All The Way Home

by AconitumNapellus

Summary

Sequel to To Live a Little. Illya has been blind for two years, but now there's hope that his sight can be restored.
Chapter 1

‘I keep telling you, it will be all right,’ Napoleon said in a low voice to Illya.

‘Yes, you keep telling me,’ Illya nodded, his voice very dark, holding on as Napoleon’s arm guided him along this cold, level sidewalk.

He had been in a bad mood for days, so fearful of this appointment. After two years of blindness, of learning to accept that his blindness could not be changed, it was so odd to be walking to an appointment where he might be told there was hope of seeing. He had first been tentatively offered that hope by his chance meeting with an ophthalmologist in Egypt and this appointment with Dr Bruner’s colleague would tell him how firm that hope could be. He didn’t know how to deal with that. He didn’t know what would happen if he went in to this appointment and his hopes were shattered again. Even if he were told that Bruner’s optimism was well founded, it still wasn’t a certainty. It wouldn’t be a certainty until he opened his eyes to sight.

He tapped the end of his cane across the hard sidewalk and kept following the steady movement of Napoleon’s arm. It was colder here in Chicago than it was in New York, but there was little else to distinguish the place from the city where he had made his home. The sounds were very much the same and the streets were just as thickly blanketed by ice and snow as they made their way to Dr Wilkinson’s clinic. The air smelt of salt and Napoleon had told him there were great frozen piles of snow four feet high in some places at the sides of the streets. He had been hearing snow ploughs in the streets all morning. Despite the prevailing opinion that all Russians were good with snow, Illya wasn’t keen on it at all after the first magic had worn off, especially now he couldn’t even see it. It made life so difficult, and it had been snowy for far too long.

‘Oh, watch it there,’ Napoleon said as Illya slipped a little.

‘Well, if you would guide me properly,’ Illya said irritably, regaining his footing. ‘Can’t you warn me of icy patches?’

‘Not if I can’t see them any more than you can, no,’ Napoleon retorted. ‘Illya, I know you’re nervous, but I’m doing my best.’

His anger flared. He should have controlled it but he just didn’t have the resources. He was using everything he had just to keep himself together, and he just wanted to be able to walk without something going wrong.

‘Well, if your best includes letting me break an ankle before I’ve even got to this blasted clinic, then – ’

Napoleon stopped so suddenly that Illya’s hand jarred against him. He batted Illya’s fingers from his arm, and stamped away.

‘Go on, then,’ he said, his voice cracking with anger. ‘It’s number 244. It’s probably somewhere on the next block. I’m your partner, not your seeing eye dog, so take yourself to the damn clinic, and godspeed.’

Fury welled in Illya’s chest. Why should he have to rely on Napoleon anyway? He was sick of relying on other people. He was sick of it all.

He slapped the end of his cane out in front of him and started walking, but he quickly felt uncertain. He had built a mental map of many of the New York streets based on sounds, scents, echoes, on the
cane’s feedback and what he knew was there. He had nothing like that for Chicago. The sidewalk felt rough through the cane, but his gloved hands muffled some of the sensation. There were sure to be more icy patches ahead. There was traffic moving very slowly in the street, but not much of it, and every sound was muffled and sucked up by the snow.

He carried on walking, using the snow banks at first to keep himself straight, but they were too irregular, so he sidestepped to the other edge of the sidewalk and tapped the cane onto the building façade instead. The cane hit what felt like a potted plant and he moved around it. Then there was what seemed to be a double door, one of them not quite closed, then another potted plant to get around. He had the urge to kick the stupid thing. Then there was the hard wall again, and then he heard Napoleon coming after him yelling, ‘For god’s sake, Illya! You don’t need to prove yourself.’

‘I’m not proving myself. I’m getting myself to this wretched appointment, since you don’t want to help me,’ Illya growled. ‘You must get sick of having me clinging to your arm.’

He squared his shoulders and carried on, and then Napoleon grabbed him from behind and said, ‘Illya, stop!’ just as his cane tapped into empty air and his foot stepped on half-nothing, and he reeled to a halt, shocked, almost slipping on the icy sidewalk.

‘You’re not getting yourself to this wretched appointment. You’re walking off in a huff like an idiot, not looking where you’re going,’ Napoleon said very quietly, his hand on Illya’s collar still, pulling a little at his throat.

Illya was too shocked for anger. Napoleon was right. He had been dragging his cane along the shoreline of the wall, and not using it to tell what was right in front of him.

‘What in hell is that?’ he asked, batting his cane at the sheer edge and a hole that seemed to have no bottom, but Napoleon was shouting at someone else now.

‘Can’t you even put out cones, for Christ’s sake? A barrier? He almost walked straight into it! Can’t you carry a fence?’

There was rough shouting in response and Illya realised that, despite the cold that deadened everything, he could smell coal dust.

‘It doesn’t matter, Napoleon,’ he said, but Napoleon was fired up.

‘Like hell it doesn’t matter! You could have broken your neck! Doesn’t anybody think about the blind?’

‘No,’ Illya said. He felt shaken from his near miss. His heart was pounding. ‘No, Napoleon, they do not. The sighted never think about the blind. They put out plants and tables and chairs and signs and wooden Indians and barber’s poles, and they leave boxes and packages on the sidewalk, just for a moment, while they go in to find someone, and they don’t clean up after their dogs or watch their children, and they open up holes in the ground, and they do not think of the blind for an instant. This is my reality. This is what happens when I go out without you. You think a Thrush minefield is hard to navigate? You should try Fifth Avenue in the summer. Thrush have got nothing on that.’

‘Come on,’ Napoleon said very quietly, closing a hand around his arm. ‘Come round this booby trap, at least.’

So Illya let him tug him by the arm, using the cane to feel the edge of the coal hole until they were past, breathing in the biting air and trying to master the need to punch something.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said at last, rearranging things so he was holding Napoleon’s arm. ‘I’m nervous. I
‘Well, you’re my brat, at least,’ Napoleon said fondly, pressing a gloved hand over Illya’s gloved hand. ‘And, Illya, I never get tired of helping you. You never cling to my arm.’

Illya tilted his head a little closer to his partner and gave a wan smile. He wished he could feel Napoleon’s hand properly. He hated wearing gloves. He hated not being able to feel.

He could hear someone ringing a bell up ahead, and as they reached the sound Napoleon murmured to him, ‘Salvation Army girl. I’m going to give her a little change.’

‘Oh, pretty, is she?’ Illya asked.

‘Well, now that you say… Hair like a flame, very pale skin.’ Napoleon paused in his step then and Illya heard the tinkle of coins hitting coins, and a soft, ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘It was entirely my pleasure,’ Napoleon said in his smoothest voice, but he leaned in to Illya and said quietly, ‘She doesn’t hold a candle to you,’ as they walked on, and Illya smiled.

The bell clanged out behind him again and there was a snippet of singing that came through a door that opened and closed, and he remembered hearing similar sounds not long after he had been blinded. It had been this time of year when Illya came back from Stockholm, and how strange that had been. The arrhythmic sounds of Salvation Army bells as their people collected money on the street. The singing out of choirs, Christmas carols filling the air. The shrieks of people on temporary ice rinks. It had been so weird.

Napoleon had urged Illya to come out with him to complete some Christmas shopping, and Illya’s heart had sunk, because he hadn’t even remembered about Christmas, and how could he buy Napoleon something when he couldn’t see? He had walked around Macy’s in the clamour and bustle and tried not to let Napoleon see how hard he was finding it. He hated it. He hated the jostling and the heat in the shop, the clinging on to Napoleon’s arm, the vulnerability, the thought that people must be staring at him as he blundered along with one hand held out in front of him. In the hot, crowded elevator he had got close to claustrophobia, something he had never experienced before, and then they had stepped out onto another floor and Napoleon had exclaimed and tried to describe the decorations, and that seemed worse than not knowing they were there.

He had just wanted to go home. In the apartment there was a great Christmas tree he could smell and touch but couldn’t see, although he had helped to decorate it, at Napoleon’s insistence. He could just make out the colour of some of the tree lights if he brought them right up to his face, but that was no way to experience them. Napoleon had put the box of ornaments on his lap and Illya had touched them and tried to remember them from other years, and Napoleon had been so insistent about Illya hanging up some of them himself, about sharing the experience. The scent of the tree had been all around him, and he loved that scent, but he gained little more from the experience.

But Napoleon had been so desperate that Illya would enjoy this first terrible Christmas without sight. He kept rolling up his sleeves and cooking Illya Christmas treats and special Ukrainian delicacies. He put Christmas records on the record player and filled their apartment with beautiful music. He had got hold of a recording of the carols from Kings College, Cambridge and that was about the only thing that Illya could take comfort in at that moment. He had sat and closed his eyes and remembered being there in Cambridge, listening to those carols himself, remembered the candles and the light sparkling from gilt and polished wood and pooling soft on carved stone. The upper heights of the fluted columns and the delicate lacework of the arching ceiling almost disappeared in the enveloping darkness of night, but the voices of the choirboys shimmered through everything with the clarity of water. It had been so beautiful.
And then in Macy’s he wondered if he could get Napoleon a record for Christmas. Maybe he could do that, and get them to wrap it up for him, because how could he even wrap a present like this? That had been his first spark of joy in that horrible shopping trip. He had got Napoleon to get an attendant to help him, and had gone off into that noisy, crushing soup of customers, feeling ridiculously vulnerable being separated from Napoleon in this busy place, but glad that he had thought of something he could get for him. He had spent an hour in the record department listening to discs that the incredibly helpful lady brought him, until he had picked out five that were perfect and had them wrapped up and slipped into a bag.

When Napoleon had unwrapped the gifts on Christmas day it had been wonderful. Napoleon had bought him records too. A couple of full length recordings of favourite books of his, and some wonderful new jazz. It had seemed perfect that they could both enjoy each other’s presents, and although that had been the strangest Christmas he had ever had, he remembered it with warmth. By the next Christmas he had been more used to this strange blind world. This would be his third Christmas without sight.

‘All right, this is it,’ Napoleon said, turning towards the left. ‘Door’s hinged on the left. It opens inwards,’ he added, so Illya knew he didn’t need to worry about it since he was on Napoleon’s right, as always. The cane tapped from the concrete sidewalk onto something softer, and it immediately grew warmer, but Illya felt a different kind of cold that was heavy in his stomach.

‘It’ll be all right,’ Napoleon said.

‘So you keep saying,’ Illya replied rather blackly.

He followed Napoleon’s arm across the lobby and Napoleon told him, ‘This is the reception desk, Illya. The receptionist is right here.’

So Illya pasted a smile onto his face and said, ‘Mr Kuryakin, to see Dr Wilkinson. I have an appointment at half past twelve.’

‘Ah, Mr Kuryakin.’ A woman, a midwest accent, with a smoker’s voice, he thought. At any rate, there was a scent of cigarettes in the air that was stronger than the scent of perfume. ‘Please, take a seat. I’ll let you know when the doctor is ready.’

So Illya followed Napoleon to a soft but utilitarian chair, and rather envied Napoleon as he heard him pick up a magazine.

‘National Geographic, Illya,’ Napoleon said brightly. ‘It’s the latest issue. Want me to read it to you?’

‘You’ll spoil it for me when I get home,’ Illya murmured.

He had been going to cancel his subscription when he lost his sight, but Napoleon had put him off, promising to read every issue cover to cover out loud if Illya wanted him to, and to describe all of the pictures. So far he had read every one without complaint. Illya felt rather self conscious, though, at the idea of Napoleon reading aloud to him here.

‘Well...’ And Napoleon tapped his fingers. He was almost incapable of just sitting quietly. Illya didn’t want to talk and he didn’t want to listen. He just wanted to be left alone to think – or brood, as Napoleon would probably put it. This appointment was too momentous for distraction. He just wanted it to happen. He wanted it to be over, one way or another.

((O))
Illya sat through the appointment with Dr Wilkinson and as he went through test after test his dread lightened. It was going to be all right. Almost everything that this new doctor said was positive, and although Illya hated the sitting in a chair and pushing his face against the instruments and having bright lights shone into his damaged eyes, he became happier with each test. It was actually starting to seem possible.

‘But I must warn you, Mr Kuryakin, that nothing about this process will be swift,’ Dr Wilkinson told him. ‘Each eye will be done in a separate operation with a full thickness transplant, and I’ll recommend doing the right first since that has the highest chance of success. Your vision will fluctuate over the first year after transplant and you will almost certainly need to wear corrective lenses once your eye has settled down. Also, I must be clear on this: any kind of contact sport is contraindicated at any time after a penetrating keratoplasty. Now, you’ve indicated your previous occupation was some form of law enforcement. Mr Kuryakin, after transplant the eye will never be as strong as before and a blow could cause blindness. I cannot recommend your return to that career even if your vision is good enough.’

Illya sat there, feeling mildly stunned. All those words revolved in his head. He would see. He was going to see. But – His mind turned dizzily. Corrective lenses. No return to active enforcement. No chance of returning to the field with Napoleon. But sight... The promise of sight. Oh god. Vibrant colours, reading books, walking swiftly and with confidence, perhaps driving, perhaps – An entire world was opening up in his future.

‘Er – Thank you, doctor,’ he said eventually, becoming aware that he was just sitting there without saying a word. ‘Thank you.’

‘Well, that’s it, Mr Kuryakin. You can go. I’ll pass on my findings to Dr Bruner, and I’m confident he’ll be just as pleased with the results as I am.’

Illya stood up from the chair and shook the man’s hand, feeling slightly giddy. Napoleon’s hand closed on his arm, and his partner said quietly, ‘All right, Illya. Let’s get out of here.’

He sounded as stunned as Illya felt. After they left the examination room Napoleon took Illya into the toilet and pulled his partner into his arms and kissed him so hard that Illya’s knees weakened.

‘Napoleon, if someone comes in,’ Illya began, breaking breathlessly from the kiss at last.

‘They won’t. It’s a single toilet and I’m standing against the door.’ And Napoleon pushed his fingers through the hair at the back of Illya’s head and kissed him again. ‘God, Illya,’ he breathed. ‘My love, my love. This is going to happen, Illya. It’s really going to happen.’

Illya hardly knew what to think. As a scientist he liked to deal in percentages and this doctor hadn’t mentioned percentages. He had just muttered things like, very promising, and a good deal of healing has occurred, and the sclera seem sound. So perhaps… Perhaps Napoleon was right, and it was really going to happen, and now he just needed to wait for – And his thoughts sobered. He needed to wait for the right person to die.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ he said, and Napoleon’s hands stopped still in his hair.

‘Hey, are you all right?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine,’ Illya promised. ‘It’s a lot to take in. Give me a chance to process it.’

So Napoleon kissed him softly on the forehead and smoothed down his hair and said, ‘As long as
‘Napoleon, I think I could do with being alone for a while,’ Illya said suddenly. ‘Do you mind?’

There was the smallest hesitation, but then Napoleon said, ‘No. No, Illya. I don’t mind. I tell you what – I’ll take you back to the hotel, then I’ll go out for a while, leave you to it. Is that okay?’

‘If you don’t mind,’ Illya said. He felt awful rejecting Napoleon and essentially throwing him out of his own hotel room, but he really felt that he needed time on his own to settle his spinning thoughts.

((O))

He lay on his front on their bed, his face pressed into the bedclothes, the silence of the room hissing in his ears. There were faint noises from outside, a few cars, but not much penetrated the windows. Napoleon had left him alone, true to his word, with the promise to come back in time to take Illya out for dinner, because he wanted to take him out and treat him, and Illya acquiesced to that, because he understood Napoleon’s excitement and joy.

His own emotions were far more complicated. He knew there was no hope that Napoleon could understand. He could hardly understand himself. What sane person would prefer blindness to sight? And he didn’t prefer blindness. He knew that. But he preferred stability to chaos. He preferred a low level of contentment to shattered hopes.

How crazy this was…

He lay there, turned his face sideways, opened his eyes wide to the pearly blur of light that was his vision. There was nothing there. A slight sense of light and shadow, sometimes a very vague sense of colour. But really, that was all there was. It was like frosted glass, or worse, because it was more opaque.

He remembered the last thing he had seen clearly, when he had run into that lab with Napoleon. It wasn’t a very big building; small enough for two men to tackle alone. In the end it had turned out that there were twenty men there. Only a handful were guards, but all were Thrush personnel, and the scientists were just as aggressive as the armed staff. They had already cleared out six men on the ground floor. Illya had felled three of them, using sleep darts, not bullets. Napoleon took the other three, and the men were slumped where they had fallen. They would come around, but not for a few hours.

And then they had crept upstairs, and Illya had pushed open the door to the lab. There had been a man in a white lab coat standing at a bench near the door, beaker in hand, and another man on the other side of the room by another open door. There were a number of benches in the room, a few stools, a couple of posters and some crude pin-ups on the walls. There had been test-tubes and a lit Bunsen burner hissing and letting a scent of gas into the air. There had been flasks of colourful liquid, the last really colourful things Illya remembered seeing.

Illya had stepped into the room, raising his gun, and Napoleon had shot past him at the man over by the other door. But Napoleon had missed, and the man closest to Illya had raised that beaker and thrown it directly into Illya’s face, and he had cried out, choking on the pain and the smell simultaneously. He had no idea what was happening then. He heard shouting, he thought, but all he could focus on was the terrible, terrible pain in his eyes and his face, and he dropped to his knees,
shaking, shuffling himself under the bench that he knew was behind him because there were bullets snapping through the air. Then Napoleon was shouting over his cries, ‘I need to leave you. The other guy ran. I’ll be back, Illya, I promise. Hold tight.’

And then he had gone. He had gone, and Illya had been alone. There had been the hiss of the Bunsen burner, still alight on one of the benches. There were thudding footsteps from elsewhere. Illya knew that his life depended on being small and quiet, on not being found, so he tried to choke his screams back into his throat. He pressed his jacket sleeves against his face, trying to wipe that stuff off his skin, his eyes closed so tightly that everything was black. And it hurt. It hurt so much. His breath came in wheezes with his effort not to scream.

He had been huddled back, hard against the wall, the bench low above his head. And he had been shaking. He shook so hard, pressed against the leg of the bench, that the glass instruments on top rattled. He moved his hands to his face and stopped short of touching because he didn’t want to burn his hands too, but it hurt too much to press his rough sleeves against it again. He clenched his hands on his knees and shook. It hurt so much that his stomach revolted, and he turned his head aside just in time to avoid getting the sick down his front. Oh god, it hurt.

He sat there and listened to the distant sound of shots, the smell of vomit and the smell of that chemical thick around him. What would happen if Napoleon didn’t come back? Had he seen a telephone in this lab? He tried to remember, and couldn’t. He couldn’t think. His mind was screaming with pain and he wanted to scream aloud but he didn’t dare, because he was almost hidden here. He didn’t know how long he had been here now. What if Napoleon didn’t come back? What if – ?

Then thumping footsteps, and he held his breath, and then, god, Napoleon’s voice.

‘Illya? Illya, it’s all right. I’ve cleared them out. All dead or incapacitated. I can get you out of here.’

So Illya started to unclench himself and crawled from under the bench, trying to avoid the vomit. The smells of that and the chemicals were so strong. He felt like an animal, all fear and revulsion and visceral feelings. He could make noise now, and he let out his pain in deep, long, wavering cries. And Napoleon’s hands grabbed hold of him and yanked him out further, and he was saying, ‘There’s not too much on your face, but your eyes, Illya – ’ Then Napoleon was putting a thumb on his eye, trying to pull up the lid, and Illya quavered, ‘No, no, don’t touch.’

‘Illya, I have to,’ Napoleon said, his voice deadly serious, and he forced the lid open and said in a horrified tone, ‘Jesus Christ,’ and Illya couldn’t see anything at all through his opened eye. Napoleon pulled him across the room and a tap turned on and Napoleon shoved his head under it and forced his eyes open again, but it made no difference at all.

‘I can’t see, Napoleon,’ he said, water trickling down his face, and his voice had been so thin and shaking. His entire body was shaking and he felt so cold.

‘Both eyes?’ Napoleon’s thumb had forced his eyes open again, and he blinked against the pain and the dripping water and saw nothing more than a dim haze.

‘B-both eyes. Can’t see...’

‘Okay, I’m getting you to hospital,’ Napoleon had said, and it hurt so much Illya barely even knew he was walking. He couldn’t stop the shaking that wracked through his whole body, but Napoleon’s arm was so firm and hard around his back and he felt all of his friend’s worry and love in that grip. Napoleon had walked him all the way out of the building, stumbling down the steps, into the car. And Illya had sat there with his hands over his face, shaking and making little sounds of pain that he
tried to stifle, and Napoleon had kept saying, ‘I’m going as fast as I can. Almost there, Illya. Almost there. How painful is it?’

And Illya felt like the entire world was white in a blaze of pain, his whole face on fire, his eyes being eaten away, and he hadn’t been able to think of a coherent response so he let loose a string of swearwords instead, and Napoleon asked, ‘Did that help?’ and Illya said, ‘No.’

And then they were there. Napoleon had braked to a halt so suddenly that Illya lurched forward and hit his head on the dashboard, and Napoleon had hauled him out of the car apologising, holding him so tightly again, saying, ‘I’ll have to leave you in the ER, Illya. I have to get back and organise the clean-up team. I’m so sorry, Illya. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s your job,’ Illya had growled, because what he really wanted to say was, please, god, don’t leave me, Napoleon. I’m so scared. But of course Napoleon had to. He hustled Illya through the door and spoke rapidly to someone, and while Illya was being pressed into a wheelchair he had patted Illya’s shoulder and said, ‘Good luck, tovarisch,’ and then he had been gone.

It had been so awful. It had been terrible. And later Napoleon came back, later, after they had spent so long trying to irrigate his eyes, and they had finally given up. They had covered the acid burns in cream and wrapped him in bandages, and he was sitting with the Ukrainian doctor they had found who could speak to him in his own language, who was so wonderful, so motherly, who made him feel as if even though everything was terrible there was some small anchor for him to cling to. He hardly listened to her telling Napoleon what had been said about his injuries. He had felt as if his entire body were buzzing. He was so tired and in so much pain, and he was still shaking. 

Shock, the doctors had told him. He was in shock. It wasn’t surprising, really. They gave him hot, sweet tea and the cup clashed against his teeth and he spilled some on the blankets, and they made him drink the whole cup, even the dregs with the grainy, part dissolved syrup of sugar at the bottom.

‘Well, I’ve lost my eyebrows and my eyelashes,’ he had said to Napoleon when they were alone, in a pathetic attempt at something approaching humour, but he didn’t think he knew what humour was any more, and Napoleon didn’t seem to either, because he just said gravely, ‘They’ll grow back. But, Illya, your eyes...’

And Illya had said, ‘Yes.’

And then he had sobbed. Suddenly and without warning he had sobbed, his entire body jerking, the sobs coming out of him like something entirely separate from his control. He hadn’t been able to do a thing about it. He just lay there and filled the room with that terrible noise, and first Napoleon’s hands had gripped his, and then Napoleon had just taken him in his arms and held him so tightly, whispering, ‘It’ll be all right, Illya. It’ll be all right.’

Illya had cried so hard that his ribs hurt and his throat became sore. He had felt desperate, utterly desperate. And Napoleon had said, ‘It’ll be all right.’

That had been Napoleon’s mantra. He kept saying it. ‘It’ll be all right, Illya. You’ll be all right. I’ll look after you, I promise. It’ll be all right.’

Sometimes he had wanted to throw those words back at Napoleon so hard, but no matter how angry Illya got in the terrible weeks that followed Napoleon never gave up on the idea that somehow it would be all right. He had put up with Illya smashing his crockery in violent rage. He had put up with Illya waking up in the night, at god knew what time, in the little room that Napoleon had turned into his bedroom, and crying naked tears. Napoleon always came through when he heard him crying, no matter what time it was, and sat with him and held him and talked softly to him and stayed until he fell back asleep. He had massaged cream into Illya’s burns to prevent scarring and he had
changed the dressings and one day he had brushed a finger in an arc over the top of Illya’s eye and said, ‘Your eyebrows are coming back. It’s like peach fuzz. Eyelashes too.’ At first he had shaved Illya and helped him dress and cut up his food. He had held Illya’s arm and guided him around the apartment and taken him for walks; like a dog, Illya had thought at first, but later he had appreciated it. Napoleon had read to him and when they watched television he described what was on screen. Napoleon had done so much. And all the time he kept saying, ‘It will be all right.’

Illya groaned and rubbed his hands over his face, and rolled away from the light from the window. He scrabbled at the covers and pulled the edge up over himself, so he was rolled in the blanket, and punched the pillow into a better shape. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift over those early days, the pain and then the itching of the healing scabs on his face, the anaesthetic drops that he had to put in his eyes to soothe their pain, the feeling so, so blind, blind in an elemental, incapable way, feeling as if he were a shadow of what he used to be, feeling like the most useless and helpless thing on earth. Napoleon taking him by the hand and helping him, Napoleon bringing him his food, Napoleon trying to cajole him out of his black, desperate funks. Always Napoleon…

((O))

Napoleon made his way back towards the hotel room around five, hoping that Illya had had enough time alone now to process his thoughts. He understood Illya’s doubts; at least, he thought he did. It was hard to empathise entirely because Illya’s experience was so hard, and so alien. He had tried over the past two years so often to put himself in Illya’s place. He had tried once, although he had never admitted this to Illya, tying a scarf around his eyes and managing around the apartment like that, just to understand better how Illya felt. He hadn’t lasted half an hour before he ripped that scarf off and threw it back in the closet, and then he had sat down on the sofa and cried for what Illya had lost, and what he had lost too.

It was hard to confide in Illya over those things, because Illya had enough of his own burden to carry. He didn’t want to sit down and tell him how much he missed the days of their being sent out on missions all over the world, how he missed Illya driving, how he missed watching Illya taking aim with his gun and letting off a perfect shot. He had never told Illya exactly how much he missed the blue of his eyes, that was covered now with a milky white. Sometimes he slipped out a box of polaroids and snapshots that had Illya in them just so he could see him as he used to be, and it hurt so much to see him as he had been then, and then to look up as Illya came into the room now, one hand held out a little before him and his eyes clouded in white and that look of concentration that had him holding his head slightly on one side as he listened to his surroundings.

Whenever he saw Illya outside of the apartment, sweeping his long cane before him, finding his way along the street, he felt a mixture of pride and pain, because in the past it would have been ridiculous to be proud of Illya for being able to walk along a sidewalk. But after those early weeks when Illya had barely moved from his bed, and when Napoleon had got him out he had held onto his arm like a drowning man, Illya being able to navigate around town alone was an amazing thing. When he had first told Illya that he would be coming to live in his apartment he had imagined a life of him needing almost constant care. Now Illya could go out alone and buy the ingredients for a three course meal and cook it and serve it up and clean the dishes afterwards. He was better around the house than he had been before he lost his sight. He had remade his career in the Intelligence department in U.N.C.L.E., and he was an asset, not a burden. He was capable in so many ways.

And now there was this chance… He knew why Illya was nervous about the idea of the transplants.
He had been there with Illya at almost all of his appointments with various specialists early on in his blindness. He had sat there and watched as they shone lights into his eyes and muttered and shook their heads. He had taken Illya back home again afterwards, looked at his pale face and his bitten lip, and spoken useless words of comfort. And then he had sat there at night after one of those consultations in his big queen bed, knowing Illya was just a wall away in the little room that had been his study, the room in which he had carefully recreated Illya’s own bedroom, and he had heard the quiet, stifled sounds of crying. Napoleon had seen too much crying from Illya, from the man who brooded and sulked and snapped but never cried, since that awful moment in Stockholm.

He had clenched his fists and sighed and padded out of his room quietly, and just stood there for a moment in the cracked open door to Illya’s room, looking at his friend. Illya had his bedside light on and was cradling it on his lap, between his thighs, and was staring down at the brilliant bulb, and just crying. So Napoleon had gone in and gently taken the light away and taken hold of Illya’s hands and asked, ‘What were you trying to do?’

Illya hadn’t answered. Perhaps there was no answer. He had just let the tears come, stopped trying to stifle the sound since Napoleon was there, and Napoleon had enfolded him in his arms and rocked him and whispered promises to him about how everything would be all right, never believing for a moment that it would be. Every time Illya had these appointments he seemed to lose another part of himself, and at that point, before Illya was enrolled in the blind school, before he had learned any of those wonderful techniques or got the cane, it all seemed so hopeless.

And here they were again. Yes, the prognosis was different, but he understood why Illya was afraid. He understood how many hopes he had pinned on these things and how hard it had been for him to turn away at last and just accept that he was a blind person now and that would never change. No wonder he was so conflicted, so confused.

Napoleon picked up his pace for the final few yards of the corridor and turned his key in the door. As he opened it he saw Illya stir on the bed, sitting up as if he had just come around from sleep, his head turning blindly towards the sound.

‘Only me,’ Napoleon said, because Illya still had an agent’s wariness for unannounced presences, and Illya smiled, his smile somehow fuller and more real without his eyes to qualify the expression. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and got up, coming over towards Napoleon with his hand out, slowly because he wasn’t sure of the room.

‘I think I fell asleep,’ he said, fumbling at his watch to feel the time. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to throw you out in the cold all this time. I didn’t mean to be such a mess.’

Napoleon met him halfway across the room and kissed him gently. ‘It’s allowed,’ he said, curling his fingers around Illya’s hands. ‘It’s a lot to take in. Can I take you out to dinner, Illya? Would that be acceptable?’

‘That would be just fine,’ Illya said. ‘I will try to be like an American. Big smiles. No Russian moods.’

Napoleon laughed. ‘Please, dear Illya, don’t ever try to be like an American. Just be you.’

((O))
He took him to the most expensive place he could think of, because Illya deserved it. Illya was dressed so beautifully in suit and bow tie, and because the light wasn’t glaring in this place he didn’t wear his glasses. The light gleamed on his blond hair and his lips were perfect, and Napoleon couldn’t keep his eyes off him. He felt so happy. He thought of Illya with the blue of his eyes restored, with the sureness of movement he used to have, Illya being able to fix him with a glare or a penetrating look, being able to do so much. Perhaps he would never return to the field, but right now that seemed like such a tiny thing.

A string quartet was playing on the other side of the room and Napoleon could tell that Illya loved it by the way he kept turning his ear towards the music and moving his fingers in time on the tablecloth. When he had first been partnered with Illya he had never suspected the scientific, practical Russian of being a closet musician, but Illya’s love of music was one of the precious little secrets he had discovered over time. He loved those seemingly infinite folds of Illya’s interests and talents.

Illya chose the wine and Napoleon watched him as he delicately inhaled the scent and tasted the sample poured by the wine waiter, and he felt as if he were overflowing with love just at the beautiful sight of him. And then the waiter said to Illya, ‘If you don’t mind me mentioning, sir, we have a menu written in Braille. Would you like – ?’

Illya’s whole face lit up at that wonderful thing, and he said, ‘Yes. Yes, please. That would be very good.’ When the waiter moved away he turned his dazzling smile on Napoleon and said, ‘Just think, for once you won’t have to read it for me!’

It was such a small thing, but it was obvious to Napoleon how much it meant.

‘Napoleon, surely this must be a whole cow, not a single steak,’ he said when the menu came and he drifted his fingers over the prices, but Napoleon said, ‘Don’t look at the prices. I’m treating you. Let me do this for you.’

So Illya kept his fingers away from the prices and chose what turned out to be an exquisitely cooked rack of lamb, while Napoleon went all out and ordered lobster.

‘I couldn’t even begin to tackle that in public,’ Illya said rather wistfully, leaning forward a little to inhale the scent of it, and Napoleon promised that as soon as he got the chance he would arrange for Illya to have lobster at home and he could eat it any way he liked, naked, if he wanted.

The cream and passion fruit and meringue confection that Illya chose for dessert was incredible, and Napoleon almost forgot to eat his own dessert because he was watching Illya eat. And then over coffee he said, ‘Dance with me?’ and Illya flushed and said, ‘Napoleon, don’t be silly. We are two men.’

So then Napoleon clicked his fingers for the attention of a waiter and said, ‘I wonder if we can do something rather unconventional? You see, my friend has always loved to dance and he hasn’t had the chance since – ’ And his voice trailed off with a concocted amount of awkward pathos, and a moment later Napoleon was ushering Illya onto the floor with a hand on his waist, and somehow the patrons from the nearer tables were applauding, and Illya hissed in Napoleon’s ear, ‘You have no shame.’

‘None at all, tovarisch,’ Napoleon said gleefully, and he drew Illya into a waltz, glad that he could lead, because that was his natural stance. And he was astonished at how naturally Illya waltzed, following his partner’s movements with an easy grace. He knew he had taken a few lessons with that Tavia woman after the affair with the killer bees, but he had never expected Illya, brusque, unromantic Illya, to have much interest in dancing. And yet here he was, sailing about the floor with his hand in Napoleon’s and another on his shoulder as if he had been made to dance. His lips were a
little parted in concentration and his hand was tight around Napoleon’s, but he looked as if he were in another world. It took all the self control Napoleon had not to kiss him. Had Illya been a woman, had this affair been decent in the eyes of the world, he would have been holding him so much closer and kissing him so softly and with such passion.

‘Aren’t you glad?’ Napoleon asked, and Illya smiled and said, ‘Well, if I must make a fool of myself I might as well make it with you.’

‘You are so far away from making a fool of yourself,’ Napoleon said. ‘Now, if we were dancing a polka,’ he began, as the music faded and then started up with a new tune.

‘That’s a tango,’ Illya corrected him. ‘And if you think I’m attempting that – ’

So Napoleon led him from the floor and back to their seats, so happy at the sense memory of Illya’s hand in his, happy at the pink flush on Illya’s cheeks, happy that he had lifted him, for now, from his preoccupied, dour haze.
‘Mr Kuryakin, it seems you’re to be liberated from the office once again,’ Waverly said brightly, and the table suddenly shifted under Illya’s elbows as the chief rotated it. When the motion stopped Illya tentatively touched his fingers to the table to find a thick stack of Braille printouts in front of him.

