

# The PartyTime Affair

by Linda White

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Napoleon Solo shivered in the brisk morning air and tried to sink deeper into his overcoat. His gloved hands cupped his communicator pen, hiding it from the view of those who passed in the parking lot outside Rayell Pharmaceuticals.

"Illya? Is she going to see you?"

Illya Kuryakin held his pen against the magazine he was reading. The waiting room was full of people, mostly waiting for blood work in Rayell's medical lab, none of them happy about it. The Russian pretended to cough, and murmured into his pen.

"Yes, Napoleon. I'm waiting for her now. But I don't know how I'm supposed to get near the files. I'm supposed to be applying for a chemist's position. Job applicants are seldom left alone with classified information."

Solo's smile was audible in his voice. "You'll think of something. Just hurry, okay? It's freezing out here."

"Mr. Kuryakin?" Ginelle Rigg, a dark-haired woman with luminous brown eyes, glanced up from the clip board she was holding to scan the waiting room.

Illya fumbled with the magazine, clicked his pen shut and stowed it away. His thick horn-rimmed glasses and the worn leather briefcase he carried reinforced his scholarly look.

"Here," he responded. He shuffled over to the door. Rigg was two inches taller than he was. "I am Illya Kuryakin." He held out an uncertain hand. His briefcase crashed to the floor. He squatted to retrieve it, pushing his glasses up on his nose with one finger. "I'm so sorry!" He stood up. "Just a little nervous, I guess. Interview jitters." He shrugged his jacket forward on his shoulders and smiled, then thought better of it and assumed a serious expression.

Rigg's eyes twinkled with amusement. "This way, Mr. Kuryakin." She led the way down the hall. White-coated personnel hustled around them. Rigg turned left through double swinging doors, and suddenly they were in a quieter place. The research wing. "Ordinarily I wouldn't have seen you. Your application missed the

official deadline, you know."

"Yes, I'm sorry. You see, I was out of town, and I only just—"

"It's quite all right. Your qualifications demanded that I interview you. If," she added ominously, "everything on your application is true." She looked at him shrewdly.

"Oh, it is quite true. My degrees are a matter of record, and my last employer was quite satisfied with my work."

"Until the lab exploded?" Rigg had a soft, husky voice.

"I assure you, madame, the explosion was the fault of a co-worker. He put many of us out of work, you see."

"Of course. In here." She pulled a key from the pocket of her white lab coat and opened the door to her office.

Once inside, Illya could see the famously impenetrable file room through a wall of shatter-proof specialty glass that stretched across one end of the office.

"Would you like a cup of coffee? Tea?" offered Rigg.

"Tea, please," he mumbled self-consciously.

Rigg pressed a button on her intercom. "Lacy? Bring me two cups of tea, please." Then to Illya. "It's Irish Breakfast. I hope that's okay."

Illya nodded assent. He straightened his tie as Rigg perused his application file.

"I see some interesting items here in your file. But tell me in your own words, please, just what you were doing on your last project."

"Well, it was quite sensitive work. Not all of it has been declassified — we had a government contract, as I explain there — but I was overseeing an experiment on the effects of hallucinogenic tryptamine on human subjects. Quite frustrating, actually. Before the government became involved we were unable to get permission to give the drug to subjects. But once the military found a use for the experiment, they lined up volunteers for us. And of course, we were thus able to sidestep some of the more stringent FDA controls if we chose to do so. We did not, by the way. We were very conscientious about meeting their standards for pharmaceutical purity."

Rigg nodded thoughtfully, her eyes still

on the file. “Go on.”

Illya cleared his throat and absent-mindedly toyed with the ballpoint in his pocket. “Yes. Well, we gave the drug in a placebo-controlled, double-blind, dose-response manner—”

In the parking lot, Solo pulled his coat tighter around himself and hunched a bit in order to get his ear closer to his receiver. He smiled as Illya spewed jargon at the lab manager. The Russian’s Ph.D. came in handy every now and then.

Half an hour later, Illya emerged from Rayell Pharmaceutical and fell in step with Napoleon, who headed for the car.

“How did it go?” asked Solo.

Illya looked surprised. “I kept my channel open—”

“Yes, but ten minutes ago a security guard decided I looked suspicious and started a conversation. I missed the last part.”

“Ah. Well, you are now talking to the newest employee of Rayell Pharmaceutical. I start tomorrow.”

“Did you find the file room?”

Illya snorted. “It is unmistakable. It is also quite inaccessible. The only entrance is through Rigg’s office.”

“Well, not to worry,” smiled Solo. “As an employee, you will soon find an excuse to visit, I’m sure.”

Napoleon fell silent as he maneuvered the car through the cross-town traffic. He had been hoping his legendary luck would hold and Illya would manage to retrieve the PartyTime file, or at least photograph it. He squirmed inwardly at the thought of reporting failure to Waverly.

Illya’s question caught him off guard.

“Napoleon, what did you think of Ginelle Rigg?”

“Hmm? Who?”

“Dr. Rigg, the woman I was sent to see. You saw the film of her at the briefing.”

“Oh, her.” He shrugged. “Not much. What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know. The usual. Did you find her attractive?”

“Not especially.”

“But she meets all your usual criteria, doesn’t she? Tall, slender, immaculately

dressed, perfect hair, perfect nails, deep sexy voice — what is that word you use? Husky?”

“Why all the questions?” The Dodge’s heater made a lot of noise.

“I just wondered. She seems like the kind of woman you would like.”

“Trying to set me up?” teased Solo.

Illya winced. “Hardly.” The place inside where he stored his feelings threatened to evict them. He snapped a lid on it, hard and fast. “I found her intriguing,” he said at last.

Napoleon stared at his partner for so long that he nearly rear-ended a bus.

“Napoleon! Watch what you’re doing!”

“Sorry.” Solo tugged at his bottom lip. He didn’t say anything until the light changed. “What do you mean, intriguing?”

Illya shrugged. “She was very concerned about me being out of work. So kind. So attentive. It was very nice, really. I don’t know.” He searched for the words. “She seemed easy to be around.”

Napoleon played a tattoo on the steering wheel with his fingers. “Illya, you don’t like girls, remember?”

“Yes, I know. Strange, isn’t it? So why do I find her attractive?”

Napoleon made a sharp sound, almost a laugh. “Hey, partner, don’t go changing stripes on me now. I’m just getting used to knowing you’re in love with me.”

Illya wondered if he was being teased. “I thought you would like it if I was normal,” he said softly. “We could double-date.” The thought of going out on a date with Napoleon made him giddy.

Napoleon pulled the car severely to the right and turned into the U.N.C.L.E. parking garage. The tires slipped for a milisecond on a remnant of last week’s snow, and the car fishtailed, but Solo corrected for it. He sped down the ramp and around the other cars at a dangerous speed. The tires squealed in protest. He found the space he was looking for and braked hard, slammed the car into park, and yanked the keys from the ignition. He shook them heatedly in Illya’s face as he spoke.

“You listen to me, my Russian friend, you are not abnormal. Do you understand? Who the hell comes up with these labels anyway? I like you just the way you are, and

I don't want you trying to change yourself for my benefit. You got that?" He realized he was shaking the keys in Illya's face like a fist. He fell silent and suddenly deflated, embarrassed by his public display of passion. He stared at the green concrete wall ahead of him.

Illya laughed softly, a nervous laugh. "Let me get this straight. No pun intended. You like having a gay partner?"

Napoleon tapped a rhythm on his top lip with his left fist. Stalling for time. At last he spoke.

"Look, Illya, you're my best friend. I never had such a good friend. Ever. And if you change, I'm afraid everything will change." He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes tight against the jumble of feelings that rioted inside him. "Just forget about this girl stuff, all right? Even if you were straight, I'd tell you to forget this Rigg woman. She's too close to Thrush. Too dangerous. It's not worth it. Stay away from her. Understood?" He pushed the car door open and paused to look back at his partner.

Illya's blue eyes darkened with confusion. "I will do as you say, Napoleon." But he didn't understand any of it.

Alexander Waverly puffed absent-mindedly at his pipe and didn't even look up when they entered. He was studying a file, running a finger slowly down each page as he read it.

Solo cleared his throat.

Waverly puffed, in no hurry, then without lifting his eyes from the file, "Yes, Mr. Solo. I'll be with you in a moment."

Napoleon straightened in his chair, a tactic to disguise a deep intake of breath. He toyed with his cufflinks. He hated reporting failure.

At last Waverly closed the file and leveled his gray eyes at his two top agents.

"I take it you failed, Mr. Solo." He passed the folder to Illya.

Napoleon shifted his eyes away for a second, then met his superior's gaze. "Only partially, sir. There was no opportunity for Mr. Kuryakin to see the file, but he did manage to get hired on as a chemist."

"Excellent. That should provide him

with sufficient opportunity. I suspect it's a rather massive file."

Napoleon quipped wryly, "It must be some Party."

Waverly snorted. "Indeed. PartyTime, gentlemen. The discovery of the century." He twirled the revolving table top, sending the file he'd been perusing toward his agents. "Rayell Pharmaceutical has been developing it for some time. It held no interest for us until our people detected some Thrush money laundering being done through the lab. On closer inspection, it turned out to be more than that. In the last four months, more than two million dollars of Thrush capital has been channeled through that lab, all ear-marked for the PartyTime project."

Illya glanced up from the page he was reading. "These reports are titillating, sir, but none of them really say anything substantive. What exactly does the drug do?"

"We're not sure, Mr. Kuryakin. But the rumor in the pharmaceutical industry says it's a pleasure-enhancing substance. Hence the name, PartyTime. It produces a euphoric high with none of the judgment-clouding properties of alcohol. And none of the health risks either, supposedly."

Napoleon took the page Illya handed him and scanned it quickly. "Is it addictive?" he asked.

