

Where There's Smoke **(also known as „Smoke Without Fire“)**

by Mint Julep

Part 1

"I feel I should tell you," Steed said in uncharacteristically hushed tones as he led his two dinner guests into the parlor, "that Emma has quit smoking."

"Crikey," Gambit sputtered, lighting up a Dunhill, "again?"

Purdey, not quite surreptitiously, gave him a swift kick to the shin. "OW," Gambit exclaimed. Purdey leaned toward Gambit and whispered into his ear as Steed went to make drinks for them.

"You might be a little more supportive."

"Well, I'm not," Gambit replied, exhaling a long, sibilant stream of smoke, "because I'm against it. Don't you remember what happened the last time she tried to quit?"

"That was quite accidental," Purdey said, "and anyway, the charges were dropped."

"Even so," Gambit pointed out, "that poor lorry driver was in traction for six weeks, and didn't they have to pay for all those chickens?"

"That wasn't Emma's fault," Purdey insisted. "He had no business driving a poultry truck in the bicycle lane."

Steed brought them all drinks and the three of them settled around the fire.

"I hope you'll enjoy our little feast this evening," Steed happily began, propping his feet upon an Abercrombie and Fitch ottoman.

Purdey grinned. "I'm sure we will. What marvelous thing have you prepared for us this time?"

"Just a modest little game fowl...."

"Don't tell me," Purdey said, "I'll bet. You bagged the birds at Lord Moulton's shooting party yesterday."

"Well... " Steed cooed, with endearing modesty, "not exactly."

"I'll bet," Gambit muttered, "that Emma had a nicotine fit and strangled them with her bare hands."

"Purdey glared at him and emitted a loud, menacing "Shush!" Then, sotto voce, she added, "Here she comes." And then, in their midst, was Emma. The two top buttons of her blouse appeared to be missing, there were deep circles under her eyes, and her sanguine and willowy figure seemed a little less sanguine and willowy than usual. She was chewing an enormous wad of gum and fiddling with a Rubik's cube in her hands. Purdey and Gambit were both startled at her appearance.

"Emma," Purdey said, suppressing a small shudder of horror, "it's so good to see you."

Emma nodded a little nervously. "I'm so glad to see both of you, Gambit, you're looking as dashing as ever."

"Thanks," Gambit said. "You look like hell." Steed and Purdey looked plainly horrified. "What," Gambit demanded. "The woman looks like hell, and someone should tell her."

Steed's body briefly tensed and he was clearly about to say something when Emma shook her head at him and gave Gambit a crooked little smile.

"Thank you, Gambit. Really, I respect you for saying that." Emma sat down beside her husband, and there followed a long moment of silence, as Steed appeared to be debating whether or not to take a poke at Gambit.

"All right," Emma finally sighed. "We may as well eat."

As Emma, sighing heavily, set the salad plates down before her husband and their guests, Steed asked Gambit and Purdey how their team assignment with the two American agents was progressing.

"Oh," Purdey fairly burred, "it's been great! We're getting a kind of crash course in American culture while we're at it."

"Yeah," Gambit gruffly assented. "The CIA bird is really into rhythm and blues. She came over to my flat the other night and played me some terrific old Smokey Robinson records."

Emma began fiddling with a button on her blouse, turning it around and around in her nimble fingers. Purdey cocked her head slightly to one side and regarded Gambit with an atypically uncool look.

"Oh?" she said, a bit icily. "You didn't tell me about that."

"Well," Gambit replied, shooting a sly macho glance at his host, "it wasn't strictly business, you know."

"Interesting," Purdey said, with a barely discernible little sniff. "I hadn't realized you had become that friendly with her."

Gambit shrugged. "I'm not surprised you didn't notice, Purdey. You've been too busy chumming it up with the FBI chap."

"Oliver is a very interesting man," Purdey said, recovering most of her customary aplomb. "And his cultural tastes, I'm happy to say, lean rather more toward the higher brow. For your information, Gambit, he's very knowledgeable about the classic works of American literature."

Gambit burst into laughter. "Classics? Oh, yeah, like 'God's Little Acre' and 'Tobacco Road.'"

Emma fiddled a little more frantically with her blouse button.

"Not exactly," Purdey briskly informed him. "As a matter of fact, he collects first editions of the great American poets. The other night, when I was at his flat," she added, not quite parenthetically, "he showed me a very rare first edition of T.S. Elliot's 'Ash Wednesday.'"

Emma's fingers began working overtime. Steed, having evidently decided that it was time for the host to make peace at the table, began to walk about and pour wine into everybody's glass. "I think you'll like this," he said, smiling broadly. "It's a fume blanc that Emma and I found in a wet little village in the south of France. It's a little dry at first blush, but it has a marvelously smokey after-taste."

On this phrase, he had arrived at his wife's place at the table and was just in time to see the third button of her blouse plop right into the wine he poured into her glass. Emma made a sour and tragic face and looked up at her husband with such a pathetic and helpless expression that his heart was deeply touched. It was not often that Emma was at a loss of any kind.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be silly," he said and immediately set a fresh glass before her.

Emma glanced up at her guests. "I seem to keep losing my buttons," she said, half jokingly and half apologetically.

"Hey," Gambit said, raising his glass to her, "I'm not complaining."

Purdey, sensing her hostess's distress, became inordinately fascinated by her salad. "This is delicious, Emma," she said. "How do you do it?"

Emma looked at Purdey as though she were quite mad. "I pour oil and vinegar over lettuce," she replied.

Well, it's delicious," Purdey repeated. "I love your blouse, by the way. I really like the way the sleeves puff out."

Emma began drumming her fingers on the table. "All this talk about Smokey Robinson and Tobacco Road and Ash Wednesday and puffing," she began, "reminds me of...."

"Of the time we went to New York and visited that marvelous exhibit on pop culture," Steed happily interjected. "It was really quite extraordinary. And then we went to that fabulous little cabaret, you remember, darling, and heard that terrific singer, Bette Somebody, who stopped the show with that wonderfully sad little torch song, what was it...?"

"Smoke Gets In Your Eyes," Emma miserably replied.

Steed smiled at his wife, wincing a bit at the sight of her despondence, and gave her a supportive little wink that made her grin, the muscles at the corners of her mouth reflexively turning upwards, as though tugged by some distant magnetic force. Even at her lowest, Steed could always make her smile, and there were times when Emma suspected that one of his ancestors must have been a forest sprite: he seemed in possession of an impish magic that had successfully enchanted her for many years. She could picture a little elfin Steed of centuries past, swaggering through the woods and turning frogs into princes and ugly ducklings into swans. Or maybe the magic was himself.

When he saw Emma's grin, Steed knew that she would somehow manage to get through the evening with her faculties intact and thus assured he then repaired to the kitchen to fetch the main course. He emerged bearing on a platter a succulent duckling, honey-brushed to perfection and browned to a golden crisp.

Purdey gave a little gasp of admiration. "Oh, Steed it's beautiful!"

"Thank you, my dear," her host graciously responded.

"I got the idea for it when my Auntie Maude sent me a lovely jar of brandied peaches the other day. I took one look at them and said to myself, 'What these peaches need is a nice fat duck stuffed with wild rice and shallots underneath them!'"