‘How you read that gobbledegook is a mystery to me,’ Waverly muttered, ‘but the man in documents assured me it’s all in order. You’re wanted for surveillance in Miami. It’s a secure location and you’ll be with two other men, so no need for you to go on rescue missions,’ Waverly said very firmly. ‘You understand that, Mr Kuryakin? You’ll stay in the hotel, out of the line of fire.’

‘Of course,’ Illya said, running his fingers over the top piece of paper. And then his heart sank. ‘Mr Solo – ’

‘Mr Solo will be in Yugoslavia, I’m afraid. I’m quite aware that you’re used to his attention, Mr Kuryakin, but I’m sure Doyle and Phillips will be able to look after you quite nicely.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Illya murmured, caught between wanting to give the impression that he was perfectly capable of looking after himself, and apprehension at the thought of being lumbered with two men who had no experience with the difficulties he faced and the techniques for helping him overcome them.

He shoved that aside. This mission was a good thing. It proved that Waverly trusted him, it allowed him out of the office and into the field again. He knew all about this mission; after all, he had prepared the preliminary intelligence reports himself. Thrush were developing some kind of chemical and U.N.C.L.E. needed to go in and find out everything they could about it. But he did wish now that he hadn’t suggested Paul Doyle for the job. He hadn’t expected to be assigned to go with him.

‘Well, Mr Kuryakin, you can read through that lot at your own leisure,’ Waverly said. ‘I expect you’ll want to take the usual equipment. It will be much like your experience in Cairo. You will monitor the bugs and take notes and report developments while Doyle and Phillips are involved in active tracking and infiltration.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Illya murmured, running his fingers lightly over one of the pages lower down in the pile. He caught a sentence about how Doyle expected to get into the facility, and shook his head. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, sir, I think they’d be much better approaching from the west side of the complex. The light will be – ’

Waverly tutted. ‘I’m aware that Doyle and Phillips are not a match for you at your best, Mr Kuryakin,’ he said in a tone of sympathy, ‘but please try to remember that they are the active agents now.’

Illya sighed. ‘Yes, I suppose they are. Will that be all, sir? I’ll take all this down to the office and go through it, if so.’

‘Yes, yes, that will be all,’ Waverly told him, so Illya tucked the thick sheaf of paper under his arm and felt for his cane on the floor, and made his way pensively back down to the office.

‘You look like the cat that didn’t get the cream,’ Napoleon commented as Illya came through the door. Illya grunted, tapping his way towards his desk.

‘Waverly is sending me on a surveillance mission,’ he said, ‘but it is with Doyle and Phillips.’
‘Ah,’ Napoleon said, and his chair rattled as he stood up and came over to Illya. ‘The Laurel and Hardy of the U.N.C.L.E. organisation.’

Illya grimaced. ‘They’re not quite that bad,’ he said, ‘but – ’

‘But,’ Napoleon echoed. ‘I know.’

Illya straightened his shoulders and felt for a clear space on his desk and put the load of paper down beside the typewriter.

‘It is absurd to think I will not be all right,’ he said. ‘I have worked with Doyle before, and Phillips is acceptable. I’ll just need to run through a few things with them before we go.’

He took his seat at his desk, thinking of those things. Should he try to instruct them in how to guide him properly? Perhaps Sarah could find them some leaflets which would help. Would they resent being expected to play nursemaid to a blind man while trying to do their duty? But really, he didn’t need that much help. He just needed a little extra guidance and patience while he was getting used to a new place. He would need them to understand not to move his things. He would need them to –

He sighed. He was building this up in his mind. The best way to deal with this would be to familiarise himself with all of the documentation and perhaps to have Sarah see if she could find him a floor plan for the hotel. He wouldn’t need that much help. He just needed them to be tolerant.

‘I’m sorry I can’t be there,’ Napoleon said, standing behind him, laying his hands on Illya’s shoulders and gently rubbing the tension out of them.

‘You’ll be in Yugoslavia,’ Illya muttered. He leant back into Napoleon’s massaging grip. ‘Really, there is no difference to your usual jaunts out of town – it’s just that I will be out of town too.’

‘Do you want me to have a talk with them? Run them through how they might need to help you?’

Illya felt an uncomfortable sensation in his stomach. ‘I don’t want them to have to help me,’ he said, and Napoleon stroked his shoulders more lightly.

‘No, I know, but you will need some help, Illya. They’ll have to accept that and so will you. Now, I can have a word with Doyle – ’

‘No, I will have a word with them,’ Illya said firmly. There was no reason he couldn’t tackle this. It was so easy to slip into letting Napoleon act for him, and that would not give Doyle and Phillips any confidence in him. ‘We will have to come together for a briefing. I will run them through any help I may need at that time. And it will be all right.’

((O))

It was all right. That was as much as Illya could say. They took a commuter flight down to Miami, and Jason Phillips was quite a competent guide for Illya, remembering to warn him about doors and steps, at least. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with Doyle’s driving in the hire car from the airport, but there wasn’t anything to be done about that. He was never really comfortable with anyone but Napoleon driving him, because he had always been happiest driving himself. He hated sitting inside a car with closed windows or without the top down, because the whole journey was just a series of vibrations, of lurches left and right and back and forward, and no real sense of making progress.
With Doyle there were more lurches than usual, and he had to concentrate hard to keep his tendency towards travel sickness at bay.

‘I asked if you have everything you need,’ Phillips said, tapping his arm. He was sitting in the back with Illya, and that was another little bit of awkwardness; that feeling that he was being sat with because the blind man shouldn’t be left to sit on his own.

Illya started and turned his head towards the man. ‘Oh. Yes, I have everything I need. I will be able to set up as soon as the bugs are in place.’

Phillips shifted, and the vinyl seat creaked. ‘You enjoying getting back in the field?’

Illya gave a little shrug. ‘It is not exactly the field, but it is more stimulating than the office, at least.’

‘It must be very hard. I mean, to go from being an active agent to – ’ Phillips said, and his voice trailed off in a kind of wistful sympathy that made Illya a little uncomfortable. But then, sitting here in the back of this car being driven jerkily by Doyle, he thought that perhaps if he opened up a little it might help. He had hardly spoken to the pair on the plane, opting to sit in the third seat alone rather than breaking up their pairing, and he thought he was probably coming over as more taciturn than usual.

‘It was very hard. But one must do what one can,’ he replied. He had told very few people about the possibility of corneal transplant and he preferred to keep it that way. ‘I have adapted, and this is the latest development in my adaptation.’

There was silence from the front of the car. He suspected that Doyle was none too pleased about having to play nanny to a blind man. But Phillips patted his arm and said, ‘Well, I must say, you’re doing incredible work, Illya. No one expected you back after that acid attack.’

Illya smiled thinly. He hadn’t expected to come back himself. He had imagined a lifetime of living on a disability pension – a generous one thanks to the terms of his employment contract, but a pension nonetheless.

‘I should not cause you too much trouble once I’m set up,’ he said. ‘If you can show me a few basic routes in the hotel when we arrive and find me a place to put my recorders and brailler, then – ’

‘Your brailler?’ Phillips asked.

‘My Braille typewriter. I use it for taking notes. It’s in the suitcase with the other equipment. As I say, if you can find me a place to set all those things up I will be able to look after myself from there. We have a double and a single room booked, don’t we? I’ll take the single.’

‘Come on, Kuryakin. You’ll need someone with you,’ Doyle said from the front seat, and Illya heard that edge in his voice that had been there since he had started consulting with the man on this mission.

Illya shook his head firmly. ‘Not once I’m familiar with the room and a few basic routes,’ he said. ‘I can look after myself, Paul. It would be better for you two to room together. You’re partners.’

He thought rather wistfully about all the times he shared with Napoleon. It was a shame that Napoleon wouldn’t be here. He couldn’t imagine that Doyle and Phillips would be sharing the same kind of things that he shared with Napoleon.

‘There’s an interconnecting door anyway,’ Phillips put in. ‘So yeah, it makes sense. You take the single, Illya. We’ll take the double. We won’t be there so much anyway, so it won’t make much
Illya nodded and relaxed back into the seat. He was glad that Phillips was here too. He was afraid that if he were alone for too long with Doyle one of them wouldn’t be leaving alive, and Illya had always trumped Doyle in self defence and offence.

((O))

The rain started hissing down as the car reached the busier streets of downtown Miami, and Illya cracked the window open a little as they sat motionless in traffic, listening to the three dimensional picture made by the raindrops as they hit solid objects. He could hear the metallic shells of the cars and the solid flatness of the road, and it was lovely to get that shadowy impression of the shape of his surroundings. Then he realised that Phillips was sounding disgruntled and he wound the window up again, explaining, 'I can hear the shapes in the way the rain falls.'

'Oh, open it again if you like,' Phillips said rather awkwardly, but Doyle chimed in, 'It’s foul out there. Keep it closed. Besides, we’ll be at the hotel in a few minutes. I’m sure there’ll be a window in your room, Kuryakin. You can listen to the rain all you like.'

'And I will,' Illya murmured. It felt as though this mission was going to be interminable. He sat and listened to the sounds outside until the car began to move again, and after another ten minutes they were drawing up outside the hotel and Illya got out of the car and let Phillips guide him into the building. He got his equipment taken up to his room and excused himself as soon as possible. It would be easier to set everything up alone.

He sat in the hotel room listening to the faint sounds of the others through the connecting door and tinkering with his recording set up. Phillips had shown him where the socket nearest the side table was but that was all. He would rather explore the room on his own. Then there was a light knock at the door and before he could say anything it opened, and Doyle said, 'Kuryakin, Phillips and I are going out to set the bugs. You’ll be all right on your own, yeah?'

Illya suppressed a sigh. Doyle’s tone had been reasonably friendly, but he hated to think the man believed he couldn’t look after himself.

'I will be all right on my own,' he nodded. He tapped his fingers on his case, where he had a couple of volumes of a new novel. 'I’ll read my book. Call me when the bugs are set.'

He turned to his brailler and put a thick sheet of paper into it, ready, and was aware of Doyle still there, presumably watching him.

'What’s that?'

'My brailler,' Illya said patiently. 'It is just like a typewriter.'

Doyle came closer. 'But there are only – what – seven keys? How does that work?'

Illya touched his fingers to the keys, smoothing his fingertips over them, depressing them slightly but not hitting hard enough to make dents in the paper. He was so used to typing Braille that he didn’t even think about which keys to hit.

'Paul, Braille is made up of six dots in different combinations for every letter of the alphabet, the
numbers, and punctuation marks,’ he explained. ‘There are six keys and a space bar. I press the right combinations to make each letter.’ He didn’t want to waste paper on demonstrating it because he had a limited amount, but he felt out to the right for his suitcase, opened it, and brought out a volume of his book. ‘The brailler makes impressions just as in this book,’ he said, opening it to a random page and running his fingers over the type.

He felt Paul come closer still, leaning over him a little.

‘Can I touch?’

Illya shrugged. ‘Feel free,’ he said.

Doyle stood right next to him and Illya heard the light sound of his hands on the paper.

‘It’s utter gobbledygook. It all feels the same.’

Illya smiled, then reached out to touch the book and find Paul’s hand with his. Doyle’s hand was cool, and rough around the fingertips as if he bit his nails.

‘Here,’ he said, laying his hand over Paul’s and moving his finger to the top of the page. He placed his fingertips either side of Paul’s and drew them over the bumps. ‘Each cell – each letter or symbol – is made up of a combination of up to six dots. They’re numbered, top to bottom, left to right, one, two, three, four, five six. That’s simple enough. Some things are shown by more than one cell, and – Oh, well, that doesn’t matter right now. We’re just talking about letters. Look, this letter here,’ he said, brushing his fingertip over a letter and then moving Paul’s finger to it. ‘A single dot in the top left. That is an A. This here is an R. Dots in one, two, three, and five. Over here is a W. Mirror image of R. But it’s complicated because this is Grade 2 Braille, which employs a lot of contractions.’

‘There are grades?’ Paul asked rather nervously.

‘Yes, of course. There are so many types of Braille, not just for prose but for mathematics, scientific notation, music...’ He sighed. It was a matter of annoyance to him that with everything else he was trying to learn he still hadn’t managed to learn musical Braille yet. ‘But we’re talking of Braille for reading, yes? English Braille, American Edition. And for that there are grades. The first is very literal. Every letter is transcribed. That’s the first that I learnt. Grade 2 uses contractions, and Grade 3 uses hundreds of them. It’s complicated but it makes it faster to read and more compact to print.’ Learning Grade 3 was an ongoing challenge, but it was assisted by his extremely good memory and his desperation to read and write in a less cumbersome way. Almost no books were printed in Grade 3 because it was so variable, but at least it could make his personal documents more concise. ‘This novel here, it’s in Grade 2. Some contractions but not as many as 3.’ And he began to read. ‘ – and of course the poor baby was baptised. At the font, Grigory prayed zealously, yet he did not change his opinion about the newborn. However, he did not interfere in any way, but for the two weeks that the sickly boy lived, he –’

‘You must be a genius, Kuryakin,’ Doyle said in a tone of awe. ‘It all feels the same to me. I mean, I can see the difference, but feel –’

Illya smiled thinly. ‘I don’t care to think how long it took me to be able to read, Paul,’ he said. ‘Believe me, it all felt the same to me at first, too, but necessity is a good teacher. But I thought you were going out to set the bugs?’

‘Oh, er – yeah,’ Doyle said quickly. Then he said, ‘Thanks for showing me that, Kuryakin.’
‘No problem,’ Illya murmured.

He wondered, as Doyle left the room, if a lot of the man’s problem with him was nervousness. He had always seemed jealous and suspicious of Illya’s intelligence and his position in U.N.C.L.E., and then so awkward and odd about his blindness. Perhaps he was just nervous.

He waited for the door to shut before starting on his survey of the room, preferring not to be watched in what felt like a more extreme blindness. At the moment he was sitting at a kind of island and all around him were unexplored waters. But he took his cane and moved slowly and carefully around the room, finding a low set of drawers with a mirror on top, another chair, a narrow single bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe with hanging rail, and a door that admitted him into a small bathroom equipped with toilet, basin, and shower.

He went back out into the bedroom and followed the brightest point of light to find the window. Jerking it open and fixing it on the catch he stood and listened to the steady sound of rain falling, making a three dimensional veil over everything out there. He could hear raindrops on leaves, rain falling on soft ground and a little further away on hard, and on the metal roofs of cars. He could hear the hissing of car tyres on the wet road. He turned his ear and just stood there, listening. Then he exhaled and closed the window again, made sure it was securely fastened, and went back to the table that held the recorder and brailler, ready to tune in as soon as he got the call that the bugs were set.

((O))

The mission took place over a few days and went with amazing smoothness. Illya couldn’t say he didn’t envy Doyle and Phillips their time in the field just as he had envied Napoleon in Cairo, but that lingering envy was offset by the amount of intel he managed to gather through the bugs. They had come here knowing only that Thrush were engaged in developing some kind of chemical. Now they knew that Thrush were developing a nerve drug to increase susceptibility to suggestion which they intended to put in water supplies around the globe, and it was imperative that they were stopped before they reached the point where they could produce it in high quantities. They would be focussing on producing it in Eastern Europe at first, although a specific country was never mentioned.

It was largely Illya’s information that led to Doyle and Phillips being able to successfully infiltrate the complex and get out with what was needed; a sample of the drug and photographic copies of some of the production notes. He couldn’t pretend he didn’t wish he had been sneaking in to the facility with them, and he really wished that he could have pored over the production notes himself, but it was gratifying to prove again that he possessed vital skills. Few others in U.N.C.L.E. would have been able to gather the same amount of data from what came through the bugs.

‘Dinner and a bar to celebrate?’ Phillips suggested, and Illya said, ‘Perfect,’ just as Doyle said, ‘Well, if you’re all right with – ’

Illya snapped his case of equipment closed. ‘Paul, I assure you, my capacity to eat and drink are no different to yours. I still enjoy going out. But this had better go in the hotel safe first.’

‘I’ll take it down,’ Phillips offered. ‘Everything’s in there?’

‘Everything. I got a good, comprehensive set of details about their future plans; everything but a definite location for production. It’s all typed and in the case – in Braille, I mean. I will transcribe it to
Phillips clapped him on the back. ‘Good work. Well, shall I meet you in the restaurant? That Mexican place down the street, yes?’

‘See you there,’ Doyle replied, then asked Illya, ‘You ready, Kuryakin?’

Illya felt for his cane, slipped his wallet into his pocket, and nodded. ‘I’m ready. Can I take your arm, Paul?’

‘Uh, yeah, sure,’ Doyle said rather awkwardly.

So Illya took his arm and felt the stiffness in him. He wished he were going out with Napoleon, but it couldn’t be helped. He followed Doyle’s very nervous and inept guidance down to the lobby and to a restaurant along the street, and it was only a large amount of alcohol that made the experience tolerable, because Doyle and Phillips really weren’t the type he would usually socialise with. When he arrived back in his hotel room later that night he could barely stand, and he needed Phillips’ inebriated help to make it into bed. He lay there, feeling the mattress rocking beneath him, wishing he had thought to ask Phillips to get him a glass of water before he had left him, but not feeling anywhere near able to go and get one himself. He felt numbly on the nightstand for his communicator and managed to assemble it.

‘Napoleon?’ he asked a couple of times, before remembering to request channel D. When Napoleon did answer, Illya slurring said, ‘Ah, Napoleon. I love you, Napoleon. Did y’know that?’

‘Illya, are you all right?’ Napoleon asked, obviously concerned. ‘Are you drunk?’


From a long way away he heard Napoleon sigh. ‘Where are you?’ he asked. ‘Are you safe, Illya? Are you somewhere safe?’

Illya considered that. He couldn’t see, but he could feel the bed underneath him and the covers over him.

‘Hotel room,’ he said eventually. ‘Hotel room. Safe. In bed. I’m in bed, Napoleon. I’m okay.’

He heard Napoleon laugh. ‘Well, it sounds like you’re having more fun than me. I’m in a cold empty office room in Yugoslavia watching a notorious criminal through binoculars.’

‘Oh,’ Illya said, then didn’t know what to say. ‘Oh,’ he said again.

‘Illya, have you drunk plenty of water? Is your door closed and locked? Are Phillips and Doyle there?’ Napoleon asked very seriously.

‘Yes, yesh, door locked. They’re next door. No water. I should drink water, shouldn’t I?’

‘Do you have water nearby? Illya, listen. Will you be careful? Go now and drink some water, but take the communicator because if you trip and crack your head open in the bathroom I want to know. Okay?’

Illya grumbled and shuffled out of bed. He felt very warm and for a moment he wasn’t sure which way he should go to find the bathroom. He felt around for his cane but it wasn’t anywhere to hand, so he staggered around until he found the door and then he felt out for the basin and groped for the
glass that should be there, but he swiped it off the basin and onto the tile floor, where it smashed. He
knelt down and started to feel for the glass as he heard Napoleon say through the communicator,
‘Illya, did you break something? Illya, don’t try to clear it up. Do you hear me? Illya, don’t – ’

But Illya was sweeping his hand over the floor and then he hissed as broken glass sliced into his
flesh.

‘Oh, dammit, Napoleon, I think I’ve cut myself,’ he said. He suddenly felt more sober. ‘Oh hell.’

‘How bad is it?’ Napoleon asked, and Illya almost laughed. He squeezed his hand closed and open
again. It hurt and he could smell blood and he could feel the wetness of blood, but how could he tell
how bad it was?

‘It stings,’ he said.

‘How bad is it?’ Napoleon sounded immensely frustrated.

‘Oh, I – not bad, I think,’ he murmured. ‘Somewhere – somewhere on my palm and fingers.’

‘Oh, Illya, you know to feel with the back of your hand!’ Napoleon said impatiently.

‘Oh.’ His forehead creased. He did know that. Always feel with the back of your hand at times like
that. Always. But he’d stupidly just pressed his palm straight onto the broken glass.

‘Illya, get someone to help you,’ Napoleon said. ‘Do you hear me?’

‘Oh, no, it’ll be all right,’ Illya assured him. ‘Promise.’

He got up and ran water into the basin and splashed it over his face and into his mouth with his left
hand. Then he pulled off a huge amount of toilet paper and wrapped it round the hand and said, ‘It’s
all good now, Napoleon. I’ve dressed it. All fine. You know, I think I need some sleep. I’ll call you
in the morning, Napoleon. I love you.’

He didn’t wait for Napoleon’s response. He just closed his hand around the mass of tissue and
stumbled back into the bedroom and fell into bed. Bed felt so good. It was such a good place to be.
He hugged himself against the pillow, and he fell asleep.

((O))

He woke with a crushing headache and thick nausea and a sore, stinging pain in his right hand, and
he lay there for a moment wondering what Thrush trap he had fallen into this time. And then he
blinked and pushed the blankets back from his face and stared into the dim blur. He felt at the clotted
mass of tissue around his hand and frowned, and sat up, rubbing at his head. The tissue was stiff with
dried blood.

Oh god. He hadn’t been that drunk in a long time. He never let himself get that drunk without
Napoleon to hand, and when Napoleon was with him he didn’t end up doing stupid stuff like – ah,
yes. He had broken a glass, hadn’t he? Where was that? It was in the bathroom. So he couldn’t go
into the bathroom, which was a shame because he really needed the toilet.

He felt at his clothes. He was wearing an undershirt and underpants and nothing else. He couldn’t
remember undressing, much less where he had put his clothes. His head throbbed and his mouth felt foul. He swung his feet out of bed and started to look for his cane, but he couldn’t find it, so he gave up on that and made his way blearily to the interconnecting door to the next room, and knocked gently.

‘Shut up that blasted racket,’ someone grumbled from the other room, and he opened the door and asked rather shamefacedly, ‘I could do with a little help. I think I broke a glass last night.’ And he held up his hand and heard one of the men hiss.

‘For god’s sake, Kuryakin,’ Doyle said, but a mattress creaked and it was he who came over to Illya and grabbed his arm and led him into the bathroom. ‘That tissue’s all dried into the cut. I can’t even see how bad it is.’

The hand felt hot and sore and when Doyle held it under a warm running tap it was a relief, even when he started to prise bits of tissue out of the cuts.

‘God, what a mess,’ Doyle muttered, and then Phillips pushed into the room and clattered a glass against the basin and Illya heard the plop and fizz of seltzer tablets and then long, deep gulps.

‘Come on,’ Doyle said, leading Illya by the wrist back into the other room. ‘Sit down. I’ll dress it. It doesn’t need stitches.’

Doyle started to pat Illya’s hand dry with a towel and apply antiseptic cream, and then Phillips came out of the bathroom too.

‘I’ll go clean up the glass,’ he said. ‘Here, Illya, drink this.’

Illya felt a cold glass against his fingers and drank the seltzer gratefully. It would only dull the edges of the hangover, but right now they were very sharp edges.

‘You know, you’re fun when you’ve got some drinks in you,’ Doyle commented as he put cream on the cut and wrapped Illya’s hand in a bandage.

‘I am?’ Illya remembered very little about last night. He was cursing himself for drinking so much and for damaging his cane hand. ‘I shouldn’t have drunk so much.’

‘None of us should have drunk so much,’ Doyle said grimly. ‘Hardly professional agent behaviour. Are you going to report us all to Waverly?’

Illya smiled. ‘I’m not even sure how I rank against you in my current position,’ he said. ‘Perhaps we should agree that what happens in Miami stays in Miami.’

‘Perhaps we should,’ Doyle agreed. There was the sound of tape being unwound from the roll and Illya felt him firm it around the bandages, then he patted Illya’s shoulder and said, ‘All done. We’d better get washed up and out of here. Waverly will want us back in New York asap.’
Napoleon was already waiting in the well-warmed apartment when Illya got back, looking forward to surprising him with his presence. At last he heard Illya’s key scratching in the lock, and the door opened to admit him, snow on his collar and in his golden hair, a scarf wrapped around his throat, his dark blue overcoat firmly buttoned. His suitcase was in one hand, his cane was a white line in front of his body, and his cheeks were pink with the cold. He looked beautiful.

Napoleon hurried over to his partner with a broad grin, saying, ‘Welcome home, Mr Magoo. Do I get a kiss? I have mistletoe.’

‘If you call me Mr Magoo again you will get something far more solid than a kiss,’ Illya retorted tartly, and Napoleon grinned still wider at the pouting expression on his face.

‘All right, then,’ he said in a placatory tone. ‘Welcome home, honey. I still have mistletoe.’

Illya bumped the door closed behind him and put down his case and affected suspicion, turning his face towards Napoleon and holding his cane before him as if in defence. ‘How do I know you have mistletoe? I didn’t even know you were home yet. You weren’t due in until midnight.’

Napoleon took the cane out of his hands and leant it up in the corner. He brushed his fingers affectionately over the lapel of Illya’s overcoat. Snowflakes melted on his fingertips.

‘I got an earlier flight. Flew back overnight. And here, let me show you.’ Napoleon took Illya’s hand and stripped off his glove and saw the bandage across his palm. ‘Oh, ouch, is that from the glass?’

Illya smiled a little ruefully and pulled off his other glove too. Napoleon took them both and put them aside.

‘That is from the glass, yes,’ Illya said. ‘But what about the mistletoe?’

‘Hold out your hand.’

Illya held out his undamaged left hand, so Napoleon gently placed the delicate, pale-leafed sprig into his palm. Illya traced his fingers over the leaves and white berries very lightly, and smiled. The delicacy of his touch made something flip over in Napoleon’s stomach.

‘Well, I believe you,’ Illya said. ‘Now the kiss?’

Napoleon took the sprig from him and held it over their heads as he softly kissed Illya’s chilled lips, then he put it on the sideboard next to Illya’s gloves and took hold of him and kissed him hard.

‘How was the mission?’ he asked when they finally pulled apart.

Illya shrugged, unwinding his scarf and starting to unbutton his coat. ‘I shouldn’t have let myself get that drunk. It was stupid. But the mission was over by then. I got some vital intel about the drug Thrush are developing. It’s a nerve drug, an insidious concoction. They’ll be able to add it to any water supply and after a few days susceptibility to suggestion will be increased to such a level that any kind of subliminal message will have maximum effect. They could make subliminal suggestions through a variety of media; television advertising, radio messages, posters, public address systems. The possibilities are endless.’

‘Ooh, nasty little Thrushies,’ Napoleon said with a soft whistle, taking Illya’s coat and scarf and
hanging them both on the coat stand by the door.

‘I just wish I could get my hands on that sample in the lab,’ Illya said, clenching and unclenching his fists in frustration. Napoleon recognised that lit up look in his face. He knew how much Illya missed hands on work in the labs. Even if chemistry wasn’t his forte he still loved to get involved.

‘Well, we’ll have the best team on it,’ Napoleon tried to reassure him, ‘and maybe Sarah can transcribe the reports. And how were the Laurel and Hardy of U.N.C.L.E.?’

‘Doyle and Phillips did their parts well enough,’ Illya conceded, ‘and they were tolerable to work with, even Doyle, once he had got used to me. What about Yugoslavia?’

Napoleon grinned. ‘I took out Djuric and shut down the whole cell. It went so well that Mr Waverly promised me we won’t get any nasty calls until at least the twenty-seventh, and Aunt Amy reminded me about the invite to Christmas dinner with the family. Mom’s been going on about how long it’s been since she saw you. I promised we’d be there by midday.’

‘Ah, that is perfect,’ Illya smiled. ‘We can have a quiet morning for ourselves and then drive over.’ Then he turned his head towards the corner of the room, where a tall, fresh Christmas tree stood in its stand. As yet its branches were dark and unadorned except for a string of lights. ‘Do I smell pine?’

Napoleon grinned. ‘Yeah, I stopped by a yard on the way back from the airport and had it delivered. It’s a real tall one this year, Illya. Ten feet. I’ve been waiting for you to get back so we can decorate it. It’s Christmas Eve. I only remembered as the plane landed.’

‘Surely you’re tired?’

Napoleon laughed. He was tired, but sharing Christmas with Illya made him so happy that it was easy to shrug it off. He put his hand under Illya’s elbow and walked with him over to the tree.

‘Come take a look. I’ve put the lights on already. Right here,’ he said, guiding Illya’s hand to part of the long string. ‘Do you see that?’

Illya brought his face very close to the tree and cupped his hands around his eyes and the lights and said, ‘That one’s blue, isn’t it?’ He moved along a little, his face coloured by the lights as if he were standing by a stained glass window. ‘Yellow. Red. Green. Thank you, Napoleon.’

Napoleon loved the fact that Illya could make out the colours of those lights. He had bought the brightest ones he could find last year in the hope that Illya would be able to make them out, and although he couldn’t see them at all at distance he had always been able to correctly name the colours if he got very close. It felt like a tiny gift, to give Illya colours at Christmas.

‘Well, we’d better get decorating,’ he said, but Illya said rather tiredly, ‘Napoleon, would you mind if I had some coffee first? It’s been a long day and I’m suffering for last night’s excess.’

‘Oh. Oh, yeah, of course,’ Napoleon said quickly. ‘I’m sorry, Illya. I’ve been back for a while, I’ve had a chance to rest. Look, I’ll go make coffee, and why don’t you phone for take out, and we can decorate when we’ve eaten? As long as it’s done by midnight.’

‘As long as we can spend some more time under that mistletoe afterwards,’ Illya said very gravely, and he reached out a hand to stroke Napoleon’s cheek. ‘Why don’t you hang it above our bed? I want to feel you with all of me.’

So Napoleon promised, because that sounded like a very good idea indeed. He left Illya by the Christmas tree and went to start the percolator, then he stood in the kitchen doorway and watched his
He was standing by the tree, gently brushing his fingertips over the pine branches and then bringing his nose close to them to smell them. Then he smiled and turned away from the tree and found his way to the sofa, where he sat with obvious weariness. Napoleon came back through and plumped himself down beside Illya and stroked his snow-dampened hair.

‘It’s going to be the best Christmas,’ he said. ‘We have so much to look forward to.’

‘Yes,’ Illya said simply, but he smiled and turned his head towards Napoleon and caught his lips in a long, slow kiss. Illya’s fingers traced Napoleon’s jaw, his ear, the short hair at the side of his head. There was so much love in his touch that Napoleon’s heart swelled.

‘It will be the best,’ he said. ‘And by next Christmas – well, perhaps you’ll be able to see that tree. You’ll be able to see the lights. Won’t that be amazing?’

‘Yes,’ Illya said again, rather uncomfortably this time, and Napoleon knew enough to pull back from the subject before he went too far. Illya was so scared of being let down again, he knew. He stopped talking and took Illya’s hand and just stroked his fingertips over Illya’s soft skin until the coffee was ready.

((O))

Nothing could compare to the blissful, quiet Christmas morning together in their apartment, waking up far too late, making love, eating croissants and drinking coffee in bed, sharing a few little presents under the tree. The larger things would wait until later, at Aunt Amy’s penthouse, but Illya had bought Napoleon cuff links and a book he had wanted, and Napoleon had bought Illya a new recording of the Ring Cycle and an expensive supply of tea which smelt divine. And then they stirred themselves to leave the warm and comfortable apartment to get to Aunt Amy’s in time for dinner at two o’clock.

‘Oh, do we have to?’ Illya complained. ‘It’s so warm in here and it’s so cold out there.’

‘It’ll be plenty warm enough at Aunt Amy’s,’ Napoleon said firmly, ‘and we haven’t got a scrap of food in the house – not food worthy of Christmas dinner. Now, get wrapped up,’ he said, buttoning the top button of Illya’s coat and wrapping his scarf more snugly around his neck, ‘and let’s go. Here’s your cane. I’ve got the presents.’

He picked up the bag of presents they were taking with them and patted Illya on the arm.

‘Come on. Let’s go.’

It was freezing outside, quiet and dead with cold. The streets felt very empty as Napoleon drove across the city and the air bit into Illya’s skin again as he got out of the car. Napoleon warned him about the ice on the ground and came around to guide him to the building. But as soon as they went in through the doors to Aunt Amy’s building the warmth blossomed around Illya. He pulled his gloves off and pushed them into his pocket. As Napoleon tipped the doorman, Illya turned his head and tapped the cane on the floor to get a better impression of what felt like a vast lobby full of hard surfaces.

‘I’d much rather open my own door,’ Illya murmured as Napoleon guided him across the lobby, ‘than have a man stand there all day to open it for me.’
‘Ah, you can take the man out of the Soviet Union but you can’t take the Soviet Union out of the man,’ Napoleon laughed.

‘Well, Napoleon, do you think it’s right that he should have to stand there playing servant on Christmas Day just because he’s not deemed valuable by society?’ Illya asked indignantly.

‘For a start, my little Bolshevik agitator, the man was Chinese. He might not celebrate Christmas at all. And second, I’m sure he’s being paid extremely well for pulling Christmas day duty.’

‘And money is your deity,’ Illya sighed.

‘Well, it certainly helps. Come on, here’s the elevator. I’ll tell you if the bellhop’s Chinese.’

He didn’t say anything to Illya about the bellhop and the man was so discreet and softly spoken that Illya could make no assumptions about his ethnicity. Napoleon tipped him too when the elevator reached the penthouse, and then they stepped out into a confusion of greetings and hugs, the scent of alcohol and perfume and aftershave, hands touching and lips brushing against Illya’s cheek and hearty slaps on his arm.

‘All right, Illya?’ Napoleon murmured into his ear, and he grinned.

‘Yes, just tell me who I’m saying hello to,’ Illya grumbled good naturedly, so Napoleon raised his voice and said, ‘All right, all right. Yes, merry Christmas, everyone. Okay, Illya. Illya, first and foremost, right in front of you here is my dear Aunt Amy. Aunt Amy, I’ve told you all about Illya.’