"Don't know," grumbled Waverly.

"But if it is," offered Illya, "your Food and Drug Administration will never let it get to market."

"Well, with that kind of a watchdog," began Solo, "why exactly are we involved?"

"Because, Mr. Solo, Thrush does not spend millions on harmless substances." He pointed his pipe at Illya and added, "Nor do they bother with FDA approval."

Illya cleared his throat and dropped his eyes to the file folder. "No, sir, I don't suppose they do."

"By the way, Mr. Solo, we are not the only ones interested in this matter. A man named Cameron Beecham has been asking questions of Rayell employees. We don't know who he's working for, but he has attracted Thrush's attention. They are following him. That suggests he may be on to something."

Illya tapped at a page in the file. "What about this field researcher, Robert Swanson? He headed the last Rayell team in the Amazon rain forest."

Napoleon's brow creased in a question. "Rain forest?"

Illya nodded. "Most of the drugs in the world today are derived from plants that grow in the rain forest. Swanson may be able to give us a clue about PartyTime's ingredients if he's willing to tell us what he brought back on his last trip."

"Do you think he'll talk to us?"

"That's what you must find out, Mr. Solo." Waverly busied himself with another pipe. "We must know exactly what that drug does and how Thrush is involved."

"Yes, sir. We'll do our best, sir."

"Well, my fine Russian friend, do you have any ideas?"

"Not yet," said Illya. "Perhaps after lunch. Thinking on an empty stomach is inadvisable."

Solo grinned. "My treat. Pizza? Chinese?"

"You choose." Illya was pleased. It was as close as he got to a date with his partner.

Solo pulled a quarter from his pocket. "Heads, Chinese. Tails, pizza."

He tossed it, caught it, and announced, "Pizza."

Illya rubbed his hands together. "O Solo Mio," he sang softly.

Napoleon laughed.

Over lunch, Napoleon recapped an article he read in *Guns and Ammo* about the pros and cons of altering the grip on an M-1911. Illya nodded, mentally weighing the options Solo discussed, and picked olives off the pizza, eating them individually. Napoleon ate precisely, tidily. He even folded his paper napkin back to its original shape when he was finished.

At last, Solo brought them back to PartyTime. "So, what do you think of this new drug? Or whatever it is." He sipped his beer.

Illya shrugged. "Not much information in the file," he said softly. "But even if all it does is what Waverly said it would, it will still earn an incredible amount of money. That is, if it ever made it to the

marketplace. People could get drunk without the side effects of alcohol! Everyone would want it."

Napoleon raised a brow. "Really? You'd want to try it?"

Illya's blue eyes grew serious. "Something can get me drunk without destroying my liver? Yes, I would try it."

Solo nodded. "Oh." He let his eyes wander around the rustic pizza parlor. Out of habit, they lingered for an appraising moment on each woman they encountered. "So, my newly-employed chemist, have you figured out how you'll get your hands on that file? Or a sample of the drug?"

Illya noted Solo's activity. He knew his partner was on automatic pilot, but it still hurt to have his attention wander to women in the middle of their lunch together. "I will ask Ginelle Rigg for a date." It popped out, unbidden.

Napoleon's eyes snapped back to his partner's face.

Illya added, "She spent a great deal of the interview sneaking glances at my face. She thinks I'm cute."

Solo started to protest, but couldn't think of anything better to offer. His eyes dropped to his thumbnails. "All right. If you think it might work. But be careful."

"And you?"

"I'll check up on Beecham and Swanson." Solo grinned, suddenly aware of how reversed their roles felt. Illya was going to come on to the woman, and he was going to follow up on the men.

"What's funny?"

Solo shrugged. "Nothing. Come on, let's go. Lots to do before your first day at work."

Tuesday morning was not a good one. Napoleon Solo stared at himself in the men's room mirror. The dark circles under his eyes bore witness to the lousy night he'd had. Another nightmare. He was tied on his side to a metal table. Dr. Dabree was practicing spinal taps on him. After that it got ugly. He woke up in a cold sweat at 3 a.m. and didn't dare go back to sleep.

Illya spent the night in his own apartment. He wanted to study the material Rigg had given him. It wouldn't do to

ignore it. He was, after all, an eager new employee. He had to act the part.

Solo splashed cold water on his face and braced himself for the day. He had phone numbers and addresses for Beecham and Swanson. He'd try Swanson first. He ran a comb through his hair, reparted it, and combed it again. He made a disgusted noise. No amount of hair combing would remove the dark circles. He sighed heavily and headed for his office.

Swanson and Beecham were already out and about. No one answered the phone at either residence. Solo jotted down numbers and street names in a small notebook, then automatically checked his weapon. He made sure he had a full clip of sleep darts. All ready. He hesitated. There would be no Illya to back him up today. He laughed and shook his head. Idiot. You're just asking a few questions. You don't need a partner for that.

But before he left, he unlocked his top drawer and slipped a clip of .45s into his jacket pocket.

Swanson lived in a twelfth-floor apartment on 61st Street. Solo drove north on Third Avenue, then cursed himself for taking the car when he couldn't find a parking place. The glamorous life of a field agent. He spent forty-five minutes looking for parking, wound up in a small commercial lot on 63rd Street, and had to walk back down to 61st. If Illya was with him, he could have hopped out, done the deed, and had the Russian circle the block.

He pressed the buzzer marked Swanson. No response. He wasn't surprised. The man didn't answer his phone. But he wasn't at Rayell, either. Solo had already tried that number. He patted his pockets like a man looking for his key. He pulled a square metal keychain out of one pocket, pressed the smooth side against the metal door frame, and pressed a button on the side. From somewhere in the tiny empty lobby came a buzzing sound, followed by a click. Solo pushed on the door, and it swung open. He smiled and put the keychain away.

Not much money in the rain forest. Swanson couldn't afford an apartment with a doorman. Solo took the elevator to the twelfth floor. He wasn't sure why he was

going up to the apartment. Swanson didn't answer the phone and he didn't answer the buzzer. The man wasn't home. But Solo spent forty-five minutes finding a parking place and he wasn't going to leave without something, anything, to show for his effort.

Apartment 1219. Solo knocked briskly on the door. Silence. He leaned against the door bell. Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong. More silence. Idly, he wondered how Illya's morning was going. He wondered if Illya had slept the night before. He wished Illya was here.

He caught himself with a start. His mind was wandering, a dangerous luxury for an U.N.C.L.E. agent whose face was known to every Thrush in North America. He glanced about, but he was still alone in the corridor. He heaved a tired sigh.

An odor caught his attention on the inhale. He cut the sigh off and sniffed. An unpleasant odor. He frowned. Where was it coming from? He moved away from the door and sniffed again. Nothing. He pressed his nose against the crack where the door met the jamb and sniffed. There it was. The smell of a Mexican slaughterhouse on a hot afternoon.

The hair on the back of his neck rose and prickled. He pulled his gun. He was not surprised when the door opened easily. Whoever was here last left in a hurry. The reason for their hasty departure lay in a bloated heap on the living room floor. Robert Swanson would provide no information about his rain forest trip.

Solo reached for his handkerchief and pressed it over his nose to cut the stench, then quickly closed the apartment door. No paramedic could help this victim, so a five-minute delay would hurt nothing. As quickly and efficiently as possible with one hand, Solo searched the apartment.

It was one o'clock before he returned to headquarters.

"Dead, Mr. Solo?" Waverly blinked up at him from his plush swivel chair.

"Yes, sir. Very. I'd say he was killed three days ago, from the condition of the body."

"Cause of death?"

"Gunshot, close range, through the heart."

"Too bad," said Waverly. "He can't tell

us much dead.”

“No, sir, but his killer spoke volumes.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Waverly.

“The boarding passes for his flights to and from Ecuador were on the coffee table. He just got back four days ago. But there was no sign of luggage anywhere, and his closet was practically empty. I’d say whoever shot him stole his bags and everything in them.”

“Curiouser and curiouser, Mr. Solo.”

“Yes, sir.”

Just then an efficient young woman in the yellow blouse and black skirt of an U.N.C.L.E. employee entered with Waverly’s lunch on a tray.

“Care to join me, Mr. Solo?”

Napoleon blanched. “No, thank you, sir. I’m... on a diet.”

The afternoon dragged by. Solo had a splitting headache by three p.m., and the paperwork on the morning’s discovery was still not finished. People kept interrupting him. Section Three wanted his input on a revised duty roster. Section Four wanted to know when he was going to return the aerial intelligence photos he and Illya had used two months ago. Solo didn’t even remember the photos, much less where they were. He hung up the phone and sagged in his chair. Maybe everyone was right. Maybe he did take advantage of Illya’s willingness to help. Paper work was much easier when the Russian was around. Solo longed for the shortcuts of field work. Running for your life in Madagascar or Timbuktu, no one expected you to fill out forms.

He tried Beecham’s phone number every hour on the hour. The man was not at home. Period. Solo refused to think that he, too, might be lying on his living room floor, dead. The presence of a dead body made Thrush’s involvement all the more likely. They didn’t bother with sleep darts. Too many loose ends. He wondered idly if Thrush agents had to fill out forms when people died. Probably not.

For the hundredth time, he wondered what Illya was doing. The Russian’s revelation on the mountain wasn’t really a surprise. Solo had suspected he was gay.

However, finding out Illya was in love with him made life complicated, not because he was disgusted by the idea, but because he was pleased. It made him smile. And that was confusing as hell.

At five thirty, Solo realized he was watching the clock. The closer he watched it, the slower it moved. At five forty-five, he realized he was pacing. Where the hell was Illya? Didn’t the lab work nine to five? At six o’clock, he pulled out his communicator pen and started to open a channel.

“You have nothing better to do than chat with girls on your communicator?” Illya’s voice was music to his ears.

