

The Team Player Affair

By

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Napoleon Solo pulled the U.N.C.L.E. station wagon into the parking garage space and slammed it into park. Illya Kuryakin sat on the passenger side, glaring out the front window. Mark Slate and April Dance exchanged quick looks in the back seat and got out of the car as fast as they could.

“Thanks for the ride, mates,” said Mark. “See you later.”

Napoleon didn't move. Neither did Illya. At last, Napoleon said, “Will you at least tell me why I'm getting the silent treatment?”

Illya turned his head to the right and studied the fender of the little yellow Beetle in the next space.

Napoleon squirmed and fidgeted with the steering wheel. “I need to know the reason for all this hostility,” he said, “before we go upstairs and draw another mission.”

Silence.

Napoleon stared at his partner's profile. At last, he said softly, “All right, I'm sorry. I know I said I wouldn't bring it up again. I didn't mean to go back on my word. It's just...” He spread his hands. “Damn it, Illya, if I offer to fix you up with someone, it's not an insult, you know? I mean, anyone can see you're shy. I'm trying to help you meet girls, that's all.”

Illya swiveled and pinned Napoleon with a scathing glare. “You are afraid to spend time alone with me.”

“What?!” Napoleon tried to laugh. “That's crazy.”

“Last night I asked if we could sit in your apartment and watch a soccer match. Football, Napoleon. Two hours, that's all. The soccer game and sandwiches for dinner. And you turned it into... the Dating Game.”

“Illya, I'm not afraid to spend time with you. That's absurd. I had no way of knowing that Charlene was going to show up on my doorstep. I explained all of this last night.”

Illya made an exasperated noise. “Yes, while the women were sitting right there on the couch, waiting for you to talk me into changing my plans.”

Napoleon clenched and unclenched his fists around the steering wheel. “Yeah, well, listen, Illya, I have never seen you treat anyone as rudely as you did those girls. That was not nice.”

“Two hours,” said Illya evenly. “I wanted two hours of your time. Two hours, to relax and watch some soccer. You couldn't do it. Besides, those girls were not my type.”

Napoleon played with his upper lip, tweaking it between two fingers. Now he was the one staring out the front window. “You could have just said no, instead of making a scene.”

“I did not make a scene.”

This time Napoleon turned and gaped open-mouthed at his partner. “Excuse me? You told those women I already had a date. With *you*.”

“Well, you did.”

Napoleon threw his hands in the air. “Illya! In American society you don't tell anyone you have a date with another man!”

“Well, what was I supposed to say? I wanted to watch the soccer game.”

Napoleon's voice was stern. “You could have said that. You could have said, Sorry, ladies, Napoleon and I were getting together tonight to watch sports on TV. That would have been fine.”

Illya shrugged. "My grammar was perfect and my word usage was acceptable, according to the dictionary." He enunciated pointedly, "I went home and looked it up."

Napoleon sighed like a martyr. "You know, most men are pleased to be handed a beautiful woman for a date without having to ask her out themselves. And besides, if I fix you up, then we can double date. See? I was thinking of a way we could spend the evening together."

"In the company of women. Strangers. With no interest whatsoever in soccer."

Napoleon deflated. "Well, we didn't go, did we?"

"Only because I refused and left."

Napoleon pursed his lips together and blew a bubbly raspberry at the windshield. "Charlene will never speak to me again."

"Good. You have too many women dangling on a string as it is."

Napoleon looked offended. "I do not. I don't dangle them. They come after me!"

Illya had no suitable reply. Besides, Napoleon was right. The women flocked to him, like moths to flame.

After a few seconds, Napoleon looked at his watch. "We have to go upstairs. Look, Illya, I don't want you to be mad at me. I thought I'd be doing you a favor. You just seem so tense lately. And I know you don't feel comfortable making small talk in English. And a double-date seemed like a good idea. At the time."

Illya relented a little. He shifted on the car seat and leaned his elbows on his knees to study the floor mat. He glanced sideways at his partner. "I should not have been rude. I apologize." He leaned back on the seat. "I'm sorry. American girls are just so... American."

Napoleon felt his partner's hostility fade away, and he smiled. "Okay. And I apologize for springing them on you and ruining your soccer night." He stuck out his hand. "Friends?"

Illya looked at Napoleon's outstretched hand, then shook it firmly. "Friends," he said.

Napoleon whistled happily all the way to the elevator. Inside, Illya said casually, "If we're not on a mission this weekend, Friday night we double date. But I pick the women."

Napoleon stopped in mid-whistle. He arched a brow and eyed Illya warily. "All right," he said at last. "Friday night."

"I'll bring them to your apartment at eight, and we will leave from there. On our date." His eyes gazed straight ahead at the elevator doors. "Agreed?"

Napoleon grinned and straightened his jacket. "Agreed."

If he had bothered to check, he would have seen Illya's eyes twinkling like dew on a fairy's wings.