‘Yes, of course you have, dear, of course,’ said an older woman’s voice as her hands came to touch Illya’s arms. She kissed his cheek in a fog of perfume and powder scent. ‘I’ve wanted so long to meet you, Illya dear. A real Soviet! How exciting! I’ll let you get through the introductions and then you must come sit down and have some sherry.’

Illya murmured thanks and then Napoleon was saying, ‘You’ve met mom and dad before,’ and there were brief greetings, a kiss from Napoleon’s mother and a slap on the arm from his father.

‘Okay,’ Napoleon said. ‘Ah, well my cousins have hightailed it back to the other room, Illya. I’ll introduce you to them later, but I want you to meet my sister, Antonia. Antonia, come here. Come meet Illya and look after him while I go put these presents under the tree, will you? Thank you, dear.’

‘He’s probably gone to scout out if there are any pretty maids on Aunt Amy’s staff,’ Napoleon’s sister Antonia said covertly to Illya as Napoleon walked away, and Illya smiled, wondering what she would say if she knew what her masculine, woman chasing brother had been up to that Christmas morning. ‘He didn’t even introduce us properly.’

Illya smiled and held out his hand. ‘Illya Nikolayevich Kuryakin,’ he said, and she took his hand and then leant in and kissed his cheek.

‘Antonia Solo. I’m delighted to meet you, Illya. Now, how do I look after you?’ Antonia continued, laying a hand on his arm. She seemed a little shorter than he was and smelt of expensive perfume. He wondered idly what she might look like, whether she shared any of Napoleon’s features, whether she had the same colour hair. ‘Nappy said you were completely blind. No sight at all. Is that right?’

‘Well, just some light perception,’ Illya said awkwardly. ‘Nothing of any use.’

Her hand moved a little on his arm as if she were trying to resist stroking him. ‘You poor thing. Well, you could write my experience of that on the back of a postage stamp, I’m afraid, so you’ll have to
educate me. If I were to take you to a seat how would I go about it?’

‘Oh, just let me take your arm,’ Illya said quickly. ‘The cane does a very good job. Yes, that’s it. Thank you.’

He followed her through what seemed to be a hallway and into another room where the cane caught on a deep pile carpet and there was more chatter and noise, classical music playing on a record player, and a scent of alcohol in the air. He took a seat on a deep, low sofa and accepted the glass that was pressed into his hand. He found himself sandwiched between Antonia and a man who he thought must be a cousin because he sounded relatively young and had something of Napoleon in his voice. Antonia introduced him as Brett.

‘We were just settling down to play Charades before dinner,’ Antonia said. ‘Do you think you can play Charades, Illya?’

‘Well, I can try,’ Illya said gamely. He had experienced the game at a few U.N.C.L.E. parties. ‘I won’t be able to see the charades but Napoleon can describe them, and I can certainly perform them.’

Then Napoleon was there saying, ‘Move over, will you, Brett. I want to sit with Illya.’

‘Nappy, we were about to play Charades,’ Antonia said. ‘I’d suggest splitting you two up to make the teams even, but maybe if we push Brett onto the other team with Ed and Brian you two can be together on mine. It’ll be cousins against cousins.’

‘Illya?’ Napoleon asked as he sat, putting a hand lightly on his thigh.

‘Well, I know how to play, Napoleon,’ Illya shrugged. ‘I’ll be all right acting out a charade. For guessing, you’ll just have to describe what’s going on.’

‘Well, if you’re game, I am,’ Napoleon said willingly.

Illya grinned. ‘Then I’m game,’ he said.

‘Oh, but we’ve got the titles written down on pieces of paper. We’re going to pull them out of a hat,’ Antonia said suddenly. ‘Illya can’t read that, can you Illya?’

‘Well, no, but you could have someone who isn’t playing read it and tell me covertly,’ Illya suggested.

So a game of charades started and Illya found himself up first, standing in what Napoleon assured him was a good open space between the Christmas tree and the sofa, trying to act out East of Eden. It was far easier to act out the charades than it was to help guess one when he couldn’t see the person in front of him, especially when it was Napoleon acting it out and Antonia trying to describe his movements. It was fun stretching himself to try to guess the charades and listening to Napoleon’s descriptions of the other side’s mimes, but it wasn’t so much of a surprise to Illya that their team narrowly lost to the three cousins on the other side, who seemed to be able to read each other’s minds.

‘Never mind, never mind,’ Antonia told him magnanimously, putting her arm around his shoulders and squeezing. ‘I think dinner’s about to be served anyway. Illya, you did sterling work. Maybe we can have a rematch after dinner.’

Illya smiled rather apologetically. ‘Well, perhaps I’ll sit that one out. After all, I – ’

‘Don’t be so silly,’ she told him quickly, and then the cousins came crowding around to
commiserate, all talking at the same time. It was something of a relief when Napoleon came to guide Illya through to the dining room, because he hated trying to talk in groups like that when he could hardly tell who was speaking. All of Napoleon’s cousins sounded the same.

‘Here you are, Illya,’ Napoleon said, putting his hand to the back of a chair made of carved wood so smooth that it felt like glass. He traced his fingers over it and felt the sinuous carvings. ‘I’m on your left and Ed’s on your right with dad next to him. You’ve got mom opposite you, Brett next to her on her right and Brian on the other side, and Antonia’s next to Brian. Aunt Amy is at the head, on your left.’

‘Thanks,’ he murmured as he sat down. He put his hands carefully to the table to feel a high quality tablecloth, the rows of cutlery, and the delicate foot and stem of a glass.

‘Here, let me lean your cane up against the wall behind you,’ Napoleon said, and then he sat down by Illya and told him, ‘Be prepared to loosen your buttons. Aunt Amy never stints at Christmas.’

((O))

After a full, rich meal chairs were pushed back and drinks were passed around, and Illya just sat on his chair listening to the conversation, not trying to join in much because it was so awkward conversing with groups.

‘Hey, Rip Van Winkle.’ Napoleon nudged him in the side, and he jumped, putting his glass of sherry back on the table. He had started to get sleepy.

‘Uh – What? Sorry,’ he mumbled confusedly.

‘Mom was just asking you about the transplant,’ Napoleon said, sounding rather apologetic, and Illya picked up his drink again and said, ‘I’m sorry, Mrs Solo. What did you say?’

‘I asked if you were nervous about the transplant, Illya,’ came her voice from across the table, and Illya understood why Napoleon had sounded apologetic. He didn’t like talking about it.

‘Well,’ he began. He took a sip of his drink and then shrugged. ‘Well, I’ve had operations in the past, so – ’

‘Oh, yes, of course. You and Napoleon got into such terrible scrapes, I know,’ she said quickly. ‘But this is different, surely? How certain are the doctors that it will work? What’s the prognosis for improvement in your vision?’

Illya fiddled with the edge of the tablecloth where it touched his knees. He really hated to talk about this. Then he heard Antonia saying brightly, ‘Come on, Nappy, come help wash the dishes,’ and to his immense relief Napoleon whined, ‘Hey, why can’t Illya help with the dishes?’

‘Napoleon, Illya’s blind!’ his sister hissed.

‘Yes, Napoleon. I’m blind. You can’t make me wash up,’ Illya said, latching on to the lifeline of their conversation with a sudden grin. ‘Listen to your big sister.’

He knew exactly what Napoleon would say.
‘Antonia, Illya is very, very capable of washing the dishes,’ Napoleon told his sister. ‘Almost as capable as he is at dodging chores he doesn’t like. But doesn’t Aunt Amy have staff for that?’

‘Oh, she sent them all home. Told them to enjoy the rest of the day. Come on, Napoleon. There’s a mountain to do.’

Illya heaved himself up from his chair, groaning at his full stomach.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Solo. Duty calls,’ he shrugged, and held out a hand. ‘Come on, Napoleon. I’ll wash. You and Antonia can dry and put away. I can’t put away in a strange kitchen.’

‘And that’s about the only thing he can’t do,’ Napoleon said meaningfully to his sister. ‘Don’t underestimate Illya, Antonia. That’s when he’s at his most dangerous.’

((O))

They worked in the kitchen with wonderful smoothness, Illya carefully washing each piece of china or glass, then passing them to Napoleon to wipe dry, who then passed them on to Antonia to put away. Napoleon listened to his sister’s chatter but he kept glancing at Illya, at his rolled up sleeves, at the muscles of his forearms and the gold hair on his skin and his hands reddened by the heat of the water. There were far too many times when he wanted to just grab Illya and stop him doing whatever he was doing, and kiss him.

They had almost finished the pile of crockery when Illya nudged him in the side and asked in an undertone, ‘Napoleon, can you show me the bathroom?’

‘Er, yeah. Give me a moment.’ He wiped his hands dry on the towel and let Illya take his arm, leading him carefully through the apartment to the large, marble-tiled bathroom. He showed him the toilet and washbasin then asked, ‘Want me to wait, honey?’

Illya grimaced a little. ‘After all that turkey? No, that’s okay. You go back to the washing up. If I can’t find my way out of this echoing chamber I’ll shout for help.’

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ Napoleon said with a laugh. He kissed him quickly on the cheek and went back to the kitchen. Antonia was just finishing putting away the last few items of crockery as he came back into the room.

‘Ah, Nappy,’ she greeted him with a grin. ‘Just in time to avoid the rest of the work, yes?’

Napoleon laughed. ‘Of course. I always did have good timing.’

She looked at him curiously for a moment, and he cocked his head to the side.

‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

She wiped her hands briefly and took off her apron. ‘I’m just looking, little brother. I haven’t seen you look so relaxed in a long time, and it suits you. You seem sublimely happy, you and your boyfriend.’

‘Uh, Tonia, he’s not – ’ Napoleon began, but she batted at his arm.

‘Don’t be so silly, Nappy. You’re transparent as glass. You two are so in love. It’s just nice to see
you settled.’

Napoleon glanced around at the kitchen door. ‘Uh, mom and dad – ’

‘Don’t be silly. They wouldn’t suspect a thing. You could be in flagrante with him on the sofa and
they’d just think you were horsing around. None so blind, and so on. Anyway, I don’t care, except
that I think you two are absolutely darling together, and I hope that he’s the one.’

Napoleon smiled at that and leant in to kiss his sister on the cheek.

‘He’s the one, Tonia,’ he assured her. ‘I’m sorry you won’t ever be able to buy a hat for my
wedding, but yes, Illya is the one. He always has been. I just didn’t realise it until we were forced
together by his blindness.’

‘Well.’ His sister exhaled and put her hands on his shoulders and smiled. ‘I don’t need a wedding,
Nappy. I’m just happy you’re happy. Don’t worry, I’ll be quite discreet. Now, shall we get back to
the centre of things? Aunt Amy’s absolutely bursting to give out the presents.’

‘Uh, yeah. I’ll swing by the bathroom and wait for Illya,’ Napoleon said. ‘Thank you, Antonia,’ he
added with great sincerity. ‘Your blessing means a lot.’

(P)

Presents were handed out, and Illya was pleased by Napoleon’s response to the expensive new
woollen overcoat he had bought him with Sarah’s help. Napoleon was like a peacock over his
clothes, and he had been hoping that this coat would be as perfect as Sarah had said it was. He had
felt the soft, heavy quality of the cloth, and wished he could see Napoleon wearing it. Then he was
handed his own present from Napoleon, and he took it in his hands, passing his fingers over the
paper that wrapped it and trying to feel the contours – but it was in a cardboard box, and there were
no clues. So he ripped away the paper and touched the cardboard and asked, ‘Can I tear this?’

‘Yeah, it’s just a box,’ Napoleon assured him.

Illya began to tear at the cardboard, and Napoleon put a hand on his and said, ‘Steady there. Keep it
that way up. That’s it.’

He finally got the top open and touched his fingers into the box and felt cool, smooth, curving metal.

‘That’s a teapot?’ he asked, slipping his fingers further down, feeling what the teapot stood upon. ‘
Oh, Napoleon...’

He could feel the quality of the samovar just by the smoothness of the metal, and he carefully lifted it
out of the box.

‘To go with my tea!’ he said in glee.

‘That was the idea.’ He could hear Napoleon’s happiness. ‘It’s Tombak bronze, Illya. It’s a beautiful
colour, and the man in the shop assured me it was quite rare. I thought it might make you better tea
than the old battered thing you have now.’

Illya couldn’t stop the grin that was making his cheeks ache. His samovar was one he had found in a
junk shop and bought on a whim not long after he had moved to this country. He liked it because it reminded him of home, but it dripped and it was awkward to use. He hated to think how much this rare specimen had cost Napoleon, but he knew better than to ask.

‘It is perfect,’ he said, running his fingers over and over the surface. He thought it must look amazing, but he said, ‘I hope you will be the one to keep it polished, Napoleon.’

Napoleon snorted. ‘Well, someone will have to, because your current one resembles nothing so much as a piece of coal.’

‘My current one also leaves small puddles wherever it goes, like an errant puppy. Thank you for this, Napoleon,’ he said in his most sincere voice. ‘I will treasure it.’

Napoleon’s knee pressed against his and he heard Antonia give a little sigh, but he put the samovar carefully back into its box and set it on the carpet between his feet so that he could give his attention to the other presents being passed around. He thought back on Christmases of his past, of his first years in the US when he hadn’t celebrated at all because Christmas was not his festivity, of Napoleon gradually persuading him to join in with his own celebrations, and then of these past Christmases since losing his sight. This one felt like the best yet. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t see the other happy faces or watch the presents being unwrapped. Being here next to Napoleon, basking in his love, was the best gift he could have.
Chapter 4

The phone rang in long, drawn out trills. Illya made his way over to it carefully, remembering that the Christmas tree was in the corner where the telephone table usually stood so the room was a little different in its arrangement. Christmas day had come and gone, but the tree still gave out its scent of pine. He really got very little from it beyond that scent, and Napoleon’s joy, but Napoleon’s joy was enough. They had shared the decorating of the tree with many touches of hands, with Napoleon’s fingers over his to guide him to the branches, Napoleon’s body close against his and his breath warm and voice low as he described the ornaments that Illya was handling. For that alone, it was worth it.

He picked up the cold phone receiver in his hand, cleared a little roughness out of his throat, and said, ‘Kuryakin.’

‘Herr Kuryakin,’ the voice on the other end said. ‘You are speaking to Eva Schmit, appointments secretary for Dr Bruner. We have acquired a suitable donor cornea and you are required to attend the clinic for transplant into your right eye. We will need you at the clinic on Thursday at nine forty for a physical examination prior to the surgery.’

Illya’s heart gave an odd kind of jerk. For a moment he didn’t know what to say. He stood there rubbing his fingertips on the wooden phone table. And then he stuttered out, ‘Yes, of course. Of course, I will be on the first available flight.’

‘You have read through the literature sent to you?’ the secretary checked. ‘You know what to expect and where to come?’

‘Yes,’ Illya said. ‘Yes, I have read – ’ Well, Napoleon had read the literature to him since it had been in conventional type; but he had taken it all in. ‘Thank you, Fraulein Schmit,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

Such a short phone call. Such an odd dropping feeling in his stomach. He stood there for a moment just holding the receiver in his hand with his mouth part open, dazed. Then he quickly depressed and released the cut off and dialled another number. Napoleon was in the office today.

‘Solo here,’ came Napoleon’s voice, and Illya said, ‘Uh – Napoleon – ’

‘What is it?’ Napoleon asked, instantly on the alert from Illya’s tone.

‘Napoleon, the clinic have a donor cornea. I need to be on a plane as soon as possible. I must be there on Thursday morning.’

The pause on Napoleon’s end was probably very much as Illya had sounded to Dr Bruner’s secretary. Then he said very quickly, ‘Illya, I’ll go see Waverly. Don’t worry about the flights. I’ll get one of the girls here to book them. You start packing, okay? Get your stuff packed and I’ll be back as soon as I can and throw my things into a case. I’ll be back soon. Okay, Illya?’

Illya smiled. Napoleon sounded more nervous than he was, if that were possible. Perhaps this was what it were like when a couple were having a baby.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

Then he put the phone down and stood there very still, marvelling at all of this. It was hard to believe in the truth of this happening. He stroked his fingers over the smooth, cool plastic of the receiver, feeling its curves, and then suddenly he moved away into the bedroom and pulled his case out of the wardrobe and began to pack. It was hard to believe in the reality of this, but it would never happen at
all if he didn’t get to Munich.

((O))

The aircraft engines droned through the air and Illya was slipping in and out of sleep in his seat. Napoleon sat there watching him, finding himself drifting off too. There was something so soporific about flying. The cabin was warm, the air was stuffy. There were even a few beads of sweat on Illya’s forehead.

Napoleon just watched him, looking at his slightly parted lips and the soft rise and fall of his chest. His cane was leant up beside him and he had fallen asleep with his hands resting on a Braille book, having decided this time to take one in his carry on luggage despite the bulk. It was worth it so that he had something to read on the long journey.

Napoleon reached out a hand idly and touched the raised dots. In all this time he had not yet managed to be able to distinguish one letter from the other by touch; but, as Illya was fond of telling him, necessity was a good teacher. Still, he was in awe of Illya, and so proud of him. He had worked so hard, so ceaselessly, at becoming literate again.

He rested his hand lightly over Illya’s still hand for a moment as the aircraft droned on. It felt very private, sitting like this in their paired seats. The people across the aisle weren’t looking and no one else could see, so he just let his fingers rest on Illya’s. His hand was as warm as his forehead looked. The cuts on his palm and fingers were healing well; Napoleon had checked and dressed them just before they left, worrying that an infection would cause the operation to be cancelled. But still, his hand felt warm.

He bit his lip into his mouth and chewed on it a little. Illya had been working very hard since Christmas and there had been a lot of illness going around headquarters. Sarah had been bedridden for the last few days with a heavy cold and Illya had been complaining so much about not being able to get anything done without her that in the end Waverly had told him to go home too.

His heart felt as if it were sinking down into the depths of his abdomen. If Illya were sick...

Suddenly he felt so angry at this whole thing. How could any of this have happened to Illya? From that very first moment in that lab when Illya had been screaming with pain and the world had been turned upside down; how could that have happened? He remembered seeing that man throwing the beaker of acid, remembered seeing it hit Illya’s face and how Illya had instantly given such a terrible sound of pain and fallen to his knees. He shouldn’t have left him. He should have stayed with him at least long enough to get water on his eyes. He shouldn’t have forged on after the enemy. Illya’s life had been taken apart in that split second and the minutes and hours that followed.

He knew that was a useless argument. If he hadn’t left Illya they both could have been killed. Surely it was better for Illya to be blind than dead? That wasn’t a question that even merited an answer. And Illya had fought so hard ever since. He had come so far.

He touched Illya’s hand again. It was warm in this busy cabin. Unsurprising he was hot. Anyone would be. He stroked the back of his hand lightly and Illya stirred and blinked and turned his face towards Napoleon with a smile. Napoleon smiled back even though Illya couldn’t see it. The Russian pushed a finger under his collar and then dropped his hand back to his book, feeling it as if he had forgotten it were there.
‘Is there a fan up there, Napoleon?’ he asked.

‘Oh, er – yeah,’ Napoleon said, and he reached up and turned on the little air vent and angled it towards Illya. ‘Better?’

Illya smiled again. ‘Yeah. I’m warm.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Napoleon said, and he didn’t manage to keep the worry from his voice.

‘Huh?’ Illya asked, catching the tone. ‘Napoleon, it’s just warm in here. Nothing to worry about. It’s always warm on flights.’

‘Yeah, it’s always warm,’ Napoleon murmured very quietly. He raised his voice. ‘Want me to get you a drink?’

‘I’d like some coffee,’ Illya said. ‘I feel like I need some caffeine. I keep dropping off.’

‘Yeah, I noticed,’ Napoleon said with a wry grin. ‘All right, tovarisch. Coffee.’ And he pressed the button for the stewardess and waited for her to come.

((O))

The feeling of dread was like a lead weight in Illya’s chest as he sat in the cab on his way to Dr Bruner’s clinic. Much as he could pretend that the heat he felt in his skin was just because it was warm in the cab, he knew the symptoms of a cold well enough. He knew the little aches and pains and the feeling of having water down the back of his nose and the occasional shivers. He knew the real source of that headache that he was trying to pretend was just a result of air travel and too much coffee. He had slept terribly in the hotel after getting off the aeroplane and he only felt worse this morning.

‘They aren’t going to take me,’ he said finally as the cab pulled into the kerb and stopped. Traffic kept moving past their stopped car.

Napoleon’s hand pressed over his and squeezed. ‘Now, you don’t know that. Let them see you first. Nothing’s definite. Stay there while I come round to you. You’re on the road side.’

Illya sat still while Napoleon got out of the car and came around to open his door. The air was damp and the sound of traffic in the road got louder. He got out cautiously, tapping his cane onto the road surface and taking Napoleon’s arm quickly because the shushing of the cars in the street made him nervous.

‘Come on,’ Napoleon murmured. ‘We’re going round the back of the car. Here’s the kerb. Can you manage? The sidewalk’s level and clear.’

‘I can manage,’ Illya nodded, finding the kerb with his cane and stepping up. He felt as if he were going to his executioner. His nose was starting to block up and the scents around him were deadened. He could feel the sweat on his forehead. He felt shaky. There was a tickle in the back of his throat.

‘They’re not going to take me,’ he said fatalistically.
‘We’ll wait and see,’ Napoleon said again. ‘Now, we’re right outside Dr Bruner’s clinic. It’s a modern building, very square, lots of glass, only two storeys high. Come on, let’s get inside. We won’t find out anything by standing here.’

((O))

Illya sat in a huddle in the chair by the hotel room window, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around them, his forehead resting on them.

Napoleon didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to say. It had been terrible. They had come all of this way and Illya had sat down in an examination room and the doctor had looked at the cuts on his hand and taken his temperature and looked into his throat and announced that the operation could not go ahead. The cornea would go to the next viable recipient. Illya was feverish and to undergo such an operation with both a feverish cold and a wound was an unnecessary risk. There was another suitable candidate who could take the transplant, and Dr Bruner was anxious to operate on the patient with the highest chance of success.

‘Illya, do you want to go get something to eat?’ Napoleon asked after a while.

For a minute Illya didn’t respond, and Napoleon was about to ask again when the Russian murmured, ‘I’m very tired.’

‘Well, you’re not well, and it’s been a very long couple of days,’ Napoleon said softly, and Illya made a strange little noise that was almost a sob.

Napoleon crossed the room to him in an instant and put his arms around his partner and held him. Illya turned his head against Napoleon’s body and breathed in deep, shuddering breaths.

‘I suppose we should get the next flight home,’ Illya said at last, and Napoleon said, ‘Illya, there’ll be another chance; at a better time of year, too. Everyone’s sick in the winter. We’re staying here tonight. You need a chance to rest up and sleep off that fever.’

‘Oh, Napoleon, let’s just get a plane,’ Illya sighed, and Napoleon shook him a little.

‘Illya,’ he said firmly, then he put his hand under Illya’s chin and turned his head. ‘Will you listen to me, you stubborn Russian? This is not the end. It’s not that the transplant didn’t work. It’s just that you’re not well. But another one will come up, and you will be well. You know that.’

Illya lifted his head and smiled. ‘All right, Napoleon,’ he said. ‘All right. I’m sorry. I do believe you. And you’re right, I’m not well. I feel awful.’

He sniffed and pressed his handkerchief to his nose, then sneezed hard.

Napoleon ruffled his hair and then looked at his flushed cheeks critically. ‘Oh, you are a sick Russian,’ he said sympathetically. ‘You need mother’s chicken soup and a soft bed. Aren’t you glad you’re not going under the knife, dear?’

Illya grunted and shrugged. Napoleon kissed him on the crown of his head and said, ‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll go down and see if I can persuade someone to make you some soup. I’ll look after you. Don’t you worry. Come and get into bed.’
And he took Illya by the hand and led him to the broad bed, then fussed around him, settling him under the covers and then kissing him softly on the lips.

‘You’ll catch my cold,’ Illya warned him.

‘I never catch colds,’ Napoleon said flippantly. ‘I’ll get you that soup,’ he promised, and Illya said mournfully, ‘I need Ukrainian soup. They will not be able to achieve that in Munich.’

Napoleon smiled. ‘You never know. Maybe they have a Ukrainian chef. Never say die, Illya.’

And he left the room thinking about Ukrainian chefs, and then instead of going straight down to the restaurant he went to the telephones in the lobby.

((O))

Illya had the first inkling that something was going on when the lady at the check in desk spoke to him in Russian. It was such a surprise that for a moment he didn’t answer, and she repeated her question in English in a perplexed tone.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he said rather confusedly in Russian, then asked, ‘Napoleon, what is going on?’

‘Oh, er – ’ And there was a rustling of paper. ‘Well, gee, would you look at that? I meant to get tickets to the U.S. but I seem to have gotten them to the S.U. instead. The Soviet Union, that is.’

‘Napoleon!’ Illya said in amused frustration. ‘Napoleon, how on earth did you – ’

But Napoleon pressed a hand on his arm in just the right way that Illya knew to stop talking. He meekly presented his passport for scrutiny, and then handed over his U.N.C.L.E. card too, when asked.

‘What is this on the surface?’ the woman behind the desk asked, and Napoleon said lightly, ‘Oh, Mr Kuryakin’s card is marked with Braille. I guess you do have Braille in – ’

‘Of course we do,’ the woman replied rather tersely, and she gave the card back to Illya. ‘You are free to board, gentlemen. Thank you.’

‘Napoleon, I don’t understand how you managed to secure the paperwork,’ Illya began quietly as he followed Napoleon’s arm away from the desk. He was all too aware of just how many hoops needed to be jumped through normally to travel from one side of the Iron Curtain to the other, even if the other side happened to be his own country.

‘Rank hath its privileges, comrade,’ Napoleon murmured in a self-satisfied tone, then clarified, ‘I managed to scare up a little work in the Kiev office. I can’t do anything to make the flight more direct, but we’re travelling on U.N.C.L.E. credentials.’

‘Kyiv?’ Illya echoed. He hardly knew what to think, but an enormous sneeze overtook him and he felt for his handkerchief. He still felt unwell, unwell enough to be relieved in a way that he was not about to undergo surgery.

‘Kiev,’ Napoleon confirmed, pressing a hand over Illya’s where it held his arm. ‘Come on, sweetheart,’ he murmured. ‘You’re going home.’
Illya almost forgot to use his cane as he followed Napoleon’s guidance out of the terminal building and towards the plane in the stream of other passengers. The air smelt of jet fuel and snow, and it was biting on his face. He felt feverish and shivery, and so full of questions that he didn’t know where to start. This time when the stewardess asked him to leave his cane with her he didn’t even argue, partly because he was so distracted and partly because he knew better than to argue with Soviet officialdom. It was a miracle that Napoleon had secured their passage in the first place. It would be a long flight because they would be forced to travel to Moscow and double back, but it would be worth it.

‘Where – er – where are we staying?’ he asked as he edged into his seat, his mind running through the various possibilities he was aware of in his home city. He ran his fingers over the seat fabric, over the arm rests, and found the ends of the seatbelt before he sat on them.

There was a smile in Napoleon’s voice, or a grin, by the sound of it. ‘We are staying with a lovely couple. A Mr and Mrs Kuryakin.’

Illya tried to speak, and coughed instead.

‘Try not to look too ill, dear. I don’t want them to refuse us entry,’ Napoleon said, still with that glee in his voice.

‘Napoleon,’ Illya said very seriously, in a warning tone. Napoleon was as affectionate as he could be without outraging common decency, but Illya was very well aware that their relationship would be viewed with a much more dangerous censure where they were going. ‘Can the endearments,’ he said in an undertone, ‘for both our sakes.’

‘All right,’ Napoleon replied softly, touching his hand very briefly. ‘I understand. Illya, we are staying with your parents. I called HQ and had them look up their number. Your mother is very excited to be seeing you.’

‘Yes,’ Illya said rather pensively. ‘I’ll just bet she is…’

He hadn’t seen his mother in years, since long before that terrible incident that took his sight. He had spoken to her on the telephone often, but he wasn’t sure how to process the idea of walking in through the door of that little apartment, of trying to live with his mother and father like this. His mother had not yet been able to have a phone conversation with him without crying. It was all odd. Just odd.

‘How – how long are we staying?’ he asked.

‘I have secured us a whole two weeks. Mr Waverly must be feeling generous, and besides, the business in the Kiev office is real. It needed some Western agent to attend, and it’s going to be us. Which reminds me. Is there really Russian Braille, Illya?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Illya said tentatively, ‘but I’ve never tried reading it. I spoke to someone at the Braille library, asking about Russian books. He couldn’t source any in New York, so I haven’t had a chance to try. Russian and Ukrainian both use slightly different character sets to represent the Cyrillic letters, and I’m spending so much time learning Grade 3 and Nemeth that I hardly have room in my head for another set of codes.’

He rubbed his fingertips over his knee, thinking of how that Braille might feel and wondering if he might be able to source something in his own language in Kyiv. It would be fascinating to try.

‘Well, I doubt that the Kiev office is equipped with a Braille printer and you didn’t bring your brailler
this trip, did you?’ Napoleon asked, and Illya could feel his shrug because Napoleon was sitting so close to him, leaning closer to him than was necessary, he was sure.

‘No. I brought my slate but not the brailler. I didn’t expect to need to use it.’

He had not expected to need it at all. He had expected to be in the hospital by now. He had dared to hope that he might not ever need to use the brailler again.

‘Well, it’s some very routine stuff that needs doing,’ Napoleon assured him. ‘You’ll only need to come in once or twice to satisfy any over-zealous officials who might be watching and you can dictate if you need to, I’m sure. They need a couple of Western men to oversee the initiation of a few new recruits, since the Kiev office is so new, and there’s a little paperwork on the side. It’s nicely spread out over these two weeks. And the rest of the time will be our own.’

‘Our own,’ Illya echoed, leaning back against the seat, feeling the slight burning of his lungs and the aching of his head that told him he was still unwell. His mother would fuss over him. How strange that would be, to be in his parents’ apartment, in his childhood home. How many of his friends would still be in the locality? How much would the place have changed? He knew the streets around the apartment block so well he had always thought he would be able to navigate them blindfold. Well, now he had the chance to find out if that were true. But he would have to be careful. He knew that. It was so easy to rely on memory when in reality so much could have changed, and so much must have changed since he had been home. It always did change, in subtle ways. He wouldn’t be able to go out without a guide. It would be foolish to try.

‘Hey,’ Napoleon said, nudging his arm. ‘Don’t look so pensive. It’ll be fine. I told you you need mother’s chicken soup. Well, I’m sure your mother’s got a carcass on the boil as we speak. She was so excited to be seeing you.’

((O))

They landed in Moscow at last, and Illya felt exhausted. He was so relieved to have their U.N.C.L.E. credentials to take them out of the usual line of passengers waiting for entry to the country, but even so he and Napoleon spent an hour in a small private room trying to assure the officials that their business was legitimate before they could board the Aeroflot flight to Kyiv.

‘Never let it be said that my country is not thorough,’ Illya murmured to Napoleon when they were finally released. He followed Napoleon wearily to wait for their connection to Kyiv in an area of milling passengers.

It was so odd to be here, to hear the Russian voices all around him, to hear the distinctly Soviet sounds that he hadn’t even realised existed until now. He boarded the smaller plane that would take them to Kyiv and sat there feeling an odd kind of adrenaline fuelled nervousness. He fiddled with the edges of the seat and traced his fingers over the window and wished he had a book, although he knew he wouldn’t be able to focus on it if he had.

They landed at Boryspil, almost twenty miles out of Kyiv, and now they would have to get a bus. Had they been able to fly directly to Kyiv they would have been here hours ago. It was early evening and the light was dimming and the air was chill, and he was feeling his cold badly now. He followed Napoleon’s guidance to the bus terminal and helped him when he floundered at trying to secure tickets, but he fell back against the seat in tired relief once they were aboard and the bus was moving.
‘Tired, huh?’ Napoleon asked him, and Illya nodded. He felt hot and shaky and exhausted.

‘Very,’ he said simply.

He closed his eyes and leant into the seat and let everything drift, and then suddenly he was jerking awake and Napoleon was saying, ‘We’re here, Illya. Time to wake up. Can you manage coming behind me? I’ll take the cases.’

So Illya followed Napoleon down the aisle and took the steps carefully, and then he was standing in Kyiv, and it felt so strange. He breathed in the air and listened to the sounds of people talking his language, people’s feet moving about on the paved ground, the sounds of cars and further away a train’s wheels squealing on rails. He knew this place. He could visualise it in his mind’s eye, perhaps not perfectly but well enough.

‘Is there snow?’ he asked. ‘Is it very dark?’

‘Some snow around the edges. Looks like there’s been a bit of a thaw after a while of good snow. No, it’s not too dark yet,’ Napoleon said. ‘You think we can get a cab around here?’

Illya chuckled tiredly. ‘A marshrutka, at least. There used to be a route that went by close to the apartment block. Come back to the bus stop and I’ll ask someone to help. It will be perhaps fifteen kopeks each, although it might be best to buy an extra seat for the cases. I’ll make sure the driver knows where we want to get off.’

‘And this – er – marshrutka is – ?’

Illya grinned, feeling ridiculously nostalgic despite his tiredness. ‘A minibus. A routed taxi. Probably a RAF-977. Oh, I wonder if they still smell the same...’

‘What do they smell like?’ Napoleon asked dubiously, and Illya laughed.

‘Just – I don’t know. Nothing bad. Just – like a marshrutka. Like home...’

((O))

It was another half hour before they finally disembarked from the minibus and Illya stood wearily on the pavement as Napoleon gathered the cases.

‘All right, Illya?’ he asked. His partner was pale and looked exhausted.

‘I’m all right,’ he nodded. ‘You don’t need to fuss over me, you know.’

Napoleon smiled wryly and looked around. It was almost dark, and lights shone in various windows around them.

‘Er, do you know where we are?’ he asked.

‘Supposing they haven’t moved the stop, we are only a block away.’ Illya took Napoleon’s arm and nudged him forward, tapping his cane over the pavement and turning his head a little to listen to the echoes.

