



***Ruzyne Airport. Prague, Czechoslovakia. May, 1968.***

It was the eyes that did it. And the hair.

Over the years, each time Ellie Hoffman trotted out her first impression of him, preserved in her memory like an odd but treasured souvenir, she always decided it was his eyes that got her. Certainly, there was nothing else to distinguish him from the rest of the crowd, lined up that morning, in front of the Ceskoslovenske Aerolinie check-in counter. Nothing except, of course, the hair, which was straw-colored and shaggy and cut in a style more often favored by rock musicians and college students nearly half his age.

He was short, but not unusually so. Fair and rather pale, but not peaked. Slim, but not undernourished. He was dressed entirely in black — black shirt, black pants, black shoes — with a charcoal-grey tweed sports jacket that probably looked black from a distance. Standing directly behind him, Ellie assumed he was a priest. That is, until her compact dropped out of her shoulder bag as she searched for her passport, and he turned to retrieve it. He was the only person around who seemed to notice it fall.

With both of them reaching down for her lost compact, they met about eighteen inches above the floor. It was then she saw that the black band around his neck was not a clerical collar, but the edge of a turtleneck sweater, and that his eyes were blue.

Well, not blue exactly. More like slate blue, almost to grey — the color of the Hudson River on a mid-winter's day. His gaze had a similar quality: deep, piercing, but unfathomable.

With apparently quicker reflexes; his fingers closed around the compact well before hers. When he handed it to her, they locked eyes briefly and Ellie suppressed an involuntary shiver.

"Thank you," she said, in English.

The man offered her a nod and a polite smile in return, then resumed his place in line. Ellie studied his back intently for the next fifteen minutes.

Illya Kuryakin never noticed her interest in him, and even if he had, he wouldn't have cared. At the moment, his mind was occupied with more important matters, such as the two unobtrusively vigilant gentlemen, loitering near the entrance of the terminal. They were both wearing trench coats with turned-up collars, which was odd since the day outside was neither cold nor rainy. Kuryakin might have pegged them for STE, except that the cut of their coats was too Western and too expensive for anyone living on the salary paid by Czech State Security. They didn't exude an air of home-turf cheekiness characteristic of the KGB either, which meant — by process of elimination — that they were lackeys of Thrush.

As an Enforcement agent working for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement — a "nephew" in the parlance of the espionage trade — Kuryakin was not at all pleased. He knew who the men were searching for and why, even if they didn't appear to be quite sure themselves. They wanted him, or more precisely, the roll of microfilm he was carrying in his tan leather grip.

Trapped in this agonizingly slow check-in line, it was only a matter of time before they spotted him. Kuryakin saw them scan the terminal in his direction. Both of the men were of the burly, thick-set, no-neck variety. Neither of them looked particularly bright, but that was little consolation. In this instance, brains weren't necessary. These two were merely bloodhounds dispatched to flush out a fox.

Just then, the line moved.

Kuryakin advanced one place and nudged his bag forward, along the floor, with his foot. When he looked back at the men, they were staring straight at him, a shadow of suspicion darkening their already dim faces. One of them pulled out a dog-eared three-by-five photograph from his breast pocket and huddled over it with his companion.

The line moved again. Now, only an elderly English couple surrounded by a pile of mismatched luggage stood between Kuryakin and the counter.

Through the corner of his eye, the agent stole a peek at the men in the trench coats. A conference was going on. Animated discussion. Dawning recognition. Nods in his direction. Consternation. More discussion. More consternation. Finally, one of the bloodhounds scurried away, no doubt in search of a public phone.

There was nothing much they could do about him now, Kuryakin told himself, but he could

bet his expense account that a Thrush welcoming committee would be waiting for him when he landed in Copenhagen. The Russian agent sighed in resignation and stepped up to the check-in counter. *Time for Plan B.*

“Dobré rano,” the clerk greeted him automatically, then examined Kuryakin’s ticket, passport, and visa, asking the usual questions.

“Please see that this receives special handling,” the agent said softly, in Czech, as he surrendered his suitcase for weigh-in and tagging. The nod from the clerk, who supplemented his modest income with a monthly retainer from U.N.C.L.E., was barely perceptible.

“As you wish, Pan Kuryakin,” the clerk said, without looking up. He completed the paperwork and returned the documents. “Have a pleasant flight.”

“Dekuji,” Kuryakin replied, satisfied. He headed for the gate and the clerk turned to his next customer.

“Dobré rano, Slecna,”

“Hiya,” Ellie Hoffman said, smiling nervously. As she handed over her papers, the clerk smiled back.

“Do you have any seating preferences?” he asked, in English. Ellie hesitated. She almost said “no,” but the clerk seemed friendly enough and her sister was always telling her to act more assertively.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She pointed in the direction of the departing U.N.C.L.E. agent. “How about next to him?”

The clerk caught a fleeting glimpse of Kuryakin’s blond head and chuckled. “Of course, Miss,” he said.

## 2.

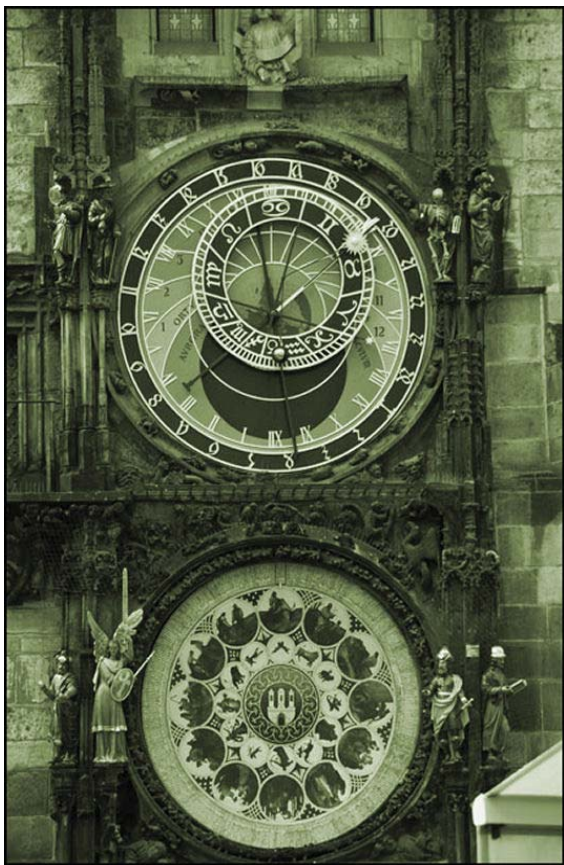
The plane was a short-haul Tupolev and the flight was crowded. A toddler howled, a mother scolded and a couple argued, while the rest of the passengers settled in, excusing themselves in a half dozen languages.