That was Monday.

On Tuesday, Napoleon had to turn down dates with two different women, both of whom had tickets to different Broadway plays on Friday night. The first woman was the gorgeous new counter help at his dry cleaners. She said she was an actress, trying to pay the rent between gigs. Her last part paid in Broadway tickets. The second was at his barber shop. She was the manicurist. Not real bright but earthy and fun-loving.

Saying no the first time was easy. There was a question of loyalty to his friend. And the fact that he'd already seen the show. The second time was harder. The manicurist was someone Napoleon had tried to date twice before, but she'd turned him down. And the ticket was for *Hair*, close enough to the stage to count the moles and freckles.

On Wednesday, Napoleon asked Illya whom they were seeing Friday night.

“Not fair, Napoleon. Charlene and her friend were a complete surprise to me. So Friday night should be a surprise for you. Yes?” He looked up from the typewriter where he was writing the first draft of a report on abuse of dangerous chemicals in the U.N.C.L.E. lab.

Napoleon sucked noisily at a tooth and jammed his hands in his trouser pockets. He leaned over Illya's shoulder and said, “Benzine is spelled with an 'e'.”

“It has an 'e',” said Illya.

“Yes, well, it needs another one at the end.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a clue, huh?”

Illya pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

“I'll read that for you if you'll eat dinner with me,” said Napoleon.

Illya paused and turned to look his partner in the face. “No hungry females pounding on your door?”

Napoleon rocked back and forth on his heels. “Nope.”

Illya nodded. “Can I go like this?” Black turtleneck, black slacks, black jacket.

“Yep.”

“Good. Yes, I'll go.”

Dinner was Italian. Napoleon knew how to order all the good stuff, and the waiters loved him because he could do it in Italian. Illya could do it in ten other languages, but he was content to let Napoleon talk. After a protracted conversation with the waiter during which Napoleon hear all about his family and grandkids and political views without revealing anything of substance about himself, Napoleon sighed happily and poured wine.

Illya picked up his glass gratefully and shoved a ballpoint and the draft of his report at Napoleon. Napoleon smiled and proofread the first paragraph.

Illya remarked, “You are very good at that, you know?”

“What, proofreading?”

“No. Talking to people. Getting them to talk about themselves. The waiter is ready to give you the intimate details of his love life any minute now.”

Napoleon made a face. “Please. Not before dinner. The guy has to be sixty if he's a day.”

Illya hummed a laugh into his wine.

“I am amazed,” he continued, “that none of your lady friends was free for dinner.”

Napoleon's brow creased, but he kept proofing as he spoke. “For your information, Mr. Kuryakin, I don't go out to eat every night, and I certainly don't go out with women every night. Too exhausting.”

“Limits? Napoleon Solo has physical limits? I am horrified.” Illya's tone of voice was quiet and even, revealing no horror at all. “My personal image of you has been completely destroyed.”

Napoleon grinned. He set the pen down and sipped his wine. “So, Mystery Man, where are we taking our Mystery Dates on Friday night?”

Illya wagged a finger back and forth. “No clues.”

Napoleon shrugged. “All right. But you will have a plan, correct?”

Illya's whole face glowed with enjoyment. “You'll see. Keep proofing. I need to finish that early in the morning.”

Napoleon squinted at the second page. “What are these guys doing with these chemicals?”

“I'm not sure, but I have a sleeping hunch.”

Napoleon blinked at him, then corrected quietly, “Sneaking hunch. You have a sneaking hunch.”

Illya wagged his brows over the edge of his wine glass. He returned to Napoleon's chat with the waiter.

"I especially liked the part," he said, holding the glass out for Napoleon to fill, "where you turned all his questions about you into something about him. Very instructional."

"Thanks." Page three. "You know, your spoken English is so good, no one would ever suspect I proofread your written reports for you."

"Yes, I know. You make me look very good on paper."

Napoleon leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Actually," he said, "you make me look very good, too. Not on paper. I mean, in other areas."

Illya snapped a bread stick in two and took a bite. He shrugged. "We are a good team, then."

Napoleon nodded in agreement and sipped wine. They were at his usual table, in a corner far from the windows, where they could sit, each with his back to a wall, and watch the restaurant patrons come and go. They were also close to a rear exit that Napoleon had used more than once. He cultivated the waiters and chefs for a reason. Illya always felt safe when Napoleon chose the restaurant. The man appeared so casual, but never left anything to chance.

That made it all the harder to understand his penchant for wining, dining, and bedding woman after woman.

Out of the blue, Illya said, "You can't control them, you know."

Napoleon looked up from page four. His eyes searched Illya's face for a hint of what he was referring to. Then, in one of his clairvoyant moments that Illya had come to depend on, Napoleon said, "That's the point. A little excitement."

Illya made a rude noise. "Yes, I see. There is no excitement in your life. What a shame."