Purdey smiled at Emma. "You're so lucky to have a husband who's so clever in the kitchen."

"Oh, yes," Emma muttered, "Steed's very resourceful. You should see what he did with the package that arrived from his Aunt Marietta."

"Isn't she the one who lives in Canada?" Gambit asked.

Emma nodded. "We had Moose Stroganoff for the better part of a week."

Gambit twisted his face into a small sneer.

"Gambit can't cook at all," Purdey announced. "Throws a chop on the fire, boils a couple of potatoes, and that's dinner, folks."

"I've never seen the point of learning to cook," Gambit confessed, "as long as I can find a

woman who's good in the kitchen."

Purdey, slightly annoyed, glared at him. "And is that lady agent from the CIA good in the kitchen?"

"Sometimes," he said. "It depends on how high the counters are."

As Purdey opened her mouth to say something (probably unpleasant), Gambit turned his attention to their host.

"Is this what you've been doing while Purdey and I have been paired up with the American agents? Going to shooting parties and serving up the spoils?"

"Well," Steed replied, "one does like to keep busy.

"Well," said Gambit, "I'm glad you've been keeping busy while Purdey and I do all the work. What were you and Mother plotting together last week? I heard you were closeted in conference for two hours."

"Gambit," Purdey said, "that's none of our business."

"I'm sorry, but it bloody well IS my business --- we're all partners, aren't we?"

"Purdey clenched her teeth "Maybe he doesn't want to discuss it," she said.

"I'd just like to know, that's all. The scuttlebutt is that Mother's being retired. OW!"

"Sorry," Purdey said, "my foot slipped."

"Into my shin?"

Emma looked up. "Mother retiring? I should have thought they'd have to carry him out of there feet first." She considered the unintended insensitivity of her comment. "So to speak," she added.

"There are always rumors," Steed said dismissively, "whenever there's a change in administration. I think it's safe to say that Mother's good to the end of the millennium."

Purdey sighed. "Do we have to talk shop at the dinner table? We're probably boring Emma."

"Not at all," Emma assured them.

Gambit turned toward her. "Seriously, Emma, have you thought about returning to active service? You were one of the best."

"That's very kind of you, Gambit, but no, I think that one spy in the family is enough."

"Agent," Steed corrected her.

Emma nodded. "Agent, then. One agent in the family is quite enough. And now would not be a good time."

"No time like the present," Gambit said.

Steed smiled. "I quite agree. And since this is the present, there's no better time to enjoy this lovely duck."

Purdey admired the main course again. "It looks delicious," she said.

"It's not quite finished," Steed said. "This dish is properly served flambe. Unfortunately, Emma's thrown out every match in the house... "

Emma briefly clenched her teeth. "I told you why I had to throw out the matches, Steed ---"

"You didn't have to throw out the long wooden kitchen matches as well. My God, they're ten inches long. You couldn't possibly light a cigarette with them."

"You could if you wanted one badly enough ---"

"Here," Gambit offered, "use my lighter."

"Thank you."

With a characteristically stylish little flourish, Steed managed to ignite the duck into a brief but magnificent reddish blueish purplish halo of thin fire. It flashed for perhaps two seconds before it went out. Both Purdey and Gambit were momentarily speechless with admiration and for a while the only audible sound was a low, misery-laden grumbling noise that seemed to be coming from Emma's general vicinity.

"That didn't go off quite right," Steed remarked, frowning down at the bird. "It should have flamed more."

As he reached tentatively toward it, Purdey reflexively cried out, "Be careful with the duck, Steed. It's smoking."

Emma looked wistfully at the main course. "Happy duck," she sighed.

Steed's limit on after-dinner brandies was two, and he ignored Emma's half-quizzical, half-disapproving expression as he poured himself and Gambit a third.

"No, thanks," Purdey said, shaking her head as Steed offered her a brandy,

"I'm driving."

"I'm not," Gambit said, puffing extravagantly at a fat panatela. "This is really a great cigar."

"Yes, well, do us a favor," Purdey told him, "Try to exhale toward Manchester, will you? Some people in this room are trying to breathe."

"I don't mind at all, really," Emma said, smiling at Gambit. "I like the smell of a good cigar."

Purdey briefly twisted her face into an expression of disgust. "Do you? I think it's just awful."

"My father used to enjoy a good cigar now and again, especially after Sunday dinner," Emma rather wistfully mused. "My mother couldn't bear to be in the room with him when he smoked them. I liked it, though. Dark, masculine, heavy sort of smell it was. Mother didn't smoke at all."

"Not even cigarettes?" Purdey asked.

"Not that I recall. It's odd, though..." Emma frowned slightly at the memory "I remember once when I was a little girl, I was in their room one afternoon, looking for a handkerchief, of all things...I'd lost mine somehow and it was the laundress's day off and nobody could find any handkerchiefs. So my mother told me to go and fetch one of hers, and to hurry about it because we were going out...and there in her handkerchief drawer, just underneath, was this really beautiful cigarette case, all gold with ivory inlay. I didn't know what it was, and I shouldn't have opened it, but I did, and there were about five cigarettes in there. It wasn't full, you see, it just had these five cigarettes in it."

"So she was a secret smoker, then."

"I don't know. I shouldn't have thought so. She never had it on her breath or her clothing. I would have noticed. It just seemed very odd to me."

"What happened to the cigarette case?"

"Apparently my father kept it after she died. It was among his effects that eventually came down to me. I had it for years."

"Had it? You mean you don't have it any more?"

"No."

"Oh, dear! Did you lose it somehow?"

"No, I, um..."

"She sold it," Steed said, surprisingly coldly, not looking up from his brandy.

"I didn't actually sell it," Emma protested, with quiet emphasis.

"Caused to be sold then," Steed amended, his soft gray eyes peering into the warm amber of his unusual third brandy.

Part 2

It occurred to Emma that Steed had been drinking considerably more than usual this evening. Was it her imagination? Of course, Steed rarely had any problem holding his liquor, but he was tired tonight, and it showed. Or maybe she really was just imagining it. Her perceptive sensibilities were, after all, not at their keenest these days.

"Well, what happened to it?" Gambit asked, puffing at his cigar and ignoring the "Don't go there" look Purdey was shooting at him from across the room.

"Oh, well," Emma sighed, "I read that when one stops smoking, one should get rid of all one's paraphernalia. Matches, lighters, ashtrays ---although I did cheat a little there on the ashtrays, as Steed likes a cigar now and then, and we do have friends who smoke --- and, um, cigarette cases."

"Including family heirlooms," Steed added, rather pointedly, before taking yet another sip of brandy.

"I understand completely," Purdey said. "I mean, I've never smoked myself, but that makes perfect sense to me."

Emma nodded. "Yes, it does, doesn't it."

"So you sold the cigarette case, then?"

"I didn't sell it," Emma repeated. "I donated it to a charity auction for cancer research. The irony of it," she added, with a crooked little half-smile that made her look almost herself again, "was not lost on the foundation."

"That must have been difficult for you," Purdey observed, with great sympathy.

"Well," Emma sighed again, "I've never believed in half measures. One either commits to something or one doesn't. It's as simple as that."

"My wife is a perfectionist," Steed said, leaning slightly toward Gambit. "They are not easy to live with."