Solo grinned a welcome. “I was beginning to worry about you. Did you have overtime your first day on the job?”

Kuryakin set his heavy brief case on Solo’s desk and tapped the side of it with one finger. “Be grateful we are enforcement agents,” he said. “In the real world, people have to take paperwork home with them.”

Napoleon made a face.

Illya grumbled. “How was your day?” he asked.

“Long.” And lonely. “I found Swanson.”

Kuryakin raised an expectant brow.

“Dead,” finished Solo. “Three days ago. In his apartment.”

“How pleasant for you. I overheard someone at the lab today asking about him because he did not come to work on Monday. And someone else said he had heart trouble.”

“They were close. His heart had trouble beating with a bullet in it. And his luggage and clothes are gone.”

Illya rubbed his eyes. “Could you fill me in over dinner? I’m starved.”

They picked up Chinese food and ate at Napoleon’s apartment. Solo was anxious through dinner. He grew impatient with his chopsticks and resorted to a fork.

Illya watched his partner out of the corner of one eye. He knew what was wrong. He wished Solo would ask and get it over with. Then they could relax.

At last, Napoleon ventured, “Would you mind sleeping here tonight?” He gestured at the couch Illya was sitting on.

The Russian smiled softly. “No problem.” Russian intonation. It was one of

the American expressions that had been adopted by the Russians.

Solo grinned and visibly relaxed. At last, he would get some sleep. He clicked the remote at the television and slipped out of his shoes. He reclined on the couch, his arms behind his head for a pillow, and said softly in Russian, "I missed you a lot today."

Illya was pleased, but he didn't allow himself to get carried away. He remembered Napoleon's words on the mountain. The special love he felt for his partner was one directional. He kept his voice casual.

"I missed you, too. No one at Rayell has a sense of humor."

Solo chuckled. "Well, not much funny happened today anyway." He turned innocent brown eyes on Illya. "Do you think I take advantage of you?"

Kuryakin wondered what motivated the question. He shrugged. "Nyet."

Solo looked pleased. "Good." His voice grew fainter with every word. "I hate paperwork."

"Did you have a lot of red tape to handle because of Swanson?"

No answer.

Illya shifted his gaze from his plate to his partner's face. Solo was sound asleep.

The Russian finished his chow mein. He turned off the t.v., then retrieved a blanket off Solo's bed and draped it over Napoleon. He poured himself a glass of vodka from Solo's wetbar, and rummaged in the kitchen for dessert. He found potato chips and a bar of Swiss chocolate. He left the chocolate, but finished off the chips while watching Solo sleep.

His first day on the job had presented no opportunity to get into the file room. He did learn, though, that Rigg never let anyone near the PartyTime file. That juicy piece of gossip came to him from two different sources. Everyone in the lab suspected everyone else of secretly working on the project, but Rigg would not let on about who was involved. Two of Illya's coworkers were certain he had been hired on the basis of his work with hallucinogens, but no one would confirm that PartyTime was hallucinogenic. Besides, that didn't make sense. How could a respectable pharmaceutical company hope to make any

money on hallucinogenic drugs?

By quitting time, it was obvious to Illya that their only hope of learning anything lay in the possibility of befriending Rigg and getting her to spill the beans. In the morning he would ask for Solo's advice on dating Ginelle Rigg.

The briefcase nagged at him from the coffee table. He sighed resignedly. But first, music. He put Elvis on the stereo, volume on low. "Are you lonesome tonight?" His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. How perfect. Now, to work.

Wednesday at three p.m. Ginelle Rigg received a dozen roses from a newly hired Russian chemist named Illya. It was thrilling to get flowers, especially from such a handsome young man.

At four p.m. Ginelle Rigg received another dozen roses and a pound of chocolates with a note: "Please say you will have dinner with me. Illya."

At four-oh-five p.m. Ginelle received a phone call.

"Did you get the flowers?" asked Illya softly.

Ginelle chuckled. "Yes, they're lovely. Thank you very much."

"And did you get my note?"

"Yes, I did."

"What is your answer, then? Shall I pick you up for dinner?"

She paused. A moment later, "Why not?"

Then she remembered her meeting.

"Oh." Disappointment.

Illya asked, "Problem?"

Her voice full of regret, Ginelle explained, "I have a very important meeting at seven. I just can't miss it."

"Ah." Illya pushed some disappointment into his voice as well.

"But...if you wouldn't mind eating early?"

"Early? No, not at all," said Illya smoothly. "After all, dinner is just an excuse to see you again."

Ginelle smiled with satisfaction. "Wonderful! Then, perhaps..."

Illya took over. "I'll meet you in front of the lab at five. That will give us a couple of hours before you must leave for your meeting. Is that all right?"



"Oh, yes! That's perfect."

"Good. Oh, and Ginelle?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you." Click.

Ginelle Rigg slowly hung up her phone. She was flattered by Kuryakin's invitation, but the timing was troublesome. She had too much on her mind right now to think about romance. Still, she couldn't say no to Illya. Besides, a woman had to eat. And if he was not all he seemed to be, it would be better to find out now.

Napoleon Solo spent four hours Wednesday morning on a private stakeout. Cameron Beecham was not answering his phone or his front door. Napoleon used his U.N.C.L.E. devices to let himself into the man's apartment, just long enough to verify that he wasn't lying dead on the floor. Then he left the building and stationed himself in a cafe across the street with the New York Times and Pravda.

At fifteen to one his patience paid off. Solo didn't pay much attention to the tall slender man who swept up the front stairs of the building across the street until he spotted the Thrush on his tail. Alfred "Dusty" Raggs, thug for hire, more or less on Thrush's permanent payroll. Beecham was home.

Napoleon signalled the waitress, paid his bill, and folded his newspapers. No rush. He left the cafe, studiously ignoring Raggs on the other side of the street, and found a phone booth three doors away with a splendid view of the front door of Beecham's building.

Solo dialed the number by heart, but there was still no answer. He cursed softly, and wondered if Beecham had slipped out the back door. Napoleon let the phone ring on as he thought about what to do next. Lucky Illya. The flowers and candy would guarantee him a dinner date. Solo was sure of it. He was about to hang up on the thirtieth ring when he was caught off guard by a breathless, "Hello?!"

Napoleon blinked into space. "Uh, Mr. Beecham? Cameron Beecham?"

"Yes, speaking. Who is this?"

"Uh, my name is Napoleon Solo, Mr. Beecham. I need to speak to you on some

urgent business. Do you think we might—"

"Mr. Solo, I don't take on new clients without a personal referral. I'm sorry."

Solo thought fast. "But I've been trying to call you for days! Can't you make an exception?"

"This is really a bad time. I just got out of the shower. Won't tomorrow do?"

"Well, actually Mr. Beecham, I was hoping we could resolve this whole business tonight. I have some information that is getting older by the minute, and I was told you would know what to do with it."

A loud sigh and a lengthy pause on the other end of the line.

"It's about PartyTime," said Solo.

Silence. That got his attention.

"Oh."

More silence.

"Mr. Beecham?"

The voice was guarded now, more distant.

"All right, then. I'll see you at six... at Bailey's. That's a bar on 28th street. Between Fifth and Sixth Avenue. Do you know where that is?"

Solo grinned. Of course. Right around the corner from one of Illya's favorite Russian bookstores. "I'll be there," he said smoothly. "I'll be sitting at the bar. I'm wearing a dark blue tie."

Beecham made a sound Solo couldn't interpret. "All right, then. See you there." Was it amusement in the man's voice?

At four thirty, Illya reported his progress to Napoleon, including the news about Rigg's seven o'clock appointment, and Solo told Illya about his scheduled meeting with Beecham.

Napoleon was so sure his flower and candy routine would work that he insisted Illya drive the sedan to the lab that morning. The sedan had an excellent heater, and the temperature was dropping steadily. Illya was grateful. He didn't want Ginelle to freeze on the way to the restaurant. Damn! He hadn't chosen a restaurant. He wracked his brain as he maneuvered the car through Rayell's parking lot. The only restaurant he could think of was that little hole-in-the-wall

place he'd been to a couple of times with Dennis Treacle from Section Three. Run by gay men. Very romantic. Both times he spent the whole evening wishing he was with Napoleon. Later he discovered that Dennis had, too. No, that restaurant would not do at all. Maybe Ginelle would have a suggestion.

At five-oh-nine, Illya pulled up at the front entrance of Rayell Pharmaceutical. Before he could turn off the engine and get out of the car, Ginelle emerged from the glass doors and scurried over. Her coat was for show, not for the cold. He was going to circle and open her car door, but she was too fast for him. Into the front seat and shivering.

"Brrr! When I left my apartment this morning, it was not this cold!"

"The car has a good heater," said Illya, cursing himself for not having anything more scintillating to say. Suddenly he felt nervous. But at least he had a reason. Taking a woman out for dinner was not his usual evening activity. Oh, well, he would pretend she was Napoleon's sister. That made him laugh out loud. Napoleon's sister was a nun.

"Something funny?" asked Ginelle, her voice low and soft.

Illya shook his head. "No, it's nothing. Where would you like to eat? I did not know what kind of food you might enjoy."

"I eat mostly vegetarian because I have to watch my figure." She stroked the hem of her skirt. It was black and slinky, and not nearly as long as her lab coat had been. "But tonight I guess I can splurge."

Illya's palms dampened on the steering wheel. Ginelle's dress was not the least bit nun-like. She kept tugging at the hem to maintain her modesty. The miniskirt rode halfway up her thigh.

"You must work out," commented Illya, glancing at her leg. "You appear to be in good shape."

Ginelle laughed. "Are you always this direct?"

Illya searched his memory for the kind of phrases he had heard Napoleon use with women. No, none of them were appropriate. He didn't want to talk Ginelle into bed, after all. Instead, he stammered, "I'm sorry if I said something wrong. And

yes, I am fairly direct." He kept his eyes on the traffic. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, Veselka. Corner of 9th and 2nd Avenue. Is that all right?"