Napoleon grinned. He gestured at their surroundings. "Training forces me to stack the odds in my favor," he said. "To do otherwise would be foolish. With women, I take controllable chances. No matter what happens, I know I have an ace in the hole."

"Which is?"

"I'm physically stronger. I can hold them down with one hand." His eyebrows danced up and down. "Believe me, it has come in handy on more than one occasion."

Illya nodded. "So you date all those women because you *can* control them?"

"Correct. Like I said, a *little* excitement." Napoleon smiled up at the waiter as their food came. They busied themselves with seasoning and applying Parmesan. After the waiter had gone and they had tasted their food and agreed that it was excellent, Illya asked, "So what is this insane urge you have to sleep with Angelique?" He pronounced her name like she was a poisonous snake.

Napoleon looked at Illya thoughtfully. After a moment, he replied, "Uncontrollable animal lust."

Illya shuddered. "She is..." He searched for an appropriately lethal metaphor. "...a black widow spider."

"I know."

"A pit viper."

"You're probably right."

"A copperback rattler."

Napoleon laughed. "Diamondback, and where are you getting these zoological analogies?"

"She is deadly," said Illya quietly.

Napoleon sipped wine. "All right, if it makes you feel better, with her I take precautions."

Illya kept his eyes on his plate, trying not to look too interested. "Such as?"

"Oh, no, you don't. Not unless you want to tell me about Friday."

Illya smiled a tiny secret smile and kept his eyes on his plate.

They left the restaurant and said their good nights at the corner.

“That was fun,” said Napoleon. “Here's your report.”

“Thank you.”

Napoleon shifted from one foot to another for a few seconds. “So.”

Illya's complexion was rosy with wine. “See you tomorrow,” he said.

Napoleon would learn nothing about Friday. “Right.”

On Thursday, Napoleon had lunch with Mark Slate.

“Napoleon, April could join us if we did this tomorrow.”

“I know, Mark, but we'll get together with April some other time. I need to bend your ear. Guy talk. You know.”

Slate was intrigued. “Guy talk?” he enunciated. “We aren't going to talk male underwear and foot fungus over lunch, are we? Because it will really interfere with the food.”

Napoleon laughed, louder than he needed to.

“All right,” said Mark. “What's this all about? Are you and Illya still fighting?”

“We're not fighting. We were never fighting. We're partners. We were discussing something.”

“Quite right. Discussing.” Slate looked at his menu. “I say, the prices in this place are a bit much.”

“My treat,” said Napoleon.

“Oh. Well, then.” Mark smiled brightly. “The lobster sounds good, doesn't it?”

Napoleon smiled wanly. “Terrific.”

A dark-haired, dark-eyed waitress with ruby lipstick smiled at Napoleon. “Back again? This is so nice. Another visit, and I'll think you're coming to see me.” She winked at him. “Are you boys ready to order?”

Napoleon smiled back at her, and looked her up and down with boyish exuberance.

The waitress laughed sweetly. “I'll be back,” she lilted. “Take your time.”

“My, my, my,” said Napoleon softly, watching her walk away.

“Easy, boy. Don't drool on the menus,” teased Mark.

Napoleon pulled his gaze back to the table. “Did you see that? She came on to me. I did not go after her.”

Mark nodded and sighed heavily. “You and Illya are still not seeing eye to eye.”

“We never see eye to eye,” said Napoleon. “I'm taller than he is.”

Mark examined the menu again. “How about those lovely pastries for dessert?”

“You are picking the most expensive items on purpose,” said Napoleon.

“But of course. If you plan to pump me for information, I expect to be well rewarded.”

“He told you, didn't he?”

Mark's eyes twinkled. “He told me that he is lining up dates for the two of you for Friday night.”

“All right, now we're getting somewhere.” Napoleon rubbed his hands together. “Who are they?”

Mark hesitated.

“Come on, come on, I won't tell him you said anything. I just need to know what to wear. You know. Some girls like the opera and some girls like to dance. It'll look pretty silly if I have to change my clothes after they get to the apartment because I didn't know where we were going.” He leaned intently toward Mark, but just then the waitress returned.

“Ready to order now?” She bent provocatively over Napoleon's shoulder, making sure he got an eyeful of her cleavage. “The lemon chicken is very good. Soft, tender breasts...” She drew the word out slowly.

Napoleon turned his head to look up at her, but his eyes got no further than her bosom.

“Oh, my,” he said. He turned his head away and saw Mark glance at his lap. Napoleon reached for a drink of water. Two small spots of color appeared high on his cheekbones.

Mark smiled brightly at the waitress. “Napoleon will have the halibut.”

She straightened up. “Okay, if that's what you want, Napoleon. But you could have had the breast,” she added huskily.

Napoleon stared at her as she departed. “Illya should have been here,” he said at last. “I told him about this.” He turned back to Mark. “Did you see her?”

“She was definitely getting fresh with you, Napoleon. We should complain to the management.”

