

THE RUBY BUTTERFLY AFFAIR

Linda White

Friday, May 5, 1972

"No, absolutely not." Napoleon Solo kept his voice low, but his jaw was clenched with determination.

"You've done it before," said Illya Kuryakin, tugging at the collar of his ruffled shirt. He was not accustomed to the feel of a tuxedo, and his boss's demand that he get his hair cut before showing up at the charity event had soured his mood. He ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair, pushing it off his forehead. It fell immediately forward again. "I feel bald," he grumbled.

Solo relaxed his jaw. "Your hair looks fine." He could sympathize with his partner's dismay over his hair. Pride in personal appearance was something they had in common, although they measured themselves against entirely different standards. "I slipped the barber a fiver. He only took off half an inch. In a month Waverly will be yelling at you to cut it again."

Kuryakin rolled his eyes skyward, trying to see past his own brow line to gauge the length of his bangs for himself.

Solo nudged him gently with an elbow. "Don't do that. You look cross-eyed."

Kuryakin snorted.

"Besides," said Solo, taking up their previous conversation where they'd left off, "if we keep playing those gay roles on assignment, pretty soon the opposition is going to figure out that we do it too well, and I do not want them trying to get to me through you, or vice versa."

"They already do that." Kuryakin managed to scan the room they were in without demonstrating any interest in its occupants. "Our target is at two o'clock, drunk as a skunk, and most likely heading for bed. I doubt that we will have to follow this one around the night club circuit."

Solo made a face. "Is that the good news or the bad news?"

A ghost of a smile flitted across Kuryakin's features.

Solo reached out gracefully and snared two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter's tray. He handed one to Kuryakin who raised his brows. "Drinking on duty?"

"Not at all," said Solo. "Merely completing our cover. We look out of place with no refreshments in our hands."

"In that case, I suggest we visit the buffet."

Solo smiled. "Your dedication to duty is truly astounding, tovarisch. Lead on."

Kuryakin did so. Scant inches to his rear, Solo continued the other conversation. "Yes, they already do that, but they don't know they're doing that. If they get wise to us, they will get more devious and inventive because they will know exactly how they are getting to us. And I would rather they not be armed with that information."

Conversus interruptus, as two bejeweled women in velvet gowns recognized Solo from evenings at the opera. They chatted and fluttered and asked after his dear old uncle Alexander. Solo gifted them with his boyish charm, assured them that Waverly was doing well, and turned a full three-sixty circle as he waved them on to the next familiar face.

"What is it with you and the opera crowd?" asked Kuryakin, passing a crystal plate to his partner. "Speaking of hints to the opposition."

Solo made a face. "Waverly loves the opera. More importantly, when she was alive, Mrs. Waverly loved the opera. And when they went, agents in town would provide security. Discreetly, of course. But it forced me to mingle with a certain quality of people."

Kuryakin nodded. "Culture in the line of

duty.”

“I like that,” said Solo. “Very clever. Put some of that smoked salmon on my plate, would you?”

Kuryakin obliged, picking and choosing carefully. “Very well, then. We will tell Tuula that Section Three will have to find another set of players for their little game.” He tasted a tiny corner of Solo’s salmon before releasing the plate.

“What are they after this time?”

“You said you were not interested.”

“All right, be that way.” It was Solo’s turn to scan the room. “Our target has a lot of powerful friends. That fellow by the punch bowl works at the State Department. And the tall woman with the conservative gown heads a branch of the Food and Drug Administration. And the fellow talking to the band leader works for the Office of Government Ethics. Oh, darn. Eat fast. Mr. Higgenbottom is being escorted out of the hall.”

Kuryakin set his plate down and turned to follow Solo. The band chose that moment to strike up a lively dance number and a dozen couples gravitated to the dance floor as the lights dimmed and a mirrored ball began spinning from the ceiling, sending crazed patterns of light careening off walls, floors, jewelry, and ball gowns. By the time they reached the exit, there was no sign of Higgenbottom or his escort.

“Out front,” said Solo. “They’re probably looking for his driver.”

“Or hailing a cab.”

But when they stepped through the grand entry doors, they were met with nothing but a blast of cold air. A double line of limos stretched halfway down the next block. Except for a single driver leaning against a fender, huddled in his overcoat, warming his hands around a cigarette, there was no human activity in the street.

“Inside, then,” said Solo. “They must have escorted him upstairs to let him lie down.”

As they passed the ballroom doors, Tuula Crighton emerged, dressed in the black-and-white uniform of the wait staff. Even in flats, she looked Solo straight in the eye. She was not happy. “Elderly, overweight society dames are not supposed

to move faster than the speed of light. One second she was there, the next she was gone. Waverly’s going to have a cow.”

Kuryakin’s brow crinkled in confusion.

“I’ll explain later,” said Solo. To Tuula, “We were about to go upstairs in search of our own elusive guest. Care to join us?”

“With pleasure.” She deposited her tray full of ashtrays and dirty glasses on an expensive looking chair and the three of them headed for the broad staircase.

“Where do you conceal your weapon in that outfit?” asked Kuryakin.

“I’ve got a peashooter in a little pocket under my apron. But if we need major fire power, I’m counting on you guys.”

All three took the stairs two at a time. On the landing at the top, the stairs separated and ended at two different corridors.

“I’ll go with Tuula,” said Solo.

Kuryakin nodded and headed down the corridor on the right. Solo and Tuula investigated the one on the left. They stopped at every door and listened for movement on the other side. Nothing behind the first door on the left. Silence at the door on the right.

Tuula whispered, “Did Illya ask you about my plan?”

“No,” said Solo crisply.

“No, he didn’t ask? Or no, you won’t do it?”

They paused at the second door on the left. There were definitely sounds coming from behind that door, but they both recognized them for what they were and moved on to the second door on the right. Nothing.

“No, I won’t do it.”

“Okay, I’ll ask Mark. Him and Dennis make a cute couple.”