Ellie’s trip down the narrow aisle was a slow one, but finding Kuryakin in the seat next to hers made the effort seem worthwhile. She took a breath and said, “Excuse me. Ah. . . Prosim. Prominte.”

Her limited Czech vocabulary nearly exhausted, she pointed to the window seat and added in English, “That’s, um— that’s mine.”







Kuryakin looked up from his newspaper and then over, to the seat beside him. "Would you prefer the aisle, Miss?" he asked, misinterpreting the anxiety in her eyes. "It would be no trouble to move."

"Oh, no, no. The window's okay."

He rose from his seat to allow her to climb into hers, then returned to his newspaper. "You speak English," Ellie remarked as she buckled her seat belt.

"I've lived in New York for many years."

"Oh, wow, what a small world. Manhattan?"

Still reading, Kuryakin nodded.

"I'm from Staten Island, but I work in Manhattan."

The plane began to taxi and the scenery outside the circular windows accelerated. Ellie clutched her shoulder bag in her lap, fingering it. Kuryakin watched her without appearing to do so. "It shouldn't be a long flight," he observed gently. "We'll be in Co-

penhagen before noon."

"Oh, I'm not nervous." She paused and smiled self-consciously. "Well, not much, anyway. The truth is, up until two weeks ago I'd never even been on a plane. It's my first trip to Europe."

"Don't worry. No one will guess," he said, offering her an encouraging wink. She stiffened a little as the plane became airborne, then forced herself to relax and sit back in the seat. Kuryakin folded his newspaper, and placed it on his knee. After losing his place three times in the same paragraph, he decided it was useless to continue reading.

"You seem to be managing quite well," he said conversationally. The expression of gratitude on her face for his interest was so transparent, he wondered fleetingly if it was also genuine.

"I'm Eloise Hoffman," she said, extending her hand to him. "All my friends call me Ellie."

He took it and answered, "Illya Kuryakin."

"That's an odd name. You have an accent, too..."

"My family is Russian."

"Oh, probably from Brooklyn, right?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Were you in Prague for the spring music festival?"

No,” Kuryakin answered with real regret.  
“Business.”

“Oh? What do you do?”

“Import and export,” he replied, without missing a beat.

“Travel a lot?”

Kuryakin chuckled under his breath.  
“Too much.”

“Well, I’ve never been anyplace, really. This vacation was my grandmother’s idea. She wanted me to meet her relatives —.”

“ — And no doubt you discovered cousins you didn’t know you had.”

“I’ll say,” Ellie agreed and they both laughed. “But it was fun. They showed me all the sights. The castle, the museum, the bridge with all the statues —.”

“The Karluv Most. The Charles Bridge.”

“Yeah, right. You’ve been there?”

“Many times. Did they take you to see the astronomical clock on the old town hall?”

“You mean the one with all the moving figures? Yeah, that was really something. We should have a clock like that in New York. They could build one on St. Patrick’s, you know?”

Kuryakin chuckled to himself again. If this was merely an elaborate cover story, it was a good one. “It sounds as if you had a very enjoyable time,” he said.

“It was all right, I guess. I learned a few words in Czech. Prosim: please. Dekuji: thank you. Dobré rano: hello, good morning. Na shledanou: goodbye.”

“Unless it’s a close friend,” the agent interjected. “Then you should say, nazdar.”

“Oh yeah?” she replied, surprised. “Nazdar. Okay. I’ll remember that, if I ever go back. I might. The people there say the country is really changing...”

Kuryakin put a discreet finger to his lips. He inclined his head and lowered his voice. “Never discuss politics in a crowded airplane, Ellie. You never know who might be listening.”

The young woman blanched. “Oh, yeah. Right.”

She hunched down further into her seat, and didn’t speak again until Kuryakin changed



the subject to Czech food. Relieved, she was only too willing to prattle on about the problems of counting calories on a steady diet of potato pancakes, roast pork, and dumplings.

And as he listened, Kuryakin wondered again if “Ellie Hoffman” was not just another Thrush lackey sent to keep an eye on him. Not for the first time on this mission did he wish that his partner, Napoleon Solo, were along for the ride. Napoleon would have relished an opportunity like this to test his instincts, Kuryakin thought. For Solo, uncovering duplicity — particularly, the female variety — was more invigorating than several brisk sets of tennis. He probably would have toyed with this girl for hours.

But Kuryakin had neither the patience nor the temperament for such parlor games. There were better, more dependable methods of discovering the truth. So, taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, the agent excused himself, slipped into the lavatory, uncapped his communicator and called U.N.C.L.E. New York. Connie, who worked the night owl shift, was on duty in Section Four.

“What can I do for you, Illya?” she asked, sounding bored.

“Could you run a prelim on a Miss Eloise Hoffman? I’m not certain of the spelling. Probable residence, Staten Island. It’s important. I’ll wait.”

One minute and twenty seconds later, Connie returned with the information. Eloise Hoffman, two f’s, one ‘n,’ age twenty-three and single, did indeed reside in Staten Island, New York, with her parents and a brother who attended City College. She also had a married sister who lived nearby. Currently, Miss Hoffman was employed by Allied Water Supply, West 29th Street, a company that repaired and maintained office water coolers, as an executive secretary to Allied’s only vice president, Stanley Newkirk. She had no criminal record, no outstanding debts and no political affiliations. Evidently, the closest she’d ever come to international affairs was a donation last year to UNICEF.

“Anything else?” Connie asked, when she was finished.

“Yes. I’d like a complete background check ASAP. I’ll call back later if I need it.” For some reason, Kuryakin had a hunch that he would.

He signed off and returned to his seat. Now on her second wind, Ellie had moved on to a comparison of Prague and New York weather. Kuryakin didn’t mind. With his professional curiosity satisfied, he was content to just sit back and listen, mentally predicting what she would say before she said it. He was also reasonably sure that before the morning was over, he would know more about Ellie Hoffman than she knew, herself.

### 3.

#### ***Kastrup Airport. Copenhagen.***

Kuryakin’s tan leather grip was waiting for him at the baggage claim, along with a fresh pair of bloodhounds from Thrush lurking nearby. Since the men were both blond and Scandinavian fair, Kuryakin assumed they were local talent, hastily recruited. One was broad-shouldered and unusually tall — well over six-six. The other looked like his twin brother, after he’d been squashed down by an industrial compactor and subjected to a frontal lo-

botomy.

