

# The Hours Between

by Myrtle Groggins

With a noisy melange of voices around her, Emma Peel sat in a ladderback chair running a finger serenely along the rim of her wine glass. The wine was good, sanguine and a touch dry, just the way she liked it. The globed candle before her cast a pink shadow through the glass, onto the white tablecloth underneath, and lit flickers on her face like butterflies.

Outside the window of the Café Pontalba, a few hearty souls hurried by, some pulling their coats tighter against the biting wind and drizzle. It was February in New Orleans. Night was falling, and the temperature had dropped noticeably in the last hour.

Emma had always associated a languid warmth with her vision of the Big Easy, but this weather reminded her of England. She had enjoyed her first, albeit brief, trip to the Deep South, as much as she could in her line of work, but she had to admit to a little homesickness. She would also, if anyone had been around to push the question, admit to a twinge of worry under her calm features. Steed had not returned.

He should have sauntered into the little café an hour ago, so utterly out of place with his bowler hat and three-piece suit here on the corner of Jackson Square. Had it been anyone else, Emma wouldn't be worried quite in the same way because no one else she knew could give her cause for such feelings. It wasn't like him to be late. Steed was punctual, damn it, like a Swiss railway. From painful experience, she knew what could cause him to be late. In her mind, a thousand deadly scenarios flashed swiftly in a grim progression. She wished she could stop herself, but in the final analysis, she realized it would be futile to try.

'That's what you can't dismiss, isn't it?' she thought. Slowly, over the course of time, Emma had learned to acknowledge the instant attraction she had felt for Steed ever since the scant moments after she rear-ended his car years ago in London. Those were hard days, just after her husband Peter died, when the world was a bleak, tedious monument to her loss. There she was – a widow in her mid-20's – a rich, awful joke.

And then, one day, the mishap that changed her life, that jolted her back into the world of the living – bumping John Steed's Bentley. Despite the little ruse they played for the public eye, he was no mere acquaintance, no old friend. So much more. He was the inescapable truth which clung to her conscience like a velvet robe. His absence now was the gnawing heat hidden behind her soulful eyes.

The instant attraction they both felt long years hence had taken the natural course of such things. Indescribably wonderful getting to know him, getting to feel him easing into her soul, getting to love him. It was to the point now where he could have been a living extension of her, like an arm or leg. She could no longer disassociate herself from Steed anymore than she could tell her hand to drop off.

But on this day, if pushed a little further, Emma would also admit to a tiny part of her being coloured with self-loathing for ever allowing herself to fall so hard again. After Peter died, she swore to herself that she would never love another the same way. In a manner of thinking, she had kept her promise. She didn't love Steed as she did Peter; she loved him more.

"Would you like to order, ma'am?" said a man to her side.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. I was a little distracted, I'm afraid."

"I understand. Thought you might like another round."

“That... would be lovely.”

The waiter pocketed his notepad in his dingy apron and ambled toward the huge oaken bar at the front of the café. People crowded together at the tables, laughing over their beers, etouffee, and po-boys. The windows streamed with condensation from the heat inside.

Her reverie interrupted by the waiter, Emma wanted to soak up the life around her. The slow rain had stopped, giving way to a hefty twilight breeze from the river. More people were dallying around the Square.

The portrait painters had largely packed up to go home once the rain started, but a few were setting up their wares again. The psychics, perhaps sensing that the shower would be short-lived, never left at all. They merely sat stoically under their huge umbrellas and waited for the unpleasantness to pass, dishing out fortunes to whomever would pay them. Emma mischievously thought of asking them if they'd ever heard of Janice Crane, then smiled at the memory.

A sound from outside the window drew her attention. At the streetlight on the corner, a musician breathed mournful notes into his saxophone. A few gutter punks threw criticisms his way, but his tune carried a life of its own, filling the heavy air with melancholy. Only the frenetic tap dancing of two boys a few feet away, with bottle caps glued to the bottoms of their worn-out shoes and a cardboard box full of assorted change, kept the atmosphere in Emma's head from being unbearable.

At eight o'clock, three hours after she had expected to see Steed sitting across from her, Emma left the café. Angry, worried, and tipsy. Despite being in one of the world's great culinary cities, she didn't eat a bite, and the wine had gone straight to her head. Well, how could she have eaten without Steed and his assessment of the duck jambalaya? 'I wouldn't have left you here alone,' the waiter had told her with a wink and a smile as she paid her tab.

She wandered a little unsteadily now into the brisk night air, enjoying the coolness on her face. The gusts lifted her auburn hair in gentle cascades. On nights like this, she felt like she was flying. These nights where she could dream of soft feathers sheltering harder bones underneath. An eagle to soar far above the ancient slate rooftops and wrought-iron balconies of this raucous city. They were his wings that carried her, Steed's wings.

New Orleans was uncharacteristically subdued on this Thursday evening just after Mardi Gras. Sleeping off a six-week bender, it was. Emma was a little disappointed to have missed all the excitement. Most of the tourists had returned home, allowing the locals to get back to the less frenzied madness they considered normality. Even the Vieux Carre, the venerable French Quarter, was in a humane mood as Emma walked along the damp, uneven sidewalks. A good hosing down by the barkeeps and shop owners, not to mention the recent shower, had washed most of the Quarter's ubiquitous sludge into the gutters and drains. Emma seriously considered burning her shoes later, but was wary of the possible dangerous conflagration they might ignite, covered as they were with the watered-down residue of thousands of alcohol-related deposits left on the sidewalks. It really was quite disgusting, she thought, even for a city which thrives on the human weaknesses most find distasteful.