‘What’re you grinning about, tovarisch?’ Napoleon asked, grinning too at the sudden delight on his
‘It all sounds just right,’ Illya said with a great air of contentment. ‘It smells just right. It’s like stepping into a memory.’ He stood for a moment just listening, then said, ‘We should be on the right side of the road. We’ll walk about a hundred yards and cross a side street, and the apartment block takes up the whole of the next block. We’ll find it.’

Napoleon peered ahead. He could see a large building looming in the distance, and the darkness of nature to their right. ‘There’s what looks like open space on the other side of the road,’ he said.

Illya smiled. ‘Yes, I can feel it. That is the park.’

‘You can feel it, huh?’ Napoleon asked, looking sidelong at him and then turning his face towards that empty space. ‘Tell me again what a park feels like?’

Illya laughed. ‘It’s – I don’t know – there are subtle sounds and a lack of sound. The hours I spent there...’ He had perked up considerably. ‘We’re here, Napoleon. We’re in the right place.’

‘Come on, then,’ Napoleon said with a grin, leading him forward. Illya tapped his cane on the hard ground and followed him, and it wasn’t long before they had crossed the side street and came upon the door of the vast apartment block.

‘I think this is it, Illya,’ Napoleon said. ‘There are steps, okay?’

Illya nodded. ‘Six steps. I remember.’ He put his hand on Napoleon’s arm then to stop him going in. ‘Napoleon,’ he said very seriously. ‘The authorities know where we’re staying, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Napoleon echoed. ‘I had to tell them.’

‘Yes. Well, you will have to sweep for bugs in my parents’ apartment, and sweep again any time the place has been left unoccupied. You’ll have to check my clothes for me.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Napoleon said pensively. It was naive to think that just because U.N.C.L.E. was government approved they would not be monitored. ‘We’ll have a little competition to see who’s best at the bugging game. Shall we get inside? I want to meet your parents.’

Illya gave a slightly uncertain smile. ‘Yes, let’s get inside.’

Napoleon led him up the steps carefully and Illya followed him inside and breathed in deeply, as if the aroma of the shabby place were the perfume of summer flowers. He let go of Napoleon’s arm and moved unerringly towards a flight of concrete steps. There was a sudden clattering from somewhere, and Napoleon was astonished at the smile that lit Illya’s face; he himself was already reaching for his gun.

‘Someone’s using the rubbish shoot,’ Illya tossed over his shoulder at Napoleon. ‘I’d almost forgotten that sound.’

He reached his cane ahead of him and it clattered against the first step. He reached out and touched the chipped paint of the stair rail and smiled again.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘It’s only four flights.’

‘No elevator?’ Napoleon asked rather ruefully.

‘No elevator,’ Illya confirmed. ‘What does a good Soviet citizen need with an elevator when he has
legs, Napoleon?’

‘I thought you were feeling ill,’ Napoleon said plaintively.

‘I am,’ Illya said, ‘but I am also happy to be home.’

‘So – er – what’s your parents’ place like?’ he asked tentatively, following Illya up the first flight of stairs with the cases hanging heavily from his hands.

Illya shrugged. ‘Not bad,’ he said, ‘although I think you’ll see soon why I saw my New York apartment as an unthinkable luxury when I first arrived. But with that new apartment – we moved there some time after the war, I don’t remember when – we were lucky enough to avoid shared amenities and to have soundproofing. There is one bedroom. We have our own kitchen and bathroom, and a balcony.’

‘Well, imagine the luxury,’ Napoleon said rather cynically.

‘It is home,’ Illya said simply. ‘Or, it was home. It was a better home than the old place, where everything was shared. We did relatively well because mama and tato are well respected in their fields. You could fit that apartment into your living room, I think, but it was home.’

‘So, if there’s only one bedroom,’ Napoleon began.

Illya smiled again, waiting at the second landing for Napoleon to reach him. His hand was on the rail, fingering the rough holes in the flaking paint as if he were touching velvet.

‘My parents are just as resourceful as you would expect, Napoleon. They’ll have somewhere for us to sleep, perhaps on the sofa bed or in their room. There will be somewhere. But there will not be much privacy wherever we sleep,’ he warned him.

‘Ah well, I will just have to savour sweet memories of our bed at home,’ Napoleon murmured. It would be worth it, he was sure, for the joy that Illya was showing at a time he hadn’t expected him to be able to feel any joy. He seemed to have forgotten the cancelled operation entirely, at least for now.

‘Come on, Napoleon,’ Illya said, leading him up another flight of stairs, and then another. ‘Here, this should be the correct floor.’

He tapped across a small flat space and moved into a long corridor that smelt faintly of damp.

‘Napoleon, help me here,’ he said. ‘The corridors are not always clear.’

‘No, I can see that,’ Napoleon responded, looking down the long corridor that was lit with flickering fluorescent bulbs and cluttered in places with possessions and bags of rubbish and various miscellaneous items. ‘Is this the Soviet dream, Illya?’

Illya smiled rather cynically. ‘Have you ever known a dream to transfer successfully to reality? Even capitalism?’

Napoleon moved his shoulders a little self consciously.

‘Watch out here, dear,’ he said in Illya’s ear as they reached a cluttered, narrow table outside one of the doors. ‘Someone’s put a table out here.’

‘Tovarisch Shevchenko,’ Illya said with a fond smile, brushing his hand along the edge of the table. ‘Yes, there is a mark right here.’ He rubbed his finger into a nick on the table edge. ‘He will always
keep his shoes outside under here.’ He crouched and felt under the table. ‘Those are his boots. But – ’ He felt over the other pairs of shoes and grinned. ‘A woman’s shoes? A child’s?’

Napoleon bent to look. ‘Both, I think.’

‘Well,’ Illya said with a strange smile. ‘After all these years... And is there – ’ He felt over the top of the table. ‘Yes, there are his plants. Tovarisch Shevchenko,’ he said with great satisfaction. ‘Three more doors, Napoleon.’

And he picked up his pace again, touching his hand to the wall to feel for the doors, until he reached the third, and traced his fingers over the surface as if he were greeting an old friend.
Illya stood with his palm on the door, suddenly nervous. This was all so familiar to him, but it was so strange. The damp, dusty, stale food scents of the corridor were like a childhood blanket. The light was dim and flickering in his eyes, but in his mind he could see that corridor stretching away, cluttered with junk. He could remember it so well, but it was probable it was very different to his memory. And the door was so – it was so normal, so ordinary under his hand, as if he had never been away. But it was strange. He hadn’t been here in years, and now he couldn’t see, and on the other side of that door were his parents...

He almost couldn’t bring himself to ring. He felt ill. Suddenly the cold and fever and tiredness seemed to have caught up with him again, and he stood there in the corridor, his palm on the door, and leant his forehead against the cool panel.

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said softly from behind him. ‘I don’t want to have to sleep in the hall. Is this the right one?’

Illya jerked his head from the wood and tucked his cane between his arm and his body. He ran his hands over the door once more and said, ‘Yes, it’s the right one. Yes, this is home.’

He found the bell push just where it had always been, and pressed it.

There was a sudden noise from inside, a flustered sound, the door opened, and – oh, the scent was so familiar it made his throat swell – and he was being enveloped in his mother’s arms. She was so solid, so real, he could feel the softness and the strength of her. She was just a little shorter than him, she felt so real, she smelt so real. For too long she had just been a voice on the phone.

‘Illyushenka, Illyushenka. Oh, baby, oh, my angel...’

He was drawn inside as if by an elemental force, his cane clattered onto the ground, his mother held him and rocked him and kissed him and cried. And then his father’s voice; gruff, brief, so very familiar.

‘Masha, let him come in, let him take off his shoes, let him sit down. Let his friend come in.’

His mother said, ‘Oh,’ suddenly, and her arms were gone, and Illya wondered where his cane had fallen and reached out a hand, and then his father’s hands were clasped around his and then he was being held in a hard, tight hug that smelt of tobacco and faintly of his father’s sweat.

‘Tato, tato,’ he said, pressing his hands against his father’s back, feeling the thin jumper or cardigan and his father’s solid body underneath. He felt ill, flushed, he felt like letting tears fall. And then his father let him go and Napoleon was putting his cane back into his grip and putting a hand in a proprietorial way onto his back and saying, ‘Let me help you, Illya. It might not be how you remember it.’

Oh, but how could it be different? How could anything be different? The scents were the same, the sounds were the same. But he stepped forward and stumbled against something and realised that of course it wasn’t the same, of course things had changed. Napoleon put a hand on his arm and said, ‘Illya, let me help you. There’s a little hall table here. Come into the living room.’

‘Let me take off my shoes. Take off your shoes,’ Illya said, reaching out to the right to find that the coat stand was still there in the hall, still with its broad wooden back and the ledge at the bottom for shoes. He took off his coat and it was taken from his hands before he could move to hang it up. He
bent and slipped off his shoes and felt the cool parquet floor under his socked feet, and he waited for Napoleon to finish removing his own shoes.

‘Okay,’ Napoleon said, putting a hand on Illya’s arm again. ‘Come through into the living room. That’s it. Come over to the sofa.’

So Illya let himself be guided through the apartment that he thought he knew and he sat down on the old familiar sofa, and he felt tears sparkling in his eyes.

‘Kolya, make the tea, make the tea,’ his mother said, and then she was sitting beside him and stroking his fringe from his forehead and saying, ‘Oh, Illyushka, your hair has grown so long. You must let me cut it while you’re here. Of course, you can’t see it, so – ’

‘No,’ Illya said firmly, closing his hand over hers. ‘No, mama, I have a very good barber in New York who cuts my hair just as I like it.’ Then he explained in English to Napoleon with an amused smile, ‘My mother wants to cut my hair, Napoleon. I’ve told her about Mr Gregor.’

Napoleon came over and ruffled Illya’s hair affectionately.

‘Don’t let her touch a single golden strand,’ he said with a grin. Illya wanted to catch Napoleon’s hand into his. He wanted to kiss him; but he could not do that in front of his parents. Of course he couldn’t.

Then his mother put her hand on his cheek and turned his face a little, and she said tearfully, ‘Oh, your eyes, Illyushenka. Your beautiful blue eyes. Oh, my baby.’

And she enveloped him in her arms again, and cried.

‘Mama, it’s all right,’ he promised her. ‘It’s all right. No, don’t cry. I’m fine.’

‘But you’re blind,’ she sobbed. ‘My beautiful baby. Your beautiful eyes. You can’t see. Oh, Illyushenka. Oh, my darling. I’ve been so afraid for you working for that terrible organisation, and now you’re blind, and – Oh...’

‘Masha, the tea,’ his father broke in. ‘Illyusha, the tea is ready. And please, your – friend – ’ And there was something in the way he said friend that made Illya wonder. ‘You haven’t yet introduced your friend.’

So Illya disentangled himself from his mother and stood up and reached out, asking, ‘Napoleon?’

‘Right here, Illya,’ Napoleon said, touching his hand.

‘Napoleon, these are my parents. My mother Marya Petrovna, and my father Nikolay Ivanovitch,’ he said in English, then switched to Ukrainian to say, ‘Mama, tato, you know all about Napoleon. He is my partner at U.N.C.L.E., and I have lived with him since the accident. He is my mainstay, my saviour. I would love for you to treat him as one of the family.’

‘Oh, but what can I do with a name like that?’ his mother asked laughingly, then she said haltingly in English, ‘Napoleon, please, sit with Illya. Will you have tea?’

And Napoleon replied in his most charming voice, ‘Thank you, Marya Petrovna. I would love to have tea.’

‘Mama, where are we sleeping?’ Illya asked, listening to the tea being poured, revelling in the wonderful scent of tea being poured, at home, no doubt being mixed with hot water from the old
samovar. They must be using the old samovar. He could smell the burning coals. The tea would be so good, it would be sweet with jam and so strong.

‘Here, Illyusha, here is your tea,’ his mother said, taking his hand and carefully pressing his fingers to the handle of the cup. ‘There. It’s not too full. Take care.’

Illya smiled. ‘Mama, I have been blind for two years,’ he said patiently. ‘I have drunk a lot of tea. I can even make my own, you know. Napoleon gave me a beautiful samovar for Christmas.’

But she just replied, ‘Oh, Illyusha,’ then said, ‘Your father and I have been talking about where to put you two,’ and by that Illya read arguing, ‘and we see no choice but to let you have our bed.’

‘Mama,’ Illya began in a tone of protest, but she touched a hand to his forehead and said, ‘No, Illya. You aren’t well and you are blind and you need order, don’t you? If you sleep out here we will have to tidy away your bed every morning and things will be moved. Your father and I will sleep out here and you and your friend will be happy sharing the bed. I am not going to argue.’

Illya lifted his head a little and asked, ‘Tato, is it all right for us to use your bed?’

His mother made a grumbling noise but then his father said, ‘Of course, Illya. Of course it is. You need to sleep well. Your mother and I will be fine out here.’

Illya could feel Napoleon close beside him, his thigh along Illya’s thigh. The sofa was small and they were squeezed on it with his mother on the other side of him. It was so good to be home, but it would be better to be in privacy with Napoleon, close to him in bed. And he wondered again what his parents knew or thought about their relationship.

‘You two must be hungry,’ his mother said after a silence that was filled only with the sounds of drinking tea. The tea tasted wonderful. ‘I have dinner cooking. All your favourites, Illyusha. Will you need me to cut your food?’

Illya resisted the bridling feeling that rose in him. ‘No, mama, of course not. I just need to know where things are on my plate. Napoleon will tell me.’

He felt Napoleon’s minute reaction at his name and explained, ‘We are talking about dinner.’

‘I know,’ Napoleon replied. ‘I’m following some of this, I’ll have you know. I’m sure my Ukrainian will be excellent by the end of this two weeks.’

((O))

When Illya’s mother went back into the kitchen Napoleon patted a hand onto Illya’s thigh and then got up to follow her, ostensibly to carry his cup back to the kitchen, but mostly just because he wanted to see the place. He had been surprised at how colourful the apartment was. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had expected; some sort of uniform Soviet gloom, perhaps; but there was colour everywhere, pictures and fabric hangings on the walls, what looked like crocheted or tatted covers on the arms of the chairs, colourful rugs on the wooden floors. It was small, and he understood what Illya meant about how different his apartment in New York had felt, but it was so homely that he knew exactly why Illya felt so strongly about coming back here.

There were curtains hanging ceiling to floor on one side of the small living room, probably covering
the door to the balcony Illya had spoken of, and that balcony must be a relief in such a small place. He wondered how it would have been had Illya had siblings. Where on earth would they have slept?

He pushed open the door to the kitchen, and blinked in a billow of steam. The room was tiny, barely big enough for one person to stand and cook, but somehow Mrs Kuryakina had managed to pile up pots of food and was preparing more.

‘Er, my cup,’ he said in hesitant Russian, holding it out. He had always been more confident reading Russian than speaking it.

The woman turned and smiled and took the cup, and Napoleon smiled back, just looking at her. Her hair was grey, but he could see some of Illya in her face. Her eyes were blue just as Illya’s had been, and looking into them he felt a welling of sadness for Illya’s eyes. It had been so long since he had seen them, and he had been hoping that soon the white opacity would be removed and he would be able to see them again. He felt a furious surge of hope that this delay wouldn’t be a long one.

Illya’s mother was looking at him questioningly, and Napoleon smiled again and patted her cheek and said carefully in Russian, ‘You have Illya’s eyes.’

Tears welled in those eyes then, and he felt sorry for provoking such a reaction. But she smiled and shook her head and wiped the tears away with her sleeve, murmuring something that Napoleon couldn’t catch, that he thought was probably Ukrainian, not Russian. Then she said in English, ‘You look after my Illyusha, yes?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Napoleon said fervently. ‘Yes, Mrs Kuryakina. Yes, it is my joy to look after him.’

She smiled again and said, ‘Marya Petrovna, Napoleon. Yes? No Mrs Kuryakina. You call me by my name.’

He nodded. ‘Marya Petrovna. Yes. I look after Illya, and he looks after me.’

She glanced at the door, reached round Napoleon, and pulled it properly closed, shutting them both in the tiny space that was full of the scents of food.

‘He is – oh – ’ Her forehead wrinkled in exasperation as she grasped for words. ‘He is well?’

‘Well, he has a cold,’ Napoleon began, but she shook her head.

‘No, no. He is – Illya is well with his blindness? He is happy? Is Illya happy?’

Now Napoleon didn’t know what to say. Illya’s emotions were so complex; they always had been; and often Napoleon didn’t really know exactly what was going on in his mind.

‘He’s all right,’ he said at last. ‘Sometimes happy, sometimes sad. More happy than sad now. And soon he’ll have the transplant. The operation.’

‘Yes, the operation,’ she echoed wistfully. She nodded towards the pots on the small stove. ‘I will feed him and make him well. We will make him strong. He will have his operation.’

‘Perhaps in the summer,’ Napoleon hazarded. ‘There are less illnesses in the summer. It really depends on when another cornea becomes available.’

He could see that he was losing her a little, and he smiled again and put a hand on her shoulder.

‘He will have his operation,’ he said. ‘We’ll make him well.’
She stood and looked at him then, regarding him as if she wanted to ask him something. But then she shook her head minutely and turned back to the stove to stir one of the pots. She picked up the cup he had brought in then and said, ‘You drink more tea, yes? Drink with Nikolay Ivanovitch. Rest. Yes?’

He took the cup and turned it in his hands. It was a delicate china. It looked old, like the beautiful samovar and the teapot on the table out there. So he smiled at the woman again and went back into the cramped living room, where Illya had opened his suitcase and brought out a Braille book and was showing his father the tactile writing.

‘Napoleon?’ he asked as Napoleon closed the door behind him.

‘The one and only,’ Napoleon replied. ‘I’ve come for more tea, Illya. Your mother insists.’

Illya reached out a hand towards the table, saying something in Ukrainian to his father, but his father put his hand on Illya’s to stop him reaching the teapot and replied gruffly.

‘Give him your cup, Napoleon,’ Illya said in a wearied tone. ‘He’ll pour.’

Napoleon passed over his cup and sat down by Illya again, glad that the small sofa forced such closeness.

‘How are you doing, honey?’ he asked quietly while Nikolay was focussed on pouring the tea, and Illya smiled rather wanly.

‘Just a little tired,’ he said. ‘This wretched cold. And – ’ He waved his hand vaguely, and Napoleon said, ‘I understand.’

He did understand, he thought. He understood how strange it must be for Illya to be sitting here in his old home, with his parents who were seeing him as a blind man for the first time, when he had been blind for so long. It must be frustrating for him to have to go through convincing his parents that he wasn’t entirely helpless.

‘We’ll have dinner, and then maybe you can beg off and get some rest. It’s been a very long day.’

He took the cup that Illya’s father held out to him and thanked him, then sipped at the strong tea.

‘There are some good smells coming from that kitchen,’ he commented. ‘Your mother must be a good cook.’

‘The best,’ Illya smiled. ‘When she can get the ingredients she’s the best cook.’

‘Do your parents work?’ Napoleon asked, and Illya nodded.

‘Yes, still. Mama is a chemist. Tato too, although he was a soldier during the war, of course.’

‘Your father fought?’

Illya nodded. ‘Yes, he was a very brave man,’ he said with pride. Then he spoke in Ukrainian to his father, who smiled and patted Illya’s knee. ‘I was showing tato my Braille book,’ Illya said then, with a grin. ‘He doesn’t understand how I can read it either.’

‘The simple answer is that you’re a genius,’ Napoleon said affectionately.

Illya shifted uncomfortably, then said, ‘All this tea. Too much liquid. Where’s my cane?’
'Here it is,' Napoleon said, handing it to him. ‘Need help?’

Illya shook his head. He said something to his father and then sighed as the man stood up, apparently not listening to Illya’s protests that he could manage, and took his hand to help him to the bathroom door.

((O))

It felt like a very long time until Illya was granted the luxury of lying down in his parents’ small double bed, but at last he and Napoleon were alone. Napoleon had swept the apartment very thoroughly for bugs and now he dropped a little clattering handful into Illya’s palm.

‘That’s our little haul,’ he said, pressing Illya’s fingers hard around the bugs to muffle them. He put a glass of water in his other hand. ‘Do you want to do the honours?’

So Illya grinned and dropped the handful into the water, and imagined the chagrin of the agents at the other end as one by one their bugs went dead.

‘I take offence at them bugging my parents,’ he said.

‘Well, that’s the last until they get a chance to sneak in again,’ Napoleon said in a satisfied tone. ‘They weren’t very imaginative with their placement – and, yes, I did check the imaginative places too. I guess they’ll up the game next time.’

‘Well, at least for tonight we’re alone.’

Illya lay back on the rather lumpy mattress, his head aching and a little feverish, but full of good food and surrounded by the strange combination of the scents of his old bedroom and Napoleon’s musky aftershave. He turned over onto his side and reached out a hand to stroke Napoleon’s cheek, finding his lips with his fingertips and then bringing his face closer to kiss him gently. His mouth tasted so good. Despite feeling unwell he was overtaken by the urge to press himself hard against Napoleon’s body and take things further. Napoleon’s hands began to roam over Illya’s sleek back, massaging the muscles, and Illya groaned softly.

‘Oh, I wish we could,’ he murmured, stroking the soft length of Napoleon’s back, feeling their cocks growing hard together. ‘But even if you have got rid of the bugs, we’re in my parents’ bed, Napoleon. The walls are paper thin and we would have to walk through the living room where they’re sleeping to get to the bathroom.’

‘I’d be very quiet,’ Napoleon promised silkily.

‘You’re never quiet,’ Illya contradicted him. ‘You are an exhibitionist.’

‘Humph,’ Napoleon said. ‘You’re a fine one to talk.’

‘We cannot make love in my parents’ bed, Napoleon,’ Illya said sternly. ‘And that is the end of it.’

‘Oh god, Illya,’ Napoleon whispered, closing his strong fingers around both their cocks. He didn’t move his hand, just held it there, holding them together, and it felt so right and Illya so wanted him to stroke with his strong hand. ‘Two weeks... I won’t survive.’
Illya almost groaned at the tight grip around his cock, at Napoleon’s heat against him. He wanted to make love, he really did. He wanted to have Napoleon inside him, to have Napoleon’s hand pumping him, drawing him up to a crashing climax. It would be so easy to relent; but if they were discovered by his parents it would be terrible.

‘You will survive, idiot. This was your idea,’ he told Napoleon. ‘But anyway, they will both be out at work tomorrow, lyubimy, and the apartment will be ours.’

He could almost feel Napoleon’s glee at that thought.

‘Did you ever bring girls back here?’ Napoleon asked. ‘Or boys?’

Illya grinned, and stroked his fingertips over Napoleon’s hair. ‘That would be telling.’

He pressed his mouth against Napoleon’s cheek, feeling the roughness of stubble on his lips, then moved to nibble along the edge of his ear, delighting in the salty taste of the soft flesh. He wanted to whisper all sorts of endearments into that ear. He wanted to kiss and be kissed. Then he sighed, suddenly overcome with a flash of nostalgia for all those times in hotel rooms around the world, all the gritty, dangerous times when he had slept with Napoleon not as a lover, but as a partner, before facing danger or after it, always sharpened by the adrenaline in his system, always so alive. He had been blessed with a small taste of that again in recent months, but it was not quite the same when he couldn’t go out with a gun in his hand and face death head on.

‘Have I got soft, Napoleon?’ he asked, drawing his mouth away from Napoleon’s skin.

Napoleon’s fingers palpated strongly around his hard cock. ‘I wouldn’t say so, honey,’ he said with a smile in his voice.

‘I don’t mean that,’ Illya said rather impatiently. He groaned softly. He didn’t need this now, didn’t need that touch. ‘I mean, have I changed? Has being blind made me soft? Have I changed so much?’

Napoleon stroked his fingers down Illya’s cheek and said, ‘Illya, we’ve both changed. We’ve both changed because you’re blind and we’ve both changed because of this too. Because of this love.’ He laid a kiss on Illya’s lips. ‘Of course we’ve changed. But no, you haven’t gotten soft. Not at all. You are stronger than you’ve ever been. You fight every day. Maybe not men with guns, but you fight for everything you do. You’ve never pretended this was easy. I can tell it’s not easy. Even now it’s not easy. No, you haven’t gotten soft. And if in a month, two months, five months, however long it takes, if this operation makes you see again, you will still be strong. I know your sight might not be as good as it used to be, I know you’ve been told you can’t go back in the field, but you’ll be just as strong as you always were. We’ve always taken care of each other in the field, as partners if not as lovers. No, you’re not soft.’

Illya smiled and stroked a hand down Napoleon’s arm, feeling the muscles just beneath the skin. He knew that he had changed. He had put on a little more weight than he had used to have because although he worked out in the gym and went running with Napoleon, his life was more sedentary day to day. His hair was a little longer because Napoleon liked it longer and because the barber assured him that that was how the fashion was now. The women at U.N.C.L.E. still complimented him on his looks and on his hair, although they no longer made comments about his blue eyes. He wondered idly what had happened to fashions while he couldn’t see, what clothing would look like, what hairstyles would be. He had not imagined anything changing, but things always changed. He suppose his parents must look a little older. Napoleon must look a little older.

He thought about the operation, the operation he should have had by now. He should have been lying in the clinic in Munich getting over it. Perhaps he would be opening his eyes and seeing
something. The doctors had been very realistic about it all. His right eye would be done first because that one had the greatest chance of success, and the left would have to wait. There was no chance that he would come out of the operation with perfect vision. Perhaps he would never have that, and at first at least things would be very blurry; but blurry would be better than a white haze. Perhaps he would be able to read large print, perhaps he would be able to see objects in his path. At first he would still need the cane, he would still need help, but gradually, hopefully, things would grow better, and perhaps at last he would have useful sight.

He snuggled closer to Napoleon and rested his head against his shoulder. There was nothing to be done about that but wait. The disappointment about the cancelled operation had been displaced, or at least obscured a little, by the wonder of being here at home, with Napoleon at his side. He needed to get over the nasty lingering sore throat and fever and sneezes and just wait for another opportunity to come up.
In the morning he felt so much better than he had. He had found himself sweating in the night, wrapped around Napoleon and hot under the covers, but that seemed to burn the fever away, and he woke with a clear head and a lightness in his chest. He stirred and stretched and blinked his eyes open, and then remembered just where he was, and smiled.

‘Good morning, Napoleon,’ he said quietly.

He wasn’t entirely sure of the time, although there was some light in the room; a faint change in the blur before his eyes when he turned his head towards the curtained window. He reached a hand under the covers and touched what might have been Napoleon’s forehead, but then he realised it was his shoulder, and he kissed it softly.

Napoleon grunted and moved. ‘Good morning, lover,’ he said sleepily. ‘You feeling better?’

‘I am,’ Illya said. ‘I am feeling much better.’

‘The good air of home, perhaps,’ Napoleon replied.

Illya chuckled and turned over in bed and felt first for his watch and then for the clothes which he had left carefully folded on the chair at the side of the bed to put on in the morning. He pulled on pants and trousers and felt the time on his watch, then got up, steadying himself with a hand on the wall.

‘Y’okay? Need help?’ Napoleon asked sleepily.

‘I’m okay,’ Illya said. ‘I know things might have moved around but the doors and the walls are in the same place. I just need the toilet. You stay there.’

It was chilly in the apartment at this time of the morning, but it didn’t matter. It was still home. He moved cautiously over to the bedroom door with one hand held out before him and crept into the living room. He wasn’t sure exactly how far the sofa bed extended, so he walked very carefully, pushing his bare feet over the floor and holding his hands out at waist height to feel for obstructions. He felt the smooth wood of the parquet flooring under the soles of his feet, and then the rug. There were obstructions as he moved across the room but none of them were his sleeping parents. He made it to the toilet and used it, then slipped into the separate bathroom to wash his hands. He splashed a rousing handful of water over his face, and then turned back into the living room.

‘Illyusha?’

He turned his head towards the voice on the other side of the room.

‘Good morning, mama,’ he said quietly. ‘Is tato still asleep?’

And his father grunted something, by which he took it that he wasn’t as asleep as he would like to be.

There was a fumble of noise and the room lightened as his mother turned on a lamp and got up.

‘Be careful,’ she told him, coming over to him and putting a hand on his arm. ‘The room is so cluttered now.’
‘I’m all right,’ he promised. ‘Mama, I have been blind for a long time; what feels like a long time. I know this is the first time you have seen me like this, but I promise you, I am much more capable than you think I am.’

She kissed his cheek and stroked his arm, then touched his forehead with the back of her hand.

‘Do you still feel ill this morning? You look better.’

‘I feel better,’ he assured her.

‘Well, then, do you want tea?’ she asked.

‘Let me help,’ Illya asked her, feeling for her. He could feel her slight plumpness in the flesh of her upper arm. ‘Look, mama. See, I hold your arm like this, just above the elbow, and that’s how you guide me. Take me to the kitchen.’

He wondered if he could convince his mother that he could use the gas ring and that he was quite capable of using the samovar. He had told her on the telephone about how he had learnt to cook without sight but he had never been quite sure that she believed him. His mother was a scientist, a rational woman, but she seemed to have no rationality at all in her anxiety over her son.

He crowded next to her in the little kitchen and listened to the striking of a match. The smell of phosphorus blazed into the air and mixed with the scent of gas. She was making tea on the stove instead of with the samovar. Illya reached out to where the kettle had always been kept, but it wasn’t there.

‘What are you looking for?’ his mother asked him, and he said, ‘The kettle.’ At her hesitation he said, ‘Mama, I look after myself very well in New York. I go to work every day. I get around without a guide in familiar places. I cook for myself and for Napoleon. I can certainly fill a kettle.’

‘Oh,’ she exclaimed suddenly. She had been looking in the food larder, Illya thought, judging by the blast of cold air that had suddenly come in from outside. ‘Illyusha, we used all the milk last night. I’ll pop out and get some.’

‘I’ll come,’ Illya said instantly. ‘I’ll go and find some more clothes.’

And before she could argue he left her in the kitchen and found his way back to the bedroom.

‘Napoleon, where’s my coat?’ he asked as he hurriedly got on a shirt and jumper. Napoleon had brought his coat into the bedroom so he could identify it easily, instead of having to feel through all the others on the rack in the hall.

‘Huh?’ Napoleon sounded as if he had been falling back to sleep.

‘We’re out of milk. I want to be dressed before my mother decides to go without me.’

‘Oh. Oh.’ Napoleon sounded a little more awake then. ‘Uh, your coat’s right here. Got your shoes?’

Illya was already slipping his socked feet into his shoes and feeling for his cane where he had left it leaning by the bed.

‘Yeah, just need my coat and gloves. Thank you, Napoleon.’

He shrugged into the coat as Napoleon handed it to him and pushed his gloves into his pocket.

‘I expect you to be up and dressed by the time I get back,’ he tossed over his shoulder to Napoleon
as he left the room, then called, ‘Mama, are you there?’

He could hear her moving in the hall. He willed her not to argue, and she didn’t. She just came to him with a sound of keys dropping into her pocket and said, ‘What must I do? How do I help you?’

Illya patted her arm with a grin.

‘It will be fine,’ he assured her. ‘Here, let me hold your arm just above the elbow as I showed you. I’ll use the cane too. Just try to warn me of doors and kerbs and other changes in ground level.’

‘Oh, Illyushenka,’ she said rather sadly, patting her gloved hand over his. Then she sighed and said, ‘I’m sorry. I’m an old fool, Illya. I know you are a grown man. I know you’re not helpless. But I love you. You know that I love you.’

‘Of course I do, mama,’ Illya assured her. ‘I know this is hard for you. It was hard for me at first, and it still is sometimes. But let’s get some milk. I need my tea. And – oh, do you have coffee in the house? Napoleon will want coffee.’

‘Coffee,’ she murmured as if Illya had asked for gold, frankincense, and myrrh. He knew she and his father had never been fond of coffee. ‘I’m sure there will be coffee at the gastronom. Come on.’

((O))

The early morning air was bitter and crisp and wonderful. It pressed against his nose and cheeks and filled his lungs. Illya could feel the space of the park as they crossed the road and walked along near the railings. The scent of snow filled the air and a slight rustle of wind moved bare branches. He could hear a few voices from somewhere in the park, children shouting in joy in the language of his youth, probably playing in the snow before school. It all felt wonderful. It was bittersweet because he could see none of it, but there was joy.

‘Do you remember the children’s railway in Sirez Park, Illya?’ his mother asked him as he moved his cane across the hard pavement, feeling for ice and snow. ‘I wish they had built it ten years earlier. You would have loved it.’

Illya smiled. He would have loved it. He remembered hearing of it with some jealousy when he was twenty and just too old to be involved. He would have so enjoyed getting his hands into the engineering of the locomotives and running the things along the rails.

‘Yes, I remember it,’ he said, thinking of the sulphur scent of the burning coal and the clanks and squeals of engines in motion. ‘Yes, you should be glad they didn’t build it ten years earlier, because I never would have been at home. I might have become an engine driver instead of a scientist.’

His mother laughed, and then quietened, and he knew what she was thinking. If he had become an engine driver he would not be blind. But what a limited life that would be compared to what he had experienced.

‘It’s all right, mama,’ he said softly, squeezing his hand a little on her arm. ‘I wouldn’t rewrite it. I wouldn’t miss out on what I have had, and what I still have.’

She let out a sigh, and he could hear her sadness.
'Has the park changed, *mama*?' he asked, changing the subject, turning his face towards the open space through the railings that he couldn’t see but could sense in the sounds and echoes.

'The park? No, the park is just the same. I still walk across every day to go to work. It doesn’t change."

Napoleon would have told him that the trees were bare because it was winter, and he would have said how much snow was on the ground or told him the colour of the grass, or picked out the colour of an unseasonal blossom on a shrub. But he accepted what his mother said. The park hadn’t changed. He tapped his cane over the pavement and followed his mother’s arm, and listened to the sounds of traffic stirring and the trolley buses rumbling over the hard streets. He closed his eyes and felt how unchanged it all was.