Ellie Hoffman's powder blue Tourister Pullman was nowhere in sight.

"My suitcase? Where's my suitcase?" she exclaimed, as the carousel emptied and the rush of passengers dribbled away. Her voice rose an octave in panic. "It's not here. Oh my God, what am I going to do?"

Standing beside her, Kuryakin groped for words of reassurance. "Perhaps the plane hasn't completely offloaded yet. Perhaps it will still turn up," he said, knowing full well that it wouldn't.

"But suppose it doesn't? What could've happened?"

"Most likely, it was sent on a different flight," he replied reasonably. Which, of course, was the truth. Kuryakin had taken his time picking up his own bag, lagging behind the other passengers, waiting for something like this to happen. The fact that the clerk back in Prague had chosen Ellie's suitcase rather than someone else's, made his task easier, but also more difficult.

He forced himself to talk fast, to calm her. Just beyond the customs desk, the blond bloodhounds were sniffing the air, their interest piqued. If he wasn't careful, he was going to lose control over the situation.

"I'll accompany you to the airline office. We'll file a report. This sort of thing happens all the time. Don't worry. I'm sure they'll find it."

"But I have to catch a connecting flight for New York in two hours!"

"Then give them your home address. They'll send it on to you, after they find it."

"But I have important things in that suitcase! Irreplaceable things. My grandmother's photographs. My great-aunt's ring. And what about all my traveler's checks? They're in there, too. I was afraid of getting robbed. I don't even have enough cash to take a cab home!"

Kuryakin grimaced, but he didn't bother to scold her for not keeping her valuables in her purse. She was an inexperienced traveler and anyway, what was done was done. Instead, he said, "I'm sure the airline will make some arrangements —."

But Ellie was having none of it. She didn't even seem to hear him.

"What am I going to do? What am I going to do?" She twisted the strap of her shoulder bag around her thin fingers while repeating the question, over and over again, like a plaintive mantra.

Kuryakin ran a nervous hand through his tousled hair and thought: *Napoleon, why are you never around when I need you?*

Then, bowing to the inevitable, he took a breath and said, "Look, Ellie, I'll be staying on here a few days. It's only a small, modest hotel, but I'm certain they'll have a room for you,



too. I'll advance you the money. When the airline returns your bag in a day or two, you can reimburse me."

He read her face as she wavered between gratitude and growing suspicion. He continued, warming to the idea. "You said on the plane that you wished you could see Copenhagen. Well, this is your chance. I'll show you the sights. We'll have a night on the town."

"You'd do all that for me?" she asked in a small voice. She wanted desperately to believe in his sincerity, that he was simply acting chivalrous with no ulterior motives.

"Why not?" Kuryakin swallowed hard and improvised a measure of enthusiasm. "Traveling on business can be very lonely. It'll be nice to have company."

For some reason, that did it. Ellie smiled and her fingers ceased their incessant twining. She seemed relieved that the decision had been made.

"Okay," she agreed and, summoning up her courage again, she added, "But don't try to talk me into sharing a room with you."

Kuryakin took her by the shoulder, and aimed her in the direction of the airline office. "I wouldn't dream of it," he said.

Through the corner of his eye, he saw the bloodhounds turn and follow.

#### 4.

*If only Trish were here for this!* Ellie thought to herself as she stared out the taxi window at the scenery whizzing by. Trish, who was always telling her to hem her skirts higher, to use brighter lipstick, to dye her mouse-brown hair a more vivid shade of red or blond. Well, here she was, in a strange city, on her way to a hotel with a strange man she'd known for less than half a day. What would Trish say if she could see her little sister now?

Ellie knew what her mother would say — in *that* tone of voice. The young woman glanced over at Kuryakin sitting beside her. He was leaning forward in the seat, dictating directions in Danish to the driver. She knew what Momma would say, but Momma would be wrong. With those soulful blue eyes and that pale, troubled-angel face, he couldn't possibly be a white slaver or a masher or even a thief.

Admittedly, he didn't much look like a businessman, either, although she couldn't help but believe him, back at the airport, when he said he was lonely. There was something deliciously sad about him, like the melancholy heroes in her romance novels. She couldn't imagine seeing him laugh out aloud. Even when he offered her a smile from time to time, it was as if he had to keep reminding himself to do so. "I told the driver to stop at Strøget on the way to the hotel," Kuryakin said, breaking her train of thought.

"Strøget?"

"The shopping district. I thought you might want to buy a change of clothing. Something more casual, perhaps."



Ellie smoothed the skirt of her conservative beige travel suit and dropped her eyes downward to her high-heeled pumps. She turned an ankle and studied one shoe thoughtfully. "I'm not going to get very far sightseeing in these, huh?"

Kuryakin smiled and shook his head. "You probably should look for something to sleep in, too." The suggestion was offered matter-of-factly, without the slightest hint of innuendo. Nevertheless, it made Ellie feel uncomfortable. Embarrassed, she turned away from him, to stare out the window again.

"Boy, you think of everything, don't you?" she said, with a nervous laugh.

"Always," he agreed, taking the opportunity to steal a quick glance over his shoulder. The grey Volvo was still behind them, some two cars back. Hans and Fritz, as he'd come to nickname the two Thrush agents, were clearly visible in the front seat. Fritz, the one with the frontal lobotomy, was driving.

Kuryakin settled back in his own seat, situating himself for a better angle of the driver's rearview mirror. He kept one eye focused on the image of the Volvo, while he monitored the progress of their own taxi, acutely alert and aware of his surroundings.

Now, they were in Sundbyerne. Now, Christianshavn. Past the minaret-like spire of the Church of Our Savior, with its gracefully twisting outer staircase. Over the central canal. Past the narrow houses and the Dutch-style warehouses and finally, over the Knippelbro, the bridge that connects the island of Amager to the main part of the city.

Similarly, he also ticked off the day's expected itinerary in his mind. First, he would take Ellie to Strøget, where they would stroll through the maze of alleyways and pedestrian-only streets. Then, they would check into the hotel where he would allow her time to change and freshen up.

The rest of the afternoon, they would wander through museums and churches, palaces and town squares, probably ending the evening at Tivoli, with the entire time spent safe among the crowds of tourists. It was important, Kuryakin knew, to keep the bloodhounds occupied but at arm's length.

He looked over at Ellie, anxiously fingering the strap of her bag, on the other end of the seat. It was important to keep her occupied and at arm's length, too. A great deal depended on what Kuryakin did in the next twenty-four hours.

