then the rest of him as he ducked his head to avoid a collision with the tightly spiralled staircase. He smiled at the puzzled expression on Mrs. Peel’s face. “Perhaps an explanation is in order. I *am* an editor at Grayson and Sons. We all work our way up through the ranks, family tradition, you know. I am Winfred Franklin Grayson, major shareholder in the family business. It comes in quite handy, having three last names.” He walked across the room and touched the spine of a large red leather volume. The bookshelf it sat on made a whirring noise and began to rotate to reveal a wet bar. “Might I offer you some refreshment after your drive?”

“A brandy would go well just now.” Said Steed as he walked toward the tall man. “Do you have three occupations as well as three names? Editor, horticultural consultant and what else could there be?” He asked as he took the glass from the taller man. He glanced at Emma. She met his eyes and advanced to stand beside him. He swirled the snifter and inhaled the fumes released by the motion of the liquid.

Emma watched the tiny whirlpool that the brandy formed and the thought that it might contain a bit of what had caused Steed’s problem at Emile’s blossomed. As Franklin began to speak she turned to face him, wondering how to keep Steed from drinking the brandy.

“I don’t quite know how to respond to that. I don’t know that I have a real occupation at all, but several avocations.” He turned to Mrs. Peel, “And what for you Mrs. Peel? You know how it is to have many interests and to have inherited a business that may not have been your first choice. How would you classify the many things that you pursue? Occupations? Avocations?”

Emma opened her mouth to answer, but he continued, turning his attention to Lowe. “And you Lowe, you are a man of many talents, as well. How would you rate your interests?” If Lowe answered at all the sound of it was lost when Emma stumbled against

Steed and knocked the drink from his hand. The brandy spilled on the red Turkey carpet that was spread on the wide oak boards of the floor.

“Oh, How clumsy of me, I do apologize.” She stood looking down at the spreading stain and shards of glass as if she had never before seen spilled liquid.

Steed took his handkerchief from his pocket and began to wipe the few drops that had splashed his sleeve. “Really, my dear, I don’t think you need anything more after the wine we had at Emile’s.” His voice was heavy with sarcasm. Only Emma saw the “well-done” look in his eye.

“You should talk. The cost of your alcoholic intake would finance a small country.” She threw the words at him. “*Follow my lead, indeed!*” she thought.

“It’s really no problem.” Franklin interjected as he rang for the butler and began to pour another brandy for Steed. “Why don’t we all just take our drinks and go into the morning room and talk about the things that brought you here?”

“Perhaps, I don’t need anything more myself.” Steed smiled as he sent a placating look at Mrs. Peel.

Emma glared at him and walked away, making her irritation plain for the others to see. “I really don’t see that I need be included in any plans Steed might have. I’ll just stay here and look around your library.”

The door opened and the butler came in. Franklin nodded to him and a gun appeared in the older man’s hand. “I’m afraid I really must insist, Mrs. Peel. You people keep throwing a spanner in the works regarding the plans I have spent so long trying to implement.” He walked over to her and looked down on her with a resigned smile. “I had thought that since you have stumbled into something that would have never come to light if it weren’t for Lowe’s panicked reaction to your visit to Sweet Nothings, that perhaps we could persuade you that what we are doing is for the greater good. But now, though we would, I’m sure, be able to convince Steed with the help of the persuasive compound that Lowe stumbled on to, I’m not so sure about how we could manage you.”

Lowe straightened at the mention of his name and looked daggers at the tall man. Steed and Mrs. Peel exchanged glances and it was not missed by Franklin. He pulled a gun from his jacket pocket and held it pointed at Emma.

“I really can’t figure you two out. I keep getting such mixed signals. First,” he studied Emma’s passive face, “you tell me you’re involved, and then you bicker and act as if you are less than friends. I think it may be for the best of us if we kept you two separate until we decide just how we will take care of this situation.” He turned to address the butler. “Jenkins, kindly escort Mr. Steed to the wine cellar and make sure he is restrained. Lowe,

perhaps you had better accompany them and be of assistance if necessary. I will take care of Mrs. Peel.”

Emma would have taken advantage of that split second of diverted attention if Jenkins hadn't been standing quite so close to Steed. As it was she watched with a bland expression as Steed was escorted from the room, the butler's gun pointed at his back and Lowe at his side. When the door closed behind them she looked at the tall man standing near her.

“Franklin, could you satisfy my curiosity and tell me what, exactly, you are trying to accomplish. I think I understand at least a part of the plan, but I would hate to die without a complete understanding.” She stepped back just a fraction and looked him full in the face with no sign of fear. “Why did you feel you had to cause the deaths of those men? Were you not able to persuade them to aid in the accomplishment of your plan?”