'Does Aneta Shevtsova still work in the *gastronom*?' he asked.

'Oh, yes, still. She’s still just as pretty, too,’ his mother added, and Illya felt a longing to see the twinkle he knew would be in his mother’s eyes, little as he cared about how pretty Aneta Shevtsova was. He remembered her well. She was a little older than he and he had gazed on her sometimes at school, but he had no interest now. He made a non-committal grunt and his mother hesitated just enough in her step that he stumbled.

'Illyusha,’ she said in a low, serious voice. ‘You do know that your father and I love you no matter what?’

‘Yes, of course I do,’ he said quickly, but he had an ominous feeling about where this conversation was going.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘That’s good.’ Then she said in a rush, ‘And your Napoleon. You love him.’

‘Napoleon is a very good friend,’ Illya said cautiously.

‘Of course he’s a very good friend. Any fool can see that,’ his mother said impatiently. ‘But you know I’m talking of something else. Illyushenka, you are my only boy, and I love you. My only concern is your happiness. You are happy with Napoleon, aren’t you?’

Suddenly Illya felt relief like a sunrise in his soul. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, I am very happy with Napoleon. We complete each other. I love him.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘I’m glad. Your father and I are both glad. Both of us, Illyusha. Your father – well, we have suspected this for some time and we’ve talked about it a lot, and he has a harder time with it, but he has told me, he has assured me, that he is happy that you are happy.’

Illya wasn’t sure what to say, but he pressed his hand firmly on his mother’s arm and smiled.

‘We’ll be considerate around *tato*,’ he assured her.

‘Of course you will. Of course. And you will be careful, won’t you? Be very careful while you are here. I don’t think they’d send you to a camp because you are blind, but the thought of those hospitals sends ice through my soul.’

Illya shuddered. The very idea of being dragged off to a mental institution and forcibly treated to ‘cure’ him of his love for Napoleon was horrifying.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘We’re careful in New York too, even if the penalties aren’t quite as drastic. We’re always careful.’
‘Good, Illyusha,’ she said. ‘Good. I only want your happiness. You must take happiness wherever you find it.’

Then she turned and stopped walking and said, ‘We cross the street here. You remember?’

She seemed relieved to be able to change the subject, and Illya felt relieved too.

‘I remember,’ he nodded.

He hadn’t known exactly where they were but now he did. He remembered the street and the trees and the long low modern block that contained the shop amongst other amenities. He found the drop of the kerb with his cane and followed his mother’s anxious guidance across the road, and was glad of the cane because she completely forgot to warn him of the kerb on the other side and apologised profusely when she remembered, after he had managed it safely.

‘There now, the shop,’ she said as the echoes of a high, hard surface rose in front of him.

Illya said, ‘Now, I know this door is hinged on the left and opens inward, but it is useful for you to tell me which side they are hinged and which way they open when we come to doors.’

‘Of course. I’ll try to remember,’ she promised, and Illya followed her into the shop which he remembered vaguely but had probably changed. The scents were the same, though; the impersonal scent of dust and hard floors and little moments of food scents in the cold air. He followed his mother’s arm around and heard the clink of the milk bottles when she picked them up, and then there was the scent of coffee with the rustle of a paper packet.

‘There. That’s all. I thought we could eat at a restaurant tonight, Illyusha. We could celebrate having you here.’

‘That will be perfect,’ he assured his mother.

And then a voice rose as they approached the counter, feminine but high with surprise.

‘Illya Nikolayevich! Is that – ? What’s happened? I thought you lived abroad. Illya Nikolayevich, are you blind?’

Illya grimaced a little, but he slipped his wrist through the loop on his cane and stepped closer to the counter. He ran his hand over the hard edge and then slipped off his glove and held his hand out to the sound of the woman.

‘Do you remember me?’ she asked. ‘Do you know who I – ’

‘Of course, Aneta Matveyevna,’ he said with a polite smile, trying to sort her fluster of questions in his mind as she gripped his hand. ‘Yes, I live abroad, in the United States. I’m just back for a short visit. And yes, I am blind. Was there another question you asked? Sorry, I – ’

‘What happened?’ she said, squeezing his hand still. ‘Yes, I asked what happened?’

Illya tipped his head down a little, rubbing his other hand over the hard edge of the counter again, feeling it mutedly through the leather of his glove. ‘An accident in a lab,’ he said with reasonable truthfulness. He gestured at his eyes with a shrug. ‘Acid.’

‘Oh, Illya Nikolayevich!’ She sounded genuinely upset. ‘Oh my god, Illya – I can’t believe it. You were the cleverest in the whole school. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.’
He smiled rather self-consciously, but he resisted the impulse to assure her that his intelligence was quite intact.

‘It’s all right,’ he told her. ‘It’s all right. It’s been two years. There’s no need – ’

‘But, Illya, how do you manage? Where do you live?’

‘I do all right,’ he mumbled with an awkward smile, trying to retrieve his hand, which she was squeezing so hard. He never knew what to do with conversations like this. He far preferred it when people acknowledged his disability but then moved on. Aneta seemed overcome with shock.

‘We should get back with the milk,’ he murmured to his mother. ‘Make that tea. Aneta, it has been good to see you. No doubt I’ll be in again while we’re here.’

‘Oh, oh, yes,’ Aneta replied, finally letting go of his hand. ‘Yes, Illya, it’s good to see – I mean – Oh – ’

Illya smiled and pushed his hand back into his glove, and said to his mother again, ‘We must be getting back.’

And she seemed to understand his discomfort, because she patted his hand and put her groceries in her bag and led him out of the shop. It was such a relief to be in the open air, and Illya took a very deep breath and almost laughed.

‘Oh, Illya, is that how I behave towards you?’ his mother asked ruefully, pressing her hand over his where he held her arm. ‘Am I so terrible?’

‘Oh, no, of course not, mama,’ he said quickly, then added with a little smile, ‘besides, that is your privilege as my mother.’

‘It’s very hard to get used to, you know,’ she said. ‘I know it has been two years but I haven’t seen you in all that time. I haven’t seen how you have changed.’

‘Am I really so different?’ Illya asked.

‘Not you, Illya. Not you. But – well, the shell of you. Something of you is different, of course. It must be.’

He sighed. ‘Well, I suppose it is,’ he said.

‘Listen, Illyusha, let’s walk back through the park,’ his mother said suddenly. ‘And I’ll tell you everything that is there. The little birds looking for food in the snow and the people walking and the trees and the little lake which of course is all frozen right now. I’ll tell you all that’s changed and all that’s stayed the same. I’ll make you see it. You’d like that, yes?’

And Illya smiled. ‘I would like that very much.’

((O))

Napoleon was just finishing getting dressed when he realised he could hear Illya’s voice in the apartment again. He put his head rather cautiously around the door into the living room to see that Illya’s father was dressed and was folding the thin mattress that he and his wife had slept on back
The door to the kitchen was open and steam was wafting through the cold air. It felt amazing to be here. He had spent very little time in the Soviet Union before this, and never so intimately, right in someone’s home. And Illya seemed more Russian here than he ever had. He was exotic and beautiful in his home territory. Even his accent was stronger.

Napoleon rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin, wondering when he would get the chance to shave, supposing he would have to take turns with Illya in the tiny bathroom rather than shaving beside him at the basin as he liked to at home. It was always a pleasure to loll around in the bathroom watching Illya shave, watching him touching his face with his fingertips and then following them with the razor to remove the white foam from his skin.

The smell of coffee began to creep from the kitchen, and Napoleon grinned. He had resigned himself to drinking nothing but tea while they were here. And then Illya emerged from the tiny room where he must have been cramped in with his mother, using his cane to navigate the cluttered living room and making towards the door.

‘Hi,’ Napoleon said, still smiling broadly and reaching out to touch Illya’s arm when he was close enough.

‘We got you coffee,’ Illya said, ‘but it’s brewing, as is the tea. There’s time to wash and shave first. Can you help me?’

‘Will we fit?’ Napoleon asked half-seriously.

‘Well enough,’ Illya shrugged. ‘I’m just not sure where my shaving kit is in the luggage. Can you find it for me?’

‘With pleasure,’ Napoleon told him.

‘When we’ve had some breakfast I want to take you out to see the park and some of the city,’ Illya said. ‘Or must we be at the office today?’

‘No, just any time within the next few days,’ Napoleon said easily. ‘I want to see your park, and your city, and all your Ukrainian delights.’

Illya smiled subtly at Napoleon’s intonation and said, ‘Well, I’m sure we can have a spare key and we’ll let my parents get to work before we go out, and I’ll show you as many Ukrainian delights as I can. Now, the shaving kit. Will you find it for me? Or your coffee will be cold by the time we’re done.’

So Napoleon went to find the shaving kit and crowded into the small bathroom with Illya, and they fit, just. The coffee afterwards wasn’t the best but the blinis that Illya’s mother cooked were delicious, and then finally they were left alone in the small apartment, and Napoleon sighed with relief, slumping down onto the sofa and pulling Illya down beside him.

‘Alone,’ he said, leaning in towards his partner to kiss him lightly on the cheek. ‘At last.’

‘Yes, it’s good, isn’t it?’ Illya asked with a wry smile. ‘I thought I remembered everything about this place so well, but it seems smaller than it ever did.’

‘Well, now we’re alone...’ Napoleon began suggestively.

‘Patience,’ Illya admonished. ‘First, Napoleon, my mother spoke very seriously to me on the way to the shop.’
‘Uhuh?’ Napoleon prompted him, feeling apprehensive.

‘No, it’s all right,’ Illya assured him, feeling for his hand and stroking his fingers lightly. ‘But she and my father have guessed the depth of our relationship. They know, Napoleon. I think they knew even before we came.’

‘And?’

Illya shrugged. ‘Mama is anxious only that we’re happy. Tato is apparently a bit more reluctant to accept it, but he does accept it. We only need to be tactful in front of him – in front of both of them, of course.’

‘My love, I am always tactful,’ Napoleon reminded him as he stroked Illya’s golden hair back from his temple and kissed him. ‘I’m glad they know, Illya. I know it might feel awkward at first but I don’t like deceiving your parents.’

‘I wonder what your parents would say,’ Illya mused, and Napoleon chuckled.

‘Did I tell you Antonia knows?’

‘No?’

‘She said it was blatantly obvious, to her at least. She told me at Christmas, gave us her blessing. She thinks we make a lovely couple.’

Illya laughed. ‘That’s very kind of her. And we do make a lovely couple. But is it really so obvious?’

‘To Antonia. Thank the lord, only to Antonia. Not to mom and dad. I think mom would be on board but I don’t know about dad. I look forward to them never finding out.’

‘Hmm, double standards,’ Illya murmured, but he seemed to have far more interest in tracing his fingertips over Napoleon’s face and neck than talking about their respective parents. Napoleon tilted his head back and shivered under the delicate touch. Illya leant closer to Napoleon so that he could leave kisses along his jaw and then catch his lips with his own, then he said huskily, ‘Let’s take this to the bedroom, lyubimy.’

‘Oh, no objections to doing it in your parents’ bed now?’ Napoleon asked archly.

‘I have more objections to my parents walking in on us in their living room. As for doing it in their bed, I will just have to close my eyes and think of Mother Russia,’ Illya said with a wonderful grimness.

‘You do that,’ Napoleon said, returning a few of the kisses, ‘and I will be sure to very effectively help you forget where you are.’

((O))

It was easy to forget just where they were with Napoleon seducing him like this. The scents and sensations of the apartment were fading quickly into the background. As horrified as Illya’s parents would be to walk in on this scene, the thought of them was drifting further and further away as more basic needs rose.
‘We could just do it here...’ Illya murmured, beginning to weaken as Napoleon sucked one of his fingers into his mouth. ‘Oh, god...’ he jerked out.

‘Not here,’ Napoleon said, nuzzling his neck again, and his breath billowed warmly over Illya’s skin. ‘I think I know just how to preserve the sanctity of your parents’ bed.’

‘Tell me,’ Illya begged, but Napoleon took him by the hand and stood him up and led him into the small bathroom and locked the door.

‘Here,’ Napoleon said, starting to strip Illya of his clothes. He kissed his bare collarbone and said, ‘You carry on. I’ll get the oil.’

And when he came back Illya was naked and as Napoleon leant past him to turn the tap on the bath Illya felt that he was naked too.

‘We’ll never both fit in here,’ he objected, catching Napoleon’s flank with his fingertips, feeling his sleek musculature.

‘Not lying down,’ Napoleon said smoothly. He put his arms around Illya and kissed him long and slow, dipping his tongue deep into Illya’s mouth with the length of his body pressed against Illya’s, his broad hands roaming over his back and buttocks. Then he let go, put a hand on Illya’s naked hip, and said, ‘Get in, lover.’

So Illya carefully stepped into the slick, curved base of the bath, reaching out a hand blindly to feel the tiles on the wall and the slightly rough grout between them, remembering the beige gold colour of those tiles. Then Napoleon got in behind him and said in a less seductive voice, ‘Illya, why does your bath have no bath plug?’

Illya found it hard to care because as he spoke Napoleon’s fingers were drifting softly around the contours of his buttocks and teasing at the cleft between.

‘Oh, we don’t – ’ Illya began, but Napoleon’s fingers were so distracting.

‘We don’t – ?’

Illya tried to focus. ‘Standing water is dirty. We don’t use – Oh, Napoleon. Yes, there. Again... Oh god...’

‘But I’ve seen you up to your neck in standing water at home?’ Napoleon objected, pausing in his attentions.

‘God, Napoleon, just touch – oh, there,’ he sighed as his partner’s hand insinuated itself between his legs to touch his balls. ‘Does it matter if I’ve learnt to bathe like a filthy westerner? This isn’t exactly approved of in my country either. If I’d known we were coming I’d have brought a plug. Just fuck me, Napoleon, please...’

So Napoleon stood behind Illya while Illya rested his arms against the wall and warm water swirled around his feet. Napoleon left kisses on the back of his neck and along his shoulder blades and down his spine. Then Illya bent a little more forward and Napoleon slipped oiled fingers between his cheeks and then into the sensitive hole there. Illya moaned, resting his forehead on the cool tiles. His cock was so hard he almost couldn’t bear it, and when Napoleon slipped his own stiff cock slowly into Illya’s body and took hold of Illya’s aching hardness with strong fingers he cried out aloud.

Napoleon kissed the back of his neck again, his belly firm against Illya’s lower back, and whispered, ‘Shush, honey. It’s coming. It’s coming.’
So Illya stood in the warm running water in this bath he knew so well and opened himself wide for Napoleon, pushing himself back onto him, his hands braced firmly on the tiles he couldn’t see, his forehead pressed against the tiles, and Napoleon began to rock into him, sending slick, firm glides of delight rippling through him. His arms were around Illya’s body, his hands hard and slipping up and down his cock, brushing the sensitive head until Illya sobbed because the sensation was too intense and beautiful to bear.

And Napoleon moved harder, faster, losing himself in his own need, until they were coming together, crying out, panting. Illya slipped to his knees blindly in the bath tub and just crouched there, nerveless and weak and so in love with Napoleon that he had no words.
Chapter 7

One of the small luxuries of being in Kyiv officially on U.N.C.L.E. business was that with a little wrangling Napoleon was able to commandeer a car for the duration of their stay. While Illya felt a certain nostalgia for using the trolley buses and trams and the marshrutka, it made life much easier to have a car at their disposal.

‘I suppose I’ll be the wallflower in the corner,’ he said rather dourly as Napoleon drove them through the streets.

He was feeling his blindness keenly this morning. It was a few days after their arrival in Kyiv and he had woken feeling unaccountably depressed. He found himself dwelling on how long he might have to wait for another transplant to come up, on whether the transplant would work at all, on how changed everything was now from when he had lived in that apartment as a talented student with so much promise.

He recalled growing up in Kyiv so vividly. He recalled the beautiful buildings and parks and streets. Mistily he remembered the city pre-war, and then the awful burning and destruction of the years of occupation, and then the proud rebuilding. He remembered going down to the shores of the Dnieper on hot summer days and swimming in cool waters under blue skies, the splashes of water glittering like diamonds under the sun. He remembered hearing the shrieks of his friends, shrieking himself. He remembered walking the wide, tree-lined streets, hearing patriotic music swelling from loudspeakers in public places, so insistent it stayed in his brain for days. Windows and painted doors and architecture old and new, the faces of citizens walking in the streets, the flashing colours of cars and trams. The lines between paving slabs, dust in the gutters, shop fronts with clean windows full of bounty that he couldn’t touch.

Somehow he felt that all of that was gone. It had taken him months to build up his sensory map of the New York streets around their apartment so that he could go out independently and safely. He had no chance of doing that in these two weeks in Kyiv, so he must always leave the apartment here in company.

Last night he had taken a walk with his father, just around the local neighbourhood, and it had felt so strange to need help to walk around the places that he had thought he knew intimately. He had thought they were walking down one street and his father had told him it was another, and his whole mental image had slipped and skewed. His father had been overly solicitous, far too careful of everything, not even crossing a street until there was no traffic at all because he was afraid that Illya wouldn’t be able to cross fast enough. Then just as the awkwardness was beginning to settle they had run into a neighbour from the apartment block, a young woman who had faltered and stammered and made her excuses to leave, and Illya’s father had told him, ‘She’s expecting a baby, Illya, and she’s a silly, superstitious girl. You know the superstition. She shouldn’t talk with – ’

‘Yes, with the blind, or cripples,’ Illya had said darkly, and he felt very blind, very crippled, walking holding his father’s arm.

His father had patted him on the arm sympathetically and spoke platitudes, but it all felt so strange to be here like this. It felt so awful to be blind when everyone else could see, and he envied all those sighted people with a deep, deep bitterness.

Today the darkness hung on him, and he couldn’t see what possible help he could be at U.N.C.L.E. Kyiv, where undoubtedly there would be nothing set up for the blind.
‘You’re very attractive, Illya, but you don’t in the least resemble a wallflower,’ Napoleon said from behind the wheel. ‘Are you forgetting the one thing you have that I don’t have?’

‘A white stick?’ Illya asked morosely. ‘Not that I can even see that it’s white...’

‘No. You’re fluent in both Ukrainian and Russian, my brooding little flower. I don’t care about the white stick. When we’re in a room with four more dour Russians you’ll be able to tell me what they’re saying. I couldn’t do this without you.’

At that, Illya smiled wanly. ‘Well, I certainly wouldn’t be able to do it without you.’

Napoleon braked the car to a halt, and Illya prepared for a lecture on optimism, but instead Napoleon said, ‘Well, this is it, if I got the address correct. Nice building. Old. The front’s a glassware store. The windows are huge and they’re full of beautiful glass, with all the morning light shining through it.’

Illya pursed his lips. ‘Seems rather foolish, if you ask me. The first time Thrush burst in they’ll destroy everything.’

Napoleon chuckled. ‘Well, maybe that’s one of the first things we can talk to them about. They’re after our advice, after all.’

‘Well, you’d better guide me well on the way in, at any rate,’ Illya murmured darkly. ‘I wouldn’t want to break anything.’

He heard Napoleon sigh. The keys jangled in the ignition and there was the creak of the handbrake as Napoleon pulled it on, and then Illya felt his warm hand on his knee, just pressing there firmly.

‘Illya,’ he said softly. ‘What’s wrong this morning?’

Illya breathed out a long breath and shook his head, feeling rather ashamed of losing himself to this dark mood. It was hardly professional.

‘I don’t know. It’s just a bad morning, I think. I just feel – I don’t know – as if I’m stagnating, maybe. I feel so blind. Being here is making me feel so blind.’ He felt Napoleon about to speak and he shook his head. ‘Don’t misunderstand me, Napoleon. I’m glad we came here. I’m glad we’re staying with my parents. It’s wonderful in so many ways. But it’s strange too. It’s very strange for me. I can remember so much of what’s around me, just like New York I suppose, but – I don’t know how to explain it...’

‘You don’t have to explain it,’ Napoleon said, stroking his leg softly. ‘You don’t have to explain anything.’

Illya hung his head. He felt as if he did have to explain, perhaps partly because he didn’t understand himself.

‘I don’t know,’ he said again.

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said softly. ‘You are more blind here. I can see that too. You’re out of your comfort zone. You don’t have all your equipment, you don’t have Sarah at your beck and call. You haven’t been here for years so you don’t really know it as intimately as New York, but it’s your home so you feel you should know it. You’re relying on me and you have your parents, God bless them, fussing over you because they’re not used to you being blind. All of that together must be a tremendous strain. It’s not wrong that you feel it’s difficult for you. I’m sorry coming home has been hard for you, but don’t feel as if you’re failing somehow for not being at the top of your game.’
'Napoleon, if this transplant never happens…'

'It will happen,' Napoleon said firmly. 'It will. You’ve had one setback. You were ill.'

'And what if – ' The fear rushed over Illya like a drenching rain as a thought solidified, something that he had hardly let himself think consciously until now but had always been there. 'If they cut into my eye and find the damage is too deep after all. If they transplant the cornea but it doesn’t work. If I end up just as blind... But it will be worse, because I have allowed myself the luxury of hope.'

'Then we’ll carry on,' Napoleon said gently. 'We’ll carry on just as we do now.'

'You’ve never been blind.' Illya pressed his hands against the dashboard of the car, feeling the lines and the cool of metal strips edging something smooth and polished. 'You’ve been with me from the start, Napoleon, and I love you, and I couldn’t have done it without you. But I’m the one who is blind. You can’t feel this as I – as I – '

He didn’t know what to say. Napoleon’s hand moved on his leg and there was a long silence.

'I know, I’m not blind,' Napoleon said quietly at last. 'I’ve said before that if I could be blind instead of you, I would, but it’s not true, Illya. I think you know it’s not true. You have a capacity for honesty that puts me to shame, and I don’t want to take your blindness instead of you because I simply cannot imagine facing it with the strength and tenacity and bravery that you’ve shown. I know you’re made uncomfortable by this kind of speech,' he said as Illya squirmed, 'but sometimes it needs saying. I am in awe of you. You have bad days and good days but you’ve never let this keep you down. No one can promise you that this transplant will make everything all right, but I know whatever happens you’ll fight through it. I know that. You can, Illya. You’re strong enough.'

'I’m tired,' Illya said, and he did feel immensely tired.

'I know,' Napoleon said. 'But you’ll still do it. You can do it. Today you need to come with me into this office and help me, because I can’t do it without you. There’s no one I’d trust to translate every word perfectly like you, so I need you.'

Illya took in a deep breath and steadied himself. He felt so blind. He felt so lost. He had let himself remember too much about sight. He had thought too much about the streets around him that he couldn’t see, his countrymen that he couldn’t see, his inability to be independent in the city of his birth. He had learnt long ago that that was a mistake. He might have been so free in this city before he left for the Sorbonne, but that had no bearing on now. Now he was blind, and everything had changed.

'I’m sorry, Napoleon,' he said, trying to push all of that away. ‘I’m ready to go in now.’

'We were a little early anyway,' Napoleon said with a smile in his voice. ‘Come on, then. Head up. Big smile.’

Illya grimaced and Napoleon laughed. ‘I said smile. You look like you’re ready to kill someone.’

'I have a reputation to uphold, after all,' Illya shrugged. He felt capable of coming inside and ashamed of his emotion, but he wasn’t about to start grinning like an idiot. That was a step too far.

((O))
Napoleon watched Illya cautiously as he led him into the glittering glass store. Illya was walking very carefully, keeping his cane held in close to his body, and Napoleon murmured, ‘You’re okay, Illya. I’m piloting you through a nice deep channel between the shoals.’

‘Would you please speak English?’ Illya asked irritably, but he relaxed a little.

Napoleon saw a counter near the back of the store and a very Russian looking man behind it watching him suspiciously, and he nudged Illya and said, ‘You’re on, tovarisch. I’m taking you up to the counter and there’s a very grim little man behind it, so I’d like you to get us in before he decides to shoot us.’

Illya reached out his cane cautiously to feel for the counter, and then he put his hands down on the glass surface and spoke quickly in Russian to the man. After a moment, smiles were exchanged and Illya turned to Napoleon and said, ‘All fine, Napoleon. He says there’s a door on the right at the back of the shop. Yes?’

‘Yes,’ Napoleon confirmed, seeing it, and he led Illya over to it, noticing the man behind the counter turning the neck on a glass swan as they moved. The door opened easily under his touch and he said to Illya, ‘Hinged left, opens inward.’

Inside, they could have been walking into any U.N.C.L.E. office anywhere in the world. The gunmetal grey walls were the same and the pretty woman behind the desk would have easily fitted in in New York, although she had a distinctly Slavic look.

‘They make the girls just as well here as they do at home,’ he commented out of the side of his mouth to Illya, and the woman looked up at him with a smile and said in perfect English, ‘Thank you, Mr Solo, but I have been warned about you, and I should tell you I am not in need of a date.’

‘So much for needing a translator,’ Illya murmured, then he turned towards the desk and spoke rapidly in Russian, and the woman laughed at whatever he had said and handed him his number two badge.

Napoleon took his own badge and slipped it onto his breast pocket, pleased at the apparent change in Illya’s demeanour. Perhaps being at work helped.

Then a suited man came through into the lobby, smiling and holding out a hand.

‘Mr Solo, Tovarisch Kuryakin,’ he said warmly. ‘I am Andriy Yevgenyevich Kobevko, head of this office. Welcome.’ He shook Napoleon’s hand, then he turned to Illya and embraced him in a more Russian greeting and spoke swiftly to him in what Napoleon thought was Ukrainian. It was getting easier to tell the difference.

‘Ah,’ Illya said, then turned to Napoleon and said, ‘Tovarisch Kobevko would like to take us on a tour of the headquarters. He speaks little English, although apparently he’s learning.’

‘You see. Translator, not wallflower,’ Napoleon told him smugly, straightening out his jacket lapel with one hand.

‘All right, all right,’ Illya grumbled, then spoke to the chief again, then grinned and said, ‘First he thought we might like to see the stolovaya – the cafeteria. Apparently it’s considerably better than those in most workplaces and they import the coffee – somehow, don’t ask me – from America.’

‘Ah,’ Napoleon said, brightening considerably. He wouldn’t have said anything to Illya’s mother, but the coffee he had drunk this morning hadn’t been good, and seemed barely caffeinated at all.
He followed their guide to the little cafeteria, which only had four tables and was almost empty apart from a couple of employees over in the corner. Kobevko fetched three cups of coffee and put them down on the table and as Illya reached out and Napoleon moved the cup to his hand the inevitable question was asked. It was notable for an U.N.C.L.E. employee to be blind. Illya was one of very few in the world, and the only one, it seemed, who left the security of U.N.C.L.E. premises for anything like agent’s work. Illya had spoken in an amused tone of Harry Beldon’s legally blind secretary in the past, but she, at least, managed with glasses, and that small amount of sight made such a difference.

Illya got the explanations over quickly, with a few brief words and a sympathetic pat of his arm from Kobevko, and then things turned to business. Napoleon sipped at his coffee and sighed in gratification. It was much better than the coffee he had drunk that morning, and it made it much easier to sit there and listen to Kobevko speaking rapidly in Ukrainian and then Illya translating all he said, and then relaying Napoleon’s replies back again. It seemed that this office was very small as yet, with only six active agents and twenty other staff, but they did have a gun range and labs. Sometimes he needed to remind Illya to translate, as he became caught up in discussing various facilities, especially the labs, but it was such a small place that there wasn’t a lot more to talk about.

‘Four of the agents have transferred from the Moscow office,’ Illya told Napoleon, ‘but the other two are new recruits just back from the Eastern European training centre. The Moscow agents are pretty new too, by all accounts. We haven’t been set up in Russia for long. I suppose I was the prototype Russian agent,’ he said with a flashing grin that made Napoleon’s abdomen tighten. He loved that look on Illya’s face.

‘The original and best,’ he said softly, pressing his foot against Illya’s under the table very briefly. He looked down into his coffee cup. He had drained it to the dregs, although Illya’s was half full, since he had been more busy translating both sides of the conversation. ‘Look, Illya, do you want to wait here while I take a look around?’ he asked. He was half afraid that touring labs and a gun range that he couldn’t see would plunge Illya into gloom again, but then he was afraid that leaving him behind might do that too.

‘Well, won’t you need me to translate?’ Illya asked rather doubtfully, wobbling his cup a little as if to discover how much coffee was left. He spoke to Kobevko again, and then shrugged. ‘Well, apparently the range master is pretty good at English and one of the scientists studied at Oxford,’ he said then, ‘but really, Napoleon, I’d rather come. I’d like to compare notes with the lab man.’

‘Oxford versus Cambridge, huh?’ Napoleon asked with a smile.

‘We won the boat race last,’ Illya murmured, then he lifted his cup and downed the rest of his coffee. ‘Have you finished your drink?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, a while back,’ Napoleon told him, wondering if he might be able to source a packet of that coffee and substitute it for the insipid stuff that Illya’s mother had bought at the local store. ‘All right, then. Let’s go look around.’

((O))

Illya avoided the gun range, choosing to stay in the lab with the chemist who had completed his DPhil in Oxford. It felt like a compact little room, full of the scents of various chemicals and gas, and it reminded Illya so strongly of the chemistry lab back in New York. Perhaps it didn’t look the same
at all, and it was definitely smaller, but it felt the same.

He spoke for a while with the lab man about the set up. Dmitry spoke of how he hoped it would be improved with greater funding, about what was easy to source under the Soviet government and what was hard, about the varied support and opposition they encountered from the local authorities. He asked about bugging, and Dmitry told him laughingly about the many ways in which the KGB tried to bug the place and failed, about the men who trailed them on their missions, about the obstructions that were put in place all the time.

‘Take this,’ the man said, warming to his subject. ‘This is a prime example. ‘I am trying to get samples from all public facilities, trying to determine the level of contamination, trying to discover how private supplies are affected, but –’

Illya held up his hand with a smile, and reminded the man, ‘Dmitry Aleksandrovich, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is that some liquid you’re trying to show me?’

He could hear a vague kind of splashing, as if the man were gesticulating with a flask of liquid in his hand. It unnerved him a little, not knowing if the liquid were safe or not. For a moment the scents in the room reminded him not of the U.N.C.L.E. lab but of that lab in Stockholm, and he clenched his hand hard on the edge of the bench, telling himself not to be so stupid. This man was not about to throw acid in his face.

‘Oh, Illya!’ And there was the clink of glass being set down and Dmitry patted his arm. ‘I am sorry, I am so sorry. I get so enthusiastic, you know? You know how it is?’

‘Yes,’ Illya said rather tightly, then forced himself to relax. He didn’t want to go through his story with Dmitry Belousov, who had no idea of the associations Illya had. He needed to control a rather stupid fear over something that had happened over two years ago. ‘What do you have, Dmitry? Is it –’ An acid? Is it an acid? ‘Is it some kind of sample?’

‘Drinking water, Illya,’ the man replied. ‘Simple drinking water. This sample is from – hmm – sometimes I can’t read my own writing. Yes, this sample is from Stolovaya 73. I have been trying to get a sample from the cafeteria at the waterworks, but of course they won’t let me in, even with my U.N.C.L.E. identification. At this rate we’ll have to be sending agents in to get samples from our own government’s agencies, and I don’t need to tell you how crazy that is. Wretched Soviet bureaucracy...’

Illya grimaced, but then he shrugged and said, ‘I remember us having to do something similar to obtain a sample from the American White House, to be sure that Kennedy’s government wasn’t being unduly influenced during the missile crisis. It’s not only Soviet bureaucracy, believe me.’

Dmitry touched his arm again. ‘You, Illya? Did you infiltrate the White House?’

Illya shook his head rather ruefully. ‘Not me, no. Things wouldn’t have gone well for me, I think, if they had found U.N.C.L.E.’s first Soviet recruit in the depths of the White House at night, plastered in camo paint and tampering with their water supply.’

Dmitry’s laugh was belly deep and it filled the room. His stool clattered as he stood and his footsteps thudded across the floor. He was a big man, by the way he sounded. There was a clinking and a pouring and then he returned.

‘You’re not really on duty, no,’ he said, pressing a glass beaker into Illya’s hand. ‘No, not really on duty. Here. Share a drink with me.’
Illya remembered so many times sharing martinis and other drinks with Napoleon in Waverly’s office, when they were technically on duty. Waverly was astonishingly free with his private office supply, considering how tight he was usually on costs. Besides, Illya had a high tolerance for alcohol; so he nodded and accepted the glass, and raised it to toast Dmitry Belousov’s health.

The vodka was so strong it made him splutter, and he wiped a sleeve over his watering eyes.

‘Dear god, Dmitry Aleksandrovich!’

‘Good, yes?’

‘I don’t know the brand,’ Illya said, taking another sip and trying to control his wince.

There was that deep belly laugh again, and Dmitry said, ‘There’s no name printed on the still in the back room, Illya. The others call it Dima’s Finest.’

‘You make this yourself?’

Illya took another mouthful and felt it blast through him. The lingering remains of his cold were blasted further away with every swallow.

‘Well, it’s so much better than buying it. After all, what did I spend all that time studying chemistry for? You’re drinking my best pepper vodka, Illya. In Oxford they were crazy for the idea of real Russian vodka, so what choice did I have but to make them real Russian vodka? Listen, when you leave I will give you a bottle. One for your family too, yes? I think Tovarisch Kobevko said you were staying with your family?’

‘Ah – yes, yes, I am,’ Illya nodded. He felt pleasantly warm, but he dragged his mind back to the previous subject. ‘Dmitry, what was the sample you were trying to show me? That wasn’t pepper vodka?’

‘Ah, no, no. Not at all. That was the most mundane drinking water. Tell me, Illya, do your parents boil their water?’

Illya frowned. ‘Now, I think only sometimes. My mother holds a glass up in the morning and looks at it in the light, and then she decides whether to strain it, whether to boil it.’

‘Well, boiling won’t help with this, my friend. Nor straining. I’ve been extracting samples and analysing the contents.’