Mostly, he would wait. As the little taxi sped past the formidable Christiansborg Palace, it suddenly struck him how much of his job was simply that — long stretches of listening, watching, guarding. Standing around, preparing for something to happen.

And in-between, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes not, he killed people.

## 5.

Illya expected Ellie to love Støget, which he regarded as one of the most civilized places to shop in the world, and he was not disappointed. They spent several pleasant hours, roaming in and out of the stores, browsing through the handmade wares of the craft venders,

and sampling the cold smorrebrod sandwiches and pastries from the street stands. Ellie bought a light sweater, a cotton skirt, a pair of flat sandals, a white eyelet nightgown, and a Little Mermaid figurine.

Except for two pilsners and an occasional snack, Kuryakin bought nothing for himself. Still carrying his tan leather grip, he kept his wallet ready for Ellie and an eye peeled for Hans and Fritz, one of whom was never far away. Sometime around noon, he almost lost the bloodhounds. Later, somewhere between Strøget and the hotel, they almost lost him. As Kuryakin had informed Ellie earlier, their hotel was modest, but clean and comfortable, located on the Studiestraede, not far from the University. The desk clerk was a plump, chatty matron who, for a few extra kroner, was only too happy to rent Kuryakin another room on the same floor.

While Ellie left him to change, Kuryakin took the opportunity to wash up and replace his sweater with a fresh shirt. He thought of calling U.N.C.L.E., but decided to wait. It was possible, even probable, that Hans and Fritz were equipped with electronic ears and were, even now, sweep-monitoring the frequencies, poised to intercept his report. He would disappoint them, however, and use the time to prepare his room for visitors.

Dropping his bag on the bed, Kuryakin cracked it open, burrowed through his clothes to the false bottom, unlocked a secret compartment, and took out a palm-sized microfilm canister. The compartment was too obvious, he thought. His bag would be the first place they'd look and he had no intention of dragging it with him, around the city. He needed a better hiding place, one they would have to work hard — but not too hard — to find.

The bureau was out. So were the undersides of the chairs, the rugs, the picture frames, and the lamps. The room had no attached bath, but it did have a toilet. Kuryakin considered it for a moment, then dismissed this hiding place as well. *Much too clichéd*. Besides, he had no plastic to protect the film.

Which left the soft, eiderdown-quilted bed. If he stuffed the canister into the mattress, they'd probably end up trashing the entire bed, which might be difficult to explain to a hotel manager. He would be forced to pay for the damage, too, and with Ellie's shopping spree and the planned sightseeing tour, his expense account was threatening to become overdrawn.



On the other hand, the down-filled pillows presented a more feasible solution — inconspicuous, but accessible and easily replaced. From his travel kit, Kuryakin took out a spool of common white thread, broke off a short piece and tied it to the microfilm canister. Then, with his pocketknife, the agent cut a minute slit in the pillow seam, inserted the canister and shook it down while keeping a firm grip on the end of the thread. When he was satisfied that the canister was buried deep among the feathers, he replaced the pillow and smoothed it out. The tiny slit, with the thread poking through, was barely visible to the naked eye.

Just as he finished, Ellie arrived, knocking on his door.

“Illya?”

“It’s open.”

He pulled on his jacket to conceal his shoulder holster and gun a split-second before Ellie appeared. She was wearing her new sweater, skirt and sandals.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” he told her as he closed his suitcase and set it on the floor, next to the bed. He paused, as if he were trying hard to remember where he misplaced something. Ellie glanced over at the bureau. His watch, some pocket change and a gold money clip, waited there, near an ashtray.

“Are you looking for these?” she asked. “Here.”

Without warning, she picked up his watch and tossed it to him. Before he could stop her, the money clip followed. Kuryakin’s pale face turned even paler, but he managed to catch them both.

“Ellie —,” he exclaimed.





“What’s the matter?”

She was laughing, Kuryakin realized, as he gulped down a breath. Of course, he couldn’t tell her that the watch was a detonator and that the money clip, in addition to the kroner notes, contained enough explosive to take out anything or anyone within a range of ten feet.

“Nothing,” he said finally. “I just don’t like to throw my money around, that’s all.”

It was a stupid joke, Kuryakin thought, almost as soon as he said it, the sort Napoleon was so fond of, but it served its purpose. Distracted, Ellie allowed him to steer her from the room.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“Nice. Very nice.”

She smiled, pleased with the compliment and never noticed the relief in the Russian’s eyes when he locked the door behind them.

## 6.

Copenhagen is a port city, a city of ships and sailors and deep-sea quays, but for Kuryakin, it was also a city of spires. The spires were everywhere: on the churches, on the historic old stock exchange, even on the telephone booths. No matter where you turned, there they were, straining heavenward, in the midst of the modern glass and steel office buildings, above the ancient, half-timbered houses with their steep, copper-tiled roofs.



The agent knew Copenhagen almost as well as he knew Prague, but it didn’t seem to matter where they went. Ellie loved it all. Not only the tourists spots, like the Town Hall Square, with its gothic Dragon Fountain on one side and its bronze of Hans Christian Anderson on the other, but the picturesque yet commonplace details that residents and those familiar with the city took for granted. The musty bookstalls in the University quarter. The tattoo parlors and seedy dives of Nyhavn. The stern countenance of the fishwife statue on the Gammel Strand.



Ellie gushed with a child-like delight over everything they encountered — the flocks of cyclists, the postmen in scarlet jackets, the women smoking pipes and cigars, the seagulls mingling with the pigeons — which Kuryakin found sweetly endearing. He began to enjoy himself, and occasionally, he even forgot about the two



blond Thrushmen who continued to dog them, relentlessly, wherever they went.

For Ellie, still blissfully unaware of the intrigue that surrounded

her, her new-found friend remained a puzzle with missing pieces. He ate constantly, almost indiscriminately, snacking on pastries and sausages and deep-fried Camembert from the ubiquitous street stands. There were times when he was interested and interesting, more knowledgeable than a guidebook. But often, he seemed detached and preoccupied, retreating somewhere inside himself, so that he seemed not only a visitor to the city, but to the planet, as well.

On the Gammel Strand, they caught a waterbus that toured the canals and the inner harbor all the way to Langelinie, where the Little Mermaid perched on her rock, endlessly gazing outward, to the sea. As they passed the statue, situated on the edge of the harbor, Ellie was pleased to see it closely resembled her souvenir figurine.

"I had a storybook once, about a little mermaid, when I was a kid," she recalled, wistfully, to Kuryakin, who sat next to her, on the end of the very last seat. The boat was fairly crowded with tourists.