“Mark?!”

Tuula put a finger to her lips as they approached the last room on the left. Something was scratching at the door from the other side. Then they heard a whimper and a tiny bark. They started to move on when they heard a whimper of a different sort.

Solo drew his automatic and tried the knob. Locked.

Kuryakin trotted toward them along the corridor. “Nothing on my side,” he

whispered. "What have you got here?"

Tuula answered, "Unidentified moaning sound and a scratching noise."

Solo shushed them softly. He looked a question at Kuryakin. His partner nodded and pulled a pair of gray spaghetti strands out of his inside pocket. He wrapped them around the door knob and activated a cufflink on his left shirt cuff. The gray spaghetti began to smoke and generate heat. A few seconds later, the smoking doorknob fell to the carpeted floor. Another couple of seconds and something inside the mechanism gave up the ghost and the door swayed half an inch on its hinges.

Solo held his weapon at the ready as Kuryakin pushed the door inward with his foot.

Something small and fast zipped across his path. Solo swung his gun to follow it, but Kuryakin laid a hand on his arm and he lowered the muzzle.

"I thought it was a rat," said Solo.

"In this dwelling?" Kuryakin shook his head.

"Definitely a dog," said Tuula. "Kee-rist, close the door. We've got a mess on our hands." She moved quickly to the bed where her elderly, overweight society dame was sprawled and struggling to breathe.

Kuryakin swore softly in Russian when he spotted the polished shoes and skinny ankles on the floor behind the bed. He moved around to check on the owner of the ankles. "Higgenbottom."

"Drunk or dead?" asked Solo.

Kuryakin held his breath and felt for a pulse. After several long seconds, he exhaled in frustration. "Dead."

Tuula was on her knees on the bed, leaning over the woman, trying to make out what she was saying.

"Ru— ru—" She clutched at her bare throat.

"Rubies?" asked Tuula. "Ruby necklace? What is it, Mrs. Ford?"

"Save my...ruby...butterfly..." With those words, she breathed her last.

"Double crap," cursed Tuula. "What the hell does that mean?"

But Mrs. Ford had no more information to give.

"Heart attack?" asked Solo.

Tuula's nose crinkled. "Not unless the cyanide brought it on." She backed off the bed and indicated a champagne glass on the floor. "I smell bitter almonds on her breath, and I'm willing to bet your Mr. Higgenbottom suffered a similar fate. Now if we only knew why."

An eight-pound bullet darted toward the glass.

"Oh, no you don't, little guy." Tuula caught him with one hand before he could lick up the last drops of lethal bubbly. She set him carefully on the bed. He was a long-haired white and brown dog with enormous upright ears and a curled tail, and he pranced nervously around Mrs. Ford's body.

"Was that your mommy?" asked Tuula. "Poor little dog."

"That's no dog," said Solo. "That's a rodent."

Tuula shot him a look. "Well, he's an orphan now." She picked him up again and soothed him as he trembled against her chest. "I'm not leaving him here with a poisoner on the loose. Okay, boys, what the hell did Higgenbottom have to do with rubies and butterflies? Help me out here. There must be a connection."

"Could he have stolen it?" asked Kuryakin.

"If so, why are they both dead?" countered Solo. "No, they must have something in common, something that made them both targets. Okay, we were assigned to shadow their movements because they have both had conversations with unsavory Thrush types over the last month. Waverly said Higgenbottom was very close to sealing a lucrative business deal with Wilhelm Zoroaster, a major funder of Thrush munitions plants. What about Mrs. Ford?"

Tuula cuddled the little dog and paced the room as she spoke. "Mrs. Ford was recently widowed, and in honor of her dead husband, she was taking up the collecting that he was so famous for. The late Mr. Ford was a jeweler, see? And he collected butterflies. Most of his collection is real butterflies, dead ones, pinned to boards behind glass. I had the questionable pleasure of touring the collection when it was loaned to the City Museum of Natural

History. But it sounds like he must have branched out. A ruby butterfly would combine his two obsessions, right? Jewelry and flutterbys?"

"Flutter whats?" Kuryakin squinted at Tuula.

"Butterflies," said Solo. "It's a word game."

Kuryakin wagged a finger at Tuula. "No word games while we are working."

Tuula kissed the air in his direction.

Solo took in a breath and let it out. "All right. Well, we'd better notify the local police."

"After a quick search," said Kuryakin. "They were both in this room."

"Or brought here," said Tuula. "Whoever killed them may have done Higgenbottom downstairs."

Solo shuddered. "We drank some of that champagne."

"Don't worry," said Kuryakin. "Guests were not dropping like flies. The two people we were sent to watch have been killed. No one else. Therefore it makes sense that their deaths are related. At least, to me, anyway."

"To me, too," said Tuula. "And whoever did it may have a ruby butterfly in his possession. That would be hard to resist, wouldn't it? If Mrs. Ford was wearing a piece of valuable jewelry like that? You kill her for the boss, then grab the rubies for yourself, like a bonus."

"Enterprising fellow," murmured Solo.

Kuryakin finished his quick search. "The drawers are empty, there are no suitcases. No indication that either one of them was actually staying in this room. Not even a water bowl for the dog. And nothing in the dead man's pockets that might shed some light." He got down on his knees and looked under the bed. "Wait a minute. Napoleon, give me your flashlight, please."

Tuula chuckled. "I marvel at the fact that he assumes you have one."

But Solo did, and he handed it over. It was small, about the size of his communicator.

"Hey, I want one of those," said Tuula.

Kuryakin shone the light under the bed. Then he got up, went to the head of the bed, and fished down between the mattress and the headboard. "Voila. Mrs. Ford's

handbag, I think. It matches her gown."

They huddled together as he opened the bag. "Tissue. Lipstick. House keys. Money clip with..." Kuryakin counted softly in Russian. "Three hundred and twelve dollars." He peered in, then pulled out a handful of tiny kibble. "The dog must have been hers."