Emma liked that paradoxical quality of the Big Easy. The city allowed tourists and locals alike to party in the streets for weeks on end during carnival, with relatively few sanctions on behaviour, but when midnight tolled on Wednesday morning, mounted policemen swept the streets clean. It was like no-nonsense in the midst of lunacy. This place had just so recently been Hell's handbasket, home to a human ocean of drunken revellers, yet no one seemed to mind. Such uninhibited carousing definitely wasn't British, but she liked it anyway. After all, she enjoyed a good party as much as the next girl, but she knew her limits. She wasn't one to go for buggery and deceit. She'd spent too much time, energy, blood and sweat uncovering them, exposing them, bringing them to light. This was also one of her best-loved qualities about Steed.

Underneath his pleasing façade of Old World gentility was a harder man, a fatal underestimation which many idiots had learned in the worst way. And under that level was a strong sense of duty and honour, which always inspired Emma's respect. And even under that layer, far deeper than any other had ever gone, was the man she really knew and loved. Her Steed. Stripped of his pretence, his armour, and his reserve was a soul coursing to the same rhythm as her own. God! She didn't even have to think sometimes but he had already picked up on her intentions. Theirs was a symbiosis almost beyond belief, a mixture so complete that the two parts were nearly indistinguishable from the whole.

Emma's heart beat rapidly in her chest at the thought. She didn't know what to do or where to find him. They thought this job to be so mundane that they didn't take the usual backup measures.

When Steed left her that morning, he was cheery. He outlined his plans for the day, kissed her lightly on the lips as she lounged under the covers, and told her to enjoy her day of relaxation. And she did, up until five o'clock when he didn't show. After the three-hour mark had passed, she knew he wouldn't go back to the café. She had only two unappealing choices now – wander these cold, rowdy streets alone, or return to her hotel room and wait like a schoolgirl.

'What were we here for? What does it matter now?'

Emma's mind was unquiet as she paced across her room. She felt very ridiculous and frustrated. Her part in the deal had been so simple – wait in the airport for a package. A brainless courier job which a first-year trainee could do without a hitch. Steed had asked her along just so they could enjoy a brief change of scenery. His part was only a bit more difficult, or so they thought. Steed was to be the go-between in exchanging the package, the messenger. Did they kill the messenger? Emma chastised herself for such thinking.

At 2 am., she could keep her eyes open no longer. The television, its unblinking eye staring like a ghastly stranger at her, had long since become a source of boredom. The hum of life passing in the street below her window dropped away to a murmur. The lights were turned down in her cosy room, and it grew a shade darker when she switched off the television. Anxiety had made her tired, and the bed looked so inviting. She lay down and stretched her long, thin frame across the covers, snuggling the corner of the comforter under her chin. Emma liked to sleep that way with her head and shoulders hunched over like she was protecting a flower. Steed said it made her look like a little

girl, and he loved it.

*Sleight of hand and twist of fate... on a bed of nails he makes me wait...*

Sometime later, perhaps far in the recesses of sleep, she saw him. His familiar form was silhouetted against the dull blue light coming in through the window. He dropped his trademark bowler on the chair where she had been sitting, his hair tousled. Even in the dim light, Emma thought she saw a bruise swelling over his right eye. He was grungy with sweat and dirt. The immaculate whiteness of his shirt was stained with drops of blood. His trousers were ripped at the knees, and his coat was scuffed and torn. He swayed a bit on his feet, as if only his iron will were keeping him upright. Steed's appearance frightened her a little, and she realized it was no dream.

*See the stone set in your eyes... see the thorn twist in your side...*

Emma sprang from the bed to hold him, covering his mouth with a profound kiss. She felt his body ease under her hands. At any moment, she knew he could collapse at her feet, as she handled him like a child in her sensual arms. Too often, they had to be tough, smart, and tireless, but here together, they could simply exist. Steed's head dropped against her shoulder as he quit fighting the trials of his day.

Emma guided him slowly to the bed, the wooden floorboards creaking under them. She sat him down, kissed both closed eyes, and began removing his filthy, tattered clothing. "I'm afraid your best grey suit has given its all," she remarked. "You'll never get those trousers invisibly mended."

Steed gave a pained sigh and sat with his eyes still closed.

"My playmates were exceedingly uncivilized," he replied.

Emma dropped his clothing to the floor in an atypical display of untidiness. With a gentle hand, she cupped his jaw.

"Let's don't talk about it just now," she said quietly.

Steed's hands and knees were scratched badly, and the bruise on his head was a deep blue. What was it this time? A double cross? An unforeseen danger? An ambush? How many times before had it been him waiting for her? How many times had she woken him, battered and bruised, in the wee hours?

Emma retrieved warm, wet towel from the bathroom to clean his wounds. He watched her with immense tenderness, following her every movement as she carefully dabbed his numerous cuts. While she worked, he traced a finger along the curve of her breast, down her taut waist and onto her thigh. He smelled of earth and sweat, which aroused her senses.

With infinite, painstaking care, she lowered him to his pillow and lay down beside him. For long moments both were still, a myriad of unspoken thoughts and emotions passing between them. Then, with a move of longing and familiarity, Steed rolled over to pull her close. Emma felt her heart leap up, the most welcome sensation she had ever known, and one Steed never failed to inspire in her. He whispered softly into her ear, his lips warm with life.

"Do forgive me, my dear. I missed our supper."

Emma laughed in spite of herself in the murky darkness, as he pulled her even closer.

She stroked his muscular arms, wrapped protectively around her like eagle's wings. Food had been forgotten long ago. It didn't matter one bit. He was back with her, and she was at peace. The night melted into them as they shared a deep and sacred kiss. Before morning, they would carry each other far beyond the walls of this room, but now, just for now, all was as perfect as it ever could be. The sands of time had no strength; they measured only themselves as they slipped into eternity. A sublime hymn echoed in her imagination as they drifted to sleep...

And we give... and we give... and we give ourselves away...