Ukrainian food. Illya's mouth watered. "Excellent," he smiled. And it was close. Rayell Pharmaceutical was in a building near Beth Israel Hospital, so they reached the restaurant in good time, considering the traffic.

Dinner was delicious, and once Illya concentrated on conversation and ignored Ginelle's female trappings, the time went smoothly.

"You must be a brilliant chemist," he suggested, "to manage such a large lab."

"Oh, I suppose I am pretty bright, but brains had nothing to do with managing the lab." Ginelle had decided to taste assorted flavors of vodka, much to Illya's surprise, and she was becoming more talkative with every sip. "It did help to be related to the founder. He was my father." She hiccupped in a very unladylike manner.

"Oh, really? Then, is Rigg your married name? You aren't married, are you?" Illya looked stricken.

Ginelle laughed. "Oh, dear no." She caught herself. "Oh, my. I shouldn't be drinking, should I? What will you think of me?" She fanned herself. Her red nails glinted in Veselka's soft lights. "No, I'm not married, Illya. My father's name was Rigg. He named the lab after my brother and me. Ray plus Ginelle equals Rayell. Cute, hmm?"

Illya eyed her suspiciously. "I think you are not accustomed to dating," he said at last. "I am making you nervous."

Ginelle hiccupped again. "Oh, it's not you, Illya. It's— it's—" she reached into her purse and retrieved a hanky, then dabbed at her forehead. She was perspiring. Vodka did that to some people. "It's this meeting I have at seven." She glanced at her watch. "I have to leave soon." She smiled sadly and took another sip of vodka. "The future of the company will be decided tonight. You may be unemployed again sooner than you think."

"I hope not," said Illya gently. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Illya, you're a very nice man," said Ginelle. "So let me ease your curiosity. You've heard the guys in the lab talking

about PartyTime, our newest product. No, don't worry, I know they all talk about it. And why not? It saved the company." She took another sip of vodka. "PartyTime. It's alcohol without the alcohol, you see." She raised her glass in a toast. "All the fun and none of the suffering. It was a stroke of genius. Rayell was in financial trouble, and we needed investors badly. PartyTime attracted them. But things are getting complicated." Her brow darkened. "Tonight I'm meeting Jeffrey Tillis, my—" She paused, then smiled bitterly, "My banker. To give him this." She pulled a sealed white envelope out of her handbag and fanned herself with it before stuffing it back in the bag like a dirty secret.

Illya's heart raced. "The formula?" he asked.

Rigg raised one brow. "Very clever." She swished her vodka. "Yes, the formula for PartyTime is definitely in this envelope." She patted her handbag, then drained her glass.

Illya's fingers twitched in their eagerness to touch the envelope. He wrapped them around the napkin in his lap and forced them to be still. Sometime between now and Rigg's seven o'clock appointment, he had to have that envelope.

"Illya? Are you all right?" Ginelle's brow crinkled with concern.

"Oh, forgive me, Ginelle. I—" He looked uncomfortable, then leaned across the table to whisper, "I must find the men's room."

The restroom was empty. Illya searched through his pockets, looking for pen and paper. The small notebook he carried would never match the paper in Rigg's envelope. Would it matter? A thought occurred to him. If he could reach the maitre d' without being seen by Ginelle, he might be able to pull it off.

Five minutes later, Illya returned to his date. Ginelle's bag was on the table. Her left hand was resting on it. Illya reached for her hand.

"Forgive me," he said, squeezing her fingers gently. "I did not mean to be gone so long. I—" He moved his right arm as if to gesture, and knocked her bag to the floor. "I'm sorry!"

Ginelle moved to retrieve the bag, but Illya was already there. He picked it up,

fumbled, caught it again and clutched it to his midsection like a football. A second later, he straightened up, looking chagrined.

"Forgive me," he said, handing the bag to its owner. "Sometimes I am so clumsy."

Ginelle shook her head in amazement. "Do we have any test tubes left?" she asked.

Illya blinked, then realized she was teasing him. "Oh." He shrugged and resumed his seat. "I'm seldom clumsy in the lab."

Ginelle's expression softened. "I was joking," she smiled. "Don't worry about it." She glanced at her watch. "Illya, I have to go."

"I'll drive you."

"No!" Her response was emphatic. She regrouped and tried again. "I mean, no, please, that's not necessary. I'll take a cab." She bit her bottom lip. "I would like to see you again, though. If that's not too forward?"

Illya smiled. "You're the boss," he winked.

Rigg smiled back. "I love obsequious employees." She stood up. Illya stood as well. Ginelle kissed him on the cheek. "Good night."

Napoleon was too well dressed for Bailey's, but it didn't surprise him. He was often over-dressed for other people's socializing. He didn't mind. He found a stool at the bar and ordered Glenlivet, neat. He would have to nurse it. He wanted to stay sharp.

He glanced at his watch. Five fifty-five. Hopefully, Beecham would be on time.

The room behind him was larger than it appeared from the street. The entrance to Bailey's was a modest one, dark polished wood with sedate leaded glass, set back a couple of feet from the sidewalk, just enough to provide shelter from a sudden shower. No neon blazed in the dark glass beside the door. No empty bottles or glasses cluttered the sidewalk in front. Very tidy, subdued, and subtle. So the size of the bar itself was a surprise. At this time of day, not much was happening, but Solo could see a dance floor that stretched toward the back of the building, and private

booths lined the far wall. Small round walnut tables edged the dance floor, each skirted by four ice-cream-parlour chairs, also walnut. Tasteful. And toward the front of the bar, a mock fireplace formed the centerpiece for cozy sofas and coffee tables, set up for quieter conversation. This was the area that was occupied at the moment.

Napoleon liked the place. It felt comfortable. The bartender was polite and immaculately groomed. He liked that, too. He continued to scan the occupants of the room in the mirror.

Three men were engaged in quiet conversation on the sofas. Their hands were smooth, like Solo's. Professional men, then. Not laborers. Two of them wore moderately-priced suits. Napoleon smiled at himself. He could guess the price of a suit within thirty dollars, up or down. The third man was younger, slender, very closely shaven. He moved one wrist back and forth as he spoke. Napoleon thought nothing of it. The Fashion Institute was also on 28th Street, not far away.

Two more men sat in earnest conversation in one of the booths against the wall. Solo's gaze moved to them in the mirror from time to time. One of them had longish blond hair and wore a tie-died tunic and tight leather pants. A musician, maybe. The other was mid-thirties, serious, short dark hair, dark blue suit. Wall Street, or IBM. Or U.N.C.L.E.

Napoleon felt a frisson of surprise as he realized the dark-haired man could have been himself. Oh, the face was different, but everything else was so familiar. And he was sitting across from an intense blond. Solo smiled as he thought of Illya. No wonder the pair seemed familiar. He forced himself to move his eyes to another part of the mirror. They would notice him staring if he wasn't careful. Not very professional surveillance, to get caught staring.

Solo moved his eyes to other parts of the reflection, and noted that there were no women in the bar. But the place was almost empty, and it felt like a very male hangout anyway. Almost a club atmosphere. And yet no one questioned his presence.

He glanced at his watch. Six-ten! Beecham was late. He sipped at his

Glenlivet again. Another man entered the bar. He looked around, adjusting his eyes to the dim light. Solo let his gaze rest questioningly on the fellow. Could this be Beecham? But the man at the door demonstrated no sense of purpose. He was not here to meet anyone. More like he was looking for company. Solo smiled sadly and shifted his gaze back to the reflection of the couple in the booth. Couple? Why did he use that word? Just a couple of guys. Oh. Okay. The dark-haired fellow was leaning toward the blond, trying to make a point. He reached out and took the other man's hand. The personal gesture took Solo aback. A moment later, the dark-haired man pulled the blond's hand to his lips and pressed a warm kiss on the knuckles. Whatever they were discussing so heatedly a moment before evaporated with the gesture. The blond relaxed and tilted his head to one side. He murmured something. A second later the dark-haired man pushed his glass toward the blond and moved to sit beside him.

Solo could not tear his eyes away. He felt his pulse rate quicken. In his mind, he was the dark-haired man and the blond musician was his Russian partner. The intimacy of the move touched him deeply. He remembered the night in the car, on the mountain, the two of them sleeping like spoons on the back seat of the '57 Chevy. That image had come back to him in dream after dream, and left him rock hard and lonely in the morning, even when Illya slept over and lay just a few feet away on one of his living room sofas.

Then the dark-haired man put his arms around the blond, tipped his head back, and kissed him softly on the lips.

Solo didn't realize that he'd made a sound until the voice at his elbow pulled him back to the bar.

"Handsome couple, aren't they?"

It was the new arrival, the seeker. Six feet tall, average build, one-hundred-dollar suit off the rack, but good bones. Symmetrical features, gray eyes, pale skin. Solo noted all those details for his mental file before he responded.

"Sorry, I don't think we've met." A catch-all phrase, something to fill the space between them.

"I'm Bill." No last name. A tentative smile. "I've never seen you here before."

"I'm supposed to meet someone," said Napoleon, still shaken by the scene in the mirror. He sighed. "He's late." He glanced at his watch. "Fifteen minutes, now."

Bill looked sympathetic. "I'll wait with you," he offered gently. "That way, you don't have to feel all alone, in case he stands you up." His gray eyes moved greedily and none-too-subtly over Napoleon's face and form.

Solo blinked at him. "Is something wrong?" He glanced down at his clothes. Everything was in place.

Bill grinned from ear to ear. His eyes shone in the soft light. "Oh, on the contrary. You look great."

Napoleon smiled, a hint of self-satisfaction in the curl of the lips. "Thank you. I try."