Napoleon pinned Slate with a glare. “Did Illya put her up to this?”

Mark sobered quickly. “No, no, I'm sure he didn't. You know what a prude he can be sometimes. All that Communist ethic and respect for women workers.” He shook his head and frowned. “I just can't see it.”

Napoleon's expression relaxed. “Yeah, you're right. I'm getting paranoid. It's just that he's being so secretive about this.”

“No, he's going to surprise you. That's what you did to him, isn't it?”

Napoleon blinked at Slate.

“I did, didn't I?”

“What's good for the goose...” Mark let it hang.

“So, you're not going to tell me who the girls are, are you?”

Mark averted his eyes. “To be truthful, guv, he was afraid to tell me. He said you can find out anything about anybody, and the only way to keep the secret was to tell no one.”

Napoleon looked disappointed. “No one?”

Slate shrugged. “Sorry, mate. But cheer up, I'll pay for my own lunch.” He winked.

Napoleon smiled wanly. “Thanks.”

Lunch was eaten quietly. Napoleon was clearly preoccupied. Mark almost felt sorry for him. When Napoleon got a call on his communicator and had to leave early, Mark even picked up the tab.

He finished his lunch with coffee and dessert. At last, the waitress brought his check.

“How was I?” she asked.

“Absolutely top notch,” said Mark. He handed her a ten dollar tip.

“Come back again real soon,” she grinned, “and I'll put the moves on the whole table.” She winked at him and left.

Napoleon knew he was truly bothered when he found himself in Records, checking phone numbers that Illya had dialed from the office, and then he called a friend at the phone company and had her check calls made from Illya's home phone. But he searched in vain. If Illya arranged anything by phone, he did it from a pay phone. And when the telephone friend invited Napoleon to dinner and dancing Friday night, he had to decline. After the favor she had just done for him, risking her job to please him, she was not a happy woman. Napoleon held the earpiece away from his ear and made a pained face while she read him the riot act. At last he managed to hang up somewhere between “you incredibly selfish jerk” and “don't ever call me again.”

Napoleon went back to his office and tossed wadded paper balls into his wastebasket. After fifteen minutes of that, the basket was full and he was not feeling any better. He decided to try the direct approach. He got up, ran his hands through his hair, straightened his tie and put his jacket on, then went to Illya's office. He knocked on the door.

No answer.

He pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing, no typewriter keys tapping, nothing.

An U.N.C.L.E. secretary strolled by, her black skirt hugging her round hips, her yellow blouse taut across her bosom. She turned as she walked by and winked at Napoleon. "He's not in," she purred. She licked her lips. "Say, Napoleon, are you free tomorrow night?"

Napoleon almost groaned. "No," he said. Then brightly, "But tonight is open."

She looked broken-hearted. "Oh, no. I'm booked tonight. And I was so hoping you could go with me..."

"Go where?" asked Napoleon.

"I'm in a beauty contest," she pouted. "The bathing suit competition is tomorrow night. The other girls will be so disappointed. I've told them how handsome you are." She shook her head sadly and made little tsk-tsk sounds as she walked away.

Napoleon watched her go, his disappointment all over his face.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered. "The one week I'm locked into a Friday night --" He stopped and listened to what he was saying. His eyes moved left, then right. Then he smirked. "That little son of a gun. He's been setting me up all week." He laughed and shook his head. "Pretty good, Illya," he said to no one in particular. "Pretty damn good."

Then he remembered Barbara, the stewardess he met on his last flight to California. He had her phone number on the paper jacket his ticket came in. It was still in his desk. He would call Barbara and see her that very night.

Friday morning, Illya met Napoleon at the door of Del Floria's.

"Good morning, Napoleon."

"Good morning, yourself, you tricky little Russian," said Napoleon good humoredly.

Illya frowned. "Excuse me?"

Napoleon laughed softly. "Still at it, huh? Well, enjoy yourself. Only a few more hours until you show up at my front door with our dates."

"Think you can stand the wait?"

Napoleon couldn't help swaggering a bit. "Not a problem. I just hope they don't want a lot of physical activity," he smiled, pulling the curtain closed on the changing booth. Then, his hand on the hook in the back of the booth, he added sotto voce, "Because I worked out for several hours last night."

Illya followed him into Reception, his head down to hide his grin.

Once their badges were pinned on, Napoleon held his hand out to force the sliding doors open before his nose was pressed into service and turned right down the hall instead of left.

"Where are you going?" asked Illya.

Napoleon glanced at his watch. "Coffee and a donut. I just got out of bed twenty minutes ago." He wagged his eyebrows up and down.

Illya suppressed another grin and tagged along.

"Big date last night?" he asked.

Napoleon made noncommittal sounds.

Illya chuckled. "You liar."

Napoleon stopped and turned to face his accuser, hands on his hips. "What makes you think I'm lying?"

Illya sobered and held up his hands, palms out. "Just a guess."