Solo frowned. "I don't get it. Someone steals her necklace, which has to be fenced, but doesn't grab the cash?"

Tuula shrugged. "They were in a hurry, the bag slid behind the mattress. Maybe they didn't even notice it."

Solo nodded. "I suppose you're right." Absently, he petted the dog's tiny head. "Not much of a watchdog, is he? Didn't help his mistress much."

"She probably adored him," said Tuula. Her expression darkened with guilt. "I should have been able to stop this. What good was I?"

Kuryakin shook his head. "Nyet, nyet, nyet. We cannot blame ourselves. We did not kill them. Whoever did was skilled enough to do it in public and well prepared with the cyanide."

"Wait staff?" asked Solo.

Tuula shook her head. "Half of them are my people and the other half were carefully screened. It must have been a guest."

"Or a party crasher," said Napoleon. He glanced at his watch. "All right, we've delayed as long as we can."

Kuryakin whipped out his communicator. "I'll call the police."

Tuula was already heading for the door. "I'll notify my people downstairs."

Solo opened his own communicator. "And lucky, lucky me. I get to call Waverly."

The old man was not pleased.

Solo, Kuryakin, and Crighton were showing signs of wear and tear. Two hours with the police, giving the same statements over and over, made them long for the days when U.N.C.L.E. would send in a clean-up team and spare its agents the joys of interagency cooperation. At two in the morning, they returned to headquarters and found themselves reporting in Waverly's office.

Waverly only raised his voice once. It startled the tiny dog into a fit of trembling, and he circled on Tuula's lap until he could hide his face under her arm. Waverly harrumphed, but maintained a civil tone for the rest of the debriefing. He finally let them go at four a.m. with orders to find out who killed Mrs. Ford and Mr. Higgenbottom, and why.

The three agents staggered out the door into the anteroom. Kuryakin stifled a yawn. Solo stretched his arms over his head. "I can't believe he keeps these hours at his age." He kept his voice low, half expecting the old man to have super hearing.

Once they were a few yards down the hall, Tuula clarified the matter with one word. "Insomnia."

"That means he will be cranky later in the day," said Kuryakin. "I suggest we make sure we are out of the building pursuing leads for the next twelve hours."

Solo looked disappointed. "What about sleep?"

Tuula massaged one of the little dog's ears. "Why should we sleep if the boss can't?"

"Please tell me you're joking," moaned Solo.

Tuula rolled her eyes. "If only. Fortunately, Illya has leads for us to pursue. Otherwise we would be in a world of hurt."

"Leads? Me?"

"You said we should be outside pursuing leads. Tell us what they are," said Tuula.

Kuryakin snorted. "I was using a figure of speech."

"Besides," interjected Solo, "it's Section Three's job to root out the leads for Section Two to follow. I'm sure that's written down somewhere, in some U.N.C.L.E. manual. Say, I could go back and ask Waverly to clarify for us."

"Ha. Ha. Very. Funny. I'm going to take this little guy down to the cafeteria and find him something to eat."

"Shouldn't you be walking him somewhere?" asked Kuryakin.

"Oh, that's right," said Solo. "We've been in that room for two hours."

Tuula gave a moue of mock disgust. "Didn't you guys ever have a dog when you were kids? I'll bet he sleeps all night

without an accident. This is a very civilized dog." She made baby talk at the little one. "Him is sooo cute. Him needs a name, yes him does."

"You were following Mrs. Ford. Didn't you ever hear her talk to him? Call him by name?" asked Solo.

"No, not really. She was always talking about her son Percy. She was crazy about him. He's some kind of genius. Given her age, he has to be in his thirties at least, but she would go on and on. Percy this, and Percy that." She paused. "Why are you two grinning like idiots?"

Solo pointed a finger at the dog. "Say that name again."

"What? Percy?"

The little dog's ears perked noticeably and his tiny head swiveled to gaze up at her.

Kuryakin sweetened his tone and said, "Percy!"

The little head turned at once in his direction.

Tuula's eyes rounded. "You're Percy?! Oh, my gosh! See? I was right. I said she adored this little dog. Percy!"

Little Percy reached up and began licking her chin.

Solo made a wry face. "Gee, I'm glad we could solve at least one mystery tonight. I vote we all go to the cafeteria. I need fuel."

"We'll be lucky to find coffee," said Kuryakin. "It's four in the morning."

But the place was bustling. A short-order cook was busy scrambling eggs and making toast in the little kitchen. The small Formica tables were loaded with pots of coffee, donuts, and plates of bacon and sausage.

Solo stopped inside the door and asked, "What the hell is going on?"

Mark Slate, April Dancer, and Dennis Treacle chorused, "Insomnia."

Kuryakin scooted the only remaining table close to theirs and pulled over three chairs.

Solo looked incredulous. "Everyone in the building has insomnia?"

April laughed softly. "Oh, Napoleon, that was cute. Really. The problem is Waverly's insomnia, silly."

A zombie wearing an apron delivered a fresh pot of coffee. "You want food, Mr.

Solo?"

"Geez, Fred, you look exhausted."

"Twenty hour shift. Eggs?"

Kuryakin was already pouring coffee. "Everything," he said. "We want some of everything."

"And I need a bowl of water," said Tuula.

Fred's eyebrows shot up. "Is that a dog? You can't have a dog in here. This is a cafeteria."

Solo waved a hand. "He's not walking in people's food, Fred. As a matter of fact he hasn't walked a step since Tuula picked him up."

"But there are health regulations," sputtered Fred.

Kuryakin poured sugar in Solo's coffee. His fatigue was beginning to show in his accent. "He is not dog. He is top secret witness in our current Thrush investigation. We must keep him close to us at all times."

"Now you're pulling my leg."

"No joke," said Solo. As officially as he could muster, he looked at the dog and said, "Tell him, Percy."

Percy barked, right on cue.