Franklin shook his head ruefully, “That was extremely unfortunate, and believe me that it was never a part of the plan. Please sit, Mrs. Peel and make yourself comfortable. If that unfortunate incident at the printer's had never happened, if we could have gotten all the copies back before they were read, if you and Steed hadn't stumbled on to the presence of the chocolate, if Lowe hadn't panicked when he saw you at Sweet Nothings and heard you mention Prescott; a multitude of ifs. They seemed to build on each other to undermine the achievement of my ultimate goal.”

“We weren't sure it was the chocolates until that happened. What did Lowe hope would happen with Steed?” She looked at him curiously.

“I have no idea and I don't think he does either. There needs to be both drug and simultaneous direction with another stimulus. He is the one who researched all of that and he knows it better than I.” He shrugged. “To me, it seemed to be panic, plain and simple.”

“And just what was the ultimate goal, Franklin?” Emma leaned toward him a fraction, so that she was perched on the edge of the sofa.

“Nothing sinister. I only wanted good things. We touched on it yesterday morning. I had hoped that we could approach this in a civilized discussion, all of us. From our conversation at your flat, we seemed to agree on a great many of the goals I am working toward. Of course I could only approach it very obliquely then, especially after I learned of your attachment to Steed. On considering it, I thought he would really be no problem. We could just use a little of our *sweet persuasion* on him and you would follow right along. Your basic beliefs and your feelings for him would bring you in to line as well. After I left I investigated a bit further and found he worked for the Ministry. Then last night and this afternoon you two seem to be at odds. I'm really sorry, Mrs. Peel, there is no time for me to try and explain it all to you.” He took a step back and indic-

ated that she should rise. “If you’ll just proceed through that door.” He indicated the door through which they had entered and Steed and the two other men had left the room.

Emma’s mind busily tried to find a way to extend the conversation. She kept her seat. “But, I really do need to know. I can’t think that I misjudged you so. I have always prided myself on being a good judge of people. I’d hate to think that someone I found so . . . nice, so interesting, intelligent, could be capable of a diabolical plot, could be responsible for the deaths of seven men.”

“But, I wasn’t. It was not meant to be that way at all.” Franklin said in a rising voice. He seemed agitated, as if he wanted to pace about, but stayed close, the barrel of the pistol pointed at Emma’s torso. “I only wanted to influence the actions of men in positions of power to do *good* things . . . for everyone.”

“What sort of things? Tell me.” Emma said as she stood, looking at him with eyes full of sympathy.

“The latest amendments to the National Health Act. The ones that were going to cost over a quarter of a million pounds.” He didn’t seem to notice that she had risen.

“The free prescription drugs?” Emma asked.

“Yes. Yesterday you said you hadn’t thought that it could possible pass.” He smiled proudly at her. “Well that was one of ours. Now everyone, rich or poor, will be able to get the medicines they need. That is the kind of thing I want to do. Insure that all people are treated fairly. And it was working so well. That wasn’t our only success.” He seemed to be enjoying the explanation of his plan, but then suddenly he looked at her and frowned. “We should have left well enough alone, but we began to be anxious that we would be found out. I, especially, thought there must be a way to influence the decisions of these men in high places without actually having to meet with them. We didn’t want there to be a chance that someone might stumble onto what we were doing. We had worked together to come up with the new chocolates, with an extra additive to be used for our subjects. It took a while to find a shop that we could commandeer, convince Sweet that he should deviate from the methods of advertising laid down by his father and grandfather. But finally he was convinced that the new marketing methods were worth a try. I helped on my end at Grayson’s. Everything was in place, but one word, just one word that was different.”

“What word, Franklin?” Emma asked with a sympathetic expression.

“Released. It should have read relieved. *I was relieved to be free to investigate the mysteries of the afterlife.* But instead it read *released.*” He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “What’s so terrible is that it wasn’t even supposed to be the trigger phrase. It had taken so long to work out all the details. Arrange for the books and sweets to

be delivered simultaneously.” He looked at her with an expression that begged her to understand. He shook his head wearily again. “Lowe said there were too many variables for it to work, said we needed more testing and a way to insure that the drug and the correct stimuli were applied simultaneously to achieve the results we were looking for. He tried to warn me that we needed to be there to monitor and step in if something should go wrong.” Bitter defeat was in his voice. “But I was *so* sure.”

Emma stood, edged closer, and looked at him imploringly, “What were some of the other successes, Franklin? Tell me.”

He pulled away from her and thrust the gun out until it rested against her chest. “No, you can’t appeal to my pride that way. I will not go to prison for an accident. We weren’t responsible. I wish there were another way but I can’t see it.”