Napoleon's eyes narrowed. "What have you been up to, Illya?"

Illya tried to look innocent. "Me? Nothing."

"Where were you last night?"

Illya started walking away. "Home. I was home. I'm glad you had a good time last night." He turned and walked backwards so he could add, "And I hope you have fun tonight, too." He winked, then turned and walked forward again.

Napoleon's expression soured. He went into the cafeteria, got his coffee and a Krispy Kream, and sat at a little square table in the corner.

The sneaky little Russian had staked out his place. That had to be it. No wonder Barbara hadn't shown up. He should have gone to her. But she sounded so eager to come to his place. Her new roommate was a crusading Baptist and wouldn't hear of a man in their apartment. Illya had waited downstairs and steered her away. Napoleon was sure of it.

He stirred his coffee and marveled at the lengths Illya was going to in order to set him on edge for Friday night. Lost in thought, he didn't notice Mark until he sat down opposite him.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Mark stirred sugar in his tea.

"Oh, hi, Mark." Napoleon half smiled and shook his head. "You will not believe what Illya did last night."

"Oh? You mean, early this morning?"

Napoleon blinked at Slate. "Huh?"

"After he left my place? We sat up and watched this outrageous British comedian. I had to translate practically every other line for him. His English is great, but humor is a different ball game." Slate shook his head in amusement.

Napoleon's smile faded. "What time did he get there?"

"Oh, let's see. He met April and me at the restaurant at 6:30, then we took April home and --"

"When did he leave?"

"One a.m. I told him he could sleep on the couch but he said he had things to do before he came in this morning."

Napoleon nodded.

"What were you saying?"

"Nothing," said Napoleon. "Never mind."

Slate almost felt sorry for Napoleon again. "Surprises can be good things," he said hopefully.

Napoleon nodded, absent-mindedly. "Oh, sure. I know."

"Is something wrong?"

"Hmmm? Oh, no, Mark, I'm sure it's nothing." He tore a piece off the donut and contemplated putting it in his mouth.

"If you're sure?..." Mark waited for a response, but Napoleon was lost in thought. Slate shrugged, patted Napoleon on the arm, and left.

The day dragged on. Napoleon was bored. He hated office work. He broke up the tedium by spending an hour on the shooting range. Then he went to the gym and worked out. Somehow, he made it to lunch. He looked for Illya, called the lab, checked his office. Nothing. He was beginning to feel a little lonely. He had seen less of his partner this week than ever.

At last, Napoleon gave up and headed for a sandwich shop two blocks away. He ordered his sandwich and coffee, paid for it, and headed back to the office. On his way out, he ran into Barbara.

Napoleon smiled warmly at her, his face a question mark. "Hey, Barbara! Hi. I wondered where you were last night."

Instead of the apology he expected, Barbara snapped, "You've got a nerve, Napoleon Solo. I've never been so insulted in my whole life. I'll thank you never to call again."

“What? Wait, what are you talking about?” He stood there on the sidewalk, coffee in one hand, sandwich in the other, as the lunchtime crowd jostled around him.

Napoleon suddenly felt uncomfortable, with no partner to watch out for him and no hand free to go for his weapon. He sidestepped out of foot traffic, set the coffee on the sidewalk, tucked the sandwich in a pocket and paid attention to where he was going.

Barbara's behavior was a mystery, and in Napoleon's line of work, he didn't like mysteries.

Back at the office, he ate his sandwich and ran through the week's intelligence reports. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he hoped he'd know it when he saw it. He buzzed Illya but there was no answer. Where the hell had he been all week?

By five-thirty, he had noted three different peculiarities in the week's intelligence reports, but none of them had anything to do with him as far as he could tell. He notified the appropriate people about his findings, received warm thanks and teasing about being an over-achiever, then called it a day. He looked around for Illya again, but wasn't surprised when he found his office dark.

Feeling a tiny bit sorry for himself, Napoleon left the building by the river exit and spent an extra half hour getting home, using switchbacks and anti-tailing tricks along the way. He didn't relax until he was inside his apartment and certain it had not been breached. Then he set his perimeter alarms, poured a glass of Glenlivet, and stretched out on the sofa to wait for Illya and their dates.

By seven p.m., Illya's frustration was unbearable. After a week of preparations and collusion with his favorite female friend, everything was set for a dynamite evening, except for one little detail. He hadn't found a date for Napoleon. He thought of a dozen women who would be more than glad to get to know Napoleon, but Illya wanted to find someone perfect, someone who would really be a surprise. And trying to surprise Napoleon with a woman was proving too much for a Russian peasant of Communist persuasion. He would just have to share his friend with Napoleon. Illya was sure she wouldn't mind. She had even suggested as much once before. Illya considered it. Well, at least it was something. And it might even surprise the jaded Napoleon Solo.