"The mermaid fell in love with a prince. So, she went to the sea witch and exchanged her voice for legs. And the witch told her that when the prince held her hand, his soul would flow into the mermaid's body and she would become human. I thought it was very romantic."

"And how did your storybook turn out?" the Russian asked absently. He seemed more interested in the people walking along the shoreline.

"I don't remember exactly," Ellie said. "Like all fairy tales do, I guess. They married and lived happily ever after." She turned to Kuryakin and eyed him uncertainly. "Didn't they?"

"Not in the original version."

"Oh? What happened, then?" she asked. He took a moment to answer.

"Well, actually, the prince married someone else, a human princess, and the mermaid died of a broken heart."

Ellie frowned. "That's a terrible ending. Why did Anderson write such a terrible



ending?”

“I suppose he was trying to say that a creature of the land could never love a creature of the sea, and the mermaid was foolish to expect otherwise.”

“But how could they change the story like that? My book showed a picture of the wedding.”

Kuryakin shrugged, indifferently. “Americans always prefer happy endings.”

He glanced over at Ellie and was surprised to find her staring down, into the water. She looked so depressed, he almost expected her to cry, and he wasn’t sure why. Hoping to repair the damage, he quickly gave her a good impression of a smile, and draped an arm over the back of the seat, pulling her closer.

“It’s just a fairy tale, Ellie,” he said. He squeezed the curve of her shoulder. “Besides, I think I like your storybook’s ending better.”

“I do, too,” Ellie agreed. She forced herself to return his smile to prove that everything was all right again, even if it wasn’t.

7.

Although he didn’t ask about it, Kuryakin could tell that something was nagging at Ellie for the rest of the afternoon. She didn’t complain or argue, but there was an uneasiness between them that hadn’t been there before. He could see it in her face. He wondered if, in sensing his own tension, it was finally dawning on her that things were not quite what they seemed to be.

And then, again, perhaps she was merely tired and becoming a little bored with his company. In either case, he resolved to make a greater effort to appear more relaxed and involved that evening at Tivoli.

Still, as they strolled through Copenhagen’s lovely amusement park, among the fountains and flower gardens, around the buildings outlined in brightly colored light bulbs against the dusk, Kuryakin realized why he had so few close female friends. He liked women well enough — and some, like Ellie, a lot more than others — but they required so much care and attention.

For example, they talked a great deal. Women used conversation as a source of pleasure as well as information, often returning to the same topic long after it was thoroughly exhausted. Kuryakin could remember assignments on which he and Napoleon had spent hours, sometimes days, without exchanging more than ten words — and Solo probably said nine of them. At least when Napoleon felt the need to rattle on, he had the good sense not to expect a response.







Women required constant, active engagement and a kind of vigilance, too. They often ascribed layers of meaning to the simplest statements and gestures. It was all so very complicated and not a little tiring, and for Illya Kuryakin, life was usually complicated enough.

Nevertheless, he was determined to show Ellie a good time this night, to make amends for anything he'd said or done wrong that afternoon. It helped that Hans and Fritz had mysteriously disappeared, sometime before dinner.

Kuryakin assumed that the bloodhounds had revised their strategy and were, at that moment, sniffing around his room back at the hotel. If all went well, he didn't expect to see them again, hopefully, forever.

In the meantime, he and Ellie picnicked by the lake, near the Chinese pagoda. They bought a mouse-shaped balloon, from a cheerful, bespectacled young man who flirted shamelessly with Ellie in English. They rode the bumper cars, nibbled on aebleskage, delicious apple desserts laced with vanilla and biscuit crumbs topped with whipped cream, and listened to the oompah bands.

At Ellie's urging, Kuryakin even tested his skill at the shooting gallery. The sights on the pellet rifle were bent, probably more as a result of wear and tear than deliberate malice, but Kuryakin was able to compensate. As one of the New York office's top marksmen, equipped with the right weapon, he could shoot the wings off a moth at two hundred yards. Although he might have walked away with enough stuffed toys to fill a nursery, Kuryakin took pity on the elderly concessionaire. After winning an oversized teddy bear for Ellie, he deliberately missed the next round of shots, and moved on, much to the relief of the concessionaire.

Eventually, they wandered into the Italian pantomime theater, where, halfway through the show, Kuryakin excused himself, ostensibly to find a men's room. Actually, with Hans and Fritz absent and Ellie happily occupied, it seemed like a good opportunity to call U.N.C.L.E. and file an update.

Slipping out of the open-air theater, Kuryakin circled to the rear and ducked into an employee entrance. It was a warm night for Copenhagen in May, but conveniently, none of the performers were lounging about. The entire cast was apparently on stage at the moment, and the muted sounds of the audience's laughter and applause echoed softly, in the distance.



Kuryakin clicked on his communicator pen and murmured, "Open Channel D. Overseas Relay. Kuryakin, here. Please scramble."

There was the usual static, followed by the usual feminine voice.

"Channel D is open. One moment, please. We're scrambling." Kuryakin reached out a hand to the side of the building, to lean against it while he waited.

And just by chance, in the corner of his eye, he caught a glint. If he had never moved, if he had remained stock-still, facing the doorway, he never would have seen it. But he did move and he did see it. A glint in the shadows, the glint of a knife flashing, with the black bulk of a body lunging forward, behind it.

There was no time to draw his gun. Kuryakin dropped the communicator and twisted, barely sidestepping the blade as it drove on past. He caught the assailant's right hand in both of his and recognized the man's face. It was the balloon seller, without his glasses and no longer looking very cheerful.

Kuryakin took the hand with the knife and hammered it into a wooden pillar as hard as he could, but the balloon seller was stronger than he looked and he kept his grip on the weapon. The man was agile, too. Changing direction, he shoved his body sideways, ramming Kuryakin twice, against the side of the theater, knocking the wind out of the agent. Kuryakin grunted, felt the balloon seller wrench free, and prepared himself for another attack. The knife flashed again. Kuryakin raised an arm to block it and kicked out, hoping to connect with something vital. Instead, he caught the balloon seller in the knee and heard it crack. The leg gave out, the balloon seller went down and tumbled headfirst, to the concrete sidewalk.

There was another sickening crack and a groan and then, nothing. Kuryakin knelt beside his assailant, turned him over, and discovered the knife protruding from the young man's chest. Kuryakin checked for a pulse and found none. The man's career as a balloon seller — and whatever else he'd been — was obviously over.