"I wouldn't know," Gambit replied, smiling appreciatively at Mrs. Steed, "as I've never had the pleasure."

"My only point," Emma continued, "is that one has to make a clean break with a bad habit. It's important, in the beginning, at least, to avoid objects and occasions that trigger the urge to smoke. It's difficult, yes, but it has to be done. I tend to smoke quite a lot when I write, for instance, so I haven't taken on any writing assignments for the time being. And then there's the cigarette after dinner, which one avoids by not lingering at the table." Steed stared up at the ceiling as Emma went on.

"These are just common sense sort of things," she remarked.

"Well, I, for one," Gambit observed, "would never give up my after-dinner smoke for anything. Or the first cigarette of the day over the morning coffee. Or, God, the cigarette after sex, always a favorite."

"Yes, well," Steed muttered into his snifter, "she's cut out that one as well."

There was an ocean of silence on which this statement floated. Emma, momentarily stunned into a most uncharacteristic speechlessness, fancied that she saw the hint of an incipient leer on Gambit's craggy working-class face. Was it possible, she idly wondered, that such a woman as Purdey, tempered by the physical discipline of the fine and grueling art of ballet and temperamentally attracted to the classical tradition of symphonic music, could have found his vaguely simian features oddly attractive? There was, as Emma well knew, always a powerful erotic component in these professional "pairings" that the Ministry designed with something less than innocence. The realities of one's working life were such that one eventually had to enter into a unique bond of absolute trust with one's partner: one's very life, after all, might depend on it. Emma knew from her own experience that standing shoulder to shoulder with a man against the daily possibility of death for either or both created a kinky sort of charge between people that was highly sexualized.

There were, she suddenly recalled, other things, too. That "click," for instance, somewhere between a jazzy fingersnap and the clang of a metal trap springing shut on the both of you, was like a weird mutual vibration. There were indeed, she pondered, moments when she and Steed had seemed to share an almost telepathic communication, beyond both sense and language, rather like the bond said to exist, for instance, between identical twins, or between matching particles in recent experiments in physics. New studies, indeed, had revealed invisible forces of pure energy that darted back and forth between mirrored fractions that had once been whole. As so frequently happened to Emma when she reflected on such almost metaphysical speculations, she grew light-headed and giddy, her meticulously trained and superbly rational mind falling into a vertiginous spin of uncertainty that made her quite dizzy. But now (as she solemnly reminded herself) was not the time for philosophical reflection. Steed had just made a blunt and unseemly personal remark in front of guests, a lapse of charm and courtesy so unlike him that Emma's initial instinct was to put it right again, not just as a Good Wife or a Good Hostess, but also because Order demanded it.

"I can reason it out," she said to herself; and then, to her horror, she discovered that she could not. She felt too acutely Gambit's prurient interest and Purdey's sympathetic discomfort for her hosts. Emma was keenly aware of herself in an Awkward Situation, and whereas she might, under other circumstances, have made a joke of it in order to spare everyone's feelings, she suddenly felt bereft of both elegance and wit. The reality, as she quickly saw with a distinct chill, was that her husband was drunk and that she wanted a cigarette. There was nothing Metaphysical about it.

Although Gambit and Purdey were separated by the width of the sitting room, there was a moment when their two pairs of eyes briefly met, and their hostess could almost hear, albeit so faintly as to be barely discernible, an audible Click in the air between them. It was as though they had both agreed, by silent mutual consent, that their evening with the Steeds had come to an awkward end. Like weathered sailors who could smell a storm brewing just beyond the next wave, they had sufficient acumen to turn sail and head for the nearest harbor.

"Well," Gambit lazily drawled, stretching his able seaman's body out like an alley cat about to prowl, "I have a late night rendezvous with the CIA."

"And the FBI," Purdey archly added, "is expecting me for a nightcap."

"Well, then," Emma said, smiling at her guests as they rose as one to take their leave, "we

mustn't keep you." Mr. and Mrs. Steed (the former still cradling his brandy snifter) saw their guests out the front door in a clumsy little flurry of perfunctory handshakes, quick hugs, and dry kisses. Gambit and Purdey almost fell over each other in their haste to quit the scene.

Steed and Emma walked back to the sitting room in a great and ominous silence, save for the respective thud and clack of their shoes against the parquet floor as they glumly marched, solemnly and in single file, rather like an elegant two-person funeral parade, back to the fireplace. Steed poured himself another brandy.

"You've had three," Emma said, and then immediately regretted it.

"I can count," Steed coolly informed her. "I may have five or six."

"Do what you like," she snapped. "I'm going to do the washing up and then I'm going to bed."

"You don't need to do the washing up. That's what we have a maid for."

"I like to do it myself. Physical activity takes my mind off smoking."

Steed sighed deeply. "Emma..." he began.

"I'm going to do the washing up and then I'm going to bed," she repeated, gritting her teeth a little.

"Oh, well," Steed replied, not quite snarling, but not quite anything else, either, "by all means do the washing up as long as you need a physical activity. God knows you won't get any in bed."

Emma looked around for something to throw at him. "You bloody selfish pig!" The milk chocolate brown stuffed teddy bear struck Steed at the back of the neck before bouncing on to the Aubusson rug.

"That's very mature," he observed, pausing to take a sip of his brandy. "That certainly aids the situation."

"Oh, shut up," Emma snapped, sorry that she'd thrown the bear at him but too stubborn to admit it just now.

"And how is it," Steed continued, "that I'M selfish? You haven't slept with me in over a month; you've rearranged the furniture thirty-seven times, and tonight was the first time you've let anybody else into the house. I haven't said a word, not one word..."

"Well, you're certainly making up for it now aren't you?"

"I have tried to be understanding. I have tried to be supportive. But just how long is this going to go on?"

"I'm managing as well as I can. I suppose you'd prefer that I just get drunk," Emma replied, gesturing toward the snifter.

"Well," Steed mused, "it might liven things up around here."

"You know I can't drink..."

Steed nodded. "Because it makes you want a cigarette. You can't drink because it makes you want to smoke. You can't have sex because it makes you want to smoke, you can't write because it makes you want to smoke, you can't sit at the table and chat after dinner because it makes you want to smoke ... bit by bit all the things that make you you are being whittled away. My wife is disappearing."

"I'm sorry that my decision to stop smoking is such an inconvenience to you," she said, rather coldly. "Forgive me for not wanting to die from emphysema or lung cancer. I

apologize for disturbing your domestic arrangements. And while we're on the subject of who owes what to whom, I don't appreciate your blurting out our recent lapse in conjugal relations to our dinner guests."

"For God's sake, it wasn't strangers. It was Gambit and Purdey..."

"Especially Gambit and Purdey. They don't need to know everything about our personal life."

"They're only my closest friends. I owe them my life..."

"I see. And what do you owe me?"

There was a brief pause. Steed's eyebrows furrowed into a small, sad little frown.

"I wasn't aware that we were keeping a tally," he said, very quietly.

"Oh, God," Emma sighed, "I didn't mean that."

She moved across the room and retrieved the teddy bear, tenderly petting its soft head of synthetic fur. "I'm sorry, Teddy," she said, smiling sadly into its big black button eyes.