"What are you drinking? Ray? Give — oh, I don't know your name."

"Napoleon."

A flicker of doubt, a trace of disappointment.

Napoleon smiled again. "No, really, my name is Napoleon. Honest."

Relief. Bill relaxed against the bar. "Ray, give Napoleon a refill, okay?" He lay a five dollar bill on the bar.

Napoleon looked at the money and blinked. He was being picked up by a gay man in a gay bar. The realization made him first giddy, and then confused. He was confused because he felt he should be angry, not giddy.

"Uh, Bill, I don't think you should—"

Bill cut him off by laying a hand over his. "Don't worry. If your friend shows up, I'll disappear. Against my will, mind you." He winked and smiled. "Hey, it's just a drink."

Bill's hand was soft and warm.

Breathing suddenly became difficult, and the temperature in the bar zoomed upward. Napoleon let his breath out in a whoosh.

"So," said Bill, conversationally. "What do you do for a living, Napoleon?"

"I'm, uh, I'm in, in, in law enforcement."

"Oh." A syllable of understanding. "No wonder you're so shy. Well, don't worry," said Bill softly, "your secret is safe with me."

Napoleon glanced at his watch again. Six-twenty. Beecham wasn't coming. He remembered the amusement in the man's voice. Maybe it was all a set-up. The guy sent him to a gay bar just to get rid of him.

Just then the door opened and a tall, elegant man swept into the room. Solo recognized the silhouette from his morning surveillance, but he only saw Beecham's back from the restaurant. The new arrival had thick brown wavy hair, dark brows, an olive complexion, sensuous lips. His hands were long and slender, his shoulders broad, his waist incredibly narrow. He wore a cream-colored wool trench coat over a tan cashmere suit. Solo's mental cash register zoomed high into figures that Waverly would never approve of on a clothing allowance. The cream and brown scheme was echoed in a silk waistcoat. Instead of a tie, he wore an ascot, a different shade of cream. He moved with style and a certain grandeur. He smiled at Ray the bartender with large perfect teeth. His dark eyes flowed past Bill with a flicker of recognition and landed on Solo with a definite glint of pleasure. He removed the trench coat and hung it on a large walnut peg by the door. His suit was exquisitely tailored.

Cameron Beecham approached, laid a possessive arm around Napoleon's shoulders and took up a position on the opposite side from Bill.

Bill smiled wanly at Cameron, but directed his question at Napoleon. "Were you waiting for Cameron, here?"

Solo tried to reply but found his speech center inoperative. He nodded, yes.

Bill sighed heavily. "Just my luck." But before he moved away, he leaned toward Solo's ear and whispered, "I'm here every evening. When he breaks your heart, come cry on my shoulder."

Napoleon tried to laugh, but couldn't quite manage it.

Cameron's voice was thick and dark, like hot fudge. "Sorry I'm late. You're Napoleon, right? I hope you don't mind meeting me here, but I didn't want to have to run all over town."

At last Solo found his voice. "You were taking quite a chance, weren't you? Suggesting this particular bar?"

Cameron threw back his head and

laughed heartily. "Oh, God, you have a sense of humor, too. Ray? The usual, sweetie."

Another frisson down Solo's back as the term of endearment left Beecham's lips. The man was so masculine, and yet so smooth, so soft. Napoleon felt like strobe lights were going off behind his eyes.

"I could tell from your voice," said Cameron gently. "I have a knack for it. All my friends tell me that. I can guess, straight or gay, with a 95 per cent hit rate. I'm very good." He pushed a lot of things into that line, and Solo felt himself blushing.

Beecham was delighted. "I must say, though, that you are a charming surprise. My God, I never dreamed you'd be this handsome." He leaned conspiratorially close to Napoleon's ear and murmured, "So few of us are, you know." He drew back and eyed Solo from different angles. "Although I admit you're a little more butch than I'm used to. Still — no, I take that back. Not too butch. Borderline, maybe. But what a face. And they call me a heartbreaker." He nudged Solo. "All right, honey, what's this information you have for me about PartyTime?"

"Please don't call me that," said Napoleon, suddenly uneasy. He tried to put a name to what he was feeling, and was amazed when it turned out to be guilt. Poor Illya was spending an uncomfortable evening with a woman, and Solo was being hit on in a gay bar.

"What's wrong?" asked Cameron. "Do I make you nervous?" He dipped a finger in his martini and sucked the tip of it.

"I have a partner," Solo began.

"So I was right about you." Beecham was pleased.

Solo licked his lips, choosing his words carefully. "Illya is very possessive. He even sits and watches me in the dark." He thought about Illya on the mountain again, and suddenly missed the Russian very much.

"So, I do make you nervous." Beecham winked.

Napoleon laughed nervously. "Nervous? I'm not nervous."

Beecham's eyes twinkled mischievously, and he leaned toward Napoleon, lips ready

for a kiss.

"Are you crazy?!" Napoleon's stricken expression stopped the advance. Heart pounding, Solo smoothed his hair and added, "That's all I need. If someone in here tells Illya you kissed me, my life would be a living hell." Because it would break the Russian's heart, thought Napoleon sadly.

"Is he violent?" asked Cameron.

Napoleon's eyes widened. "Violent?" He sought out his own reflection in the mirror and replied matter-of-factly, "He can be positively lethal."

Cameron laid his hand on Napoleon's crotch. "And that turns you on, doesn't it?"

Solo grabbed the man's hand and yanked it away. "Don't do that."

Beecham's face registered surprise and a touch of alarm. Solo released his hand and dropped his eyes to his Glenlivet. "Illya isn't very big," he said softly, subdued by the truth of his own words, "but if he found out I let another man touch me, he'd probably kill us both."

Beecham relaxed. "I see. So I was doubly right about you. You aren't really butch at all, are you? Your partner wears the pants in the family."

Napoleon inhaled deeply. His breath left him raggedly, a sound like a bird's wings beating against its cage. "Look, Cameron, I think we got off on the wrong foot. My partner and I work for the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. U.N.C.L.E. is investigating PartyTime. This —" he gestured around at the bar "— is not my usual choice for a business meeting." He pulled out his wallet and laid three bills on the bar. Ray blessed him with a dazzling smile. "Let's wait and talk about this with my partner, okay?"

Beecham laid a hand on his arm to halt his exit. "What about your information? Look, I'm working on a big case, and—"

Solo sat back down. "Are you a cop?"

"Private," said Beecham. "I'm trying to get a line on this PartyTime concoction, too, for some very important clients."

Without thinking, Solo moved into persuasive mode. His voice held a promise of some exquisite forthcoming reward. "I don't suppose you could tell me who they are?"

"Why, Mr. Solo, a moment ago you told

me you have a jealous partner, and now you're trying to seduce me. Shame on you." Beecham picked up his martini and moved to a booth.

Napoleon sat, speechless, for a moment on his stool. Then he collected himself and followed Beecham to the booth. He slid in across from the detective and spent a few seconds deciding what to say. And how to say it.

"Look, Cameron..." He spread his hands on the table. "It sounds like we're both working toward the same goal. So why don't we help each other out?"

Beecham's eyes narrowed accusingly, but his tone remained light and teasing. "Do you mean you made this appointment to find out what I know? And you have nothing to tell me?"

Napoleon shrugged his "you-know-how-it-is" shrug and tried a boyish smile. "I didn't think you would tell me much on the telephone." He drummed his fingers on the table top. He was vaguely aware of another customer entering the bar.

Beecham laid his hands over Solo's and captured them both. He lifted them off the table and squeezed them gently. "What will you give me in return?" he asked suggestively.

Illya Kuryakin's voice was diamond-hard. "A running start."

Solo pulled his hands back as if he'd burnt them. "Illya!"

The Russian grunted a greeting, but his eyes stayed on Beecham.

Napoleon felt his blood rising fast. "This is Cameron Beecham," he rushed. "I was trying to find out what he knows about PartyTime."

The Russian sat down on Solo's side of the booth and bumped his partner over with his hip. He turned hooded blue eyes on Napoleon. His voice was carefully modulated. "And what were you going to give him?"

Napoleon opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He was aware of Illya's thigh pressed against his own. He wanted to assure the Russian that he had not come here to hold hands with a stranger, but he could not find the words. Napoleon could feel the heat of his partner's anger, and it disturbed him

deeply. It cracked his veneer of imperturbability, and his features betrayed the dark sadness that suddenly overwhelmed him. A tiny voice in his head asked him if this was what Illya felt whenever Solo lost his temper.

Illya addressed Napoleon, deliberately softening his voice. "I am not angry with you." The heat of his anger dissipated. "You were working." He turned to Beecham. "I am Illya Kuryakin. Napoleon is my partner."

Beecham nodded a greeting. "I'm afraid I put him on the spot," he began apologetically. "He didn't know this was a gay bar until he got here. I've been teasing him terribly."

Solo managed a wan smile.

Illya pulled a white envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Solo. "This will cheer you up. My... meeting... went better than yours."

Napoleon shook the envelope next to his ear. "What is it?"

Illya rubbed his hands with satisfaction. "The formula for PartyTime."

"What?!"

"What?!"

Illya blinked at the two men. "You are rehearsing a duet?" Then impatiently to Solo, "Open it! I waited to give it to you. I haven't seen it yet."

Napoleon tore off the end of the envelope. "How did you get it?" he asked, tapping the torn end against his finger to shake out the contents.

Illya's blue eyes shone with triumph. "She had it in her bag. She was going to meet with her financial backer this evening and give him the formula. I switched envelopes!"

Napoleon stopped in the middle of unfolding the eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch sheet of 20 weight bond. "You let her go to Thrush with an empty envelope?"

"No, of course not. I put a formula in the envelope. Something suggesting a hallucinogen derivative, with some chemical ad libs on the end. It should do the trick until they pass it to a chemist."