Fred nodded slowly. "Yeah. Okay. Some of everything, plus a bowl of water for the witness. Got it."

When he was gone, Tuula laughed silently and ruffled Percy's ears. "Good job, Percy!"

"Maybe he'll tell us why Thrush murdered his mommy," said Solo.

"Back up," said Dennis. "We're clueless over here."

Tuula gave them the short version of the events at the charity ball while Solo and Kuryakin worked on their coffee. By the time she finished, the food arrived. Kuryakin loaded a plate, tasted a random sample from each item, then passed it to Solo.

Dennis, Mark and April pretended not to notice.

"Entertain us," said Solo. "Tell us what you've been doing today. Tonight. Yesterday." He salted his eggs.

"Oh, goody," said Kuryakin. "Floor show with breakfast."

Mark began. "Well, April and I have single-handedly cracked a Thrush plot to drug an entire sub-Saharan population."

Dennis raised a finger. "And I have been

assigned to a kidnapping."

Solo's eyebrows shot up. "Kidnapping? Why haven't I heard about that? Who is it? A politician? A foreign dignitary?"

Dennis waggled one big hand back and forth. "More or less."

"Come on," said Solo. "Give! No offense, but why are you working a kidnapping while the three of us spent the night chasing high society at a charity ball?"

Dennis had mercy on him. "Probably because your society types were in enough danger to get them killed, and my kidnap victim was a Persian cat."

Solo and Kuryakin exchanged puzzled looks.

"You were assigned to a petnapping ring?" Solo shot a questioning glance at Tuula.

She raised her hands in surrender. "It came down from Waverly. Who am I to question the great and powerful wizard?"

Solo frowned. "Just how long has this insomnia thing been going on? A person can only go so long without sleep."

"We thought of that," said Mark, "but these cases do seem to be legitimate. The cat belongs to the wife of the Vice President. All very hush-hush, you know. Much ado about how the kidnapppers had access to the family home, how close they were to the President, and so on."

Solo nodded slowly but did not look convinced.

"Ignore him," said Kuryakin, pointing a fork at Solo. "He is very tired." To Solo, "Are you going to eat that sausage?"

"Help yourself."

Tuula was tearing a piece of bacon into tiny pieces and feeding it to Percy. The little dog sat upright in her lap with his dainty feet on the edge of the table. April offered him some sausage, but he gave a tiny snort and turned his head away. He was all eyes for Tuula and her bacon.

"So what's next for you, Napoleon?" asked April.

"A nap, I hope. And after that, we need to find a connection between our two victims." Napoleon tempted Percy with a pinch of scrambled egg. After a moment's hesitation and a couple of tentative sniffs, the dog took the offering and licked Napoleon's thumb in gratitude. Looking

pleased with himself, Napoleon continued, "There has to be something. We just haven't got a clue what it could be."

"Eat," said Kuryakin gently. "You said you needed fuel."

Solo nodded. He nibbled at his scrambled eggs, then buttered a piece of toast. "I'd be out there beating down the doors, but it's four-thirty in the morning and nothing is open except our cafeteria."

"Don't be silly, mate. This is New York."

Solo made a face. "You know what I mean. I doubt I'll find the connection in an all-night diner. And at this hour, even the night clubs are closing." He dangled the buttered toast in front of Percy.

"Nyet," said Kuryakin, taking the toast. "You will make him sick. Enough. You must sleep." He stood up and tapped Solo's shoulder with the back of his hand. "We are going home."

"Good idea," said Solo. "Tuula, wake us up at nine, okay? Better yet, come get us at nine."

"We'll be there, too," said Mark. "We've just finished up."

Dennis looked disappointed. "Hey, what about me?"

Kuryakin said, "You've got that kitty cat investigation."

Solo shrugged. "I'm sure there are cats in our building, Dennis. You should definitely come by and check them out."

Dennis's smile took ten years off his age. "Terrific."

Kuryakin steered the weary Solo out of the cafeteria. "You should not encourage him. You know how he feels about you."

Solo's features slipped out of work mode and into the personal realm. "I know how you feel about me, too, but that doesn't stop me."

"Cad."

"Of all the words in the English language, you had to learn that one?"

Saturday, May 6

Napoleon was dreaming. He was flat on his back in a soft, warm bed and Illya was on all fours, straddling him, planting wet kisses all over his face. Napoleon kept trying to move his mouth under Illya's, but

his lover was toying with him, keeping his lips out of reach. Soon only his tongue was darting out to tease him, flicking against his chin, his forehead, his eyelids.

Then Illya nipped his earlobe.

Napoleon jerked awake. "Hey!"

Percy bounced off the bed and zoomed into the front room. A couple of seconds later, Illya's head appeared at the door.

"Excellent. You are finally awake. We have been waiting."

When he realized he was home in his own bed, Napoleon relaxed and pretended to be half asleep. "When did you get up?"

Illya shook his head. "It must have been the coffee at the cafeteria. I have been wide awake ever since. Come on. Everyone is here. We are comparing notes."

Napoleon stretched under the covers and rearranged his pillow. "Just a couple of minutes," he murmured.

But Illya wouldn't have it. He hustled to the bed and ripped the covers off. "Now. Come on. Up, up, up."

Napoleon groaned in protest. "All right, I'm coming. But no more coffee for you, mister." He pointed to the bathroom, then splayed the fingers of his right hand.

"Very well," said Illya. "But only five minutes. Then I want you out here, dressed and thinking, or I will send in the dog again."

Napoleon didn't really need to lie in bed. Years of training made him alert the moment his eyes snapped open. But it was fun to play the lay about with Illya, especially when Illya was in the mood for it. "Alas, not this morning," he grumbled.

Six and a half minutes later he emerged, dressed but still damp.

Illya brought him a cup of coffee. "You did not shave."

"You said five minutes," countered Napoleon.

Illya grunted. "Point taken."