"I'm sure Teddy forgives you," Steed said, reaching forward to chuck the little bear under the chin. "Teddy forgives the nice lady, don't you, Ted?" he cooed, and then he chuckled. It was one of those funny little chuckles that his wife always found irresistibly endearing, a brief exhalation of breath and a quick "heh-heh!" emitting from somewhere near the back of his throat.

The familiarity of it made Emma feel oddly comforted. "Oh, dear," she sighed, and sank to the floor beside her husband's chair. The "oh, dear" emerged as one long stream of breath that made Emma feel greatly relieved, rather as though her heart was a big bright party balloon that had been about to burst from too much air. She felt herself gently deflating, as though all the pressure of the last two weeks had finally been released.

"I can't imagine what on earth is the matter with me," she said.

"Well, let's see," Steed mused, dropping into his ox-blood leather Queen Anne wing chair and crossing one leg over the other, "you've stopped smoking, of course, but I don't think it's that. You've also stopped writing, stopped seeing your friends, stopped sleeping with your husband, and you prowl about this house all day and night like a caged tigress, not that I have anything against tigresses, nor, for that matter, against cages, if the situation calls for it." He smiled down at her and was encouraged to see her smile back.

"What ever happened," he continued, "to that class you were going to teach at the London School of Economics?"

"I can't possibly teach now. I'm a nervous wreck."

"I don't think you're quite what I'd call a Wreck, darling," he amended, with great affection. "Look here, do you remember that time you were locked up in that house with Max Prendergast?"

"I hardly see what that has to do with ---"

"But do you remember how you felt?"

Emma idly, almost reflexively, began petting the teddy bear again. "Afraid," she finally said, in an almost inaudible whisper.

"And nervous?" he asked.

"Well, nervous, yes," she admitted, "but mostly afraid. Afraid that I wouldn't survive, afraid that I couldn't beat him, and especially afraid that you wouldn't come and get me in time. I thought, he doesn't know where I am or what's happening to me, and even if he did, he

couldn't possibly manage to get through all that fog to save me."

"And I," Steed said, "was worried sick about you. Nothing else mattered except making sure you were well and safe." He reached down and gently cupped her chin in his hands, turning her face up towards him. "It's like that now," he said, very quietly. "I feel as though you're lost somewhere, in grave danger of being lost to me forever. I can see that you're nervous and afraid, and I don't know where you are or what's happening to you, and it does feel that there's a great deal of fog to get through. But I managed to find you then and I did come and get you."

"Yes," she replied, looking up at him with some wonder. "Yes, you did."

"There you are, then," he said, smiling down at her. "And whenever you feel lost or afraid or nervous, caught in the fog, or trapped by a diabolical mastermind, or whatever, there is one thing you can be sure of: I shall always come and get you."

Part 3

"I know," Emma sighed, slightly shifting her position on the floor such that the little teddy bear rested in her lap as she reached forward and idly stroked the soft suede blue-gray tip and side of her husband's custom-made Chelsea boot. What was it? Pucci, Gucci, Something vaguely Italian, but patriotically ordered through a fine old British bootery just off St. James Place. Everything about Steed was British to the core: his unabashed anachronistic patriotism, his penchant for aristocratic shooting parties and ritualized estate weekend parties where he chatted up the Lords and flirted with the Ladies, his quintessentially English understated humour. It had often occurred to Emma that it was only here, in these rooms, where they lived and talked and quarreled together, quite apart from the rest of his world, that he felt sufficiently free to revert, as it were, to his more extraordinary self. A kind of cultural heretic, in an odd sort of way, who regarded his wife not as a possession or a trophy, but as a person at least as complicated and at least as interesting as himself.

Emma winced just perceptibly as she recalled the overheard comment of a rather too grand maitre d' of a very good dining room in a very good London hotel as he leaned with smarmy approval toward Steed and obsequiously observed: "Ah, Mrs. Steed DRESSES the room!" Relegating her to the status of a crisp clean white linen tablecloth or a perfect setting of polished silver and delicate crystal. Steed had replied with a characteristic smile of acceptance and appreciation: nothing more and nothing less. Emma had felt unaccountably grateful on that occasion, if only for her husband's silence in the face of such exquisite crassness.

Steed was in fact one of the few men Emma had ever known who seemed genuinely to like women: he liked the way they looked and the way they moved and the way they smelled. He also liked the challenge of a different sort of mind that seemed to open worlds of wonder and delight to him. He had once confessed to Emma, before they had made the problematic decision to throw their lot in together, that he had been half in love with Cathy Gale, not just for her magnificent bosom and long legs and English Rose beauty, but also for her moral toughness and gritty courage and uncompromising intellectual certainty. He had also been half in love with Tara King, bright, feisty, and intoxicating in her corn-fed farmer's daughter down-home sexuality that was all mixed up with her ambition to be a good agent and her incandescent infatuation with the great John Steed. Cathy gave him trouble, and Tara gave him adoration; and even as he diddled hither and yon with discreet

wives of impotent diplomats and frisky daughters of retired colonels, Steed had found no one to love completely, body, heart, mind, and soul, except for Emma, who hardly knew what to do with him. Nothing in her experience, including her first marriage to the charming and narcissistic Peter, had prepared her for him.

When did their healthy inconsequential lust turn into commitment, and when did their bonhomous camaraderie become love? Emma could not recall the precise moment when their mutual affection and respect and attraction metamorphosed into this impossible bond that was both a promise and a threat. One day they were best friends and occasional lovers who shared a sense of humor and a sense of honor and a healthy erotic appetite, and the next day they were united forever as though by a hoop of steel. Love was the calamity that both of them had been carefully prepared to avoid, and yet here they were, betrothed, avowed, and finally committed, until death did them part. As Emma idly caressed her husband's blue-gray suede Chelsea boot, she was aware of a great many longings swelling in her heart.

"How on earth," she finally asked, recalling cybernaut and winged Avengers and man-eating plants and electrically charged henchmen, "did we ever get here?"

Steed smiled down at her. "Bit by bit," he happily replied, "and step by step."

She reached up to hold him, and as they kissed, the little brown teddy bear rolled out of her lap and on to the exquisite Persian rug that had been a gift from Prince Ali, who had once offered twenty goats for her.

"Well," Steed began, smiling happily, "does this mean you're willing to listen to reason?"

"I'm always reasonable," Emma informed him.

"Yes, I know," he conceded, "and it's good that at least one of us is. But sometimes, you know, it can be just as reasonable not to be reasonable. I mean," he continued, with a twinkle, "if you have a good enough reason."

"Look," Emma sighed, settling down at his feet, "I know I've been a great bloody bore lately ---"

"Nonsense," Steed said.

"And a bit of a bitch---" she continued.

"Certainly not," he said.

"As well as a little pig-headed ---"she went on.

"Ah, well, there you have me, darling," he admitted, smiling a most charming smile. "I'm afraid you are pig-headed."

Emma made a fist and hit Steed's foot through his Chelsea boot. "You don't have to agree quite so eagerly," she told him.

"Look here," he said, "I do realize that this whole business has been extremely difficult for you, but you must see that it's been difficult for me as well."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry for being so beastly to you."

He frowned down at her. "I haven't noticed your being beastly. No, what's been difficult for me is that I can see how this is putting you through the mill, and I can't quite bear seeing you so miserable."