Illya decided to walk to Napoleon's from his Greenwich Village apartment. The exercise would do him good, and on the way maybe he could figure out how to break it to Napoleon that they would be sharing a woman. He made up his mind to pretend that was the game plan all along. Yes, that would have to do.

Mark had told him about the stunt with the waitress on Thursday, and Illya told him thanks but lay off. By then, he knew he was in danger of finding no date for Napoleon, and he didn't want Napoleon horny and irritable if that turned out to be the case.

Illya moved along the sidewalk, hands deep in his pockets. But his training kept his eyes moving and he watched the glass storefronts and checked for tails automatically.

So automatically, he almost missed it when his training paid off. He had checked the reflection in the glass he was passing and then took three more steps before he realized he knew the blonde female he'd spotted half a block earlier.

He didn't try anything fancy because he had a few blocks to go before he reached Napoleon's building. But he lifted his communicator unobtrusively and signaled Mark Slate.

He told Mark his location, and in seconds had set up a rendezvous. “And bring April,” he added at the end. Meanwhile, he kept the woman in sight.

Four blocks later, Illya turned right into an alley, walked ten feet, then ducked behind a dumpster. He peeked around the corner and saw Mark on the other side of the street, lounging against a bus stop sign, reading a newspaper under the streetlamp. Illya waited.

Twelve seconds later, the blonde woman's steps slowed at the alley entrance. A moment later, tacka-tacka-tacka, more women's footsteps from the other direction. Then a shriek. And April Dancer's voice.

“Oh, I'm soooo sorry, I didn't see you there. Here, let me wipe that off.”

Illya peeked around the dumpster again. April was trying to wipe hotdog mustard off the blonde's fur coat. The blonde was cursing April fiercely.

“You clumsy cow! Look at this mess! Do you know what this coat cost me?!!”

Illya was at her elbow, and Mark was trotting toward them from across the street.

“Temper, temper, Angelique,” said Illya.

The blonde head jerked up and she glared at Illya. “You!!!”

“I'm hurt,” said Illya. “You don't remember by name.”

“What do you want?” snarled Angelique. “Did you put this bitch up to ruining my fur?”

April's apologies died. She toughened her voice and cracked, “Oh, lighten up, honey. It's not real, you know.”

Angelique was furious. “How dare you?!”

April pulled a perfume atomizer out of her purse and aimed it at Angelique's nose. “Oh, do shut up,” she said, squirting the pump.

Angelique froze in mid-syllable, then slumped into Mark Slate's waiting arms. April turned and waved at a taxi down the block. Del Floria's nephew Luigi hopped out and opened the passenger door for Mark. They loaded Angelique inside.

“You remember the rest?” asked Illya.

“Don't worry,” said April with gusto. “This is going to be fun. Oh, we do get to take pictures, right?”

Illya looked horrified.

April laughed out loud and climbed into the cab.

Illya checked the time. Two minutes to eight. He quickened his pace and headed for Napoleon's apartment.

Napoleon drained his second glass of whiskey and looked at his watch. Eight-oh-three. Illya was late. Napoleon was inordinately disappointed. He wondered if whatever had interfered with Barbara's Thursday arrival would interfere with Illya's Friday arrival. He contemplated strolling downstairs to wait in the lobby of the building, but decided he would give his friend five more minutes. Meanwhile, he needed a refill.

He stood up and the doorbell rang.

Illya looked very pleased with himself. Napoleon tried to frown at him, but his expression landed somewhere between “you sneaky Russian” and “God, it's good to see you.” His eyes darted up and down the corridor.

“Hello, partner. I thought you were bringing dates with you.”

Illya's canary-eating smile was more of a tease than anything else that had happened all week.

“So?” He drew the syllable out in a rising question. “Who are they? *Where* are they?”

“I will take you to them. But first, you should dress.”

Napoleon nodded cautiously. “Dress in what?”

Illya shrugged. “There is no dress code where we are going. Wear what you like to wear best.”

“A tux?”

Illya grinned. “That would work.”

Napoleon finished locking the door and resetting the alarms. “Uh, Illya, you wouldn't be setting me up for some huge joke, would you?”

Illya chuckled in spite of himself. “No, no, I swear. I am just so pleased about the walk over here. Go, go, get dressed.”

Napoleon's mind was buzzing. He'd never known Illya to deliberately play for laughs at his expense, so he didn't really think he would start now, but Illya was definitely pleased with himself. And yet, Illya was not wearing a tux. Since they were supposed to be double-dating, Napoleon chose an identical look from his own wardrobe. Black slacks, black turtleneck, and a black sport coat.

When he emerged from his bedroom, he caught Illya putting his communicator away.

“Don't tell me,” said Napoleon. “At the eleventh hour, Waverly found a mission for us.”

Illya looked puzzled, then shook his head no. “*Nyet, nyet*. I was just checking on something. No tuxedo?”

“We're double-dating, right? I took my cue from your attire. Besides, I never get to wear this turtleneck. What now?”