The table in the dining alcove was covered with sheaves of typed reports, city maps, state maps, and a globe of the world. Mark, April, Dennis, and Tuula were seated around the table, examining the various exhibits with intense concentration. Percy was prancing around the room with a ball of crumpled paper in his mouth.

"It looks like a war room in here," said

Napoleon.

"Hey, sleepy head," greeted Tuula. She was still wearing the black-and-white wait staff outfit from the night before.

Napoleon sipped his coffee and scratched his damp scalp. "You didn't sleep either?"

"Too much to do. Take a look at this." She pushed a stack of typed pages toward him.

Napoleon leaned forward and squinted at the page. "What? A list of... club members?"

Dennis was excited. "It's a dog club, see? The Muttropolitan Club. Cute, huh? And look whose names are on the list."

Napoleon set his coffee down and pulled out a chair. He ran his finger down the list. "There's Mrs. Ford," he mumbled. His finger moved faster. "And the late Mr. Higgenbottom. Can that be the connection? They belong to the same club? But what does it mean? Who would kill them for belonging to a dog club?"

April asked, "Did the Higgenbottoms own a dog?"

Napoleon and Illya exchanged a slow look, as if they were passing information silently. Then in unison they said, "Yes."

"Illya's favorite breed," joked Napoleon. "A Doberman pinscher. Trained guard dog, patrols the family home at night."

Napoleon handed Dennis a page from the stack of information on Higgenbottom. "Dennis? Would you call the house and see if they have any other pets?"

"Sure, Napoleon. You want me to talk to the wife?"

"No. She's bereaved this morning, so I doubt she will be answering the phone. But someone will be there who knows the family."

Dennis nodded and headed for the little side table where the phone sat.

Napoleon scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Any breakfast? Any coffee?"

Tuula got up. "I'll bring it." She paused for a moment and looked at Illya. He nodded brusquely. Tuula grinned and went.

Napoleon pulled another report within reading distance. "Is this that sub-Saharan thing you were talking about?"

Mark said, "In all its glory."

Napoleon squinted at the page. "Why

would anyone put sleeping potion in a city's water supply? Were they planning large scale bank heists?"

April turned a hand over. "I voted for serial home robberies. But they would have to have a very large gang to cover that many houses."

"Whatever the reason, luv, it didn't work." Mark flipped pages until the final paragraph of their report was visible. "See, Napoleon? The attempt failed. Our people tested several samples of the local water. From what we could tell, for twenty-four hours there was sleeping potion in the water. In hour twenty-five, it disappeared. Quite a chemical feat, if you ask me. But the drug was defective. There were no mass sleepwalkings, no dropping at the wheel of the car, that sort of thing. People went on about their daily business."

Dennis hung up the phone and returned to the table as Tuula approached with a tray filled with coffee, toasted bagels, cream cheese, and strawberries.

Napoleon looked impressed. "You found that in our kitchen?"

"If you mean the tray, yes. If you mean the food, don't be silly. I picked it up on my way over. I knew we'd have to eat eventually." Tuula set the tray on one corner of the table and scooted papers out of the way as she slid it to a more secure spot.

Dennis picked out a bagel and spread cream cheese on it. "Guess what? Our cases may be related beyond the cats in your building. I just spoke to the Higgenbottom maid. Yes, they had a Doberman, but four days ago it disappeared. Then yesterday Mr. Higgenbottom was all upset about a note he found in the mail. She thinks it was a ransom note for the dog. Looks like your victim may have been the target of my petnappers."

"Really?" Napoleon picked up the club list with renewed interest and scanned quickly through the pages. He stopped and tapped a finger on one. "The Vice President's wife is a member of this club."

Tuula frowned. "But she has a cat."

Dennis nodded. "Yeah, but they have a dog, too."

Napoleon picked up a bagel and tore off

a piece. "Dennis, find an address for that dog club. I'm going to shave."

Five pairs of eyes asked the same question.

Napoleon spread his hands as if the answer were obvious. "I'm not going out looking like this."

Dennis drove. Napoleon and Illya shared the front seat. April, Tuula, and Mark sat in back.

"You do realize," said Tuula, cuddling Percy, "that there are six agents in this car headed for the same location in order to ascertain the same information?"

April shrugged one shoulder, then the other, adjusting her Jackie Kennedy bolero jacket. "Tuula, dear, there's no reason to state the obvious."

"I'm just saying." She kissed the little dog's head.

April tossed her hair in exasperation. "Fine. Then you may get out at the next corner and return to headquarters, where Mr. Waverly has still not slept." She smiled sweetly.

Tuula looked sullen. "On the other hand, who knows what kind of back-up Dennis will need when we get to the dog club."

Napoleon smiled. "That's my girl."

"Speaking of Waverly," said Illya, "what was his reaction to your report on the sub-Saharan drug-test failure?"

"Oh." April and Mark exchanged uneasy looks.

Mark cleared his throat. "Well, you see, guv, that report we shared with you? Er, actually, we haven't delivered it to Waverly yet. Officially, we're still working on the matter. Or rather, our people overseas. We, er, we—"

April rescued him. "We have been completely immersed in the investigation for eight straight days, and when we returned yesterday, we felt that a day of rest was in order. Especially since our team is still hard at work." She looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Napoleon nodded. "It makes perfect sense to me. You can't think straight if you're exhausted."

"Thank you, Napoleon," said April.

"So, did you get any sleep since your flight?"

Mark looked sheepish. "Since you bring it up, no. We returned to headquarters, couldn't think of a single positive thing to say to Waverly, and then learned that he was out of sorts. So we went to the cafeteria, and after chatting with you a bit, we were completely refreshed and, well, here we are."

Napoleon frowned, but all he said was, "Aha."