"Look," Emma pointed out, smiling up at him, "we can't have a proper fight if you're going to say things like that."

"Good, because I don't want to have a proper fight, unless of course there's wrestling involved..."

She hit him over the head with the little teddy bear.

"Really," he went on, "you don't know how many times in the last couple of weeks I've had to bite my tongue to keep from saying, 'For God's sake, will you just have a cigarette and relax?' Because I know that a cigarette is really the last thing you need right now. But I do wish you could be a little more relaxed. Locking yourself up in this house and refusing to see people may not be the best thing for you, but that was your decision, and I respect it. And even if I didn't respect it, it wouldn't matter, because you're going to do what you think is best anyway ---"

Emma nodded. "Pig-headed," she said.

"Indeed," he agreed, but not before quickly moving his foot away from under her hand.

As Steed deftly swept his shoe away from the range of Emma's fist, he lifted a hand to his brow and began massaging the area just above his right eye.

"Are you all right?" Emma asked him.

"Yes, perfectly fine," he replied, dropping his hand and smiling.

Emma briefly regarded his tired face and noticed, not for the first time, the deepening lines about his mouth and the slight sag about his jowls. What was he now, she silently mused, fifty-two, no fifty-three last February, and his naturally handsome features were beginning to show the signs of age, creeping along on little crow's feet and taking their stealthy toll. Such a life he had led, all fifty-three odd years, and tonight, after four brandies and in the light of the midnight fire, he seemed to look every minute of it. A life of cunning and commitment all mixed up with a schoolboy's sense of adventure and a hedonist's pursuit of sensual pleasure had made him look more and more remarkably like himself, as opposed to anyone else. His soft gray eyes, glinting with what Emma had once privately dubbed "twinkling melancholy," were the eyes of a man who had looked upon both beauty and horror with equal measures of deep emotion and guarded interest. So much was hidden behind the charm of those eyes, by turns flirtatious, sly, keen, and shifty. What was his wartime sobriquet? Cat's Eye Steed, yes, it suited him, diffident, aloof, and yet seeing all, even in the dark. But now the cat had grown a little gray about the whiskers, not quite as fast, not quite as graceful, and yet still a creature sure to land always on his feet.

Steed's face had begun to acquire the distinctly ruddy hue and peculiarly crinkled quality of the skin that marks those who have drunk heavily and long. What had once been a trim and lightly muscled body had recently begun to fall a bit to fat, in spite of his daily physical regimens. While he was no longer handsome in the dark matinee idol way of his relative youth, he had acquired the authority of experience and an elegance of carriage that was far more attractive than the surface prettiness of younger men.

Emma, who still had the *soignée* and willowy figure of her twenties and a face that, at thirty-six, was still perfectly symmetrical and dominated by a bone structure so exquisitely fine that it appeared to have been etched, was surprised to suddenly look at her husband and see him as something cloudy and something clear.

She realized, with something of a start, that this was in fact still her trusty old Steed, the man she had loved for so many years and taken almost for granted, if only because he had always been there and would always remain. As she watched him briefly close his eyes and lean his head against the high back of his wing chair, she felt a curious mixture of both shock and recognition, rather as though she had only known him from photographs before and was just now seeing him in person for the first time. This was the man she loved, and one of the reasons she had first made the decision to stop smoking was so that she might be able to be with him a little longer.

"This is the part of marriage Mum never told me," Emma quietly mused, hoisting up her long legs such that her knees briefly grazed her chin. "Not that she told me that much anyway," she added wryly.

Steed squinted slightly down at her, the gentle crinkles about the edges of his soft gray eyes reappearing, like the folds of a concertina striking a new chord.

"Eh? You mean your Mum never told you about...?"

"Well," Emma replied, folding her arms about her knees and reflexively hugging her long limbs, "she hardly had the time." Emma propped her sharp angular chin up on one of her kneecaps and allowed her mind to linger briefly on the image of Emmaline Kittredge Knight, that late woman of impeccable elegance and perfect manners who had mastered at a very young age all of those impressive little accomplishments that young ladies of certain class had to demonstrate so that they would be found interesting by eligible young bachelors at aristocratic weekend house parties held on various but interchangeable country estates. Miss Kittredge was fluent in French and Italian, played the piano beautifully, and was a great beauty to boot: men were often so stunned upon meeting her that they forgot to finish their sentences. More to the point, at least within the narrow definitions of the insular world in which she shone as a treasure, she was a Kittredge and was therefore destined by providence to marry well: perhaps a Duke, or at least a Viscount, or at the very worst a younger son of a minor Lord. No one in Emmaline's social circle had seriously expected her to marry as far beneath her as she did. John Knight was, after all, just a jumped-up tradesman from the merchant class who had somehow gotten himself into Oxford by dubious means and kept insisting on barging in where he didn't belong. He did make money, of course, piles upon piles of it; and in time, under Emmaline's tutelage, he managed to present the appearance of a Gentleman.

His wife was unquestionably one of his greatest assets. She gave the best dinner parties in London and was renowned as one of the grandest hostesses in all of England, or at least in all of the England that counted. She knew everybody who mattered, and everybody who mattered found her irresistibly charming. Emmaline Kittredge Knight had perfected the rare art of creating environments: whether it was her dinner table where the seating arrangement had been meticulously planned with the sort of strategic positioning usually associated with military campaigns; or her afternoon teas, where the frustrated wives of eternally absent Colonels broke exquisitely delicate biscuits with the neglected daughters of idle peers who had arranged their social lives around their misogynistic men's clubs and half drunken shooting parties; or her magnificent garden, within whose carefully clipped herbaceous borders every flower knew its place; or indeed her own home, through whose cavernous rooms and wainscoted hallways her daughter Emma had once carefully

padding, stepping stealthily for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of the decor.

It was rare for Emma to allow herself the wistful luxury of remembering her mother. The memory of that grand and perfect lady, dispensing benevolent indifference and polite inattention to relative strangers at dinner parties and charity luncheons was an image not wholly compatible with Mum. The Mum Emma treasured was the woman bursting through the door after a brisk canter about the grounds upon her favorite horse; the Mum who would suddenly and quite unaccountably leap toward Dad and fling her arms about his neck when he returned from a business trip; the frisky sprite who giddily fell to her knees and played "Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man" with her toddling daughter; and, perhaps most of all, the warm soft creature smelling faintly of Yardley's soap and drawing little Emma into her arms and on to her lap and opening a picture book of "Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland" for the two of them to read together, Mum pointing to the words as she read them aloud and Emma giggling joyously while her mother playfully poked and tickled her.

All these images, conflicting and problematic, invariably disturbed Emma's sense of order and equilibrium. She didn't like to think about them. As far as Emma was concerned, Emmaline Kittredge Knight was an exacting, demanding perfectionist who cared too much for ritual and appearance. Her most sacred mission in life was to reflect glory on to her husband and to put on a good show. She coolly presided in aloof majesty over an orderly world in which husbands and wives knew their place and where every dish and chair behaved. She spent untold hours on her presentation: concentrating with meticulous precision on every daub of make-up, fretting inordinately over a precise shade of lipstick and the exact angle of a brush of barely discernible rouge. Every dress, every blouse, every scarf, every shoe and stocking were carefully coordinated with each pair of understated ear rings and each tasteful brooch and bracelet.