“You can’t shoot me, Franklin.” Her hand went up to push the gun aside.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” His knuckles were white as he gripped the gun tightly and pressed it until the barrel dug into her breast. “You can never predict how a man will react if he is backed into a corner.”

“It’s a corner of you own making, Franklin, and you were responsible. You caused it, even if it wasn’t your intent. But you don’t have to have any more blood on you hands. I know that I can’t have misjudged you so badly. Neither you nor Lowe seem the kind of man that would purposefully take a life. Let us . . .”

“Let us what?” He interrupted. “I don’t think that there is an avenue that we haven’t explored.” The pressure of the barrel wavered slightly. “There is no way out of this, not that will allow us to continue with our plans. Or to stay out of prison now that someone has uncovered our part in the deaths. I thought we might convince you both. But . . .”

“You haven’t even tried, Franklin. Tell me more of what you set out to do. Was your goal a truly classless society? A redistribution of wealth?” Emma inched away from him and he didn’t seem to notice as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes for just an instant. It was all she needed. Her hand came up and knocked the gun away. The sound of the report was deafening to both of them at such close range. The look of shock on Franklin’s face might have been comical except for the fact that he had retained his hold on the pistol. Emma followed through with a sharp downward blow to his wrist and a kick to one knee. The leg buckled and as he struggled to remain standing she pushed her advantage and rained more blows to his neck and face. The gun fell from his grip and he crumpled to the floor. He made no effort to rise, merely slumped where he was, his head hanging in defeat. Emma picked up the gun and turned toward the door just as it burst open and Steed rushed in. He took in the situation at a glance.

“Well, what kept you Steed? Been sampling the cellar? I thought I might be forced

to creep about and find you." Emma smiled at him as he reverted from rescuing knight to slightly dishevelled gentleman.

"I did have two opponents to your one Mrs. Peel, even if one was slightly aged and the other very myopic. As for the cellar, whatever his other avocations, Mr. Franklin, Grayson, what ever his name, is not an oenophile. Perfectly wretched selection." He straightened his tie and flicked at the dust on his lapels.

Steed lounged in the corner of the big square sofa, propped against the high arm. Emma lay beside him resting against his chest. The lights were low and empty glasses rested on the table that backed the couch.

“I still can’t believe he had me so completely fooled.” Emma said. “Makes one almost doubt their ability to judge anyone.”

“People who believe what they’re doing is right, I find, most always give the impression that they are harmless. Sometimes they are, but the ones who want to take the choice out of your hands are the ones who are frightening.” Steed said softly as he curled a lock of her hair around his finger. “Lowe almost made me want to aid in his escape. Promised that he would flee to Central America and never return.”

“It’s like they fed on one another. Franklin wanting to make his idea of utopia a reality and Lowe just wanting to continue the research he’d had interrupted using the new discovery he had made.” She pulled away from him a bit and took her hair from around his finger. “Don’t do that, Steed, I can’t think when you do.” She shivered and smiled into the dim room.

“Too much thinking is bad for the brain. Gives it lots of wrinkles, and who wants a wrinkled brain?” He pulled her back to rest against him and pressed a kiss against her ear.

“I’m glad, at least, that it wasn’t just the regular Theobroma that had that *persuasive* effect. I think I am going to be a regular at Mr. Sweet’s establishment. Although. . . , just think what a boon for women it would be if we could just slip a bit of that compound in a man’s food or drink and then persuade him to do what ever we liked.” She turned toward him and watched for his reaction.

“As if you couldn’t already.” He pulled her toward him, but stopped suddenly. “I just had a horrid thought. What if the government should get hold of the formula?”

Emma laughed. “Have no fear, while you were filling out forms, I was rifling his office, flat and lab. I’m fairly certain I got all the notes and all the remaining concoction. It’s extremely diluted now, mingled with the Thames on the incoming tide.”

“And the notes?” Steed asked raising an eyebrow.

“The actual papers are ash in the fireplace, what they contained is in a very safe place.”

He continued to look at her questioningly.

“The wrinkles in my brain.” A devilish grin spread across her face. She leaned back and reached under the sofa. Brought out a small gold box with the Sweet Nothings

name written across the lid. "I did find these." She opened the lid and offered it to him.

He peered into the box and saw the blue and gold foil wrapping of Theobroma chocolates. Smiling he took one and began to unwrap it. "And where, exactly did you find these?"

"They were outside your door when I returned, along with this." She delved around under the couch and brought out a book.

Steed held the unwrapped chocolate between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a red-hot coal. "Not Lowe's mystery?" He pulled away from her as far as the back of the sofa would allow.

She laughed out loud and held the book up so he could see the title. "*The Importance of Trust in a Loving Relationship*"

"Mrs. Peel!" his voice was full of suppressed laughter as he popped the chocolate into her mouth.

THE END