Dennis performed a small miracle by finding a parking space within a block of the address they were seeking. They were on Forty-fourth Street, not far from the UN building. On the door of what looked like an ordinary residential building was a sign that said "Muttropolitan Club." The door itself was glass, the first hint that it was not being used as an apartment building. As they approached, they could hear the occasional bark from within. Another sign next to an array of buzzers listed the other tenants of the building. Shear Heaven dog grooming, The Mews cat boarding, Dr. Tracy Valiant, DVM, Bark Avenue Pet Products, Paws for Nutrition pet foods, and the Pet Nanny pet-sitting referral service.

The Muttropolitan Club was in the basement.

Napoleon glanced around at his eager crew, and as he did so, two tiny frown lines appeared again between his brows.

Illya asked, "Is something wrong?" When Napoleon looked at him, Illya grinned, realized he was doing it, and resumed his usual serious field expression.

"Not wrong, exactly," said Napoleon. "I just have this weird feeling that I am the only person in this group who got any sleep last night. And frankly, the rest of you look a little loopy."

"Just happy to be alive," said Dennis, stifling a yawn.

"Be that as it may," said Napoleon, "I'm not sure we all have to troop into this dog club together. Dennis, the petnapping case is yours. You go in. Illya and I will go with you. The rest of you, maybe you should wait in the car."

"I'm going in," said Tuula. "There may be someone who knows Percy. I could get

more info on Mrs. Ford.”

Napoleon nodded. “All right. Mark? April?”

“We’ll wait out here,” said April. “My allergies might not appreciate a room full of dog hair.”

The quartet trooped down the stairs to the lower level and another glass door. Napoleon opened it and they entered a ten-foot corridor that opened into a full basement with a matted floor. On either side of the corridor, doors opened into tiny rooms, each sporting a desk, typewriter, filing cabinets, and shelves of books and binders. The corridor itself was blockaded at the end by a baby gate. Napoleon stepped over it. The others followed suit.

A class was in progress. Fourteen people walked in a circle with their dogs at their left side. Fourteen different breeds, ranging in size from a Great Dane to a Yorkshire Terrier, moved in unison with their handlers. An instructor called out, “About face.” Dogs and people turned in unison and headed around the other way. “Halt.” They all stopped and the dogs sat, waiting expectantly for the next movement from their humans.

“Impressive,” said Dennis.

Percy squirmed in Tuula’s arms. “I think he’s excited,” she said.

A middle-aged woman with a solid frame approached them from the sidelines, where a row of folding chairs held rapt observers. “Can I help you?” Then her gaze fell on Percy. “Percy! Isn’t that Thelma Ford’s papillon? Where did you get him? Oh, Percy, it’s so good to see you.” She began petting the little dog, who obviously recognized her.

Tuula did not let go of Percy, but tolerated the woman’s greeting. “I’m afraid I have some bad news,” she said. “I’m currently Percy’s guardian, because Mrs. Ford...” She hesitated.

Napoleon’s gift of gab took over. “Mrs. Ford has met with an unfortunate accident.”

“Oh, no! Is she all right?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Napoleon. “I understand she was a member of this club.”

“And who are you?” The woman’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“I’m so sorry,” said Napoleon. “My name is,” he pulled a card out of his breast

pocket and flashed it before the woman’s eyes, “Albright. Gerald Albright, of the Fifth Avenue office, Treacle, Treacle, and Albright. Perhaps you’ve heard of us, Mrs...?”

“Nancy Flannery. Lawyers, huh? Well, I suppose Thelma would need a whole squad, considering how much money she had. What a shame. She was so devoted to her dogs.”

Tuula’s eyes widened. “Dogs? Plural?”

“Oh, yes. Years ago she used to have Labradors, but as she got older she adopted smaller ones. Easier to handle, you see.”

“May I ask if Mr. and Mrs. Higgenbottom also trained their Doberman here?” Illya addressed the question to Flannery but kept his eyes on the Great Dane and the St. Bernard, whose handlers were heeling with them less than ten feet away.

“Oh, no,” she said. “That Doberman was trained at a facility in Indiana. A kennel that specializes in security and attack dogs. Faust was not supposed to be a pet.”

Napoleon cum Gerald Albright looked innocently quizzical. “Not supposed to be? You say that in a way that suggests he became one.”

“Oh, yeah. They adored that dog. Fed him way too much rich food. Let him sleep on the bed. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. My Briards sleep on my bed. But their contract for the dog stipulated that the training guarantee would be voided for security work if he was treated as a pet. He was very well trained, but you couldn’t call him a security dog anymore. If that dog was shut out of the bedroom to do night patrol in the house, first he’d cry and whine at the door, then he’d find a couch and curl up and pout all night. The Higgenbottoms were broken-hearted when he went missing.”

Dennis interjected, “Dennis Treacle, ma’am. Do you mind if I ask what happened to Faust?”

“No one is sure. The police thought he just ran away, but that’s ridiculous. Someone had to sedate that dog to get him away from the Higgenbottom house. Poor thing. He’s probably been sold to some medical lab somewhere.”

Illya offered, “Perhaps someone wanted to breed him. I have learned that dogs have

quite expensive pedigrees.”

“Yes, they often do,” said Nancy, “but Faust had been neutered. He was not show quality. Oversized. Great for security work but not for the show ring. No point in breeding him.”

Tuula readjusted Percy in her arms. “What about Percy?” She patted his tiny neutered bottom. “Why was he neutered?”

Nancy frowned. “You’re his guardian and you don’t know that much about him?”

Tuula looked sad. “My relationship to dear Thelma was in another area altogether, but she knew I was the one to take care of him when she saw how we bonded.”

Nancy accepted her reasoning with a nod. “Papillons need a white blaze down the middle of the face in order to win in the ring. Percy is the right size, his conformation is very good, his coat is excellent, but his coloring is a bit off. Without that white butterfly body down the nose, he would never win in the ring.”

Four voices chorused, “Butterfly?”