Emma continued to hug her knees and began unconsciously to rock, swaying slightly to and fro in a reverie of nostalgia and confusion as she tried to put these disparate images together into a coherent whole. Her eyes wandered idly about the room and fell by turns upon singular anonymous objects: a pair of stilts leaning against the wall of a far corner; an enormous skeleton key hanging by a rusty nail to the paneled wall; a tiny broom resting next to a fountain pen on an occasional table; a framed photograph of herself and a parrot. She looked down at her husband's blue suede Chelsea boot and muttered something inaudible.

Steed leaned slightly forward. "I'm sorry?"

Emma hugged her knees a little closer. "I miss her," she said.

"I know you do," Steed said, very quietly. "I'm sorry I never knew her."

"She was a hard woman to know," Emma observed. "She held herself to such standards that would have seemed impossibly high were it not for the fact that she lived up to them. And I always felt, growing up, after she'd gone, that ... well, I never knew what she'd make of me."

"You never talk about her," Steed pointed out. Emma looked down at the carpet again.

"No, I don't like to. I mean, she's gone, isn't she, and one must accept that and move on."

Steed cocked his head to one side and frowned down at his wife. "But she isn't, you know," he said. "I mean, I've seen pictures, and..." He reached down and cupped Emma's chin in his hand and turned her face up towards him. "She's here, and here, and here," he

said, tenderly stroking Emma's chin, the outline of her cheekbone, and the top of her high forehead. "And here," he continued, tapping Emma's temple, "and here," touching her breast in the region of her heart. "She's all those places, if you know where to look for her."

Steed held out his open hand to her. "Do you see that? That's my father's hand. Enormous hands he had, with ungentlemanly calluses from working in the stables looking after his horses. He liked to tend to them himself."

"Like his son," Emma said, gently caressing Steed's hand. "I love your calluses." She leaned forward and kissed the inside of his palm.

"Ah," Steed sighed. "My father thanks you, and I thank you." Emma took hold of Steed's hand as he leaned back in his chair. "We carry our people around with us," he said, "in one way or another. Not just our parents, but people we've known, and loved, and hated. Do you know, sometimes I can still see the faces of every man I've had to kill. Oh, always in self-defense, of course, or in some now forgotten cause that seemed eminently noble at the time ... I can see them, just before they died, the look in their eyes and the expressions on their faces, and ... they've become part of me."

"You had to kill them. It was that, or...."

"Yes, I know, and I'm not saying I regret it. But still. A part of who I am."

"I thought you'd made your peace with that."

"Did I say I wasn't at peace? It isn't that at all. It's just that I can still see their faces."

"One must put all that aside and go on."

"You keep saying that. And it's not so easily done. Oh, one can pretend, one can let it go and even laugh and, yes, by all means, get on with life, because, really, after all, there's nothing else to do. One can, for instance, put down the cigarettes and say never again, and that's fine, that's good, but the cigarettes will always be a part of you."

Emma shook her head. "I'm afraid you've lost me. I don't see the analogy at all."

"Don't you? Let's just throw out all the matches and the ashtrays and the cigarette cases and all the rest of it; let's just not do anything that might make us want to smoke, because that will only remind us of how much we miss it. And let's not talk about our mother, let's just get rid of her things and never mention her, because then maybe we won't miss her so much. Don't you see? By denying the longing, we only make the longing stronger."

"It's not the same thing at all. It isn't like that."

"No? Then tell me what it's like."

"I can't."

"Very well, then. I shall tell YOU what it's like."

"How would you know?"

"Oh," Steed began, "you'd be surprised."

"For instance," she prompted him.

"Well, for instance," he said, "when you're in love, say, and for various reasons don't want

to admit it ---it would make life too complicated and be too inconvenient --- you can manage, if you're of a mind to, to set it aside. And when the one you love is taken away, quite suddenly, by unexpected circumstances over which you have no control, you can put it all behind you and carry on. Throw out all of her things, never mention her, take up with someone else, or with several someone elses, and wait for her to come back, even though she never calls and never writes..."

"That couldn't be helped. There were other people's feelings to consider."

"This is a hypothetical situation," Steed said, "offered merely to illustrate a point. So she never calls and never writes, and you just go right on, taking up with as many women as you can manage, even to the point of allowing one or two of them to imagine that they have your heart, when in fact you have no heart left to give. And sometimes you see friends who ask about her, or hear her name mentioned at a party, or run across a picture of her and her husband in the society pages, and you learn to simply stop reading that part of the paper, for fear of being reminded of her. You don't send a card at Christmas, and you avoid going anywhere she might conceivably turn up, and when one day comes when you find yourself sitting behind her at a charity auction, you pretend not to see her and go out by the back door. And you think that this will somehow take away the longing, will make the pain of her constant absence easier to bear, but it doesn't. She still comes to you in dreams, and you can still remember weekends at country inns and dinners at your favorite restaurants and walking through Paris at dawn, with the scent of cherry blossoms in the mist. But in your waking life, such as it is, you can gather up all the odd little mementos you've collected as souvenirs of your adventures together and put them in a box you keep in the darkest corner of the attic, just as you keep your memories of her in the darkest part of your mind. And you live with this, day by day, and little by little you come to learn that longing can't be packed up into a carton kept on a high shelf in the attic and never opened. Longing thrives on neglect, you know, and the longer you try to avoid it, the stronger it becomes."

Emma looked up at her husband with some wonder. "I never knew any of this," she said.

„Didn't you?" he asked.

Part 4

Emma hardly knew how to answer him. She had herself been adjusting to sudden departures from a very early age. She had been fourteen when she was called out of science class at her boarding school by an ashen-faced matron whose eyes seemed, for the only time that Emma could remember, filled with something like compassion. She was led solemnly into the headmistress's office with such funereal ceremony that it could only portend one of two things; and when she saw the unmistakable look of pity from the bat-faced secretary behind the desk, she knew that her intuition had been correct, and all that was left was to sit quietly and wait to be informed which of her parents had died. Her response to the news was simply "I see." Even after all the years, she still recalled the surrealistic details of that day: she noticed that the family chauffeur who had arrived to drive her home in her father's Daimler had a button missing from his jacket and that Cook, still lightly dusted from the flour of the bread she had been baking, enfolded Emma into her arms and sobbed --- a lapse in protocol of which Mrs. Knight would surely have disapproved. Emma's brother Harry, fetched from a cricket match at Eton still wearing his

bowler's uniform, already tall and broad and seeming quite grown-up, turned his head away in an effort to hide his tears. Four years later, almost to the day, when Emma was the first to see the skunk that scampered out of the rosebush to frighten Harry's horse as he was tearing on ahead of his sister, she saw, as though in slow motion, the horse rear back and throw his forelegs askance as Harry, in the only clumsy motion Emma had ever seen from him, hurtled half backwards and half sideways into the air.