Napoleon nodded. He finished unfolding the paper. His brow furrowed.

"Are you sure you switched the envelopes?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," said Illya with irritation.

"What do you mean?"

Napoleon laid the sheet of paper on the table. Typed in the center of it was one word: Surprise!

Illya slumped against the back of the booth. "I need a drink," he growled.

Cameron waved to Ray. Solo rubbed his forehead with the tips of his fingers. Illya felt his pockets for cash, found none, and nudged his partner. When Napoleon looked his way, he rubbed the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand together in the universal gesture for lucre. Solo pulled a five out of his wallet and handed it over. Illya order a vodka and a whiskey. Cameron waited for Ray to return to the bar, then leaned across the booth.

"Well? What now?"

"Don't ask me," said Illya dully. "I spent thirty dollars at Veselka's on dinner and flavored vodkas to get a chance at that formula. All my ideas tonight have been worthless."

"Not your fault," said Solo sympathetically. "You were out of your element. I should have taken her to dinner. You should have been here, weaseling information out of Cameron."

Illya hmphed. "When I came in, it looked like you were close to learning everything he knows." He shot Cameron a dangerous glance.

Ray came with their drinks. Silence.

Ray left. Cameron began again.

"Look, I've been trying to track down this damn formula for weeks, and no luck. No one at Rayell seems to know who's working on the project. I thought if I could catch up with her field agent, Swanson, I could tempt him to cough something up with a contribution to his retirement fund, if you get my drift, but he just laughed at me. He said I didn't have enough money to tempt him off that gravy train."

Napoleon perked up. "When did you talk to Swanson?"

"Three days ago. He hadn't even unpacked yet. Suitcases all over the living room." He rolled his eyes in disgust. "What a slob."

Solo watched Cameron's face as he quipped, "It's bad luck to speak ill of the dead."

Genuine surprise. "He's dead? When?!"

"About three days ago," said Solo pointedly.

Cameron looked from the dark eyes to the blue eyes. He put his hands up to fend off their suspicion. "Hey, look, he was alive when I left his place! Honest. Cross my heart. I wouldn't lie to family."

Napoleon shot Illya a questioning glance. The Russian raised his brows and shifted his gaze over his shoulder. A private signal. He would explain later.

"We believe you," said Kuryakin. "For now. Of course, it would help your credibility if you tell us everything you know, starting with who you work for."

Napoleon suppressed a smile. Touché.

Beecham sighed. "All right. My client is a consortium of brewers of beer and malt whiskey. The rumors about PartyTime caused an uproar in the liquor industry. I'm being paid to find the secret of PartyTime. They need to know if it's a real threat to their business."

Napoleon swallowed the last of his whiskey and clapped Illya on the shoulder. "Let's go find out."

Illya nodded assent and stood up.

Beecham looked from one to the other. "Just like that? How?"

Illya pulled a keychain out of his pocket. "I am an employee," he said. "I have keys to the building."

"Oh, what about your boss?" asked Napoleon. "Any chance Thrush will figure out your formula is a fake before they part company?"

Illya blinked. "Uh-oh. No, my formula was quite probable. But Ginelle was not expecting a formula in the envelope. She may give the whole thing away!"

Solo screwed his mouth sideways and frowned at his partner. "I told you to stay away from that woman. Nothing but trouble."

"Ha. Ha." Illya was not amused.

"Well, we'd better make sure she's all right before we go to the lab," said Solo.

"Agreed."

Beecham cleared his throat. "And how do you propose we do that?"

"We?" asked Solo.

Illya volunteered, "When I slipped my envelope in her bag, I fastened a tracer to the inside." He pushed his sleeve away



from his wristwatch and pressed a button on the side of it. The face sprang open and the interior began to emit a tiny beep. He turned his body until he was pleased with the readout on the watch face. "She is east-southeast of our position."

"Let's go," said Solo.

The tiny tracking device on Illya's wrist led them straight to Rayell labs. Illya parked the sedan at one end of the parking lot and checked the clip in his automatic. Solo did the same, at the same moment, like a dark twin in tune with his sibling.

"All right, Beecham," said Solo, "this is as far as you go."

The detective was indignant. "You must be kidding! If I'm not in on the end of this, my clients will claim U.N.C.L.E. did everything and refuse to pay me. No way, honey, I'm going with you."

Solo sighed and made a face. "Don't call me honey," he said wearily.

But Cameron was already out of the car.

Illya gazed pensively at his partner. Solo started to get out of the car, but turned when he felt the Russian's eyes on him.

"What?" he asked.

Illya looked away. "Nothing. I will watch what I say." He opened his door.

Napoleon laid a hand on his arm and stopped him. "What are you talking about?" He looked confused.

Illya shrugged. "I didn't know it bothered you. You know. When I call you milii moi."

Awareness dawned. "Ahhh." Solo winked at his partner. "That's different. You can call me anything you want." He patted the Russian's arm and exited the car.

Illya grinned impishly in the darkness. His chest moved up and down in a silent burble of delight. He inhaled deeply and marvelled at how sweet the night air smelled.

Beecham was already striding up to the glass doors of the lab entrance. Inside, emergency lighting cast a dim glow in the lobby of the building. Solo and Kuryakin jogged up behind him.

"Not here," said Kuryakin. "This entrance is monitored constantly by security

cameras. Around the side. Employees' entrance."

The Russian led the way. On the blind side of the building, the shadows were deep and the night felt even colder. A third of the way down the sandstone wall, a dim bulb cast a feeble glow over a solid door at the top of five concrete steps. A discreet plaque next to the door read "Rayell." Illya already had his key in the door. Solo pressed close behind him, facing away from the building, eyes checking right and left.

Illya opened the door a crack, peered carefully inside, then motioned for the others to follow him in. A moment later the three men were in a short corridor that opened onto a long one.

Beecham started to whisper, "Where are —" But sharp glances from the U.N.C.L.E. agents silenced him. Napoleon put a finger to his lips and frowned. Illya checked his directional readout. He touched his partner's arm to get his attention, pointed forward, then right.

Solo nodded his understanding. He let Illya lead and concentrated on keeping his eyes and ears open for the enemy. Beecham had the good sense to follow silently, gun in hand.

They stopped short outside a door marked Chem Lab. They could hear glass being smashed inside. Solo tapped at his wrist. The Russian checked his tracking device, then nodded. Yes, Ginelle Rigg was inside. Or at least her handbag was.

Solo motioned toward the next junction of corridors. Once there, after checking in all directions, he whispered, "Is there any way we can see what's going on in there without giving ourselves away?"

Illya thought for a moment, then brightened. "Washroom," he whispered. "This way."

He led them into a men's room. Two sinks and three stalls on the right, four urinals on the left, and at the far end, a second door. He kept his voice low. "The chemists got tired of having to exit the lab and walk all the way around to use the washroom, so they taped over the latch on that door. Against company policy, of course, because they forget to take the tape off at night, you see. I noticed it right away. There is an anteroom on the other side,

with lab supplies. The lab itself is on the other side of that. But that door is sometimes left ajar, so we must be careful going in."

"Got it," said Solo. He cautioned Beecham, "Don't use your weapon unless we start shooting, and if you fire, try not to hit one of us."

Cameron rolled his eyes. "Oh, puh-lease, honey, I know how to use a gun."

Napoleon gritted his teeth, but didn't bother to complain again.

Illya turned away to hide his smile and carefully opened the door to the anteroom.

The noise level from the lab beyond increased immediately. Glass smashed again, and an angry male voice made threatening sounds. The anteroom was dark, and they were grateful. The door to the lab was two inches ajar. The bright light that penetrated the crack kept them from running into things in the dark room.

Illya moved silently to the door, then placed himself at such an angle that he could peer through the crack. A second later, he felt a warm presence behind him. Napoleon was peering over his shoulder at the same scene. Ginelle Rigg was standing, arms akimbo, in the middle of the lab, conversing heatedly with a man who was holding a gun with one hand and rifling through drawers and cabinets with the other. He occasionally vented his frustration by sweeping glass paraphernalia onto the floor.

"I told you, you wouldn't find anything here," affirmed Rigg, not sounding very threatened.

In the anteroom, Illya, Solo, and Beecham silently checked their weapons.

Bright lights in the dark room were the last thing they expected. Solo and Kuryakin whirled as a deep voice behind them growled, "Hands up!"

Napoleon was raising his weapon at the voice. By the time he noticed the suitcases behind him, it was too late to avoid tripping over them, and he sprawled backwards. His flailing arms caught Illya on the way down and he took the Russian with him. His head hit the wall, and when the stars cleared he was looking up into an all too familiar face.

"Oh, Jesus. Alfred Raggs."

Three feet to Solo's right, Cameron

Beecham's gun hung limply on one finger, useless in the face of Raggs' lethal barrel pointed at his head.

"Damn," cursed Beecham. "I thought I lost you."

Raggs pressed the gun barrel closer to Beecham's temple. "Slide your guns away or I waste him."

Any hope of fancy floorwork was extinguished as the door to the lab swung open, and another Thrush pointed his gun at them. Solo laid his weapon on the floor and shoved it half-heartedly a few feet away. The Russian did the same.

Ginelle Rigg appeared in the doorway. She made an exasperated noise and relieved the Thrush of his weapon, like a patient mother taking sharp scissors from a toddler.

"I'll hold this, Jeffrey. You pick up their guns." She shook her head sadly at Illya. "I was afraid you were too good to be true. When I found your clever little formula in my envelope, my suspicions were confirmed."

Solo and Illya exchanged puzzled glances.

"We came to rescue you," offered Illya weakly.

Ginelle's face registered astonishment. Then she threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, that's rich." She sobered immediately. "However, the trouble you have caused me is not at all funny. My associate here now thinks I was hiding something from him. He's tearing the place apart to find the drug he thinks we were making here. Now, why don't you tell him the truth? You'll need some gold stars for truth, where you're going."