Nancy took a step back and looked at them strangely. “Yes. Papillon? The French word for butterfly? That’s the name of the breed. The big upright ears with the flowing fringe of hair resemble the wings of a butterfly and the blaze down the muzzle is supposed to resemble the body of the butterfly. No blaze, no winning points in conformation. So Percy was neutered. And Thelma’s female was spayed for the same reason.”

Awareness dawned on the agents’ faces like an ocean sunrise. “Let me guess,” said Napoleon. “That would be Ruby?”

Nancy smiled sadly. “Right. Thelma called her Ruby Butterfly.” Suddenly she looked puzzled. “If you have Percy,” she said to Tuula, “who has Ruby?”

“That is the question of the hour,” said Tuula.

“We need your help,” said Napoleon.

Dennis added, “We think the same people who took Faust may have taken Ruby.”

“Oh, no.” Nancy Flannery averted her eyes. “Well, I hope you find them. Excuse me, I’ve got to get back to my paperwork. If it’s not in order, the AKC will pull our license.” She turned to go.

“Wait,” said Napoleon, laying a hand on

her shoulder.

Nancy paused, but it was clear that she didn’t want to.

“You know something,” said Napoleon. “Please tell us. You don’t want any harm to come to those dogs, do you?”

Illya added, “A moment ago you speculated that the Doberman had been sold to a medical lab. Do you think that’s where Ruby is also?”

“No, no. I was just thinking that most dognappers make fast money by selling their victims to laboratories to be used in testing. But now...”

Napoleon’s tone urged her to continue. “But now that you know the two missing dogs may be connected?”

Nancy was obviously struggling with a moral dilemma. Finally, she said, “Come with me.” She stepped over the baby gate and led them into a meeting room off the corridor. Once there, she closed the door to give them privacy. “Have a seat.”

They sat around the table.

“Some of our members,” she began, “belong to other clubs, too. I mean, they know each other from other organizations. I don’t know all the details, but Thelma and Douglas Higgenbottom would often train in the same classes. Doug wanted to put his Doberman through the paces, and Thelma wanted to compete with her papillons. They would talk about their investment club. That’s what they called it. They were both well off, and I guess rich people talk about investments like the rest of us talk about the weather. But I think something went sour. The last time they were in class together was last week, and Douglas was upset about something. He told her to hold on to her money. He said the Zee Man was going south. That’s what he said. He said she should not have anything to do with him, that he was not a nice man. He said the Zee Man threatened him, and when he said that, he reached down and hugged Faust, like he was protecting his dog.”

Napoleon and Illya exchanged a look. “Mrs. Flannery, I think you would make an excellent policewoman. You have a nice eye for detail,” said Napoleon.

Nancy reddened. “Oh, heck, I’m just telling you what I saw. Of course, it helps that I worked in insurance investigation for

twenty years. But what if this Zee Man they were talking about did something to their dogs? Maybe his investment plan was extortion?"

The agents stood. Dennis said, "You've been a big help, Nancy. Thank you very much."

"Hey, wait. What's going to happen to Percy and Ruby, assuming you find Ruby? Faust has a home to return to, but Thelma, poor Thelma, she was all alone."

Napoleon suppressed a smile as he looked at Tuula and Percy. "Oh, I think their new guardian will take good care of them."

Tuula beamed. "And you'll get to see them soon. I want to be able to do that training stuff with Percy."

"He'll train you," said Nancy. "He's already got several titles to his name. Let me know if you need any help."

Outside, they joined Mark and April in the car. Or more accurately, noted Napoleon, at the car, since no one seemed comfortable sitting for long. He became a bit uncomfortable himself as they all chattered at once, asking questions, filling each other in. Napoleon cleared his throat.

Silence.

"Do you mind if we get in the car? I feel like a sitting duck out here." Napoleon shot uneasy glances from once building to another, half expecting to see the flash of sunlight on a gun barrel.

"Yes," said Illya. "Good idea."

They piled in.

Napoleon gave up trying to keep up with their conversational exchanges. He broke in once to say, "Our next step is to locate Zoroaster. He has to be the Zee Man."

"Agreed," they chorused. Then they resumed their nonstop cross-conversations.

Napoleon sank a bit on the front seat, leaned his head against the seat back, and closed his eyes.

After a few seconds, Illya asked softly, "Are you all right?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'm fine. It's not me I'm worried about."

Before Illya could ask another question, Dennis chirped, "Headquarters. They'll have location information on Zoroaster. And lunch. Anybody else ready for lunch?"

Inside Del Floria's, Napoleon smelled breakfast. His nose crinkled. "Bacon and eggs?"

Del Floria chuckled and replied around a mouthful, "And toast and sausage. Good stuff."

"I see." Napoleon chewed on his bottom lip.

"Something is bothering you," said Illya as they entered the anteroom where an attendant clipped their badges onto their clothing.

"It could be nothing," said Napoleon. "Where are you all headed?"

Dennis said, "Lunch."

Mark and April said, "Cafeteria."

Tuula breezed through the Del Floria entrance. She'd been delayed by pottying the dog. "Did someone say cafeteria? Count me in."

Napoleon looked a question at Illya.

Illya shrugged. "Might as well eat before we go after Zoroaster."

Once again, the cafeteria was the scene of a great deal of activity. Extra tables had been moved in from another room, and the conversation level was almost painful.

Napoleon frowned at the scene. Half the crowd was eating a late breakfast. The other half were having sandwiches. Pastrami, meatball, sausage, ham and cheese.

A group of Section Three people cleared a table for Tuula and Dennis. Mark and April joined them. Illya was about to sit down when Napoleon grabbed his elbow. "I'm sorry, but we need to see Waverly before lunch. Don't worry, we'll be back soon." He hesitated for a moment, then leaned over Tuula's shoulder and whispered something in her ear. She gave him a strange look, but after a moment she nodded.

Napoleon moved quickly through the corridors. Illya scrambled to keep up. "At least tell me what you are thinking," he said in Russian. "If I'm delaying lunch and missing out on that party back there, shouldn't I know what is going on? Even the dog is eating by now."