There was no chance to search through the pockets for identification. Kuryakin scrabbled around in the dark for his lost communicator, found it and hurried away before any fun-seeking Danes could catch him with the corpse. He kept on walking, not fast, but steadily, until he came to a deserted stand of shade trees, near an illuminated fountain. There, finally, he halted and raised the communicator to his lips.

"New York?" he said, between breaths, "Are you still there?"

"Illya?" Kuryakin recognized Wanda's voice. "Are you okay? The channel was open and then, nothing. What happened?"

"A minor interruption. Situation back to normal."

*Normal, such as it is*, he thought.



They stayed until the park closed at midnight. Although Kuryakin had seen his share of

fireworks for one night, he lingered to watch the display as if nothing had happened, for Ellie's sake. It was impossible to hail a cab in the crowd, but the hotel was near and the night was pleasant, so they decided to walk.

"That was a lot of fun," Ellie said. The balloon was long gone, but she still held the oversized teddy bear crooked under one arm.

"Yes, it was," Kuryakin managed, without a hint of sarcasm.

"I'm sorta glad my suitcase got lost, after all —."

*Not lost*, the agent mentally corrected her. *Merely borrowed temporarily.*

"—I mean, I would've gone on to New York. I never would've seen Copenhagen. I never would've gotten to know you."

*And you still don't know me*, he warned her silently. She reached out and linked her free arm through his, continuing to commiserate with the sidewalk as they strolled along.

"My goodness, when I think about it: living with my parents. Working for old Mr. Newkirk. Riding the Staten Island Ferry, back and forth, back and forth. Every day's the same. I lead such a dull, boring life. "

Kuryakin smiled, sympathetically. *Yes, I know*, he could have said, but didn't. After receiving his interim report, Wanda had fed him the rest of Ellie's dossier. It hadn't been long or mildly interesting.

"Well, here we are," Ellie announced as they arrived at the hotel, her voice tinged with regret. It was late and inside, the small lobby was deserted. The only illumination came from the desk clerk's nightlight and a shaded floor lamp, standing beside the flowered sofa. As Kuryakin released her arm, Ellie paused and said, "Thank you for a lovely evening and a wonderful day. I had a really great time. Thank you for everything. "

Shyly, almost delicately, she took his hand. He knew what was coming next. If he walked her to her room, she'd expect a good-night kiss. And if he kissed her good night, she might invite him in. And if he went into her room —.



He remembered what Napoleon always said: *If you give them all that you can, the best that you can, for as long as you can, there's never a reason to feel any guilt.*

But Kuryakin did feel guilt. He couldn't help it. He couldn't love intermittently, as his partner did, bouncing from one woman to another, like a stone skipping across a lake. Sex had to be more than a series of hit and run accidents. Otherwise, he wasn't playing fair with anyone — with the women, with his superiors, and most of all, with himself.

Kuryakin looked down into Ellie's eyes and saw what he didn't want to see: hope.

And he wondered: *If you knew there couldn't be anything else —no cozy lunch-hour rendezvous, no shared rides home on the ferry — would you still want it? One night with a mysterious stranger? A brief encounter, a fateful crossing of paths, just like in the drugstore paperbacks? Something to make you the envy of the typing pool for months to come?*

He was tempted to apologize, even as he took her gently into his arms. *I'm not a prince on a white horse*, he wanted to tell her. *I'm not even a decent, legitimate businessman. How can I be your lover, if I'm not free to be your friend?*

"Oh, Ellie," he said, sadly. He leaned down to her uplifted face and touched a hand to her cheek. Perhaps, if he kissed her here, in the lobby, he might nip this in the bud.

"Herr Kuryakin?"

The agent broke away, with a start. It was the plump lady clerk. She appeared, quite suddenly, from behind the desk and smiled, a little embarrassed. "Ah, undskyld ... I beg your pardon, but I must tell you. Someone come to see you. Earlier, after you go out. A man. A big man. He say he is your bekendt ... your friend."

Kuryakin arched a suspicious eyebrow. "I don't have any friends," he muttered. He trotted across the lobby and up the staircase, dragging Ellie along with him.

"Illya? What's the matter? What's wrong?"

As they reached the landing of the second floor, Kuryakin put a finger to his lips. The hallway was shadowed and silent. All the doors were shut tight. Resisting the impulse to draw his gun, the agent tiptoed to the door of his own room with Ellie close behind him. Carefully, he tried the knob. It turned easily. The door was unlocked. Slowly, he nudged it open with his foot.

Nothing. Kuryakin waited. He held his breath and listened. Still nothing. No sound. No movement in the darkness. It could have been a trap, but Kuryakin guessed that it wasn't. Trusting his instincts, he took a chance, entered the room and switched on a light.

The place was a shambles. The rugs were torn up. The chairs were overturned. The drawers hung, gaping, from the bureau. In the center of the room, Kuryakin's suitcase lay open on its side, all the contents dumped into an untidy pile.

*Sloppy*, Kuryakin thought to himself, though he expected as much. Top-notch profession-

als would have searched his room without leaving so much as a coverlet rumped, but Hans and Fritz were strictly third rate.

“Oh dear!” Ellie exclaimed when she saw the scene. “Illya, what happened?”

“It appears I’ve been burglarized.”

“Did they take anything?”

“Nothing important, I expect.” Then, to explain his apparent composure, he added, “Don’t worry, Ellie. I always keep my valuables with me.”

They entered the room, righting the furniture and picking through the debris. It was a mess, but at least nothing was smashed or destroyed.

Except the pillows.

“Do you really think you should stay here tonight?” Ellie asked. She hugged her arms and felt a little chill, despite the warmth of her sweater.

“Why not? It should be safe enough.”

“But suppose they come back?”

Kuryakin glanced over to the bed, where the mattress cascaded to the floor, at right angles to the bed frame. The down pillows had been slashed, reduced to shapeless lumps of feathers. The agent didn’t bother to paw through the feathers. He knew the microfilm canister was gone.

“They won’t be back,” he said.

## 9.

Kuryakin and Ellie checked out of the hotel the next morning. The agent hadn’t lied to her the night before. He was convinced that Hans and Fritz would not return. The Thrushmen had — or thought they had — what they wanted. The attack by the balloon seller, no doubt an effort to tie up loose ends, confirmed it.

For Kuryakin, however, caution was not only a virtue, but a habit as well. He decided that a change in accommodations might be prudent. Although Ellie urged him to call the police and report the burglary, he assured her nothing of value was stolen. Why call in the authorities and become entangled with all that red tape? It was simpler to put the room in order, pay for the pillows and say nothing to the desk clerk.