Solo calmed his pounding heart. "All right, all right, we'll tell him the truth." He tried to sound rattled. "Mind if we stand up?" He started to push the suitcases out of his way.

But Rigg stopped him before he could send them sliding.

"Don't try anything stupid," she said coldly. "Put your hands on top of your head and stay on the floor."

The two agents had already worked their way to their knees. Kuryakin leaned back on his heels, his toes ready to push off should the opportunity arise.

"There never was any PartyTime, was there?" said the Russian.

"No, of course not. Why bother? The FDA would never approve such a thing anyway. But it was a useful fundraising tool." She waved Jeffrey aside. "Stand back. Don't underestimate these gentlemen."

Solo nodded at the suitcases. "Did you kill Swanson?"

Rigg's eyes flashed fire. "He was going to blow the whole thing. He threatened to go public if I didn't cut him a slice of the pie. All that money. He wanted a piece of it. Too big a piece."

Illya continued, "But the money wasn't coming from Thrush, was it?"

"No," said Napoleon, like a chastised schoolboy. "It was going to Thrush. Mr. Waverly isn't going to like this."

"Don't worry," said Illya. Keep talking. People are less likely to shoot you if there's a chance you might say something they want to hear. "Look on the bright side. We won't have to tell him we failed."

"Ha. Ha," said Napoleon.

Cameron Beecham moaned. "Oh, dear, you mean you're just going to shoot us? But that's murder!" He waved his hands nervously like a woman drying her nails.

Solo looked perplexed.

So did Raggs.

"Can't you just give me one last request?" pleaded Beecham. He put exaggerated feeling into every word. He shifted his weight to one foot, and turned the other foot inward. One wrist flopped about like a hanky blowing on the clothesline.

Raggs instinctively moved away from his hostage.

"What favor?" Rigg found him mildly amusing.

Beecham pursed his lips and poured it on. "Well, I just met Mr. Solo this evening, and now it looks like we'll never know what... might be... between us." He fluttered his lashes in a vulnerable gesture. "If I could just... kiss him goodbye..."

"Christ!" swore Raggs. "The guy's a fag!" He backed away another foot.

Beecham leaned tenderly toward Solo. Napoleon leaned away, but came up short against the wall.

Rigg alerted Raggs, "Don't drop your

guard!"

But too late. No one expected the Russian to explode with the fury of a hurricane. He pushed off on his toes, roaring like a rabid bear, and shoved Beecham hard into Raggs. Alfred's gun clattered to the floor.

"Shoot!" screamed Rigg.

Jeffrey fired. Phhht! An U.N.C.L.E. sleep dart. Cameron slumped heavily across Alfred Raggs.

Solo made a leap for Alfred's weapon.

Rigg remembered the gun in her right hand and took a second to aim.

Too long.

Solo slid, scooped, rolled, fired.

The impact of the bullet shoved Rigg backward. Her face was a mask of surprise. Her knees wobbled, as if to find her balance, but she was already dead, and her knees gave up.

By that time Solo had fired again, and Jeffrey Tillis was down. Napoleon rolled to his feet in one smooth motion and swung the weapon toward Raggs.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" Dusty's eyes were wild. He was trying to scoot away from Solo, but Cameron's weight was pinning him to the floor.

Kuryakin yanked the tiny sleep dart out of Cameron's shirtfront and pulled the detective gently to one side.

"Face down!" barked Solo. "Move!"

Raggs did as he was told, laughing nervously.

"What's so funny?" asked Illya.

But Raggs couldn't answer. He just giggled, then whined, then giggled.

Solo's nose crinkled. "Jeez! The guy messed himself."

An U.N.C.L.E. team was cleaning up the scene. The coronor's office was coordinating with Dennis Treacle from Section Three, and a squad from Section Four was interrogating the aromatic Alfred Raggs.

Solo and Kuryakin had moved away from the carnage to a couple of stools at a lab table. Cameron Beecham occupied a third stool, showing no signs of his overly-sensitive alter ego. Solo was filling out a form regarding Rigg's death. Tillis had been

carted away on a stretcher, miraculously still alive.

Solo chewed the eraser end of his pencil and turned questioning eyes on the Russian.

The blue eyes twinkled with amusement. Without a word, he took the pencil and began filling out the form.

Solo addressed Beecham. "How are you feeling?"

The detective was still groggy, but upright. "I've been better." He rubbed a cautious hand over his sternum. "You know, when I distracted Raggs, I thought your partner would attack him, not me."

Solo smiled. "Yes, well, he was headed in that general direction."

Illya made a noise. "Hmph." But he didn't look up from his paperwork.

Napoleon frowned a question at Beecham. "Hey, what was all that, uh..." he waved his wrist limply in the air "...you know."

Beecham shrugged. "People have stereotypes about us," he said quietly. "Play to their preconceived notions, and sometimes they forget for a moment that you are a licensed detective. Or a card-carrying U.N.C.L.E. agent, for that matter. It has worked for me in the past."

Solo nodded, thoughtfully.

"Now answer one for me," said Beecham. "If Rigg and Tillis were in cahoots, why did she give him a paper with 'surprise' written on it? Surely he already knew there was no formula."

"He knew, all right," said Napoleon. "No, the envelope was probably his cut of the latest funding appropriations, and the surprise was that it was empty."

"Yes," said Illya, stopping his pencil on line 19. "At dinner, I asked if the formula was in the envelope, and she said definitely. Now it makes sense. Since there was never a formula —"

Napoleon finished for him. "— then one could say it was in the envelope because nothing was in the envelope." He sighed. "Clever villains can be tiresome."

"I suppose your people are going to want a statement of some kind from me," continued Cameron.

Solo's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh, uh, I don't know. Maybe we can do something

to save you the trouble." He suddenly wanted to go home. The last thing he needed was to hear Beecham tell the guys from Section Four how Napoleon had met him in the gay bar, and how he had a ninety-five per cent hit rate with voices.

Cameron's eyes darkened a shade and his voice sounded world-weary. "Don't worry, honey." He spoke softly and used the term deliberately. "I, too, must continue to make a living. I'm not going to tell your people any family secrets."

Solo flushed hotly, then clenched his jaw.

Illya came to the rescue. "Napoleon is worried for my sake," he said quietly, crossing his last t. "If word got back to Russia—" He let it hang.

Cameron nodded. Then he stood up and extended his hand.

Solo shook it.

"Oddly enough," said Beecham with a smile, "it's been a pleasure. I hope we meet again."

"Thanks," said Solo.

Beecham waited a moment, then realized Solo was not going to add, "Me, too." The detective chuckled and shook his head sadly. He released Napoleon's hand and chucked him on the shoulder. "If we do meet again and you don't say hi, I'll understand," he said softly. "Sometimes it's hard to see each other in the dark. And closets are very dark places."

"Goodbye, Cameron," said Illya, offering his hand. He leaned forward an inch. "We have excellent night vision. If we don't say hi, we are undercover."

Beecham grinned from ear to ear.

"Oh, before you leave," added Illya, "there is someone I want you to meet." He waved to Dennis Treacle, and added meaningfully, "A friend of mine."

Solo felt a large presence at his left elbow and looked up to find Dennis Treacle — sandy hair, green eyes, freckles, retired linebacker body — staring down at Illya.

"How's the paperwork?" asked Treacle.

"Oh, fine. All done," said Illya. "Dennis, this is Cameron Beecham. He helped us out tonight. He's a private detective." The Russian finished his introduction. "Cameron, this is Dennis Treacle. U.N.C.L.E., Section Three." Then he added

simply, "He's family."

"Oh." A syllable of interest. "Nice to meet you, Dennis."

Treacle blushed, but shook Beecham's hand. "Likewise."

"We are leaving," said Illya. "If we need a statement from Cameron, would you take care of it personally, Dennis?"

"Uh, sure, yeah, I'd be glad to." Treacle looked pleased.

"Oh, say, I'll take your paperwork in with me."

"Thanks," said Illya.

"Oh, by the way," Solo interjected, "there are suitcases in the anteroom that were stolen from a dead man named Swanson. Don't lose them. The police will want to see them."

It was eleven p.m. by the time they reached Solo's apartment. Neither man spoke a word from the moment they left the lab until they closed and locked the apartment door behind them.

They stood awkwardly by the door.

"If you don't want me to stay tonight," said Illya softly in Russian, "I will understand. You have probably had enough of gay people for a while."

"No, stay," said Solo. "I — I need to talk. About something." He remembered he was still wearing his overcoat. He shrugged out of it and hung it up.

Illya's winter coat was an olive drab parka. He hung it on a wooden peg near the door. He stood gazing about the room as if he'd never been there before — the three white sofas that formed a square with the television/stereo console along the wall, the glass-topped kidney-shaped coffee table, the dark mahogany Queen Anne dining table and chairs between the sofas and the front wall of the apartment. Kitchen around the corner to the left, the alcove with the hardwood floor between the kitchen and the bedroom wall. Napoleon called it his personal dance floor. Door to Napoleon's sister's room off to the right, next to the console piano. And straight ahead, to the left of the t.v., the door to Napoleon's bedroom.

Tonight, Illya blushed at the sight of the bedroom door and moved his eyes to the

coffee table. At the same moment, he and Solo offered apologies.

"I'm sorry I forgot about the suitcases—"

"I'm sorry I forgot about Raggs—"

They broke off, chagrined. A moment later, they did it again, offering explanations.

"I was so tired when you told me—"

"I was a little rattled in the bar—"

This time they laughed.

Illya cleared his throat, casting his eyes about the room. "You are too tidy, you know," he chided.

Napoleon smiled briefly. "So you keep telling me."