“A taxi is waiting.”

“How much money do I need?”

Illya shook his head, struggling to keep a straight face. “My treat. No money.”

Napoleon was pleasantly surprised. “Hey, I should double-date with you more often.”

Napoleon recognized Luigi Del Floria, of course. But it was common for U.N.C.L.E. agents to patronize businesses of U.N.C.L.E. relatives. Fewer questions to answer if something untoward happened, and a better chance of nothing hitting the papers.

Napoleon chatted with Luigi in Italian (although Napoleon's was better than second-generation Luigi's) and watched the night streets roll by outside. The neighborhood began to look familiar.

When they pulled up in front of the Alcatraz a Go-Go, Napoleon made a wry face. “This belongs to the brother of that demolition guy in Section--”

“Yes, it does,” said Illya, paying Luigi.

“It's full of U.N.C.L.E. people,” Napoleon whispered fiercely.

“Is that a problem?” asked Illya, stepping out of the cab and waiting for Napoleon to exit.

“Just answer me this,” said Napoleon quietly. “Am I going to get laid tonight?”

Illya frowned. “Napoleon, please, I am your partner, not your pimple.” He waved Napoleon out of the cab.

“Pimp,” corrected Napoleon, louder than he intended. He stepped out of the cab and was greeted by curious and disapproving stares of nightclubbers on the sidewalk who overheard his exit line. He rolled his eyes and followed Illya into the club.

The Alcatraz a Go-Go was the most recent incarnation of a club that all the U.N.C.L.E. people seemed to know about, no matter where it moved to and no matter how many times its name changed. Napoleon suspected the cousin in demolitions of mimeographing the latest club info and distributing it to everyone at Headquarters. Everyone but the Section Heads, of course, because such activity was frowned on, and a Section Head would be obliged to tell the man to cease and desist. Illya, however, was not a section head, so he knew exactly where the place was at all times.

As the current name suggested, the interior of the club was done in a prison motif. A very clean, Disneyized version of prison, that is, with scantily clad cocktail waitresses (their black hot pants were topped with black-and-white striped skater's skirts, and they wore chain bracelets on wrists and ankles) and bouncers and bartenders dressed like prison guards. More than once in the last three months, Section Three had run some operations here, and substituted U.N.C.L.E. agents for the employees and real weapons for their plastic mock-ups. Napoleon secretly enjoyed the décor. It appealed to the part of him

that liked locking up the bad guys and to the darker part as well, the part that liked to keep a hand on his firearm during intimate moments.

But Illya wasn't stopping at the bar. The Russian moved past the dance floor, too, and the cages around the perimeter with chained go-go dancers gyrating inside to entertain the non-dancing customers.

Napoleon followed Illya through the door to the restrooms, down the corridor (brightly lit here in contrast to the dark club) to a door marked "Janitor." Illya knocked on the door. A voice on the other side said, "Matterhorn." Illya countered with "Cowgirl."

The door opened and they went in.

Another corridor, another door, but this one opened easily as they approached. Mark Slate smiled brightly.

"All set?" asked Illya.

Slate was grinning now, his eyes twinkling. "All set, guv. Here." He handed Illya five twenties. "The owner said you're a valued customer. He would only take half."

"Illya frowned. "And dinner?"

"On the house." Slate winked.

Napoleon couldn't stand it any longer. "Okay, what 's going on? This place doesn't serve dinner."

Slate and Illya looked at each other and chorused, "Tonight they do."

Eyes still twinkling, Mark straightened up and sobered his expression. "Table for two?" he asked.

Illya replied, "Yes, please."

"Two?!" Napoleon followed Illya across the private dance floor to a table in the middle. It was spotlighted from above, and everything around it was in shadow. As they sat down, Napoleon smiled uncertainly. "You know, if you and Mark weren't here, this whole setup would make me very nervous."

Illya's eyebrows bounced up and down. "Yes, me, too. That's why we are here, in a secure place."

Mark was pouring champagne.

"And our dates?" asked Napoleon.

"April is helping them dress. Try the champagne. It's Russian. Very good stuff."

Napoleon began to relax. "You went to a lot of trouble," he said.

Illya shrugged. "You are not an easy man to surprise."

Napoleon sipped champagne. "This place is totally secure?"

"As secure as our lives ever get," said Illya.

Napoleon nodded. "The ladies are joining us for dinner?"

Above them somewhere, machinery hummed into motion. The sound made Napoleon reach for his shoulder holster, but when Illya continued sipping champagne, he relaxed. Four seconds later, the humming stopped and Napoleon felt a faint movement of air on his cheek. And he smelled perfume.

He couldn't help himself. He chuckled with anticipatory delight. He was completely at ease now, and he raised his glass to Illya. "A toast," he said.

Illya raised his glass as well. "To?"

"To the most surprising partner a man ever had." They clinked and drank. "Are you sure they don't want some dinner?"