They moved to a larger, more modern hotel located a few blocks away, nearer the palace. Their new rooms were far more spacious with private baths in each, and they adjoined.

“This is really nice,” Ellie enthused as she came through the connecting door and surveyed Illya’s room. Standing beside the bed, Kuryakin nodded and continued to unpack his suitcase. He watched as Ellie threw open the draperies to let in the mid-afternoon sun, and

made a mental note to close them again at his first opportunity.

Just then, there was knock at the door of Ellie's room.

"I'll get it," she said, retreating. Automatically alert, Kuryakin paused to listen. In the distance he heard the creak of the door, followed by a young man's voice, polite but formal. Ellie said something in reply. It all sounded normal. Evidently, she'd ordered room service.

Kuryakin resumed his unpacking.

A moment later, Ellie reappeared, lugging her blue Tourister Pullman with both hands.

"Look, Illya, my suitcase is back! That was a messenger from the airline." She set the case down with a grunt. "I'm so relieved they found it."

"But how did they find us?" Kuryakin asked.

"Why, the clerk back at that other hotel, of course. I told her we were coming here, just in case the airline called. And boy, am I glad I did."

But Kuryakin did not share in her happiness. "Ellie, I told you not to say anything to the clerk!"

"Not even where we were going?"

"*Especially* not where we were going."

"But I don't understand. Why not?"

Before Kuryakin could open his mouth again, the door of Ellie's room burst open, providing the answer for him. Startled, she cried out and turned. Behind her, Kuryakin's hand quickly snaked under the left lapel of his sports jacket, but it was too late. The two men he'd dubbed Hans and Fritz were already striding through the connecting door, guns drawn.

"Stoab!" said Fritz, the burly one, who was in the lead. He spoke with a thick Danish accent. "Please. Not to move. Either of you." With two silenced .45 automatics pointed in his direction, Kuryakin saw that he had no choice but to obey. He held his hands wide, away from his body, while Ellie twisted to face the intruders.

"What's going on here? Who *are* you people?"

The Thrushmen ignored her. Hans, the tall one, elbowed his companion aside. "Throw away your weapon," he said, in English that was considerably better than Fritz's.

To Ellie's surprise, Kuryakin dug under his jacket, produced his U.N.C.L.E. Special and dropped it on the bed. Fritz retrieved the gun while his partner, who was obviously his superior as well, gestured with the barrel of his .45 toward the blue suitcase.

"Ist that it?"



Reluctantly, Kuryakin nodded.

“You will open it, please. And no tricks.”

The agent hesitated and lowered his eyes. “The key, Ellie.”

“What?”

“Give me the key.” Still bewildered, Ellie left the room, trailed by Fritz. She returned with her purse and passed the key to Kuryakin.

“Illya?”

But the agent didn’t answer. Instead, he hauled her suitcase onto the bed, next to his, and unlocked the latches. Ellie stared at him, horrified. “Illya? What are you doing? Illya! Please, tell me what’s happening”

“Ja,” Hans chuckled, comfortably in control of the situation. “Why don’t you do that?” He watched as Kuryakin lifted the lid of the blue Pullman, revealing a men’s shaving kit, nestled among the articles of feminine clothing. Ellie saw it, too.

“What’s that doing in there?” she murmured. “That’s not mine.”

“Go ahead. Tell her,” Hans goaded Kuryakin. “I am eager to hear. Tell her how you have used her for your own purposes.” The tall Dane looked at Ellie. “Your suitcase was not lost accidentally, Froken. It was diverted, to serve as a hiding place. Ja, you see? You understand? He has been playing a game with all of us. Much like the pea under the nutshells.”

Hans turned his attention back to Kuryakin. “But the game is over, now.” He gestured again with the gun. “Open your little case and give us the true microfilm.”

Slowly, Kuryakin unzipped the shaving kit. A small canister appeared in his hand. He tossed it to Hans, who caught it. The tall Thrushman smiled, and then, suddenly, he yanked Ellie by the arm, pulling her close. Ellie yelped and Kuryakin hopped a step forward in response, but Fritz’s .45 warned him back. Hans’ weapon was pointed directly at Ellie’s skull.

“You don’t need her,” Kuryakin growled. Hans laughed.

“Ah, ja, but I do. This is a large hotel. How else to insure my safety?” He began to back away, dragging the terrified woman with him. As Fritz opened the door behind them, Hans barked out an order in Danish: “When we are gone, kill him.”

Then, with Ellie still in his grip, Hans hurried away, down the corridor. Fritz pivoted his massive bulk to face Kuryakin. The agent tensed, watching the weapon in the Thrushman’s hand, waiting for an opportunity to act. He knew he couldn’t wait long. *If only Fritz would relax his guard*, Kuryakin thought. If only that dull-witted brain would become distracted for just an instant ...

“Empty your pockets. Slowly,” the Thrushman mumbled.

"I beg your pardon?" Kuryakin blinked, genuinely surprised.

"Your pockets. Empty them."

*So: they intended to make his murder appear as if it happened during the course of a robbery.* The agent took out his handkerchief. Fritz made a face and motioned, and the handkerchief fluttered to the rug.

He took out a handful of pocket change. Fritz motioned again. The coins fell in a tinkling shower.

He took out his money clip, fat with kroner notes. This time, Fritz's blue pig-eyes lit up. "Here," the Thrushman grunted and held out a meaty fist.

Kuryakin cocked his head innocently. Annoyed, Fritz repeated the order in Danish. "Give that to me."

The agent smiled to himself. "With pleasure," he hissed.

And then he threw it.

## 10.

Two floors below, in a service stairwell, Hans and Ellie halted when they heard the muffled explosion. "What was that?" she exclaimed, but the Thrushman knew. Pushing Ellie ahead of him, he started down the stairs again. They gained only one more landing, however, before another sound, this time, a voice, pulled them up short again.

"Stop right there," it said in English.

Simultaneously, the Thrushman and Ellie looked up. On the landing above them, Kuryakin stood poised and ready, elbows locked, aiming his U.N.C.L.E. Special in a steady, two-handed grip.

"Let her go," he said, but the Thrushman crushed his hostage even closer. Hans was almost two heads taller and a hundred pounds heavier than Ellie. Trapped in his iron embrace, she trembled, looking very small and very helpless. Kuryakin repeated the order.

"Nej, sir, I will not. She is coming with me." Hans pointed his .45 at Ellie's temple. "But, if you do not put down your own gun by the count of three, I will shoot her now."

Kuryakin remained rooted to his spot, perfectly still and unwavering. The Thrushman began to count:

"One —."