"I don't mind, though," said Illya. He rubbed his hands together.

"Cold?"

"Da." He pushed his blue fingers under his own armpits.

"I'll make some tea."

"No, thank you, I'm fine." But he was obviously uncomfortable. He threw his arms wide and tried to look Napoleon in the face. "Look at us!" He had to glance away. "We are acting like rookies on our first assignment together."

Napoleon launched an explanation. "I thought he was really going to kiss me."

Illya nodded, moved to the middle sofa. "Yes, the horror on your face was quite evident."

Solo followed the Russian to the couch. They did not sit down. "Illya—"

"Nyet," said the Russian softly. "I won't embarrass you again. I didn't mean to behave like a jealous—" He caught himself before the word "lover" could escape and changed his tactic. "I didn't know I was a jealous person. It caught me off guard. I should not have attacked him."

"I didn't want him to kiss me goodbye," said Solo, softly. It was a confession.

"I know," said Illya, not wanting to hear it again.

Napoleon tossed his head an inch to the left, choreography that often helped him say difficult things. "I wanted—"

Illya saw the movement and pressed a finger to Solo's lips, then pulled it away, scorched. "Don't say anything," he whispered. He struggled for a moment to control his voice. "You explained to me on the mountain how it is for you." He turned

his gaze to the crucifix on the alcove wall. He didn't want to hear another round of confirmations of his partner's heterosexuality. He wanted to go home to his own apartment where he wouldn't need to fight for control, where his friend Tovarishch Stolychnaya waited in the freezer. He sat down heavily on the couch and swore softly in Russian. "K chortu!"

Napoleon lowered his backside onto the couch next to Illya. He began again, almost a whisper. "I wanted you to kiss me goodbye."

Illya blinked. He couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?"

Napoleon's eyes were drawn to the Russian's mouth. Butterfly wings beat a wild tattoo against his breastbone. Suddenly it was hard to breathe. But he had to know. He leaned slowly forward.

Fire on ice. Napoleon's lips pressed a hot kiss on Illya's mouth, still cool from the night air. Then he pulled back, his dark eyes confused, questioning. They cleared for a moment as his erection grew. Then they clouded again, this time with fear and dismay. He stared into his own lap as if it belonged to a stranger.

Illya followed his gaze, inhaled sharply. "I did that?" he whispered.

Napoleon nodded, then marveled through his confusion, "I never kissed a man before."

Illya lost his breath in an amazed, "Ui, ui, uiiii!" He couldn't help but smile when he realized what was happening, but he said nothing. Instead, he leaned forward and ran the tip of his tongue across Solo's parted lips.

Napoleon moaned darkly and pulled the Russian into a needy embrace. Their tongues danced together in the dark to the heady rhythm of their heartbeat. Solo's hands moved up and down the Russian's back, looking for something, not knowing what it was until they burrowed under his turtleneck and met with warm flesh.

Surprised at himself, he pulled away, fell backward on the sofa.

But Illya had tasted the forbidden fruit, and he wanted more. He followed his partner's intoxicating mouth and claimed it again, pushing the American down into the sofa cushions. The Russian fumbled with

Solo's tie, gave up and started on the buttons to his shirt. But his fingers were useless. Only two parts of him were functioning, his mouth and that other part that ached and strained against his trousers. He interrupted the kiss long enough to unzip his slacks and free the warm, wild thing that tortured him.

Napoleon pulled in a lungful of air and let it out in a low wail. His heart pounded so fiercely in his chest, he thought it would explode. He felt Illya's hands unfastening his trousers. A tiny voice in his head protested, no, no, this is wrong, but when he opened his mouth to speak, all he could say was, "I love you, te amo, te quiero!" before Illya was kissing him again.

The Russian shifted his weight two inches to the right, pressing his bared flesh against his partner's, and Solo roared through the kiss, and he seized Illya's backside and thrust wildly upward, once, twice, three times. And he realized that the echo he was hearing was Illya roaring back at him like a passionate Russian bear, and just then they both came all over each other, their flesh suddenly slipping and sliding with the wetness of it.

And it was over.

Illya shuddered and lay limp across Napoleon's chest, his face turned to the back of the couch. Solo breathed through his mouth and waited for his heart to slow down. He didn't want to think, he didn't want to name what had happened. He would close his eyes for a moment, clear his thoughts.

They slept that way for almost an hour.

Illya woke up face down on the sofa. The stereo was playing softly, the Elvis album. On the coffee table stood two glasses and two bottles, one of vodka, one of malt whiskey. A finger of Glenlivet was left in one of the glasses. He could hear Napoleon in the other room. The bathroom. Water running.

His first coherent thought was whether they had stained the white sofa. He jerked himself upright, patted the surface of the couch. Nothing sticky. It must have all hit Napoleon.

The sudden movement wore him out.

He fumbled with his trousers, stuffed himself back inside and zipped up. He wanted to wash, but didn't want to travel to the bathroom to do it. Sitting up, he leaned back against the sofa and enjoyed the sweet lethargy that conquered his limbs. It was a wonderful feeling, and not one he often experienced. Touching himself provided physical release and a certain amount of pleasure, but this thick-as-molasses satiety was something he'd only known a few times. He realized, all of a sudden, that he was smiling.

The water stopped running. Napoleon was coming.

Illya's smile faded at the sight of his partner.

Napoleon's eyes were wet, his nose red, his features drawn. He sat down heavily next to Illya, propped his forearms on his knees and stared at the hands dangling between his legs. When he spoke, his voice shook.

"What have I done?"

Illya expected this. He could guess what his partner was going through. Napoleon had spent many years actively pursuing his macho image, believing himself to be as straight as the next guy, looking for love in all the appropriate places but never really finding it. Instead, he found sex, enjoyable if he worked at it. He gave up the idea of fireworks early on, decided it was a fantasy invented by Hollywood. Real people didn't feel that strongly. Real people settled for moderate pleasures in the arms of strangers and hoped that someday, when they found the right match, the fireworks would happen. But he always thought the right match would be female. He never expected to find uncontrollable passion in the arms of another man. He never let himself think it was possible. He never knew.

"I don't know who I am anymore."

Illya longed to run a hand through the dark hair, but he held back, kept his distance. The time for intimacy was over. His partner was clinging to his self-control like a drowning man clinging to a raft.

"You are still Napoleon Solo," Illya began as matter-of-factly as he could manage. "You are still the best enforcement agent in U.N.C.L.E. Don't you see? Who you are is determined by many things, Napoleon, but

not by who you sleep with."

Napoleon managed half a laugh, but his bottom lip trembled.

"Listen to me," said the Russian gently, slipping into his native tongue. "Who you are is shaped by what you do, and how you do it. By the way you live your life, the rules you play by, and the things you believe in. You are a skilled and highly effective field operative. You are strong and fearless, and yet you are kind to strangers and you adore your sister. You are a good and decent man who can call on superhuman strength when he needs it to get a job done. You believe in what you do. You have a good soul, and you believe it will live forever. You are clever and witty and a snappy dresser. You are a wonderful, loyal friend, the best in the world. All those things shape who you are, Napoleon. Not who you sleep with, or who turns you on. At the very most, those details are a mere reflection of your taste. Nothing more. They are a glimpse of some allele that turned left when other people's turned right. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Napoleon nodded, and he managed a genuine smile. "You're pretty neat, you know that? I guess if wanting to touch you is a reflection of my taste, I must have really high standards."

Illya smiled back. "Me, too." But he kept his hands to himself. "Look, Napoleon, this has been very difficult for you. And no one has to know about any of it. It will be our secret, yes?"

Solo's relief was palpable.

"And I will still sleep over, any time you want. After all, a man has to get some rest sometime, doesn't he?"

Napoleon dropped his face into one hand as tears slipped from under his lids. "This is so unfair to you," he choked.

"Nyet, nyet, nyet." Illya waved it away. "Unfair? Hardly. I get to come over, watch your big t.v., drink your vodka, eat your food — by the way, you are out of chips—"

Solo laughed, a strangled sound.

Illya continued. "And I get to sleep an arm's length away from you. I get to know you are safe and sound because I am there to watch out for you. No. This is not unfair." He paused. Solo was pulling himself together. The line about the chips

helped. Illya grew playful. “Unfair would be stringing me along and secretly seeing that Beecham fellow on the side. That would be unfair.”

Napoleon laughed again, a strong laugh.

“Unfair would be deciding you preferred Dennis Treacle over me.”

Napoleon roared.

“Unfair would be—”

“Oh, stop! Let me breathe! It hurts to laugh this hard.”

Illya grinned. “It’s a good sound. You, laughing.” He poured scotch into Napoleon’s glass. “Feeling better?”

Solo wiped his eyes on a napkin. “Much better,” he sighed. “Thanks, partner.”

Illya shrugged. “You’re welcome.” He poured himself some vodka and took a drink. It felt good going down. Elvis was still crooning in the background.

“Love me tender, love me true...”

The Russian looked at Napoleon out of the corner of one twinkling blue eye. “So. You want to dance?” But he couldn’t keep a straight face.

Napoleon laughed, too. Then after a moment, he sobered and looked gently at his partner.

“...all my dreams fulfill...”

“Yeah. Let’s dance.” He held out a hand.

Illya’s breath caught in his throat. He set his vodka down and nearly missed the coffee table.

Solo grinned. “Come on.” He stood up.

Illya took Napoleon’s hand and let himself be led to the hardwood alcove. Solo pulled the Russian close and began moving to Elvis’ slow cadence.

“For my darling, I love you...”

He pressed his cheek against Illya’s and let the music take over. A moment later, Illya laid his face against Napoleon’s shoulder and fought his own battle with feeling.

“...and I always will.”

No, this was not unfair. Napoleon would either accept what he was, or they would go on as before. Either way, for now they were both getting what they needed, and life was good.