Emma later seemed to recall that she actually heard the snap of Harry's neck as it broke (the doctors later described it as a "clean break": death was apparently instantaneous), but she was never quite sure: it all happened very quickly. Death always seemed to happen very quickly around her, and she had learned from repeated experience that the best thing to do was to let it go and carry on. Make a clean break. She had tried to do that again when her father died and again when Peter disappeared and again when she lost Steed. Fortunately, or so it seemed, she had evidently inherited her mother's extraordinary discipline and had developed sufficient strength of character to withstand loss.

This was, indeed, one of the reasons that she was so angry and disgusted with herself for her apparent inability to free herself from an unhealthy attachment to poisonous little tubes of tobacco. She had survived the deaths of people close to her, the loss of the love of her life, torture and trauma and the nefarious schemes of countless diabolical masterminds. She would survive this, too. She was, after all, a woman who could crack snide quips with a laser aimed at her body and a gun pointed to her head and while tied to a table charged with 10,000 volts of electricity. But tonight, suddenly, crumpled on the floor at her husband's feet and holding his hand as though it were a lifeline tossed to a drowning woman, she felt a bit shaken and unsure.

Her only consolation was the knowledge of the fact that the other end of that lifeline was anchored by a man who would never abandon her, except perhaps in death. Even after all these years, she still fretted over Steed's safety, worried about whether each new assignment would turn out to be the last, and wondered what her reaction would be if and when she heard the news of his death --- would she sit in stone-faced shock and say "I see"? Would she see it coming, just as she saw that skunk so many years ago, and feel helpless at the inevitability? She did not know how she would feel, and the uncertainty of it frustrated her characteristic insistence on always being in control of any given situation.

Steed had always been the exception to every rule Emma had made for herself. More often than not, he had come to rescue her from her own recklessness and errors in judgement, arriving invariably at the last minute to extricate her from situations over which she had no control. Had it been anyone else, she would have felt embarrassed and resentful, but with Steed she felt safe and protected. Emma was not a woman who embraced the prospect of needing to be rescued, but she accepted the fact that Steed would always save her from whatever muddle in which she found herself enmeshed. She did not mind being rescued by him. He never used his heroism as an excuse to diminish her. She knew that he would move heaven and earth for her sake, and she knew that he knew that she would do the same for him. Losing him that time, after Peter returned, had been hard for her.

"It was hard for me, too, you know," she said.

"I'm sure it was," Steed said, "but we somehow managed, didn't we? Going on bravely without one another, each of us convinced that the other was lost forever, and both of us determined to put it aside and carry on. That's what we do, isn't it? That's why we're so good at our work. Get the job done and move on. Doesn't matter how we feel about it or who we have to kill in the process; just get it done and move on."

Steed began drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"What?" Emma asked.

Steed raised an eyebrow: "Hmm?"

"You obviously want to say something. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, really. I was just wondering..."

Emma exhaled a long sigh of frustration.

"Steed, please, you know I hate it when you do that. If you have something to say, just say it."

"Well... I was just wondering... the Ministry have been after me for some time to take on more administrative work. Supervisorial, consultational sort of thing. I'd be one of the people, um, designing the overall operation and making assignments. I suppose one might regard it as a kind of promotion."

"You've been offered these promotions before, and you've always turned them down. Why are you considering it now?"

"I'm not actually considering it. I'm just wondering. What do you think about it?"

"I think," Emma said, "that you'd miss field work too much. You like being where the action is."

"Um, yes, of course there's that. Which is why I told them that if I were even to consider this promotion, not that I am considering it, but that if I were to consider it, I'd only do so on the condition that I could continue to work with Gambit and Purdey, at least for a while, just to keep my hand in. My role as an active agent would be diminished a little, and there would be a transition stage during which I would leave most of the actual fieldwork to Gambit and Purdey, but I'd still be involved. I told them that's the only way I would consider it. I mean, I couldn't just make a sort of clean break of it. I know myself too well: I'd hate just sort of sitting behind a desk while others have all the fun. But bit by bit, after a few months or so..."

"You are considering it, then. Seriously?"

"Oh, dear, I hardly think of anything I do as serious." He laughed a little. "But, well, yes, I've been thinking about it, and of course I wouldn't make any decision one way or the other without talking it over with you, which I suppose is what we're doing now." He laughed again.

Emma shook her head. "I don't think you could ever give up fieldwork. It's in your blood."

"Yes, I know, and that's why I told them that I wanted to continue to work with Gambit and Purdey, at least for a while. You see, darling, I'm not like you, I can't just let go of something all at once and expect the longing to go away. There was a time in my life when I thought I could, but I know now that I can't."

"But won't you miss the spy game? Donning colorful disguises and lurking under cover to capture diabolical masterminds?"

"Yes, of course, but let's face it, that's a young man's game, and I'm not as young as I once was."

"Nonsense. You can still out-run, out-scheme, and out-finagle anything else on two legs, and you know it."

"That's sweet of you to say, darling, but I'm hardly the man I was when I was first tapped for service. I'll match my cunning and my instincts against any man alive, but not my reflexes and not my agility. A moment's hesitation could cost me my life. And then..." he trailed off.

"What?" Emma asked.

Well," Steed said, "for a long time I was willing to take all kinds of chances with my life because I knew I wouldn't be leaving a widow and orphans in my wake."

"Orphans? What orphans?"

"Widow, then. You see," Steed said, smiling into Emma's eyes, "I couldn't let you go through that again."

Emma ran her hand through her hair several times. "Look," she began, "I won't deny that I... that is, I admit that I... Oh, damn. I don't want you to give up spying because of me."

"Well, it wouldn't be just for you. It would be for us."

"But you don't really want to quit spying."

"You didn't really want to quit smoking. Why did you?"

"Several reasons, really. I was concerned about my health, and about the effect that it might have on ... I mean, if and when we might decide to have, I don't know, children or something..."

"You stopped smoking on September 13. I know because it's circled in red on your calendar. Which was the day after the last time we had sex. I know because THAT date has since been circled in red on MY calendar. I hate to have to point this out to you, darling, but perhaps your mother never told you that a necessary prerequisite to having children..."

"I know, I know. She did manage to tell me that much." Emma was surprised to find herself smiling at the memory. "It was rather endearing, actually. Here was this extremely proper and immaculate woman, sitting me down beside the fireplace --- my father was playing cards at his club that night --- and telling me things she felt I needed to know. I knew how awkward it was for her, and I admired her for it. I mean, she seemed to regard it as one of the more painful duties of motherhood."

"Children can never quite imagine their parents knowing about sex, let alone actually having it."

Emma shook her head. "No, it wasn't like that. I don't know how old I was when I first began to know about sex, but once I did, I never doubted that my parents were doing it."

"Really? How extraordinary."

"Yes, isn't it? But there was something very ... palpable in my parents' love for each other. I never actually heard them going at it, or anything, but sometimes, at odd moments, they would exchange a look, or he would put his hand on her arm, or she would brush a bit of invisible lint from his lapel, and it was so obvious to me, at least when I was, I don't know, thirteen, perhaps, not long before she died, that there was something very special going

on there. Yes, I must have been thirteen. I had just begun to notice boys, and my body was changing, and Mum had that talk with me, and suddenly I saw my parents in a new light. Suddenly the code had been cracked, and all those little things --- the way she used to prop her chin up on his shoulder when he was reading the paper, or the way he would smile at her over breakfast --- suddenly assumed a great significance to me. And now and then, she would just throw her arms around his neck when he arrived home from a business trip, and sometimes he would suddenly embrace her as they were about to leave for a dinner party, all done up in the most elegant attire. But for the most part, what struck me was the ... understated intimacy between them. I think they had a very private love affair. And I liked that."