Kuryakin shot him right between the eyes.

Ellie screamed. She felt a spurt of warm blood spray across the side of her face, felt the Thrushman's arm go limp, felt the body slump to the landing, lifeless, behind her. Crying,

she tore away from the corpse and ran straight into Kuryakin's waiting arms. He hugged her tight, whispering into her ear, over and over again, "You're all right, you're all right. It's over. Everything is okay."

He continued to hold her until, eventually, she heard him. Above and below them, the stairwell echoed with the clamor of confused guests and the rumbling gallop of approaching security people.

"You gambled with my life," Ellie managed between sobs when she finally found her voice again.

"I took a calculated risk," Kuryakin corrected her calmly. "I couldn't allow him to escape. If he'd taken you out into the street, he most certainly would've killed you. I couldn't take the chance of that happening."

"But you almost got me killed here! And all for your precious microfilm!"

"No, Ellie."

She pulled back in the agent's embrace. He couldn't offer her a handkerchief, so she dabbed at her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweater. "I don't think I believe you anymore," she said, as the tears subsided.

Without taking his eyes from hers, Kuryakin reached into his pocket. Then, wordlessly, he held out his hand and Ellie looked down, at his open palm.

There was another small microfilm canister in it.

11.

"So the film in the shaving kit was a decoy, too," Ellie said, and Kuryakin nodded.

"Yes. The real microfilm was also in your suitcase, in one of the liner pockets. The ticket clerk in Prague slipped it in, before he shipped it to Amsterdam."

The Russian agent leaned back in the upholstered chair in Ellie's hotel room, finishing his coffee. He sat in shirtsleeves, with his gun



and shoulder holster in full view. There was no longer any reason to conceal it.

He'd spent the afternoon flashing the usual identification, answering the usual questions, placating the usual authorities. Now it was evening. The reports were made, the bodies were gone and the destruction in his adjoining room was sealed off. As Hans, the Thrush-man whose real name he never learned had so rightly observed: the game was over.

"Are you angry with me?" Kuryakin asked. Sitting on the edge of the bed in her nightgown, Ellie brushed her hair and grinned. "I guess not. But you still deceived me."

"I'm sorry, but you see, it's part of what I do."

Ellie considered. "Well, at least you work for U.N.C.L.E. For awhile there, I thought you were a Soviet spy."

The agent smiled to himself. He didn't bother to explain to her that technically, he was that, too. She'd had enough confusion for one day.

"Will we have any more trouble?" Ellie asked.

"I don't think so, although I can't be sure," Kuryakin admitted, setting down his empty cup. "Don't worry. I intend to stay awake all night. There'll be no more surprises, in any event."

Yawning, Ellie put away her brush and climbed into bed. "You can sit on my bed," she told him.

"Thanks, but I'll be comfortable enough here."

The woman chewed her lip, nervously, "To tell you the truth, after this afternoon, I think I'd be a lot more comfortable if I knew you were next to me."

Kuryakin laughed softly. "All right," he said. She snapped off the lamp and he settled down beside her on the queen-size bed.

Lying there, still awake, Ellie studied him. She remembered the expression of stone-cold determination she'd seen on his face in the stairwell. It had frightened her almost as much as the tall gunman had.

Even now, as he sat upright, calm but watchful, his sharp, pale profile bathed in the blue shadows of the quiet hotel room, he seemed remote and foreign, almost exotic, in a way that had nothing to do with nationality.

*What was he feeling? What was he thinking about?* There was something terribly intimidating about his detachment, but also, something strangely seductive. She remembered their interrupted kiss the previous night.

"Illya?" she murmured, impulsively wanting to try again.

He turned slightly, and said, "Yes, Ellie?"



And suddenly, in that moment, she saw the chasm that stretched between them, a gap that nothing, not even a kiss, could ever bridge.

"I just wanted to tell you good night," she said.

"Good night," he replied simply, and placed his hand on hers. It was dry and very cool to the touch. As she closed her eyes, she thought of the fairy tale again. And drifting off to sleep, she wondered which of them was really more like the human prince. And which was really the mermaid.

## 12.

They didn't talk much on the plane coming back. Kuryakin slept for most of the flight. She never reimbursed him for the hotel accommodations, either. When she offered the money, he refused to accept it, and said he'd charge it to his expense account.

After they landed at Kennedy, he walked her down to the baggage claim. This time, both of their suitcases were there. "My sister is coming to pick me up," Ellie told him, as they left the luggage carousel. "She'll be here any minute. Can we give you a lift?"

"No, thank you. I'm meeting a friend."

Ellie set down her Pullman next to the oversized stuffed bear. "I thought you didn't have any friends."

"One or two," Kuryakin replied, with a secret smile.

"Then, I guess this is good bye." Ellie held out her hand. "How do they say it in Czech? Na shledanou?"

"Unless it's a close friend, then you say nazdar." He took her hand and shook it. "Nazdar, Ellie. Take care of yourself."

"You, too. And thanks again for everything."

Hefting his tan leather grip, Kuryakin nodded and offered her a wave. As Ellie watched, he walked toward a man who was waiting for him, idling beside the row of terminal windows. This man was taller and darker and he wore an unbuttoned black trench coat.

"Well?" Napoleon Solo said, as Kuryakin joined him.

"They're building a chemical factory there, all right, under a Western cover. I have the pictures and the specs on microfilm. It's just as the Old Man suspected. Thrush is hoping to exploit the liberalized political climate. Which only proves, that when you leave a door open, you never know what will crawl in."

"How did everything go, otherwise? I heard you had some trouble."

The Russian frowned. "Your very clever scheme worked better in theory than practice. Too many complications."

Solo's gaze traveled past his partner's shoulder to Ellie, who was still standing near the baggage claim. "Who's the girl?"

"One of the complications."

"Oh?" Solo's hazel eyes flickered, taking rapid inventory. "Maybe we should invite her for a drink."

Kuryakin sighed, wearily. "Napoleon, do her a kindness and let her be." The American agent shrugged in a careless, suit-yourself gesture.

"Let's get going, then. I have a car waiting."

As Kuryakin picked up his bag, Solo added, "By the way, how's the so-called 'Prague Spring' progressing? We've received unconfirmed reports that there are Soviet troops massing on the Polish border. Any word on the Red grapevine?"

Kuryakin shook his head, sadly. "I'm afraid there will not be a Prague autumn," he said.

They walked on, and from her place, just outside the baggage claim area, Ellie watched the two figures in black melt away, into the crowd. She kept hoping they would look back or turn around, but neither one of them ever did.