He reeled off a chemical formula in a long string, and Illya blinked. He set his glass down on the lab bench and frowned.

‘Now, that is familiar,’ he said musingly.

He ran his fingers lightly over the wooden bench, recalling running them in the same way over the notes that Sarah had transcribed for him, the notes recovered from Miami. He wasn’t completely fluent in Nemeth Braille, the Braille used for mathematical and scientific notation, so Sarah had needed to go through that part very carefully with him.

‘Yes, I’m sure,’ he said. He picked up his beaker of vodka again, feeling the subtle ridges of the measure markings on the side, then checked, ‘This is my drink, yes? I’m not about to swallow hydrochloric acid?’

‘I am a very careful chemist,’ Dmitri assured him. ‘No, there are no beakers of acid littering my
bench. Just your drink. Here, hold it still.’ He steadied Illya’s wrist with his warm hand and the bottle clinked against the glass as he poured in another measure of vodka. ‘There, that will warm you. Now, my formula is familiar, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Illya said. ‘Yes, just before we came out to Kyiv I was in Miami on a mission.’

‘You – forgive me – you go on missions, Illya?’

Illya smiled at the man’s incredulous tone. ‘I have just resumed limited field work, yes,’ he said. ‘I’ve grown very good at monitoring bugs. So I was in Miami, listening to the bugs set by the team I was with. It was a plot by Thrush to develop a nerve drug which they planned to put in water supplies. We couldn’t discover where they planned to develop and test it, except that it would be in Eastern Europe.’

‘Well! Well, Illya, you’ve found your test city, perhaps,’ Dmitry replied. ‘Yes? It’s the same formula, yes?’

‘Yes, just the same. I’m not a chemist but I remember it from the notes we stole. Dmitry, is the water supply here safe? I know that precautions should have been put in in all U.N.C.L.E. outlets, but this is a very new branch...’

‘Yes, yes, the water supply here is very carefully monitored,’ Dmitry assured him. ‘Every morning I run a few basic tests. But in the main we gather our water from rainwater tanks on the roof. Water that falls straight from the sky is hard for anyone to interfere with, whether it be Thrush or any agencies closer to home.’

‘Ah, good,’ Illya said, musing. ‘Good. Keep monitoring it. And water supplies to family homes? Are they safe?’

‘As yet they seem to be. We’re finding traces of the chemical in supplies to cafeterias, in some of the larger factories, high employment industries, you know? But, Illya, keep an eye on your drinking water, won’t you? An eye – Well, you understand the expression.’

Illya smiled and took another mouthful of the powerful vodka. It really was good once one got over the strength.

‘I understand the expression. My parents are both chemists, Dmitry. I’ll speak to them. And do you have agents out looking for the manufacturing base?’

‘Of course, of course, but you know, Illya, I have a still in the back room here. Everyone knows, of course. Well, Kobevko turns a blind eye because he must, and he accepts a bottle or two that I leave on his desk. So imagine, anyone could have a manufacturing plant set up in a little room. It need not be huge. The amount in water is very dilute. But you know more than I, yes? I haven’t seen these Miami reports. Communication needs to be greatly improved, I think. It’s still hard getting things through the curtain, you know, even necessary U.N.C.L.E. reports. We can’t do everything verbally through hand-held communicators, and the authorities are so suspicious. So, tell me, what is it that this chemical does? I haven’t managed to secure animals for testing yet – red tape, you know – so I’ve only been able to theorise. It’s a nerve drug, you say?’

‘A nerve drug,’ Illya nodded. ‘It increases susceptibility to suggestion. I think – I haven’t studied it – but I would imagine they’d let it build up in people’s systems, if the dilution is as great as you say, and then they mean to use subliminal messaging to affect the populace.’

Dmitry whistled. ‘Well. Imagine that. The whole of Kyiv doing as Thrush bids, yes? What would
happen then? They’d turn over the factories to producing their weapons, perhaps?’

‘Perhaps. Or perhaps they’d go further. Kyiv may only be a test site. They may see how much they can influence local government, local opinion, then take it on to Moscow, and then – well, we were talking of the missile crisis, weren’t we? How would it be if Thrush manufactured another such conflict, one that couldn’t be resolved? Once the US and the USSR have obliterated one another Thrush could step easily into the vacuum.’

The chill that ran through him felt very real, and he took another mouthful of the vodka to counter it. It blasted down his throat and settled warmly in his stomach.

‘Contact the New York headquarters, Dmitry,’ he said earnestly. ‘They’ve been researching this drug since we brought back the sample and notes. It’s imperative that you let them know what you’ve found, and they might be able to pass on something useful to you. This scheme needs to be stopped.’

‘What needs to be stopped, comrade?’ Napoleon asked as the door creaked open. ‘See, my Ukrainian comprehension is improving!’

‘Napoleon!’ Illya slipped off the lab stool and found the floor wasn’t quite as steady under his feet as he would have liked.

‘Hey, you been having a little party in here?’ Napoleon asked, coming over to him and taking his arm. There was a clink of glass and a laugh. ‘That’s some pretty strong smelling vodka, my friend. Good thing they didn’t offer me that in the firing range.’

‘Napoleon, you remember the Miami mission?’ Illya asked. ‘Well, I think we’ve found the place where they’re trialling the drug. Tovarisch Belousov has found samples of it in various water supplies around the city.’

‘Ah, well that’s very interesting,’ Napoleon said in an intrigued tone. ‘Nice coincidence, huh?’

‘Life is full of coincidence,’ Illya shrugged. ‘I’ve told Dmitry to contact the New York office and consult with our labs.’

‘Well, suddenly this mission’s come alive,’ Napoleon said, and Illya could hear the pleasure in his tone. Napoleon loved a problem to solve far more than routine diplomacy and office work.

‘Mr Solo, can I tempt you to a glass of vodka to toast this discovery?’ Dmitry asked in flawless English. Illya had almost forgotten about the man’s Oxford education by now.

‘Ah, no, thank you,’ Napoleon said diplomatically. ‘No, I can smell the proof, I think, and I want to be able to pilot this little inebriated Russian safely home to his parents. They wouldn’t forgive me if I damaged him.’

‘Napoleon,’ Illya grumbled, but Napoleon said, ‘Now, Illya, you almost fell over when you got off that stool. What would your mother say to me bringing you home drunk?’

‘I am not drunk, not in the slightest,’ Illya protested. ‘You know I’m sometimes unsteady because I can’t orient myself by sight. I’m just warmed up, that’s all.’

‘Well, let me warm you some more, dear Illya,’ Dmitry said, and Illya wondered how much of the vodka his colleague had been drinking. ‘Here, this is yours. Mr Solo, will you carry this for my new friend, yes? I like Illya very much. Illya, I am giving you a box to take home with you. Share it with your family, yes? Perhaps invite me round one evening. I’d like to talk to your chemist parents.’
'No, really,' Illya began to protest, imagining the size of the box. Dmitry seemed an extremely generous man.

'You’ll insult me by refusing, Illyukha,' Dmitry said firmly. 'Now, the tour is finished, yes? Mr Solo, have you finished?'

'Ah – yes,' Napoleon said rather distractedly. 'Yes, Illya, I’ve arranged to meet with the two new agents tomorrow evening and go along with them on a little mission. We share enough Russian and English to get along, and you can’t –'

'No, of course I can’t,' Illya said quickly. He couldn’t go on field missions, no matter how small, if they didn’t involve sitting in a hotel room monitoring bugs. Perhaps he would keep company with one of Dmitry’s bottles instead. ‘No, of course. We had better go, then, Napoleon. Yes, Dmitry, I will invite you round one evening. I will call through to the office and arrange it.’

He slipped his cane up onto its end from where it had been hanging from his wrist, and held out his left hand.

‘Napoleon? You’ll want to get me through the glass shop safely if I’m as drunk as you think I am. So, we had better go.’

((O))

‘Well, don’t you have lovely red cheeks, my little Ukrainian rose?’ Napoleon said as he settled into the driving seat of their little borrowed car after a quick sweep for bugs. ‘A couple more of those beakers of rocket fuel and you’d have a nose to match.’

Illya grunted and Napoleon glanced at him. He peeked in through the flaps of the box and said, ‘You must have made a good impression on your friend Tovarisch Belousov. There’s a dozen bottles in here.’ He slipped the couple of packets of coffee he’d managed to acquire into the box and said, ‘Mind if I put this down in the footwell, Illya? There’s not much room in the back.’

‘Oh, yes, put them down,’ Illya said distractedly, and Napoleon looked at him again and asked, ‘Are you brooding again, Illya? You know, I was joking about the drink.’

‘Yes, I know, Napoleon,’ Illya said, and he favoured his partner with a fleeting smile. ‘I was just ruminating on how I would get to the office and back without you. I mean, without my mother taking me,’ he added blackly.

‘When there are no private cabs? One of those marshrutkas, maybe?’

Illya shrugged. ‘Maybe. But it would take me time and help to learn the routes to and from the stops, and no doubt I would have to change... No, we’re not here long enough for that.’

‘Frustrating, huh?’ Napoleon asked sympathetically. ‘I’m sure I can take you if you need to come here, Illya. I mean, there aren’t going to be so many times –’

Illya huffed out breath between his lips. ‘The point, Napoleon, is that I would like to be able to come and go at will, without arranging for escorts.’

‘You can in New York,’ Napoleon said softly. ‘And you would be able to here if we were here
longer. You’re not unable, Illya. It’s just a little harder for you to – ‘

‘I know,’ Illya said snappishly, then repeated more quietly, ‘I know, Napoleon. I know all of this. It is hard being in my home city and not being independent. That is all. But it doesn’t matter. What is more important is that we have discovered the location of testing for Thrush’s new drug.’ He smiled then, a brief, thin smile. ‘I wonder what Doyle and Phillips will think of that?’

‘They’ll probably want to hop on a plane,’ Napoleon grinned.

Illya grimaced. ‘I don’t believe either of them has the requisite skills in Russian. Of course, that is why we have an office set up here – to negate the problems of flying in agents who don’t have the right skills and need a truck load of paperwork just to get into the country.’

‘As opposed to those agents who are already in the country to do non-undercover work,’ Napoleon added with a wolfish smile.

‘Napoleon,’ Illya warned him. ‘Tread carefully. As I have said, that is why we have an office set up here. You don’t have the language skills and the authorities would have a fit if they discovered you going under cover.’

Napoleon continued to smile. He put the car into gear and moved off, then said, ‘That, my little Ukrainian rose, is why I am a spy. I’m not supposed to be discovered. No, I know I shouldn’t,’ he said as Illya opened his mouth to protest, ‘but if I did I’d go in with the local team. I am here to show them the ropes, after all. It comes under the umbrella of our reasons for entering the country.’

‘I suppose so,’ Illya said rather dubiously, and Napoleon wondered if he would be so dubious if he were capable of coming along on such a mission. He took his hand from the wheel for a moment to pat Illya on the arm, and said, ‘Never mind, tovarisch. When that transplant happens everything will change, I promise.’

And Illya pursed his lips at the promise that Napoleon had no right to make.
Chapter 8

Illya fought hard not to dwell when Napoleon left the next evening to join the two Ukrainian agents on their assignment. Their mission was to gain access to a number of government run agencies and to gain water samples; simple enough to an experienced agent like Solo, but still, Illya worried about the consequences if he were caught. It may be that U.N.C.L.E.’s presence in the Soviet Union was officially welcomed, but that was no guarantee that agents wouldn’t find themselves expelled from the country or quietly sent off to the labour camps for transgressions.

There was nothing to be done for it, though. He had his communicator neatly tucked in his inside pocket, but even if Napoleon called there was little Illya could do. With a nearby U.N.C.L.E. office there was help available if he needed it, and far better help than could be offered by a man who was totally blind, he told himself darkly.

‘Cheer up, Illyusha,’ his father said from beside him on the sofa, patting his arm. ‘All will be fine.’

‘Maybe,’ Illya murmured. His parents knew Napoleon had gone out on a mission, but surely they knew little about the actual risks. Only a field agent – or a former field agent – really knew the score.

‘Listen, son,’ his father said then. ‘I do know this work is dangerous. I may be in my dotage, but I know about danger. Do you forget what I did in the war?’

Illya sighed and shook his head. He knew his father had served with great courage in the war. He had seen his medals, looked on them with awe. Sometimes for a treat in the years afterwards he had been allowed to open the little box and take them out and run his fingers over the contoured metal and the rough, colourful ribbons, and he had always been in awe.

He remembered the day his father finally came home, his uniform frayed, his boots cracked, his face gaunt from starvation. Illya had thought that he and his mother had starved in occupied Kyiv, but when his father came home with his grey face and hollow cheeks he had known that his experience had been a world away. There were little moments in Illya’s life when he could see himself growing up all of a sudden, with a little jerk, and that was one of them.

‘Tato, do you still have your medals?’ he asked suddenly.

The sofa creaked. ‘Of course, Illyusha. Of course I have my medals.’

And he stood and crossed the room, calling back, ‘You would have medals too, if all you’ve told me is true. If your Network Command gave out such things you would have ten times my medals.’

Illya smiled. U.N.C.L.E. didn’t give medals. U.N.C.L.E. gave quiet commendations and sometimes Waverly gave a special smile and a pat on the back. That was enough.

His father left the room and came back after a short few moments.

‘Here, Illyusha,’ his father said. ‘Here. Put out your hands.’

So Illya held out his hands and his father laid the little wooden box on his palms. For a moment he just held it, feeling its weight. He lifted it to his nose and smelt that familiar scent of dusty wood. Then he undid the clasp and opened the lid and touched his fingers to the medals inside. There they were, cold because his father kept the box in the floor of the wardrobe, the medals just lying in the box with no ceremony, no padded velvet to nestle into. He lifted one out and traced his fingers over the bumpy contours of the relief picture on there, and he couldn’t tell which one it was. He felt the
ribbon and knew that it was colourful, if a little greyed out with age, and he couldn’t remember the colours. He felt tears stinging in the corners of his eyes. Everything had changed so much since he had last looked at those medals.

‘Tell me,’ he said. ‘I can’t tell which this is.’

So his father put an arm around Illya’s shoulders and went through each medal one by one, reminding him of the designs, the ribbon colours, the name of each medal and why he had received it. Illya touched each one and then laid it back in the box, and when they were done he closed the lid and rested his head on his father’s shoulder, feeling the soft wool of his jumper and the bony hardness underneath. His father had never been a fat man, even before the war, but he had never lost that extra layer of gauntness afterwards.

His father kissed the top of his head and his hand stroked Illya’s arm. Illya felt very warm and safe, and very small despite being an adult now. It was a curious feeling to lose twenty years at a stroke, and be a child again.

‘I think you would have a medal for this, Illyushenka,’ his father said quietly, squeezing his arm around him. ‘I haven’t seen such bravery as yours in many years.’

Illya snorted a little. ‘I’m hardly brave,’ he said. ‘What choice do I have?’

His father stirred against him, a little impatient movement. ‘What choice do you think I had, Illya, when I was faced with a German soldier right in front of me? It was bayonet him in the stomach, or let him do the same to me. I had to come home to you and mama, didn’t I? So I ripped one man open and shot another and cracked another across the jaw with my rifle. What could I do? That wasn’t bravery, it was just staying alive. Sometimes I was doing it so I could come home to you, sometimes in such a visceral moment that all I thought about was saving my own life. Often it was a very selfish little thing, Illya, just killing a man so he did not kill me.’

Illya knew those moments. He had faced them often enough. They were quick, hot moments, almost without thought. It was kill or be killed. Those moments made him feel so alive. He hadn’t seen a moment like that for a long time.

He remembered the last time, the very last moment like that. That man’s hand coming up with the beaker in it, the sudden flash of the liquid jerking from it like a striking snake. He hadn’t been able to shoot the man because suddenly he couldn’t see, suddenly he was screaming with pain, his eyes on fire, his face on fire, able to feel the gun in his hand but utterly unable to use it. And that had been the end. Perhaps it was wrong to miss moments when he was forced to kill, but he did. Perhaps it was just the adrenaline that he missed.

‘It’s strange to have to kill to feel alive,’ he said, and he felt his father nod.

‘It is. It is, Illyusha. But we’re both soldiers in our own way. The war’s over for me and it is for you, I suppose, but we’re both soldiers.’

Illya gave a little huffing laugh of agreement. And then the apartment doorbell rang loudly and he jumped. His father got up, pressing a hand on his arm.

‘Stay there, Illya. I will go.’

Illya turned his head to listen as his father left the room and went down the hall. Then he got to his feet at the sound of a voice he was sure he recognised. He went into the dimly lit hall, and then a man’s voice rose, saying, ‘Illyukha, Illyukha! So what Aneta said was true! You’re home!’
‘Pakha!’ Illya said in astonishment. He knew that voice even though it had been a long time. ‘That’s Pakha, isn’t it?’

And he moved forward, holding his hand out because of the hall table and the coat stand, and he heard Pavel take a sharp breath from where he stood in the doorway.

‘Illyukha, it’s true, then? Aneta said you were blind but none of us could believe it. After all, she’s such a gossip. Illya, what happened? But no,’ he interrupted himself, coming forward and putting a hand on Illya’s arm. He grasped Illya’s hand and held it tightly in both of his. ‘First, Illyukha, I’ve come to ask you to visit. There’s a group of us, a kind of party. When I was at the gastronom buying food for this evening Aneta said you were home, so I’ve come to bring you to the party. Will you come, Illya? Can you come? I will take you safely there and safely home. Tovarisch Kuryakin, may I kidnap your son? I will keep him very safe.’

Illya’s father chuckled and said, ‘Pavel Igorevich, Illya is well past the age where I need to give him permission. Neither of you are at school any more.’

‘Well then, Illyukha? You’ll come?’ Pavel asked, still holding Illya’s hand tightly, and Illya nodded with a grin. He had always liked Pavel best of his high school friends. They had both excelled at physics and at distracting each other during lessons.

‘I’ll come, of course,’ he said. ‘Just let me find a few things. Tato, which are my shoes? And can you find me a bag?’

He took the shoes that his father handed to him and told Pavel, ‘Let me find my cane and my coat, and I have a couple of bottles that will help us with the evening. Some very fine vodka given to me by a new friend. I will only be a moment.’

((O))

‘Now, Illyushka, come in, come in,’ Pavel told Illya warmly, opening a door in front of him. ‘There, that’s it. Are you all right?’

He put a hand on Illya’s shoulder from behind, shepherding him through the door. Illya had tried to explain how to guide him but Pavel kept forgetting every time Illya let go of his arm, taking hold of Illya instead of letting Illya touch him. He’d taken him on the chilly, icy walk from Illya’s apartment block to his own safely enough, though, taking greatly anxious care over him, and Illya was just glad to get in out of the cold.

‘Here, this is my humble home,’ Pavel said. ‘You can hear the party already, can’t you?’

And Illya could. There was muffled music coming from another room, but the space he was in already felt large. It was chilly and smelt of stale food and living bodies. He tapped his cane on the floor and listened to the echoes coming back from hard walls. He had been in places like this before, lived in one when he was very young.

‘This is a communal?’

Pavel laughed. ‘Yes, of course, Illya. Couldn’t get anything else. But I’m single so it does for me. I share a room with Aleksandr. You remember Aleksandr Tereshchenko, don’t you? Aleksandr Bohdanovich? Some of the other tenants are at my little party, but some of them are school friends
you’ll remember.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Illya nodded, tapping his cane on the floor and listening to the echoes again.

He had a misty memory of living in the communal apartment early in his life, with lots of uncles and aunts and cousins who were not really uncles or aunts or cousins. He was never sure whether he hated these places or envied their inhabitants for their close living in which neighbours became family. It was more shut off in a private apartment; but then the older he got the more Illya preferred to be shut off from the clamour of other people.

‘Let me take your shoes. Shall I hold the cane? Yes?’

Illya let Pavel hold the cane as he bent to take off his shoes and shrugged out of his coat and then took the cane back in exchange for the coat and shoes, and then suddenly Pavel was hugging him hard and saying, ‘I’m sorry, Illyushka. I’m so sorry for this thing that’s happened to you.’

‘Don’t be. You don’t need to be,’ Illya said uneasily, although he returned the hug. ‘Really, Pasha, there’s nothing to be done about it, at least, nothing you can do.’

‘Then someone else?’ Pavel asked, releasing Illya from the hug and stepping back.

Illya shrugged. ‘There’s the possibility of an operation that may give me my sight, but –’

And Pavel was hugging him again and saying, ‘Oh, if that could happen...’

‘Don’t say anything to anyone, Pasha,’ Illya said quickly. ‘It’s not a certainty. Who knows what will happen?’

‘Well, then, come in to the party,’ Pavel said then, putting a hand on his arm again, and Illya let him guide him that way, using the cane to be certain his way was clear as Pavel propelled him forward and then opened another door. Immediately the music became louder. Illya stepped in through the door, feeling with his cane and his left hand. The cane slipped across what was in all likelihood a polished wood floor and the edge of a rug on top.

Pavel’s room was tiny, as far as Illya could tell. At least, the walls sounded close and it seemed very full and warm with bodies. Voices were everywhere, and the crackling music spilled through the room from a record player over on the other side. And then voices rose in greeting, male and female, voices Illya might have recognised but couldn’t be sure of, and he was drawn into that sea of voices and pulled down to sit on what he thought was a bed by unseen hands. He slipped his hand quickly through the loop on his cane so he wouldn’t lose it, and tried to distinguish the voices that were all talking to him at once.

‘Now wait, wait,’ he pleaded with a grin, holding up his hands. ‘I don’t know who’s here. First, who is this loud person on my right?’ he asked, reaching out and catching the fingers that touched his. It was a woman’s hand.

‘This is Yuliya, Illya,’ the woman replied, and suddenly he recognised that voice. She had always been small, short and curly haired, and focussed on becoming a doctor. ‘Do you remember me?’

‘Yes! Yes, of course,’ he assured her, pressing both hands over hers and feeling how small it was. ‘Yuliya with all the books and the hair like a nest.’

‘Always so complimentary, Illya,’ she laughed, batting at his arm. ‘You haven’t changed a bit. I remember how you used to stand with me because I was shorter than you, yes? You didn’t like the girls who were taller.’
Illya grimaced. ‘I stood with you and talked with you because you were the brightest girl in the school,’ he corrected her, although he did distinctly remember choosing not to stand too close to those girls who were blessed with height. He had been far more self conscious then, feeling himself small and puny and rather ridiculous.

‘So then,’ he asked, turning to his left. ‘Who is here?’

And the person hugged him and kissed him on both cheeks and said, ‘Oh, Illya, you’re more beautiful even than you were at school. Don’t you remember Ekaterina Mikhailovna?’

And Illya felt himself blush. Yes, he remembered Ekaterina. She was one of those tall girls, those very pretty girls that he had never been able to talk to without stammering. And she had thought him beautiful at school? He wondered what she looked like now and felt a small clenching of regret.

‘I see you do remember me, then. Ah, Illya, we could have made beautiful children. But I suppose you have a lovely American wife.’

‘Well, I – ’ He didn’t know what to say. ‘I’m happy in America,’ he said finally, flustered.

‘You have a wife? Children?’ she persisted.

‘No wife, no children,’ he shook his head, and was actually relieved when Ekaterina asked him, ‘So what happened to you, Illya? How did you become blind? How hard it must be for you.’

‘Oh,’ he said. It was always hard to go through explaining his blindness, especially to people outside of the business, so he murmured his stock excuse of, ‘An accident in a lab, two years ago. Yes, it’s hard sometimes but I manage as I can.’

‘Oh, you’re so brave, Illya,’ Ekaterina said in a trembling voice, touching his leg, but at the same time Yuliya said, ‘In a lab, Illya? So you’re still a scientist, yes? Or – ’

‘Well, I went to the Sorbonne after university and then I took my doctorate at Cambridge,’ he explained. ‘And then I – well, I moved to America and I have been working there. I still work, but in a more administrative role.’

‘Oh,’ Yuliya said softly, touching his hand, and he knew she was thinking the same as Ekaterina, but had the grace not to effuse over him.

‘Look,’ he said, reaching down to the bag he had wedged between his feet and pulling out the bottles of vodka. ‘I’ve brought these to help with the party. Maybe one of you ladies could get me a drink? I have no idea what’s around me but I can tell the drinking has started.’

Ekaterina jumped up immediately while Yuliya leaned closer to him and said, ‘I’m so glad you got your doctorate, Illya. I got my medical qualifications, you know. I’m a doctor like I always wanted to be.’

‘I’m glad, I’m glad,’ Illya said, and he really was.

‘So, what was your doctorate in, Illya? Do you make use of it?’

‘Quantum mechanics,’ Illya told her, and interrupted himself to say, ‘Ah, thank you,’ as a drink was pressed into his hand. He moved his hands around the cool, straight-sided tumbler and sniffed at the liquid. ‘No, I don’t make so much use of it now but I keep up with the journals. Napoleon reads them to me with great patience, hardly understanding a word.’
‘Napoleon?’

‘My part-er – colleague. I’ve lived with him since becoming blind.’

‘Part-colleague?’ Yuliya asked with a laugh. ‘And – this is a man called Napoleon? Really?’

Illya grinned. ‘I don’t know what his parents were thinking, but yes, he is an American man and he is called Napoleon. I work with him and when the accident happened I moved in with him. I dare say I’m capable of living alone now but – ’ But... How lonely that would be. How terrible to be all alone. He didn’t know how he had put up with it all those years. To deflect that thought he took a deep swallow of his drink and asked Yuliya, ‘Is there anyone else I know here? Where has Pavel gone? How many people are there here?’

She leant closer to him in the hot, stuffy space and said musingly, ‘Ohh, about fifteen all crowded into this room, Illya. Pavel is on the other side of the room drinking with a charming woman whose name I don’t know. Yes, there are a few more school chums. There is me and Ekaterina, you know. Dmitry and Mikhail and Grigoriy. Maksim and oh – I’m not so familiar with her over there. Polina, I think.’

‘Polina,’ Illya mused. ‘I think I remember Polina. Blond, yes?’

‘Yes, blond. Yes, that must be Polina. And Aleksandr, who Pavel lives with. And the rest – I think others from this apartment. Pavel told you it’s a communal one? They come and go.’

It was hard to socialise with large groups without seeing who was there. Illya stayed on the bed talking to Yuliya for much of the evening while the other guests milled around him, occasionally stopping to talk. He felt as if he were a quick curiosity to some of the guests and a source of pity for others, but he had never been a great mixer at parties. Yuliya’s conversation was intense and interesting, and Pavel came and went through the hours, spending some time talking, introducing Illya with a drunken gregarious flair to various people who swam in and out of the soup of noise. The more Illya drunk the less the amorphous unknown of the rest of the room mattered to him. The records played constantly, jazz records that Illya greatly enjoyed, although he wondered how Pavel managed to get his hands on them and hoped no one would report him for the illicit music.

‘Pasha, do you still have a piano?’ he asked on one of Pavel’s random appearances. Pavel’s piano had been his pride and joy.

‘In this tiny room?’ Pavel asked him with a laugh. ‘Of course I do, Illya, of course, but it’s – Hey, Dmitry, that’s not a seat, it’s a musical instrument. Get off there. Illya’s going to play for us, aren’t you, Illyukha? Now, come on – ’

And he put his hand under Illya’s elbow and hauled him up and Illya protested, ‘No, really, Pasha. No. I’ve drunk too much and – Really – ’

‘Now, little Illyushka, you were better at the piano than I ever was,’ Pavel insisted drunkenly. ‘Now, come on. You play. I remember you always playing along with my records. The improvisation king, I called you. You remember? You remember that?’

And Illya did, and he held out a hand, feeling around for his cane.

‘Pasha, where is my cane?’ he asked, slurring a little. ‘I can’t see my cane.’ He moved his foot in little exploratory slides on the floor. ‘Please, where is my cane? I need it. Wretched thing.’

‘Here, Illya, darling, here,’ Yuliya said, the bed springs creaking as she moved, and she put the cane to his hand and closed his fingers around it. ‘Now, there you are. Come with me. Hey, out of the
Illya felt his face growing crimson, but he clumsily held the cane in front of him and let Yuliya and Pavel both steer him across the crowded room until his cane and then his knee knocked into the piano stool. He sat down and reached out to the smooth, curved lid that was closed over the keys. When he opened the lid a glass crashed, and Pavel said, ‘Never mind, Illyushka. Never mind.’

He pressed Illya’s hands onto the keys as if Illya wouldn’t be able to find them otherwise, and said, ‘There, you can play, yes? Play for us.’

So Illya let his fingers rest on the keys and tried to forget the woolly feeling in his head and listened to the music from the record player. From the near sound of it it was right on top of the piano. He tilted his head a little to one side and listened to the melodies, and then he began to play along, improvising a tune that sometimes caught the brass and wind on the record and sometimes veered away. It was such a wonderful feeling to sit here in Pavel’s room and play. The other occupants of the room seemed to be enjoying his playing, because whenever he stopped someone patted his shoulder or called his name and told him to carry on.

Someone approached the piano then and leant against it hard enough to make it shudder, and he said in a loud voice over the music, ‘Hey, Illya, it’s Mikhail. You remember me, yes? You remember me in Russian classes always looking at your answers?’

‘Mikhail!’ Illya said, keeping his fingers moving smoothly over the keys. He barely remembered Mikhail at all, but there didn’t seem any sense in saying that. ‘Hello, Mikhail.’

‘So you’re with the Americans now, huh? I’m working in the textile factory, you know. I suppose I should have studied harder, yes?’

Illya grunted in a non-committal way, but Mikhail didn’t even seem to notice, because he banged his hand down on the top of the piano and said, ‘Those wretched Americans. You live with the Americans, yes? Do you see beggars in the streets, Illya? Do you see the fat capitalist bosses with their gold cuff links and big cars, and how they drive past the homeless and the poor and laugh at them? You must feel like you’re rotting inside, Illya, living in a pig pen like that.’

‘It’s a nice enough place,’ Illya said with a shrug, continuing his playing, hardly reacting to the diatribe because he knew Mikhail was drunk. Besides, sometimes he struggled with similar feelings himself, living right in the capitalist heart of the world and seeing so much inequality and suffering.

‘You mark my words. One day they’ll try to destroy us,’ Mikhail continued to rant, and Illya was rather relieved when someone else came up and Mikhail turned his attention to that person and wandered away.

He became aware of a discordant noise coming up beneath the music, a kind of two-tone warbling. His fingers faltered on the keys, and then suddenly he remembered. It was his communicator pen. He had completely forgotten about Napoleon. He slapped his hand to his pocket and then remembered he was in a room full of people, and he said, ‘Yuliya? Or Pasha? Are you there?’

A hand touched his arm. ‘What, Illya? What did you need? You’ve already been rescued from that crazy Mikhail Mikoyan. He must be so drunk or perhaps his girl’s gone on an American movie star, because he usually loves America.’

‘Oh, er – ’ It was Yuliya, and he was overcome with hot embarrassment. It would be easiest to say he needed the toilet, but that wasn’t the kind of thing one mentioned in front of other people, especially women. But he needed privacy to talk to Napoleon and he didn’t want to reveal his
occupation in front of all these people. He stood up from the piano stool and said confusedly, ‘Is there somewhere – I mean – Can I be alone somewhere?’

‘Oh, well – ’

She seemed to have caught his embarrassment. She took his arm and said, ‘Come with me, Illya. Let me help you.’

So she took him across the room and out into the cooler communal areas outside. Suddenly everything seemed very quiet. The air was chill. The beeping of the communicator was much louder out here. Yuliya started to say, ‘The bathroom is over – ’ but Illya pressed his hand to his pocket and she asked curiously, ‘What is that, Illya?’

‘Ah, well – ’ he said. He had no choice but to explain, but first he had to answer. He pulled out and assembled the communicator and tried to steady his voice from its drunken slur. ‘Kuryakin here.’

‘Illya!’ It was Napoleon. He breathed out in relief at that familiar voice. ‘Illya, where are you? I got back an hour ago and your mother said you’d gone to some kind of party. Your father tried to give me directions, but I’m standing in the snow looking up at a vast concrete edifice, and I have no idea where you are.’

‘Oh,’ Illya said, his forehead creasing. ‘Well, I’m – I’m – Well, I’ll tell you the truth. I don’t exactly know where I am. Pasha brought me here.’

‘And who in this beautiful Soviet republic is Pasha, Illya?’ Napoleon asked rather tartly.

‘Oh, um – Pavel. His name is Pavel. Look, Napoleon, are you – Yuliya, is there a window here? Does it look out of the front? Can you see an American out there?’

Yuliya laughed almost uncontrollably at that, asking, ‘What does an American look like?’ but she let go of his arm and her footsteps padded across the room and a window squeaked.

‘There’s a man down there in the snow,’ she confirmed. ‘Very snowy. Oh, he’s waving! Hello little American man!’

‘Oh…’ Illya groaned a little. ‘Napoleon…’ He felt at his watch. It was almost one a.m.. He had had no idea it had grown so late. ‘Poor Napoleon. Listen, I’ll come down. Just let me – Yuliya, will you help me say goodbye and find my shoes and my coat and – oh, all the things. Will you?’

She slung an arm around his shoulders and said, ‘Of course I will, dear Illya. Of course. Now, let’s look for your shoes. There are some shoes here that look like black beetles. Are they your shoes?’

Illya touched the shoes that she handed him, and he couldn’t tell.

‘Go and get Pavel,’ he told her. ‘Pasha will know. Pasha took them from me. And my coat.’

So he leant against the wall as she disappeared and Napoleon’s voice surprised him suddenly, saying through the communicator, ‘What’s going on, my little drunk Russian? Are you coming down, Rapunzelusha, or shall I come up?’

‘I’m coming down,’ he promised. ‘I am. Give me a minute. Just a minute.’