Napoleon stabbed a finger at the elevator button. "Why are you speaking Russian at work?" he asked.

Illya stopped for a moment, a look of surprise on his face. "Am I?" English.

"You were."

"Oh. I suppose because Russian is faster."

The got into the elevator. "And you needed the fastest possible communication mode to tell me that the dog is already eating?"

Illya blinked at the floor. His eyes narrowed. "Something is wrong."

Napoleon sagged against the wall of the elevator and sighed with relief. "Thank God. A glimmer of awareness."

Illya held a finger in the air and wagged it slowly. "All of us... not you, but the rest of us... we are behaving like... like..."

"Like a bunch of hopheads," said Napoleon. "Like you're on uppers." The elevator doors opened and he headed for Waverly's office. The female agent at the desk in the anteroom was giggling into the phone. They ignored her and went on through.

Waverly looked exhausted. The bags under his eyes appeared to have doubled in size, and the skin around them was an ugly bruised color. His whites were so bloodshot they looked painful. His big hands shook a bit as he lifted the sandwich from his plate to take a bite.

"Don't eat that!" Napoleon jogged forward and took the sandwich away. He peered between the bread. "Sausage," he said. "That makes sense." He picked up the plate and put the sandwich on it, then turned to Illya. "Are you coherent enough to run some tests on this sausage? Or do I need an outside lab?"

Illya frowned. "I am coherent," he said. "Getting more coherent by the moment."

Waverly stood with his arms akimbo. "Mr. Solo. What is going on? What are you doing with my lunch?"

"Forgive me, sir, but I have reason to believe that you have been drugged. Your insomnia has spread to the entire building. At four a.m., six of us went to the cafeteria for breakfast. I believe I was the only one who did not eat the sausage. Remember, Illya? You asked for mine. Of those six, I am the only one who was able to sleep, and the others are demonstrating unusual behavior. With your permission, I'm going

to have Illya test the sausage in this sandwich."

Waverly sat down heavily in his chair. "Yes, yes, by all means. Quite frankly, I'd be grateful to learn that some drug was causing my insomnia, because that would mean that eventually I will actually get to sleep. Go. Do what you must. Is anything in this building safe to consume?"

"At the moment, I wouldn't count on it."

"Wait! What about all those people in the cafeteria?" asked Illya.

"Don't worry," said Napoleon. "I gave Tuula the heads-up about my theory. I think she understood. She's in maternal mode with that little dog. No one down there is eating."

Illya's stomach rumbled. "Your timing leaves much to be desired," he growled. "Give me the sandwich. And have Tuula bring samples of the other foods to the lab."

Two hours later, Napoleon, Illya, Tuula, Dennis, Mark and April were seated around Waverly's briefing table. Dennis had gone out for pizza, and everyone was eating, including the old man, who gave new dignity to the consumption of a chocolate milkshake.

Napoleon leaned toward Illya and asked, sotto voce, "How can he drink that through a straw without slurping?"

Illya chuckled silently.

Mark was talking. "So you see, sir, when Napoleon divined that there was something in the food that was keeping us awake, April and I realized that there might well be a connection between this incident and the seemingly failed attempt to drug our small, isolated sub-Saharan population. The substance in their water supply was a nearly untraceable drug designed to put people to sleep. We mistakenly assumed that the test failed because the population did not succumb to the sleep drug, when in fact the true test was a success since the drug trial was actually focused on one of the common local foods which contained the same drug, as it turns out, that Mr. Kuryakin isolated in the cafeteria sausage." He smiled brightly.

The others exchanged amused glances.

April cleared her throat. "To make a long story short, sir..." She looked pointedly at Mark. "... your insomnia and ours was caused by an experimental Thrush drug. You should have no trouble sleeping as soon as it's out of your system."

Tuula pulled Percy away from the pizza on her napkin. "We should have listened to Percy sooner," she said. "He refused the sausage in the cafeteria. We should have known then that there was something wrong with it."

Waverly used a knife and fork to cut his pizza. "And what about the delivery method, people? How did Thrush manage to slip this tainted sausage into our cafeteria? And what does this have to do with that dog?"

Napoleon raised a finger. "The sausage delivery has been traced back to a Thrush-owned factory in New Jersey, sir. The late Mrs. Ford and Mr. Higgenbottom were friends through their dog club. Mrs. Ford had asked Mr. Higgenbottom to help her with investment advice, and that's how they both came to know Zoroaster. He was selling an interest in his sausage factory and his initial representation of the profit factor was quite appealing. But when Ford and Higgenbottom requested product samples, they were accidentally supplied with the tainted variety and their dogs wouldn't eat it. They were going to withdraw their investment monies and report the matter to the Food and Drug Administration. Zoroaster arranged to

kidnap their dogs to distract them, but Ford and Higgenbottom had realized by then that Zoroaster was a truly nasty specimen, and they were planning to talk to the FDA representative at last night's charity event. Unfortunately for them, they didn't realize just how nasty Thrush can get."

Illya added, "Our people in New Jersey have taken Zoroaster into custody. The FDA is shutting down the sausage plant."

Tuula beamed. "And the kidnapped canines are safe and sound. They were in Zoroaster's office. The Doberman is being returned to Mrs. Higgenbottom, and I have volunteered to take in little Ruby, Percy's sister."

Dennis looked pleased. "Also, I just got news that the Vice President's cat turned up looking for breakfast after a few nights on the prowl. That means the petnapping case is also solved, sir."

They waited expectantly for Waverly's praise, but the old man was silent. He had listened to them all with his head propped against the soft leather back of his chair and his eyes closed, as he often did. But after a few seconds of silence, the agents shifted uneasily in their chairs.

Napoleon was the first to realize what had happened. He put a finger to his lips and motioned his colleagues to follow as he headed quietly for the exit. Behind them, the distinctive rumble of contented snoring floated in the air.