"They will eat later," said Illya, leaning back to let Mark serve his salmon.

Napoleon waited for Mark to depart, then asked softly, "Who are they?"

Illya was having a great time. "Before I answer, I must know if it bothers you when people watch you eat?"

Napoleon felt a tickle of excitement deep inside. "As long as they aren't starving orphans, no, it doesn't bother me."

Illya rubbed his hands together. "Good." He raised his voice to someone in the dark. "Lights on the ladies, please!"

The breathy clack of spotlight switches accompanied the sudden illumination of two go-go cages, one hanging to Napoleon's left, and one to his right.

Suspended two feet off the floor, the cages were six feet from the table. Both were covered with black drop cloths. Napoleon glanced left when that cloth began to rise. Inch by inch, it revealed the woman in the cage. Slender legs in black nylons, a black lace garter belt, a blood-red slip, a petite trim and athletic figure with apple-sized breasts sliding freely beneath the slip every time she moved. She had short black hair, almond eyes, high Russian cheekbones, and plump sensual lips painted the same color as her slip. Her wrists were chained to the bars of the go-go cage. Her ankles were chained, too, forcing her to stand with her legs apart. She was gyrating slowly, her hips swaying from side to side, and her pink tongue moved languorously over her bottom lip. Her dark eyes were fastened longingly on Illya, who quietly ignored her.

Napoleon's mouth hung open and his eyes bulged. "That's Nina Karpova," he whispered. "Don't they call her the KGB Bloodsucker?"

Illya suppressed a smile. "Well... the sucking part is appropriate." Without looking up at the cage, he asked in Russian, "Nina darling, would you like some champagne?"

She replied huskily, "Not until I can drink it from your mouth, my sweet."

Napoleon choked on his asparagus.

Illya chuckled. "Nina is my date. She's really a very nice spy."

Napoleon coughed into his napkin and cleared his throat. "And my date?"

Illya moved his gaze to the other cage. "Unveil her, please," he commanded into the darkness.

The black drop cloth lifted. Inch by inch, another female form appeared. By the time Napoleon could see the black garters and black slip, he was sure he knew the woman. By the time her grapefruit breasts were visible, nipples hard and erect against the slip, he was grinning from ear to ear. By the time her blonde hair and furious blue eyes were visible, he was raising a glass in another toast.

"To Angelique! Illya Nikolaevich, you have outdone yourself. Incredible." He laughed with delight.

Angelique was not laughing. She was furious. The duct tape across her mouth prevented her from spewing obscenities at the two of them. She fought her bonds, struggling futilely to free her wrists and ankles, but succeeding only in amusing her captors. One moment her eyes would plead with Napoleon, and the next moment her rage would conquer her and they flashed with fire.

Napoleon could not believe his good fortune. His face didn't know whether to smile or leer. "Unbelievable," he murmured.

"Thank you," said Illya.

"But, uh, isn't this illegal? I mean, you aren't courting kidnapping charges, are you?"

Illya shrugged. "Who would believe her? Besides, Nina is exactly where she wants to be." He glanced up at Nina and smiled. She leaned forward and ran her tongue around one of the bars of her cage. Illya's complexion reddened as he turned back to his plate.

Napoleon leaned across the table. "And after dinner?"

Illya chewed and swallowed. "Arrangements have been made for a suitably romantic evening."

"My, my, my," sighed Napoleon. "I guess I should let you plan the recreation more often."

Illya looked pleased. "By the way, your friend Barbara?"

"Yes?"

"She did not stand you up last night. When she got to your apartment, Angelique was there. She has had you under close surveillance all week. She's been trying to lure you away from your colleagues,

sending women to ask you out, enticing you with Broadway tickets and beauty pageants. It seems Thrush is once again hoping to get you alone and try out some new drug or other.”

“I see,” said Napoleon, the mystery solved at last. “The beauty pageant offer came from an U.N.C.L.E. secretary, by the way.”

“Yes, we know. Her Section Head is speaking to her now. She will either be severely chastised or fired, depending on the quality of her responses.”

“And don't forget the waitress in the restaurant Thursday.”

Mark arrived with champagne refills and cleared his throat. “Sorry, Napoleon, that one was my fault. I couldn't resist.”

Illya continued, “Nina and I worked this all out Monday night, but I must admit, I had no idea who your date would be until I spotted Angelique tailing me tonight.”

Napoleon nodded. “Very honest of you. But you still did a topnotch job.” His eyes gleamed. “Frankly, in this setup, almost any woman would have done. But I must admit, there is a certain poetic balance about Angelique in that cage.” He grinned and leaned back in his chair. “What do you say we take them back to my place in chains and make them watch soccer?”

Illya chuckled deep in his chest. “Do you want to keep score?”

“Oh, no, you don't. We're partners. We don't keep score, remember? We're on the same team.”

Illya lifted his glass in a toast to the team.

End