Steed nodded. "It sounds very nice," he said. "And she didn't smoke, did she?"

Emma was momentarily startled. "Why do you keep bringing up the smoking? My mother didn't smoke. I told you that."

"Yes, you did. And of course, she could not possibly have smoked, not a woman of such propriety and discipline. It's a weakness, isn't it? An addiction. An all or nothing proposition."

"What are you getting at?"

"Nothing. It's just that you seem to have set up your mother as a kind of paradigm of perfection to whose exacting standards of correct behavior you feel obliged to uphold."

"That's nonsense. She wasn't perfect. She was just a woman. She was ... difficult and complicated and strong and..." A tear fell from Emma's eye. Steed wiped it away with his thumb.

"And you miss her," he said quietly.

Emma nodded. And then suddenly, and quite unaccountably, she was weeping, profusely and uncontrollably, with great heaves and sobs and knife-sharp intakes of breath; and Steed dropped to the carpet and held her in his arms as she shook with grief and longing for all the love she'd lost --- never again to see her mother's face or hear her brother's laugh or smell her father's Sunday evening cigars; all the tears held back for years of enduring both the dull ache and the acute pain of so much loss, all the grief and longing she had thought she had overcome by sheer force of will came pouring out of her all at once, there on the floor of the home whose sanctity she still feared might one day dissolve with the news of her husband's death. She cried and cried and cried, sheltered within the comfort of the arms of the man who had saved her life repeatedly and would happily save it again.

The torrent ended almost as suddenly as it had begun. Steed gave her his handkerchief and she restored what was left of her crumpled dignity.

"I'm all right now," she said.

"Of course you are," he said. "You always were."

They rose together to their feet, and Steed smiled at her. "Shall I make coffee?"

Emma shook her head. "I want a cigarette," she said.

"No, you don't," Steed happily informed her as he led her into the kitchen.

They were lingering over their second cup of coffee in the kitchen and discussing the ramifications of Steed's promotion, and Emma was more or less fully recovered from her recent emotional outburst. The house was so quiet that they could hear the steady ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway, its pendulum swinging indefatigably to and fro as it marked the passage of time. Emma found the sound of it oddly comforting. Time was most easily experienced in small increments of seconds and minutes, the ghostly ticking of a clock in a hallway marking arbitrary moments as the days and years of a lifetime moved along toward an unexpected conclusion. How on earth, she wondered, had she arrived at this moment in time, unmarked on any calendar, discussing her husband's eventual retirement from the spy game? He was still, she happily mused, an absolute marvel of a man; the crinkles around his eyes were the little souvenirs of decades of impish smiles; his broad shoulders still seemed almost about to burst out of the confines of his meticulously tailored shirt; and the elegance of his dress and carriage were an attractive camouflage for his scarred and battered body, reflecting the wounds inflicted by so many years of service to the Crown. Yes, it was time for him to move on.

As they talked about his new duties and the course his career might now take, Emma found herself remembering the last time they had made love, that night they had both been very tired and had neglected their usual precautions against the possibility of future generations. Emma had been off the pill since July, as she and Steed had read one too many alarming speculative reports about possible long-term side effects, and Emma had consulted her gynecologist about acceptably reliable alternatives. In the end, she and Steed had decided to place their provisional trust in the classic standbys; but on the night of September 12, from whatever motives, however wholly unconscious or otherwise, they had foregone both diaphragm and condom and lived a bit dangerously. The irony, at least to Emma, was that this particular coupling between them had been relatively mild, indeed almost pedestrian, in conspicuous contrast to their usual passionate encounters. It had been quiet, comfortable, slightly banal, and yet rendered somewhat thrilling by the mere circumstance of its spontaneity. As it happened, they were just lying in bed and holding each other, both of them tired and feeling rather tender toward each other, and somehow the sex had come about almost by accident, and by the time they realized that they needed to address the issue of issue, neither of them had the inclination to get up and slip into something or slip something into them. So to speak. They had talked a little bit the next day about the recklessness of it, but it was soon put aside and moved beyond. Neither of them had mentioned it since.

"I have a present for you," Steed said over the second cup of coffee.

"Oh, good," Emma replied, still considering the fairly remote but nonetheless very real possibility of a new life beginning inside her.

"May I ask you a question first?" he said.

"Oh, God, what?"

"It's an easy one. Which cigarette do you miss the most?"

"That is easy. I'm with Gambit. The one after sex."

"Somehow I thought you'd agree with him." Steed reached into his jacket pocket.

"What are you up to?" Emma asked.

Steed smiled. "I have a present for you, that's all. But first, let me ask you something. When did you first see your mother's cigarette case?"

"I told you." Emma felt slightly queasy. She had been sick to her stomach that morning and her period was eight days overdue. Since she'd gone off the pill a year ago, she had been experiencing slight irregularities of this sort and had decided not to think about them. "I found it in her drawer."

"And where was the drawer?"

"In her dressing table."

"And where was the dressing table?"

"In her bedroom. Where else would it be?"

"And why would she hide cigarettes in the bedroom?"

"For God's sake, why on earth ---". And then, suddenly, she knew. "Oh my God. I see."

"About time you did, darling. I figured it out the moment you first told me. Being a spy has its advantages. One learns to assume the obvious."

Emma reflected quietly for a moment. "That must have been the only time she smoked. I never ever saw any sign of it." She sipped her coffee. "I wish I hadn't given it away. That cigarette case must have meant a great deal to her. I'd give anything to have it back."

Steed extracted a small gold case from his jacket pocket and handed it to his wife. "Here you are. Try to hang on to it this time."

"Steed! How did you ---?"

"Oh, it took some doing. I tracked down the buyer and made him an offer so extravagant that he was convinced it was worth twice as much. We haggled exhaustively, and in the end, he treated me to a fine old port and graciously accepted my original offer."

Emma caressed the case in her fingers. She opened it and stared into its beautiful emptiness.

"There's a little trick to it," Steed said. "It has a very thin false bottom. Do you see that odd screw there on the left? Just press down on it and it will spring open."

Emma followed Steed's instructions and, sure enough, the false bottom leaped up to reveal a tiny golden key underneath.

"I'll be damned! I had no idea this was here!"

"I did. Being a spy has its advantages."

"But what do you suppose it's the key to?"

"I have no idea. But I believe that ladies often keep diaries with little bitty locks on them that have little bitty keys. Did your mother keep a diary?"

"Not that I know of."

Emma peered into the real bottom of the case and squinted at a new discovery: an inscription that read, "To Emma from John, with all my love."

"Steed! You had it engraved."

"No I didn't. That's the original inscription. It's been there all this time."

Emma ran her hand gently along the bottom of the case. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

Emma looked up at him. "Are you going to take this promotion?"

"I think I will."

Emma tenderly closed the cigarette case and set it down on the table. "I have a surprise for you too."

Steed grinned. "Do you want a cigarette?"

Emma sat in silence for several moments considering this question. "No," she said. "But I think you might like a drink."

End