He closed the communicator and shoved it back in his pocket, and then Pavel was there helping him with his shoes and his coat and hugging him and apologising because he had to go back into the party, but Yuliya could take him down.
'Will you take me down, Yuliya?' Illya asked. 'Can you do that? I used to be able to take myself to places, you know, but I can’t see.'

She put an arm around his back, generous in her drunkenness. 'I know, dear Illya. Come on, I’ll help you. And now,’ she said as they went out into the cold corridor outside, ‘How is it that you talk to little Americans in pens, Illya? Is that your science? Is that what you do?’

Illya sighed and tried to make his voice low. He didn’t really know how quietly he was talking. He was warm and soft with alcohol and it felt as though it were a cocoon around him.

‘No, no, Yuliya, but you mustn’t tell. Do you promise not to tell?’

‘A doctor’s confidence is the next thing to a priest’s,’ she said solemnly, and Illya accepted that.

‘Well, all right. I work for U.N.C.L.E., Yuliya,’ he said in an impressive tone.

‘I didn’t know you had any uncles in America, Illya.’

He huffed, and then he almost slipped as the floor dropped away, and she grabbed at him with the arm around his waist and said, ‘Oh, stairs. Stairs, Illya. I’m so sorry. You should – You weren’t using your cane.’

He reached out for the rail and concentrated very hard, her hand on his arm, her other arm around his back, and his cane held out in front.

‘U.N.C.L.E.,’ he said, tapping the cane very carefully down each tread before he stepped down, because he didn’t feel steady at all and everything seemed muffled and far away. ‘The United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. I am a international agent. Well, I was an international agent… I still am, in a way. Oh, it’s complicated.’

‘Illya!’ she said in astonishment. ‘Oh, how romantic! You’re a spy? Really? But if the government finds out...’

He shook his head. ‘No, no, it’s an international organisation. I was sent by the government. I was approved by Khrushchev, Yuliya. It’s all fine. All fine. But I don’t want to tell everyone. I mean, secret agents are not good when they’re not secret.’

‘Oh, well – No, I suppose not. But how exciting, Illya. You, a spy? And your friend, your Napoleon Bonaparte?’

‘Napoleon. Just Napoleon.’ They whirled around a landing onto another flight of stairs, and he felt dizzy. ‘Napoleon’s my partner, my dear partner. My partner in crime. Don’t tell a soul, Yuliya. Not a soul.’

‘Not a soul,’ she promised.

‘Not a soul,’ he repeated, and he could feel it there just behind his tongue in his drunken brain, the urge to say, Napoleon is my partner, my life, my love. Napoleon who saved me over and over. Beautiful Napoleon, you can’t understand how beautiful Napoleon is to me. He held it in tightly, thinking of what his generous government did to dissenters and free thinkers and deviants. He wanted to confess how much he loved Napoleon so hard that tears stung his eyes and his throat swelled, and as they walked outside into the searing cold he heard Napoleon’s voice, and he wanted to run to him. Snow was crunching under his feet and the cold pushed straight through his overcoat, and he stopped still because he knew he couldn’t run.
‘Napoleon,’ he said as Napoleon’s footsteps crunched over to him, and he was ridiculously pleased with himself for how controlled he was being. He reached out an arm so he could touch Napoleon as soon as possible, because he seemed so far away in the blind darkness. ‘Napoleon, come to me. You’re a boat.’

Napoleon was a boat on a dark ocean. Illya was drifting and Napoleon was like a tug boat coming to guide him home.

‘Well, you’re making a habit of getting stupidly drunk without me, aren’t you, tovarisch?’ Napoleon said rather dryly, catching hold of Illya’s hand with his gloved one.

Yuliya whispered very loudly in Illya’s ear, ‘Why does your friend call you comrade?’

Illya laughed. ‘He calls me lots of things, Yuliya. He thinks it’s a joke. Napoleon is a joker. Napoleon, this is my dear old school friend Yuliya Petrenkova. She’s a very clever girl. Very clever. She’s a doctor. Napoleon, can you see her? Does she still have hair like a bird’s nest?’

‘Er,’ Napoleon said awkwardly. ‘Yuliya, it’s very nice to meet you, but I think I should get Illya in out of the cold. And you should go back inside, really. It’s freezing out here. Will you be able to get back to the party alone?’

‘Napoleon, dear Napoleon. What a ridiculous name. I’m not drunk, you know, just warm. Of course I’ll be able to get back.’

‘Yuliya,’ Illya said, opening his arms, feeling very warm towards his old friend. ‘Yuliya, let me say goodbye to you. You’ve been a wonderful friend. It’s been so wonderful to talk to you. If you’re ever in New York...’

She laughed and stepped into his embrace, and he hugged her hard, feeling the smallness of her in his arms and her hair against his face, inhaling the scent of her. How long had it been since he had really touched a woman, a woman who wasn’t his mother? He had almost forgotten how small women could be. He remembered her teenager’s face and wished so hard that he could see. He was muffled in darkness and everything was about touch and scent and the sounds around him as he pressed his head against hers and then kissed her cheeks and felt the chill of her skin on his lips. He was possessed with an overwhelming urge to cry, and tears spilled from his eyes.

‘Come on, now, silly Russian,’ Napoleon murmured, putting a hand on his arm. ‘Come on. I shouldn’t let you get drunk, should I? Come on, I’ll take you home.’

((O))

It was hard not to feel deep affection for Illya when he was as drunk as this. It was hard not to feel affection for him anyway, but there was something delightful about him when everything was loosened by alcohol. Illya wouldn’t be guided properly. He slung his arm around Napoleon’s waist instead and Napoleon put an arm around his shoulders, and Illya leant in to him, weeping incoherently.

‘Now, come on, Illya. Come on,’ he said. ‘It’s all right. What are you crying about? Crazy Russian.’

‘Ukrainian,’ Illya said with sudden, insistent feeling, pushing himself against Napoleon’s side. ‘I’m Ukrainian, Napoleon. This is Kyiv. This is my home. All of it. It’s so beautiful, Napoleon.’ He
waved his hand rather vaguely at the surroundings, waving unwittingly at the great grey apartment blocks and the dark sky. ‘I know how beautiful it is. I love my beautiful city, but I can’t see it. All my friends. Pasha and Yuliya… Napoleon, have you seen the churches, have you seen the beautiful river? Is the river frozen this year, Napoleon? Those beautiful golden domes…’

Napoleon squeezed his arm around Illya’s shoulders. ‘Silly Ukrainian,’ he said. ‘Yes, Illya, I’ve seen the river and the churches and all the beautiful things. And the factories and the apartment blocks and all the new buildings. Yes, the river’s frozen this year. And your friends are still here. They’re not going anywhere. The city’s not going anywhere. You’ll see them again.’

‘Oh, but everything changes,’ Illya lamented. ‘Everything. Do you know the Nazis burnt the university library? They burnt a million books. A million books, Napoleon. Oh, god… Have you ever thought of those books turning to ash? Why do people rape my city, Napoleon? Why do they destroy my country?’

‘Shush, Illya,’ Napoleon said gently. There were such depths in Illya, so many things he never spoke about except when he was delirious or raving drunk. ‘Your city’s still here, Illya. It’s all right. You’ll feel better in the morning.’

‘I can’t see, Napoleon,’ Illya mourned.

‘I know,’ Napoleon said. ‘I know, darling.’

‘S’there a moon, Napoleon?’ Illya asked, turning his face to the sky and opening his eyes very wide.

‘There’s a beautiful moon,’ Napoleon said, looking up too. The moon was a silver crescent in a sky that sparkled with stars. ‘It’s a quarter moon, and it’s so bright it looks like polished platinum.’

‘It’s been so long since I saw the moon,’ Illya sighed. ‘You can’t touch the moon…’

‘If I could I’d throw out a rope and bring it down to earth for you to hold, Illya. But it looks so cold and it’s so bright I’d be afraid you’d burn your fingers.’

‘Oh…’ Illya leaned even closer as Napoleon guided him carefully over an icy patch of snow. ‘I love you, Napoleon. Have I ever told you I love you?’

‘Many times, my dear,’ Napoleon assured him.

‘No, but I do love you. You’re – you’re my air, Napoleon. My air. I love you. Because if I didn’t have air I’d – I’d – well, anoxia. Napoleon, I need you to breathe. I do. I don’t think you understand.’

‘Of course I do, because I feel the same,’ Napoleon promised. ‘It’s just I’m not three sheets to the wind on home made vodka. Now, come on. Come on home. I’ll get you to bed. You’ll feel better in the morning. Well, if you don’t have a raging hangover… You Ukrainians, you party well, don’t you?’

‘S’not like Americans don’t get drunk,’ Illya protested. ‘Americans are – ’ He seemed to be thinking hard, then he said, ‘Napoleon, I remember – Something someone said at the party. Someone – ’

‘What is it, honey?’ Napoleon asked. Illya’s tone had changed and he recognised the attempt to say something serious. No matter how drunk he was Illya was very good at grabbing hold of an agent’s sense when he needed it.

‘Mikhail. Mikhail at the party,’ Illya said. He stopped stock still on the freezing pavement and
Napoleon stopped too, facing him and putting a hand on his.

‘Mikhail at the party?’

‘Yes, he works in – in the textile factory, he said. He was raging about the evils of America. He said one day America will destroy us. But Yuliya said usually he loves America.’

Napoleon put his arm back around Illya’s shoulders and nudged him onward.

‘That is interesting, Illya. At the textile factory, yes? That’s one of the places we infiltrated tonight. I’m sure your friend Dmitry will be analysing the sample in the morning. If this Mikhail’s showing such strong anti-American sentiment perhaps Thrush have already started their subliminal suggestions.’

‘I love you, Napoleon,’ Illya said again.

‘Yes, I know, Illya. I love you too,’ Napoleon said patiently. ‘Now, come on, we’re at your apartment block. Up the steps. Okay? And in through the door.’

‘Ah, warm,’ Illya sighed. It was cold in the stairwell, but not the blistering cold of outside at past one in the morning.

Napoleon squeezed his arm around his shoulders then said, ‘Come on, Mr Magoo. You take my arm now. Let me guide you properly up the stairs, yes? You’re not too steady on your feet.’

‘Oh,’ Illya said muzzily. ‘Oh, all right then. Yes, I’ve got your arm.’

He rearranged himself so he was holding Napoleon’s arm and Napoleon concentrated on getting him up the poorly lit stairwell and along the cluttered corridor and then he fumbled his gloves off and found the key that Illya’s father had lent him and let them both in.

‘Now, shush,’ he told Illya as he led him down the hallway. ‘Shush now. It’s late. Your parents are sleeping. Come and get into bed. No, we won’t worry about pyjamas tonight. Let’s just get these clothes off you and get you into bed.’

‘Napoleon, I want to be with you,’ Illya said in too loud a voice, and Napoleon pressed a hand over his mouth, whispering, ‘Hush, Illya. Your parents are asleep. Don’t wake them up now.’

He found the bedroom door in the darkness and opened it and manoeuvred Illya through, flicking on the light only once the door was closed behind them.

‘Napoleon, I want to be with you,’ Illya said again. ‘You know, I want to fuck you so badly.’

‘Shush,’ Napoleon whispered.

He got Illya over to the bed and sat him down and started to strip off his clothes and put them on the chair near the bed. Illya reached out blindly and moved his hands over Napoleon’s body, trying to slip his fingers between the buttons of his shirt to his skin, and Napoleon caught them and stilled them.

‘Illya, this is your parents’ bed, remember? You do remember. We can’t do it in here.’

‘Oh, Napoleon,’ Illya sighed.

‘No,’ Napoleon said firmly. ‘All right. Trousers now. Come on, give me a little help, you great drunken oaf. Let’s get you out of your trousers. Why don’t you lie down, huh? Make it easier for
Illya reached out behind himself and felt for the pillow and lay back with a beatific smile, his hair tousled and golden around his head.

‘There you go,’ Napoleon said, gently stripping off his trousers and shoes and socks. He knelt there by the bed, looking at Illya’s soft, slack body and the contours of his underpants, and he had such a powerful urge to forget all the inhibitions about whose bed this was and how drunk Illya was.

He bent his head to deposit a kiss gently on his partner’s flat belly, and looked sideways to see his face, but Illya was asleep. He left another kiss on that firm mound covered by his underpants, then stripped off his own clothes and snuggled in next to Illya’s warm body.
Chapter 9

The world seemed very muzzy and confused and mostly focussed on the tight pounding in his head and the foul taste in his mouth. Illya lay there for a moment trying to work out if he could really be dying, then he recalled mistily the long night with so many different drinks. He could feel the weight of Napoleon in the bed beside him. Every now and then there was a little snore.

He slipped his legs out of bed and realised that he was naked but for his underpants. He got up and wavered, then moved carefully over to the chair where he always put his clothes. There they were, shirt and trousers and jacket, his tie draped over the back of the chair and his cane leaning up at the side. He smiled, overcome with affection for Napoleon as he picked up his shirt. It was last night’s and it stank of cigarette smoke and alcohol, but it was there. Napoleon must have been exhausted last night after going on a mission and then – yes, he had come to bring Illya home, hadn’t he? He had walked him home through the freezing streets and put him to bed, and he had carefully laid out Illya’s clothes so he would know where they were.

He put the shirt back on the chair and felt around for a new pair of slacks where they were hung on the back of the door. He pulled on a clean polo neck and the trousers he had found. His hair still stank of last night but at least his clothes would be clean.

It was quiet in the living room and he turned his head on one side, wondering if his parents were awake. He didn’t have his watch on and wasn’t sure what time it was. Then his mother said, ‘Well, Illya. Did you enjoy your night out?’

She sounded amused rather than disapproving, and Illya grinned ruefully.

‘I did last night,’ he said. ‘This morning, I’m not so sure.’

She put a hand on his arm and kissed his cheek, then made a noise of disgust.

‘You stink, Illyusha,’ she said plainly. ‘Go and wash, and when you come back I will have tea for you.’

So he went into the bathroom and turned the taps on in the bath, washing himself in refreshing, running water as he had always used to before getting used to American ways. He stood at the basin with a towel around his waist and shaved carefully, then re-dressed and felt his way to the kitchen.

‘Mama?’ he asked, listening.

‘Illya, I’m in the living room,’ she called. ‘I’m making you tea properly, with the samovar. Do you feel able to eat, or did you drink too much last night?’

He grimaced. ‘I think I drunk more than is humanly possible,’ he said. ‘I just want good, sweet tea at the moment. Is the sofa put back together, mama?’

‘Be careful of the table. The samovar is boiling on it,’ his mother said anxiously as Illya started to move across the room with his hand held out before him. His knees bumped into the low table, and he stopped, trying to get his bearings.

‘No, the bed is still out,’ his father said, his voice coming from low down. ‘I don’t want to be folded into the sofa, Illyushka.’ He patted the mattress. ‘Come on, little boy.’ He laughed at Illya’s expression. ‘I will always be able to call you little boy, Illyusha. That is my privilege, even if you do go and drink like a man with your friends. Come on, come into bed with me and your mother will
bring us tea. Is your head tender this morning?"

‘Just a little,’ he admitted, and he let his mother help him over to the bed, grateful because it was hard to know where things were when the bed had caused the room to be rearranged. He slipped in under the covers and settled on the creaking mattress, and his father ruffled his hair just as he used to do with his broad hand.

‘There, Illya. Are you snug? It’s funny, isn’t it, how a man can be a grown up and an international agent, and still climb into bed with his father and be a child?’

Illya laughed at that, but then his communicator beeped in his pocket and he quickly got it out and assembled it, thinking it would be someone from the Kyiv office.

‘Illya,’ came Sarah’s voice. ‘I was feeling insomniac and I knew it was morning there, so I thought I’d call and see how you are. I know you were so disappointed – ’

‘You’ve been talking to Napoleon, then,’ Illya grumbled. ‘I am fine, Sarah. I am quite all right. Yes, I was disappointed, but I’m all right. I suppose you’re getting an easy few weeks with me out of the office.’

Her laugh was loud through the communicator. ‘Mr Waverly doesn’t give out easy weeks, Illya. You know that. When I’m not finishing up loose ends in the office I’m transcribing to Braille for you, and the rest of the time I’m putting in secretarial work for other agents. I’ll be glad when you’re back. I think I do less work.’

‘Well, I’m sure I’ll be back soon enough, Sarah,’ Illya promised, ‘depending on how work here goes.’

‘And Napoleon’s looking after you?’

‘Of course. Just as much as I am looking after him,’ Illya nodded, but he felt wary of Sarah saying anything about his relationship in front of his father, who was silent next to him, listening. His father understood more English than he could produce. ‘Listen, Sarah. My mother has just made tea, and I should let you get to sleep. Don’t worry. I’ll come back just as blind as I went away. You won’t be out of a job for a while yet.’

‘Oh, Illya, I would never – ’ she began indignantly, and he said quickly, ‘I know. I was joking. But I must go. Goodbye, Sarah.’

He put the communicator back in his pocket and accepted the cup of tea his mother handed to him, and answered his father’s question about who that was on that strange, tiny telephone.

‘My personal assistant,’ he said. ‘I’ve told you about her, tato . Sarah. She helps me all the time in the office.’

‘Ah,’ his father said slowly. ‘She’s pretty, this girl?’

Illya shrugged, concentrating on the hot cup of tea in his hands. The aroma rose on steam that drifted past his face. ‘I really don’t know. Napoleon says she has dark hair, wears it up on the back of her head. She’s about my height. She generally wears a pleasant perfume.’

‘Well, she has a nice voice, though? You like her?’

Illya sighed. ‘I like her,’ he said. ‘She is very useful to me. I couldn’t manage in the office without her. But that is all, tato . I do like women. I can like women. But I like men too, and I love
Napoleon. You do understand that, don’t you?"

His father sighed too, a longer, deeper sigh. Then he said, ‘I don’t know if I can understand, Illya, but as long as you’re happy. I know you’re a strong man, a real man. But – Well, I had always hoped for grandchildren.’

Illya snorted. ‘I would be very unlikely to give you grandchildren in any case, tato. I’m not in the right business for having children. The chance of leaving them without a father is too great. Tato, let’s not talk about this. Drink your tea. Enjoy it. Talk about something else.’

‘Very well. Very well then. This mission your Napoleon went on. Are you allowed to talk about that?’

‘Not really,’ Illya admitted. ‘Tato do you happen to know if Napoleon swept for bugs last night?’

‘Yes, as soon as he came in,’ his father confirmed.

‘Well, then, I know it won’t go further than you and mama. Napoleon went with some other agents to collect samples of water from various organisations. Factories and the like that wouldn’t permit collection. Even with supposed government approval of U.N.C.L.E. activities the red tape can be disabling. Last night Napoleon went to get those samples, and I suppose they’re being analysed this morning. It’s almost certain that something is being put in the water supplies of some institutions which is designed to enhance anti-American feeling. Thrush are trying to provoke a war.’

His father was very silent. His mother came to sit on the edge of the bed, and she put her hand out and laid it over Illya’s. They had been through enough wars, he knew. The world wars, the civil war, the long, cruel war waged by the Soviet government to keep Ukraine under their control. Just before Illya’s birth his parents had lived through the terrible man-made famine that killed millions, when Ukraine’s famine relief was restricted so as to bring the people under the yoke. There had been too many conflicts, too much death, and Illya supposed he was lucky to have grown up in a time when the worst of those atrocities had eased, that he had been too young to understand the Purges when people disappeared in the night and never returned. But the crisis in Cuba was so recent and so terrifying that this threat was very real too. To Illya, who was privy to all the inside information of that conflict, the threat felt even greater. He knew how close the nations had come to launching nuclear missiles.

‘Don’t worry, mama,’ he said, stroking her hand. ‘We fight every day against Thrush and they never win. They won’t win now. We know about this scheme and we’re working to stop it. Don’t worry.’

‘Is there any way we can help?’ she asked, concerned. ‘After all, your father and I are both chemists. If we can help...’

He pressed her hand, feeling the tendons under the ageing skin, feeling her short fingernails and the softness of her palms. He wondered how she had aged in the years since he had been home.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Thrush is a dangerous organisation. I won’t have you put yourself in harm’s way. It’s bad enough having us living with you. I’ve been wondering if we should move to the Intourist...’

‘No,’ his mother said immediately. ‘No, I have not seen you for almost five years, Illya, and look what has happened to you in the meantime. I’m not having you stay at a hotel.’ She patted her hand down firmly on his leg. ‘No. You’ll stay here, both of you. I’m going to make you borsch later, Illyusha, just as you like it.’
Illya grinned. ‘In that case I will help you cook. That way I will be closer to the smells.’

((O))

When Napoleon got up it was to the sight of Illya cramped into the little kitchen with his mother, his poloneck sleeves pushed up to his elbows, holding a vegetable knife in one hand and carefully cutting up potatoes into slices. Perhaps his mother was supposed to be doing the same herself, but she wasn’t. She was watching Illya’s hands with eagle eyes as if she were waiting for something to happen. Every now and then she said something anxiously in Ukrainian, and Illya responded with a murmur and a shrug.

‘Having cookery lessons?’ Napoleon asked, coming up to the kitchen door with a grin on his face.

Illya laid the knife down, keeping his hand on the potato he was cutting.

‘We are making borsch,’ Illya said. ‘If there are any lessons occurring, it’s just that I’m trying to teach my mother that I’m quite capable of handling a sharp knife without slicing my fingers off.’

His mother said something in Ukrainian again and Illya responded, and then said to Napoleon, ‘Really, I have faced men with guns, I have defused bombs, I have had knife fights and fist fights. I have used a parachute and flown planes and helicopters and jumped from moving trains. I have seen flesh dissolving foam and lethal hiccup gas. I have been stabbed or shot more times than I care to remember. But my mother thinks that this four inch blade is the most dangerous thing I have ever encountered.’

Napoleon leant against the wall and grinned, ‘Well, I have to say, I was pretty nervous the first time I watched you use a kitchen knife when you couldn’t see.’

Illya made a low, grumbling sound. ‘I thought you would be on my side,’ he said rather petulantly.

‘Illya, I’m firmly in the camp of people who love you,’ Napoleon said, ‘and one of the key roles there is to not want to see you cut your own fingers off. I know you’re perfectly safe with knives now. Have you told your mother that you’ve cooked borsch quite a few times in the last two years?’

‘Repeatedly,’ Illya said. He turned back to the chopping board and continued to cut the potato into thin slices and his mother continued to watch him like a hawk.

‘Want me to try to spirit her away?’ Napoleon asked in a low murmur.

‘Much as I hate to admit it, I don’t know the kitchen well enough,’ Illya replied. ‘I don’t know where everything is.’

‘Ah, well, then you have a problem,’ Napoleon grinned. ‘I – er – don’t suppose you’ve room to make me some coffee? And when we’ve devoured this delicious borsch we should call in and find out how Dmitry is doing with those samples.’

‘Oh,’ Illya said, sounding as if he were thinking hard. ‘Was there something – something I told you last night?’

‘Ah, about your friend,’ Napoleon said.
‘Give me a moment,’ Illya said, and he spoke to his mother in Ukrainian.

She kissed him on the cheek and started to fill the kettle, and Illya moved to the sink to wash his hands and then pulled down the sleeves of his top and turned to Napoleon.

‘Let’s go somewhere with a little more room,’ he said, touching Napoleon’s arm and following him into the living room. ‘Where’s my cardigan? I left it on the chair just – ’

‘Here,’ Napoleon said, grabbing it from the chair.

Illya shrugged it on, and smiled as Napoleon smoothed the collar with his fingertips.

‘What colours am I wearing this morning?’ he asked.

‘You are wearing the light grey polo neck and the rather mustard cardigan,’ Napoleon told him, fiddling with the fold of the high shirt neck affectionately, wishing he could kiss his cheek too. ‘And I am in a yellow polo shirt and my sports jacket. We make a delightful pair.’

Illya gave him a crooked smile, then walked carefully through the little living room to the end where the doors to the balcony looked out over the park. He ran his hands over the catch and tried to open the door, then frowned and said, ‘Napoleon, give me a hand. I don’t quite remember how the catch works.’

‘Oh – er – there’s a couple of bolts top and bottom,’ Napoleon said, investigating the door. ‘I think they’re relatively new.’ He slipped the bolts open and opened the doors and stepped into the freezing air outside. ‘Well, it’s refreshing, anyway,’ he said with a grin.

Illya followed him and closed the doors behind them. ‘Refreshing,’ he nodded. He reached out until he touched the damp concrete wall that fronted the balcony. ‘It’s more a useful space than a luxury space. It allows us to dry washing and so on. But I always liked it, especially in summer. We’re lucky to have such a view. I suppose the view is still there, since the park is still there.’

‘The park’s there,’ Napoleon nodded. ‘It’s all black trees and snow and I think I can see a bit of the lake all frozen over. Yes, it must be the lake. I can see people skating.’

‘Ah,’ Illya said with something of a sigh.

‘Did you ever skate?’ Napoleon asked him.

‘Most winters. I remember how excited I was when tato got hold of a pair of old skates for me. Sometimes I’d go on the lake, sometimes on the river. Those were good times. I felt so free...’

Napoleon put a hand softly on his arm. Illya’s face had changed from a look of happy nostalgia to sadness.

‘I’m sorry, Illya,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry for all the things you can’t do like you did.’

Illya shook himself and gave a rather forced laugh. ‘Don’t be silly. I haven’t skated in years. It’s not like the rivers in Cambridge ever really froze, and I’m past that point of life now.’

‘I’m sorry, Illya,’ Napoleon said again, because he knew that Illya felt it deeply. ‘You’ll get another call from the clinic, you know.’

‘I know,’ Illya said, rubbing his fingertips on the rough concrete wall in front of him. ‘I know I will. I just get so – frustrated sometimes with this – this muffling veil over me. I get so sick of feeling
around in a fog. I wish I could just go out into the world and live.’

‘You are living,’ Napoleon said gently. If he let himself Illya would build this up into either a brood or a sudden rage, and Napoleon hated seeing him so distraught. ‘But I know. I know how hard it is for you.’

He bumped his shoulder against Illya’s gently, wishing he could hold him instead but so conscious of how visible they were on this balcony and how Illya’s parents were just inside.

‘All right,’ Illya said almost roughly. ‘All right, that’s enough. Last night, when I was so drunk I probably wouldn’t have been able to see even if I weren’t blind. What did I say to you?’

‘Ah. You told me about the friend you met at the party. Mikhail, was it? He was showing anti-American feeling. He worked at the textile plant.’

‘Oh!’ A look of remembering flooded Illya’s face. ‘Yes, that’s it. Yuliya said he’s in love with America usually, but last night he was afraid America would destroy Russia.’ Then he frowned and said, ‘You told me you’d give me the moon to hold.’

Napoleon smiled. He took Illya’s hand and very quickly kissed his fingertips. ‘I did, Illya. And I would, if I could. I would give you the moon and the sun and the stars.’

Illya dropped his head, a most endearingly shy smile on his face. ‘You’re an idiot. I’d burn my fingers,’ he said. ‘At least I would on the sun and the stars. And you would throw the entire solar system into disarray.’

‘Well, maybe I’ll stick with more earthly promises,’ Napoleon said with a grin. He pulled his communicator out of his pocket and assembled it. ‘Open Channel F,’ he said. ‘I want to speak to Dmitry Belousov.’

A minute later Belousov’s voice came through the speaker. ‘Ah, Mr Solo! Yes, good morning. You’re wanting the results on those samples, yes?’

‘Well, the textile factory sample in particular,’ Napoleon said quickly. ‘Illya was talking to someone last night who works at the factory and he was showing quite strong anti-American feeling. Have you run that one through your tests yet?’

‘Ah yes, yes I did that one first – no, second, I think. There are still a couple more tests to run, but the sample is definitely contaminated. Yes, I think the next step is to monitor television and radio broadcasts, public music and so on, to see what messages they might contain.’

‘Perhaps Illya and I could help with that,’ Napoleon suggested, and Dmitry laughed.

‘Forgive me, Mr Solo. I didn’t think your Russian was so good, and your Ukrainian – well – ’

‘Well, that may be true,’ Napoleon said. He glanced at Illya. Illya would be perfect for this job, sneaking into broadcasting centres and investigating tape reels and so on, but of course he couldn’t do that now. ‘Yes, I suppose you’re right,’ he continued. Illya was standing facing the concrete wall, his hands on the edge, and he couldn’t tell if he were reacting to the tacit reminder that he wasn’t really a player in this particular game. ‘Well, maybe we’ll skip a day, huh? Illya sampled rather a lot of your excellent vodka last night and he’s a bit worse for wear, so, yes, we’ll come in tomorrow and liaise with your new recruits again.’

‘I will pass that on to Tovarisch Kobevko,’ Dmitry promised.
Napoleon capped the communicator and patted Illya’s arm.

‘Let’s get back inside. My fingers are freezing off.’

He turned to the door but Illya’s mother was just about to open it herself, her face worried. She said something in a very low voice to Illya, and then disappeared inside again. Illya smiled tightly.

‘We have visitors,’ he said softly to Napoleon. ‘KGB.’

‘Oh!’ Napoleon replied in an equally soft tone. ‘Maybe they’ve come to pick up their bugs.’

‘Be careful, Napoleon,’ Illya said very quietly. ‘Not so much for us, but for my parents.’

Napoleon sobered then. He and Illya would be leaving in just over a week’s time, but Illya’s parents had no choice but to stay. He made up his mind to leave instructions with the local U.N.C.L.E. office to keep an eye on them for a while after he and Illya left.

‘There’s nothing they can do about our being here,’ Illya said. ‘We’re officially allowed by the government. But don’t give them a handle. Don’t tease them, don’t challenge them, and for God’s sake don’t do anything that will make them suspect our relationship.’

‘I won’t,’ Napoleon said a trifle irritably. ‘I’ve dealt with these types before, Illya.’

‘I know,’ Illya said in a mollifying tone, ‘but this is my family. We had better go in.’

Napoleon pulled the door open and ushered Illya through, sweeping his eyes over the living room.

‘There are two guys in suits both sitting on the sofa,’ he told Illya, deliberately keeping his voice normal so the men wouldn’t think he was hiding anything. ‘Your mother is making them tea on the table. Look, wait there a moment,’ he said, putting his hand on Illya’s arm. He quickly fetched a couple of dining chairs and put them on the other side of the table. ‘Here, sit down. I’ve put a dining chair there,’ he said, guiding Illya to a chair. ‘Now, good morning, gentleman. Do you speak English or – ’

‘We speak English,’ one of the men said; a small, dark haired man. ‘Good morning, Mr Solo, Tovarisch Kuryakin.’

The second man was larger, more jovial looking, and he pushed to his feet and stretched a hand across the table to Illya, who was aware of the movement but not of the hand.

‘Mr Kuryakin is blind,’ Napoleon said, deliberately keeping his voice light and friendly despite his irritation at this tactic. ‘Illya, the gentleman wants to shake your hand.’

‘Oh,’ Illya said, blinking. He reached out his hand quickly and the man caught his and pumped it.

‘Tovarisch Kuryakin,’ and he released Illya’s hand and reached for Napoleon’s. ‘Mr Solo. My name is Matvei Tvardovsky, and my colleague is Valentin Garanin. We had word of your presence in the country and we wanted to come by and see if there is anything we can do for you. Tovarisch Kuryakin, of course, knows the city, but if you would like a tour, Mr Solo – ’

‘Uh, thank you, but Tovarisch Kuryakin has been a very good guide so far.’

The dark man’s eyebrow twitched, and Napoleon could see the irony hadn’t been lost on him.

‘You’re here on official U.N.C.L.E. business,’ he said.
‘Yes,’ Napoleon said with a polite smile, ‘but of course you understand I’m not at liberty to discuss that with others.’

The two exchanged a glance and a subtle smile.

‘It might make your assignment go more smoothly if you cooperated with local forces,’ Tvardovsky suggested.

‘It might make our assignment go more smoothly if local forces cooperated with us,’ Illya said sweetly.

Napoleon knocked his foot discreetly against Illya’s. So much for Illya warning Napoleon to be careful.

‘Ah,’ Garanin said with a thin lipped smile. ‘How do you call that in English? An impasse, yes?’

At that moment Illya’s mother returned to pour the tea, and there was a moment of smiles and pleasantries. Tvardovsky complimented Mrs Kuryakina on her tea. Illya sipped slowly from his cup while still giving the impression of being on a razor’s edge. His mother retreated again to look after the borsch she was making, and the KGB men focussed their attention on Napoleon and Illya again. The conversation was like a very polite dance, moving around and around and never exactly revealing what anyone really thought. The KGB men were full of polite and helpful offers which Napoleon politely declined. Then Garanin questioned Illya about his blindness and how it was that he still worked for U.N.C.L.E., and Napoleon watched his partner cautiously, knowing it was such a sensitive subject.

‘Well, we have another appointment to make,’ Tvardovsky said eventually, when all the tea had been drunk and they had spent so long turning in circles that Napoleon wasn’t quite sure where they were. The two men stood. Napoleon and Illya stood too. Garanin picked up an apple from the bowl on the low table and looked about to bite into it, but at the last moment he suddenly threw it directly at Illya’s face. It struck him on the cheek and he stumbled backwards, lifting his arms defensively and then controlling his reaction with great effort. Napoleon acted with ruthlessly controlled rage, focussing on Illya rather than Garanin, knowing that all of Illya’s instincts were prompting him to fight.

‘Illya, it was an apple. It’s all right,’ he said quickly, putting a hand on his shoulder and then bending to pick up the apple and putting it in his hand so he could feel it. Then he rounded on Garanin. ‘Have you any idea how foolish that was? Illya has killed more men than you have fingers and toes, and you attack him in his own home, in his family home?’

Garanin looked faintly shocked. Tvardovsky was looking daggers at him. And then Illya said icily, ‘If you’d wanted to assure yourselves that I really am blind I’m sure you could have sent someone in to look at my doctor’s reports. Throwing fruit into a man’s face isn’t an approved method of any ophthalmic organisation, as far as I’m aware.’

‘We had to be sure,’ Garanin said rather shamefacedly. ‘The man who pretends to be blind, all the better to act the spy, is a familiar trope.’

‘I am sure,’ Illya responded icily. ‘But if you need further evidence – ’ He turned away and felt his way to the bedroom, coming back with his cane and his suitcase. ‘This is my cane, gentlemen,’ he said, holding it out for their inspection. When neither man took it he leant it against the chair he had been sitting on. ‘It doesn’t conceal a blade or shoot bullets. It just helps me get around, because I can’t see anything but a vague white blur.’ He put the case on the chair and opened it and felt inside in stiff, jerking movements. ‘These are my dark glasses. I don’t need them in here but I wear them in
bright light, because the glare is painful. *This,*’ he said, drawing out a thick tome and opening it, ‘is the fourth part of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* printed in Braille. The entire novel takes more volumes in Braille than I can carry with me sensibly. I can assure you that if I could just bring a pocket sized paperback in my luggage, I would. I wouldn’t have spent months learning to read Braille, either. It really wasn’t easy. After two years I am still learning some of the more complex aspects.’ He put the book down and felt in the case again, pulling out a sheaf of papers and running his fingers briefly over the top sheet. ‘This is an U.N.C.L.E. report kindly transcribed into Braille for me by my personal assistant. She spends a great deal of time transcribing things for me that two years ago I would have been able to just read in normal type.’ He felt in a pocket in the case lid and pulled out his slim metal Braille slate and the wooden-handled stylus. ‘This is the slate I use if I need to write anything down, when you would use pencil and paper. The stylus I use to punch the dots. I have a Braille typewriter but I didn’t bring it this trip, so I can’t present *that* in evidence. Somewhere in here – ’ and finally his voice broke a little ‘ – is the documentation for a corneal transplant that was cancelled at the last moment. Would you like me to show you anything else to prove my handicap? The Braille marked money clips I use so I can tell my bank notes apart? The labels in my clothes that Napoleon has cut with pinking shears so I can tell by touch my black t-shirts from the white? The Braille labels on the items in my first aid kit? I wish this were a sham. If it were I wouldn’t have spent six months of my life learning to read and write and walk and cook and clean and dress myself. I wouldn’t have to spend every day reliant on the kindness of friends and strangers. I wouldn’t – ‘

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said, putting a hand on his arm. Illya was shaking so subtly that you could only tell by touching him. ‘Gentlemen, are you done here?’ he asked.

‘Er – yes,’ Tvardovsky said quietly. ‘Yes, we are.’ Then he touched Illya’s arm and said something to him in Russian. Napoleon wasn’t sure what it was, but it sounded conciliatory.

Napoleon showed the men out. When he came back into the living room Illya was still standing there, holding the Braille slate in his hands.

‘Bugs,’ Illya said in a brittle tone. ‘Check for bugs.’

Then he dropped the slate back into the case and stalked out of the room.

((O))

Illya pushed his way into the bedroom he had known as a child and stood there, shaking. He touched a hand to his cheek. The apple hadn’t hit him terribly hard, but it had been a shock. He remembered the acid splashing across his face, searing across his eyes, he remembered screaming and screaming and falling to his knees. His stomach was roiling and his mouth had gone dry.

He hit his fist into his palm and then hit it again. He was so angry with himself. He was angry with himself for his words to the KGB agents and angry that he had been so shaken by that sudden, bizarre attack. He was angry that anyone might believe him to be lying about his blindness, angry that his blindness left him so defenceless, angry that – He didn’t know. Just angry. He wanted to scream and rage.

He stalked across the room to the corner where his bed had used to stand. There was a wardrobe there now. He didn’t know what else. He knew bits of this room, the places where his hands had touched. He didn’t know if the walls were the same colour still, if the pictures had changed.
If only he hadn’t caught that stupid cold he might be recovering from the transplant right now. He might be enjoying meaningful sight for the first time in over two years.

He felt so wretched, and a choked sob huffed out of him, and then another. He shoved his hand against his mouth, and then the door opened and there was his mother calling, ‘Illyushenka, oh, my darling. It’s all right. It’s all right.’ She folded her arms around him and said, ‘Come here, Illyushenka. Come. Sit down,’ and she tugged him over to the bed and sat with him, holding him, stroking his back, kissing his forehead.

‘There, they’ve gone,’ she whispered. ‘We’re all alone now.’

‘It’s – it’s not them,’ Illya managed to say, anger vying with upset, horrified that she thought he had broken down because he was scared of the KGB men. He had always harboured a very childish fear of those men who came and took people in the night, but it wasn’t fear of them that had produced this reaction. ‘No, it’s – ’

‘I saw him throw that apple. That stupid man. Oh, I could have slapped him.’

‘Mama,’ Illya said. ‘No, you know that would make you more stupid than him.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I know, but I am a lion when I see someone hurt my boy.’

‘He didn’t hurt me. It didn’t – ’

He drew a deep breath, trying to catch in his whirl of feelings, trying to steady his breathing. It was ridiculous. Partly it was that awful instinctive reaction at something being thrown at his face. It was making his heart race, making his chest tighten. That memory was so sharp, beyond rationality. He could probably explain that to his mother. But how did he explain the rest of it? How did he explain the sheer frustration and grief that welled up like a deep sea current sometimes? How did he explain that everything could be fine for days, and then suddenly he could find himself so angry, incandescent with fury over the ruin of his life?

‘Illyushenka,’ his mother said softly, stroking his hair. ‘It’s all right. I’ve seen you through so many things. You don’t need to smile for me.’

So he put his head against her and just let her hold him. How often could he be embraced by his mother? He was so tired of all of this, so tired of every day containing some kind of fight to just live normally. So tired of the strain of not knowing if this transplant would ever come, whether it would work when it did.

‘I just want to be able to see, mama,’ he whispered, and she hugged him more tightly.

‘I know, Illyushenka,’ she said. ‘I know. It’s very cruel.’

He sighed, huffed out hard, and rubbed a hand over his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m being ridiculous.’

There was a soft tap on the door and then Napoleon was asking, ‘Illya? May I come in?’

Illya’s mother kissed him on the forehead and said, ‘I must check the borsch,’ so Illya smiled and said, ‘Thank you, mama. Yes, Napoleon. Come in.’

He held out his hand and as his mother left the room Napoleon came forward and took it.

‘Three bugs, all now defunct,’ he said. ‘Are you all right, Illya?’
Illya smiled apologetically. ‘Of course. I just had a stupid moment. A kind of flash back, I suppose. Having someone throw something at my face...’

Napoleon embraced him gently then and kissed him on the lips. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I didn’t even think. I’m sorry, honey.’

Illya shook his head. ‘I’m all right. It was stupid. It was an apple, not acid.’

‘Not the point. It could have been anything.’

Illya shrugged. ‘Well, that is as may be. But I will not have my whole day brought down by this. Once we have sampled my mother’s borsch we are going to go out and walk around some of the most beautiful places in my city. I may not be able to see them, but that’s no reason why you should not.’
Chapter 10

The communicator beeped into the night. Illya stirred first, reaching out muzzily, forgetting at first that he was in bed in his parents’ apartment and not in his and Napoleon’s broad bed in New York. Then the scents came to him, and the feeling of the bed around him, and then he nudged Napoleon in the side and said, ‘Napoleon, communicator. Wake up.’

Napoleon grunted and shifted, and then the bed shook as he sat up suddenly, mumbling, ‘I’m on it, Illya. Where’s the light? Oh – ’ There was a click and light flooded the room, and finally the beeping stopped.

‘Mr Solo, this is Kobevko,’ a voice spoke into the air. ‘Do you have Tovarisch Kuryakin to translate?’

‘Uh, yes, I’m here,’ Illya said quickly, shifting closer. He switched to Ukrainian and asked, ‘What is it?’ He felt at his watch. It was almost one a.m..

‘Tovarisch Kuryakin, we’ve discovered the source of the chemical manufactory. If Mr Solo wants to come along he should come to headquarters straight away. I’m assembling a team and I’d welcome his experience and assistance. There’ll be a man on the team who can translate.’

‘Oh. Yes, of course,’ Illya replied. He put his hand on Napoleon’s arm and said in English, ‘Napoleon, they’ve found where they’re making the chemical. Kobevko wants you in. They’ll have an English speaker.’

‘Oh, well – ’ Napoleon still sounded half asleep. ‘Yes, of course. I’ll be down there right away.’

‘He’ll be there right away,’ Illya relayed to Kobevko.

As Napoleon put away the communicator Illya sat up straighter in bed.

‘Do you want me to come?’ he asked, half hopeful even though the bed was very warm.

‘No, you stay here, sleepy head,’ Napoleon said as he swung his legs out of bed. ‘It’s not like you can come into the field with me anyway. You might as well get back to sleep.’

‘Well, all right,’ Illya murmured.

He could hear Napoleon hopping about the room pulling on his clothes. He felt a dull ache of disappointment but there was nothing to be done for it.

Napoleon deposited a kiss on his forehead and another on his lips, and said warmly, ‘I’ll call you. Wish me luck.’

‘Good luck,’ Illya said rather pensively. He did hate for Napoleon to be going out on missions without his backup. He always had.

As soon as Napoleon had crept out of the room he switched the little light off and settled back down in bed. The best way to pass this time waiting was to sleep, but he didn’t feel sleepy now. He felt wide awake.

He sighed and felt down by the side of the bed for his book, then hauled it up and put it on the quilt. At least he could read while he waited.
He woke very suddenly, confused and muzzy headed. The book was still lying on top of him. He had fallen asleep reading. He grunted and pushed it aside and felt on the bedside table for his watch. It was almost nine.

He rubbed his eyes and swung his legs out of bed. He had expected Napoleon to have called by now. He picked up his communicator and toyed with it. It would be stupid to try to call Napoleon when he was in the middle of a mission, so he called the Kyiv headquarters instead and was answered by a soft voiced woman.

‘I’m checking on last night’s mission,’ he said rather tersely. ‘I expected to have heard from my partner by now.’

‘We’ve had no contact since four a.m., Tovarisch Kuryakin,’ the woman replied.

Illya chewed his lip pensively. ‘Were you expecting another check in?’ he asked.

‘Not a timed check in. They were going to call when they’d destroyed the manufactory.’

‘You sent an explosives expert?’

‘Two team members hold level two explosives qualifications, including Mr Solo, but they were hoping to destroy the set up with sabotage rather than a big bang, Tovarisch Kuryakin,’ she said, sounding as if she were smiling gently.

‘Hmm,’ Illya muttered. ‘Well, all right. I’ll call back later, unless you call me with news.’

He closed the communicator and put it back down with a clack on the night stand. He would have expected Napoleon to have called by now, if everything had gone as planned – whatever the plan had been. He hated this feeling of being outside the loop. He hated being so useless. At least if he had been in New York he would have had all of his adaptive equipment, and Sarah, and he would have been able to go in and work on the intelligence end of the problem even if he could do nothing in the field.

He sighed and pulled on a t-shirt and his underpants and ventured out into the apartment. He could hear someone in the living room, and he called out, ‘Mama? Tato?’

‘Good morning, Illyusha,’ his father replied from the other side of the room. ‘Your mother has already left for work. I will be leaving in a minute. Is Napoleon still asleep?’

Illya shook his head. His father’s casual tone just made him feel more tense.

‘No, Napoleon left in the early hours on a mission,’ he said.

His father stopped in whatever he was doing. ‘He is out, Illya? Well, I have to go to work, and you’re going to be alone – ’

‘I can look after myself,’ Illya said snappishly, then he held up his hand and smiled apologetically. ‘I’m sorry, tato. But really, I am fine on my own. I don’t need a sitter.’

‘But you’ve had nothing to eat,’ his father fusses. ‘You’ve had no tea...’
‘I can fix myself something to eat,’ Illya promised.

He moved across the room to where his father was standing. It sounded as if he were putting papers into a case, and he put his hand out to feel the movement of his father’s arm.

‘Tato, really, I will be fine. I spend days, sometimes more than two weeks, living alone when Napoleon is away on missions. Once he was away for a month. I will be perfectly all right here on my own.’

His father made a non-committal noise, and the clasps snapped closed on his briefcase.

‘I could boil the kettle before I leave?’

‘Tato,’ Illya said, trying to rein in his impatience.

‘All right, Illyusha. All right. But here,’ he said, pulling open a drawer and getting something jangling and metallic. ‘Here is another spare key, Illya,’ he said, pressing it into Illya’s hand. ‘Just in case you should have to leave for any reason. And please take care, won’t you?’

‘Of course I will take care,’ Illya promised. He reached out to feel his father’s shoulder, and hugged him briefly. ‘Really, tato, I’m not a child any more. I have been in far more dangerous situations than staying alone at home. You don’t have to worry about me.’

His father chuckled and then kissed him on the cheek. ‘Of course I will always worry about you, Illyusha. You who have travelled around the world so many times and killed men and set explosions and broken into enemy installations. Of course I will always worry about you. Take care. I must go or I will be late. I will be back by six.’

Illya stood for a moment in the quiet of the apartment after the front door closed. It was rather odd being here alone. He stood very still and listened to the quiet sounds, the nothing sounds of the immediate space around him and the muffled and distant sounds from the rest of the building, the soft noise of traffic from outside, the occasional scuff of the wind against hard concrete edges and through the bare tree branches in the park. It sounded like a blustery day, but it was very still and peaceful in here.

He breathed out a long breath, then went to wash and shave. He got dressed and ventured into the kitchen, feeling for the kettle and wondering where his mother kept the matches. He felt over the surface by the stove and over the little shelf to the side. He felt on the narrow kitchen windowsill. He opened the food larder and felt in there. He ran his fingers over so many surfaces that they began to feel sticky and unpleasant.

This was utterly ridiculous. Of course he was completely capable of making himself tea, but not if the matches were nowhere to be found. In the kitchen at home he could put out his hand and what he wanted was always there. Napoleon was as religious about keeping things in their place as he was. Back in the early days there had been so many frustrating moments when Napoleon had forgotten to put something back, when various things didn’t have rigid places to be kept, when Illya hadn’t known the location of everything in the kitchen. But now everything had a place, and it was always in it. He relied on it.

He refused to be prevented from drinking tea by something so ridiculous. He went through into the living room and felt over the little desk in the corner. His father had always kept the matches for his cigarettes in the drawer there. But the drawer was locked. He almost growled in frustration. He ran his hands over the desk surface and lighted on a paper clip, which he straightened out and then bent into a lock pick. It had been a long time since he had needed to pick any locks but the skill hadn’t
He slipped the wire into the hole and probed with great delicacy until the lock clicked. He opened the drawer and felt inside. Paper, a few coins, a watch that didn’t tick, but no matches.

He went back into the kitchen and tried again, opening cupboards, feeling right the way to the back, searching everywhere, but there were no matches. Finally, in utter frustration, he grabbed his cane and the spare key and went into the corridor outside. He walked with his hand on the wall, tracing his fingers lightly over the plaster until they hit a door frame and then a door. He rang the bell, and waited.

A minute later he heard footsteps. There was the sound of a crying baby, which grew louder as the door was opened, and a woman asked rather nervously, ‘Yes?’

Illya smiled, holding his cane before him, trying to look suitably apologetic.

‘I am sorry to disturb you,’ he said. ‘I am Illya Nikolayevich Kuryakin. I’m staying with my parents next door. I wonder if you could help me?’

‘Help you?’ she asked in a rather bewildered tone. She had the baby in her arms. The thing kept mewling and she was jogging it up and down.

‘I’m blind, and I just need a little help,’ he said. ‘It’s ridiculous really, but I can’t find the matches in my parents’ kitchen. They’ve gone out and there’s no one else there, and – ’

‘Oh! Oh, well – Well, I have some matches,’ she said quickly. It was obvious from the scent of her that she smoked. ‘Um, let me – let me come around. I can help you.’

Illya smiled his most winning smile. He felt wretched inside for having to call on a neighbour for something like this, but it was better than trying to contact his mother at work and worrying her or letting his father know he had failed at this most simple task. It wasn’t like he hadn’t had to do it before. He had asked for a lot of help in the early days.

‘Thank you,’ he said, turning back towards his own door before she could start awkwardly offering to guide him. He preceded her all the way into the kitchen, where she said brightly, ‘Oh, but the matches are just here.’

And she picked up a rattling box. Less than ten seconds in the kitchen and she had found the matches that he hadn’t been able to find with a fingertip search.

‘But – where were they?’ he asked.

‘Here, on the shelf,’ she said, and she jogged the baby and spoke to it softly, then took Illya’s hand and guided it to a narrow little shelf attached to the wall high above the stove. He hadn’t even known it was there. There never had been a shelf there when he had lived here.

‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ Illya said. He could feel his face growing red. How ridiculous it was to have made this woman go to all that trouble just to pick up a box of matches that had been in front of him all along. How stupid he felt. How blind. ‘I’m sorry. I am home for a visit and I don’t know the kitchen well enough. I’m so sorry to have troubled you.’

‘It was no trouble at all,’ she promised him. ‘Can I – What were you trying to do? Can I help you at all?’

Illya smiled rather shamefacedly. ‘I was just going to make some tea and buckwheat pancakes for breakfast. If I can find what I need, of course. I can cook very well at home, but here I don’t know where everything is.’
‘Well.’ She stood silent for a moment, and the baby cooed and gurgled, sounding much happier now. ‘I think a change of scenery has helped the baby. Tovarisch Kuryakin, if you can hold her for a minute I will find what you need to cook with. Will that help?’

Illya smiled. He felt so embarrassed at having to need this help, but it was wonderful that she was offering him just enough help, not too much.

‘That would be very kind of you,’ he said. He leant his cane up in the corner and opened his arms. ‘Give me the child.’

So she handed him the child and he held her with great care, feeling the solid thickness of a nappy, cotton clothes, and fat limbs. She smelt very clean, a curious scent that only small children had, as if their cleanness was a result of their newness on this earth. He thought the girl must be about six months old. She made inarticulate noises and a soft hand touched his face, and he smiled, moving one hand up carefully to feel a round head with sparse silken hair and a soft fontanelle.

‘What is she called?’ he asked.

‘Natalya,’ the woman said fondly. He could hear her opening and closing cupboards and putting things out on the worksurface. ‘Here,’ she said as she worked. ‘Here are your flour and your eggs and your milk. The tea tin I have pulled forward and put the teapot and a cup beside it. Now, the utensils are hanging on a rack to the left of the stove, some of them, and there is a drawer beneath the worksurface too. Will you be able to find everything?’

Illya handed the baby back with some relief and reached a hand out to feel what she had left on the surface.

‘Yes, I think so,’ he said. ‘And – oh – the matches?’

She laughed. ‘Well, that would be ridiculous, wouldn’t it? I have put them back on the shelf above the stove. So now you know where they are. Will that be all right?’

‘That will be perfect, thank you,’ Illya said. ‘It was very kind of you to help me.’

‘Well, I will be in all day, if you need anything else,’ she assured him. ‘I have nothing to do but look after baby and wait for my husband to come home.’

She sounded rather mournful then, and Illya felt sorry for her.

It was quiet again once she had left, and Illya struck a match into the silence and lit a ring on the stove. As the kettle boiled he made up his pancake batter and tried not to think about Napoleon. Whatever was going on, there was nothing he could do but wait. Nothing to do but cook his breakfast and wait for his husband to come home, he thought rather ironically. At first he smiled at that thought, but then he felt a twist of pain. He immediately stamped down on it. Napoleon wasn’t his husband and Illya certainly wasn’t any kind of wife. At home he would not be floundering to look after himself. He only needed more time than sighted people to get familiar with a place. That was all. Just more time.

He sat down eventually with his tea and a stack of pancakes and steadily worked through them. He felt better with some food in his stomach, but still he worried about Napoleon. When he had finished eating he felt at a loss again. He went back to the kitchen and washed everything he had used and ran his hands over the knobs on the stove to be sure they were all off. He couldn’t smell gas, anyway. Then he went back into the living room and sat there with his book, but he couldn’t concentrate. Reading felt very laborious today and he yearned for the ease of sight reading. He
yearned for the ease of sight.

Oh, this was ridiculous. He was tired of feeling so useless. He got to his feet very suddenly and went into the bedroom and packed his slate and some paper into a bag, then he found his shoes and overcoat and his cane and dark glasses, and he left the apartment. He was a man and this was his home territory, and if he wanted to leave, he would.

It was easy enough finding his way out to the street. He had walked that route so many times. And then he was on the pavement, and he turned to the right and started to walk towards the bus stop. He had done that so many times too. He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds. There was the wind in the trees across the road, and the occasional car. There was very little snow on the ground. He crossed the side street and carried on, sweeping his cane widely in the hope of finding the bus stop. And then the cane clattered into a pole, and he felt out with his hand, then stripped his glove off and felt more carefully. That was it. That was the side of the bus stop. So now he had to wait for a bus or marshrutka to come along.

Three buses stopped for him before he found the right one. The driver on the first was helpful enough to tell him which bus he would need and when it would be along, but he checked with each one that stopped. And then he was sitting in a seat right at the front, and the driver promised to tell him when he had reached his stop, and at that stop another passenger helped him to meet his connection. When he finally disembarked from the second bus he was only a few hundred yards away from the glass shop that was the front for U.N.C.L.E. Kyiv.

And there he stood, not knowing what to do. He was far from his old stomping grounds now. He had no mental image of his surroundings. He didn’t even know which way to turn. He leant against the shelter feeling lost and weary. It was ridiculous to be so close but so unable to go any further. He would have to resort to calling out for help.

Oh, his communicator! How stupid he had been. He stripped his gloves off and took out his communicator and opened a channel to headquarters and asked for help. It wasn’t long before he heard the sound of heeled shoes clacking towards him and a woman was saying, ‘Tovarisch Kuryakin, we would have sent a car! You didn’t need to come all this way alone!’

But he had, and he was proud that he had. In all this time he had really only navigated alone around New York, and here he was in Kyiv having handled two bus journeys alone. He needed help for the final step, but once he knew that route he would be able to do it again. He took the woman’s arm and let her guide him along those last few hundred yards, taking note of the sounds around him and what his cane touched and how many streets they crossed, until they were walking in through the door of the glass shop and he was taken through into the rear and given his badge.

‘But, Tovarisch Kuryakin, why did you come?’ the woman asked him as she took him through the corridors. ‘Where did you want me to take you?’

And there he was stumped. He had no office here, no equipment beyond the slate in his bag. So he said quickly, ‘Take me to the labs. Is Dmitry Belousov in today?’

‘Oh, yes, he’s always in,’ she said blithely. ‘Well, then, a left here, and here we are.’

She opened a door in front of them and Illya tapped at the frame with his cane and followed her through.

‘Dmitry, I’ve got a visitor for you,’ the woman said brightly, and then Belousov was coming across the room saying heartily, ‘Illya Nikolaich! You’ve come to find out about your partner, of course. Come over here. Come and have a seat while I finish off this little task.’
So Illya let Dmitry take him by the elbow and lead him to a lab stool, and he sat down.

‘Listen, Dmitry, I came in because I want to find out what’s going on,’ he said without preamble. ‘I may not be able to help much but I’m cut off from everything back at my parents’ apartment. Do you know the details of this mission?’

There was a clinking of glass and Dmitry made a sound of concentration, but then he put whatever he was working with down and came and pulled up a stool near Illya’s.

‘I know that they discovered a place on the other side of the river, some old warehouse, I think. They tracked a known Thrush agent to this building and saw through the window that they had a whole manufacturing arrangement there, cooking up this drug and putting it into vials. I suppose they have people going about slipping it into water supplies. The indications are that they need a constant low-level dose for the subliminal suggestions to keep working. If a worker is home for the weekend, for example, the suggestions may have worn off by the start of the week and they need to be dosed again. So they sent in a team last night to see to it.’

‘Numbers?’ Illya asked. ‘I mean, what was the suspected enemy headcount? What equipment did our men go in with? Has there been any contact since four a.m.?’

Dmitry laughed softly. ‘Illya, I am a chemist, not an agent. I can tell you any number of things about the chemical itself, how they are manufacturing it, how they are getting it into people’s systems. But I can’t tell you the intimate details of an agents’ raid. Now, let me take you up to the communications room, because there is always someone there who knows everything about everything.’ He squeezed Illya’s arm gently. ‘And don’t worry too much about your partner, eh? He’s a grown man. He can look after himself.’

Illya grunted in acknowledgement, but he didn’t stop worrying. Napoleon was not with a trusted, familiar team, and some of the agents were very new on the job. He followed Dmitry up to the communications room and sat there pensively listening to everything the girls in the office told him, noting down salient details with his slate. Then he sat there just listening to what was going on, running his fingers over the notes he had made, and waiting.
Chapter 11

The phrase *Stygian dark* kept running through Napoleon’s mind. It was funny how the mind could lock onto things. *Pitch black, Stygian darkness, blind as a bat…* They were all true. Well, the last one wasn’t true, he thought. It was utterly dark here, but he wasn’t blind. He just couldn’t see anything. His wrists were tied so tightly behind his back that he could no longer feel his hands, his feet were tied firmly to the legs of the chair he was on, and he was so tired that in a way the utter darkness was a relief.

They had spent quite a long time beating him up, but he didn’t know how long. After a while you turned your mind off, turned in on yourself, stopped listening to the outside world. And of course he hadn’t said anything. How could he? They were talking to him in Russian and while he knew a certain amount, he didn’t know enough to be able to respond accurately under interrogation. Then they had tried English, but he hadn’t responded to that, either. They knew who he was and why he was there, so what else was there to say?

He did wish he knew where the rest of the team was. He suspected they were all being held individually like him. He was almost certain they were being held by Thrush but there was that tiny sliver of suspicion, the suspicion that always lingered in matters with the Soviet Union, that made him wonder if they were KGB. It wouldn’t have surprised him if the two had ties.

He closed his eyes and felt the throbbing of his head and ribs and ankles where they had beaten him, and he thought of Illya. He had left Illya in bed, and he was never more glad of that, because if somehow Illya had wheedled his way along, even just to sit in the car outside the warehouse, he could have been in the same situation now. And Illya was so good at manipulating his way into things. He was so glad he was out of it.

He sat there and stared into the utter blackness and wondered what time it was. There was no way of knowing if it were morning, afternoon, evening. He had spent some time unconscious, so he had lost all sense of how much time had passed, and there were no visual cues.

Oh god, Illya… He felt so strongly for Illya’s condition right now. He should be thinking of his injuries and his immediate future, but he was thinking of Illya, who had spent the first few days after his blinding in a similar condition, his eyes carefully covered with shields, and bandages over the top to protect the burns on his face.

‘You’re lucky,’ they had told Illya in the hospital. Lucky there had been so little acid in the beaker, lucky it had only splashed parts of his face rather than drenching it. Napoleon had seen victims of deliberate acid attacks and he knew how very lucky Illya was to be left with his face, his lips, to be left almost entirely unscarred apart from his eyes. But, oh God, his eyes... What a mess they had been. On that second day when they had unwrapped the bandages and taken away the shields to reveal Illya’s eyes Napoleon had almost gagged. His eyes had looked terrible, an awful mixture of clouded whiteness like a cooked egg white, terrible redness, weeping. He had needed to press his hand over his mouth to suppress the noise he wanted to make, because the last thing Illya would need was Napoleon making sounds of horror or disgust.

‘I think these surrounding burns will heal rather well,’ the doctor had said, probing at the wounds around Illya’s eyes. ‘You are lucky. Mr Kuryakin. We’re not entirely sure what the acid was yet but it hasn’t damaged the skin too badly. It seems to have reacted more virulently with the eyes.’

*Lucky...* To Illya’s credit he had controlled himself all through the examination and while the nurse rebandaged the wounds, but as soon as they had left the room he had said in a wavering voice,
And Napoleon had held him as he sobbed, trying to work out what the hell they were going to do, how they were going to move on from here. His mind spun on the huge, unknowable future. They hadn’t even known then whether Illya would recover any useful sight but the doctors thought there was very little hope. So what would they do? As Illya sobbed he held him and thought through the immediate future, about what would happen when Illya was discharged from hospital. Getting him on a plane, helping him all the way back to New York, taking him home… Home. Illya couldn’t look after himself. So would he stay with Illya or would Illya stay with him? Illya needed to be somewhere familiar, but his apartment was too small and too poorly furnished to have a semi-permanent guest. So Illya would stay with him and – and the future had felt like a vast, uncharted sea.

Napoleon rocked his chair a little in the darkness. There was no point in sitting here dwelling on the past. He had to shake off the torpor of having been hit too hard around the head and get out of here. He thought of Illya back at his parents’ place, maybe still in bed, all warm and luscious with sleep. Now there was an incentive to get free, if ever there were one. He wanted so badly to return to Illya’s sweet body and his incredible mind.

So he rocked the chair again, and then again. He managed to work up a rhythm, to get it slowly moving backwards. He sung in his head to give himself something to move to. He thought of Illya. And after a long, painful time his hands touched a wall behind him, and he started moving himself along that wall, searching for something he could use to get himself free.

((O))

The intercoms and external communications almost never stopped in the little comms room in the Kyiv office. It was well past lunch time and there had still been no direct news of Napoleon, but one of the local agents had returned, badly beaten and dazed, with a tale of how he had been tied up but had managed to get free and clamber from a first floor window down a drainpipe to the ground. Illya had hardly been able to hold in his impatience.

‘And the other agents? You tried to find them? What happened to them?’

But the man had been too confused and exhausted, bleeding profusely from a head injury, Illya gleaned, and he couldn’t say what had happened to the three other men. They had completed their sabotage of the equipment. Napoleon himself had set a light to all the paperwork referring to the formula and how to produce it. Another man had destroyed the building’s generator. But one of the enemy had managed to get through a call for backup and Thrushes had swarmed the building, and everyone had been taken.

It was utterly maddening. Illya wanted with every fibre of his being to go out on the hunt for the agents, and he had to sit here with the communications women and do no more than make suggestions and hope.

And then Illya’s pen communicator sounded and he slapped his hand to his pocket, assembling the thing and answering, ‘Napoleon?’

‘Oh, no, sorry, Illya.’ He breathed out hard. It was Sarah. ‘Listen, the clinic in Munich have been trying to contact you. They have another cornea, and if you’re over that cold – ’
Illya sat up straighter in his chair. ‘What? Say again?’

‘Illya, they have another cornea. You need to go to Munich. You need to be there tomorrow.’

Illya floundered. ‘But I – ’ He didn’t know what to say. Napoleon was missing. But he couldn’t miss this chance, not another chance. He flexed his fingers then said, ‘Thank you, Sarah. I’ll get onto them as soon as possible.’

When he put his communicator away he had the urge to laugh hysterically. How completely absurd. What ridiculous timing. He sat there, very still and silent, until someone put their hand on his shoulder and asked, ‘Tovarisch Kuryakin? Are you all right?’

‘Er, yes,’ he said slowly, then more firmly, ‘Yes. I need to use a telephone. Can you show me to a telephone?’

‘Yes, of course,’ the woman said quickly. ‘There’s a private room you can use. If you’ll come with me.’

So Illya stood and slipped his slate and paper back into his bag, then reached out for her arm, and let her guide him out of the room and a short way down the corridor. She took him into another room which sounded very small, and she said, ‘Look, here’s a chair. Sit here, and the telephone is – ’

He reached out, she guided his hand to the back of the chair, he slid his hand down to the seat and sat down.

‘The telephone?’ he asked, reaching out in front of him to feel a desk surface, sheets of paper, a pen.

‘It is right here,’ she said, moving the instrument to the centre of the desk. ‘Do you need help to dial?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, not at all. Thank you.’

‘I’ll give you some privacy,’ she told him. ‘If you need someone to help you back to the communications room just use the phone again for an internal line and let us know.’

‘Thank you,’ Illya said again.

He waited until she had left the room, then he moved his fingertips over the telephone, understanding its contours, bringing an image of the model into his head. And then he just sat there. It was stupid to dither, but he was dithering. Napoleon was out there somewhere, in danger, held by Thrush. He had no way of helping him himself, but he hated the thought of just leaving. He had imagined Napoleon being at his side through this journey. What if Napoleon never came back to his side?

He had to force himself to stop that thinking. He and Napoleon had both faced danger so many times, and they had got themselves out of it every time. He had to have confidence in his partner, and he had to act on the call from the clinic.

He had the work numbers for both his parents memorised and he dialled the number for his father. The phone seemed to ring for a very long time, and then it took more time still to bring his father to the phone. But eventually he heard that familiar voice asking, ‘Illya? Is everything all right at home?’

‘I’m not at home, tato,’ he said quickly. ‘I am at headquarters. Listen. I have had a call from the clinic in Munich. They have another donor cornea and are offering me another chance at transplant. I must be there by tomorrow. But Napoleon is still – unavailable,’ he altered his words at the last moment, very aware that anyone could be listening on the line. ‘Tato, to be able to get ready and
leave in time I would very much appreciate your help. Is there any possibility you can be released from work?’

‘Of course, Illya,’ his father said instantly. ‘Of course there is. If you are at headquarters do you need me to come and fetch you?’

‘Yes,’ he said quickly. ‘Yes, please. I will see if I can get the people here to arrange my flight, but the sooner I can get home the better. I must be on a plane very soon.’

‘Our flights,’ his father said very firmly, and Illya faltered.

‘Our? Tato, there isn’t time for – ’

‘Illyusha, you are not doing this alone. If you can, please get your people to arrange flights for both of us. They have considerable diplomatic leeway, don’t they? If anyone can arrange for my travel documents to be ready in time, I am sure they can. Please do this thing for me. I will be at the front entrance for you as soon as I can make it over there.’

And the line went dead. He was leaving his son no room to argue. Illya sat there for a moment with the receiver in his hand. He put it down slowly and smoothed his fingers over the hard plastic, wondering what colour it was. And then he shook himself and picked up the phone again and called the communications room, and with his most endearing and persuasive tone he spoke to one of the women there about securing emergency travel documents both for himself and for his father. He would never have asked either of his parents to come with him. He was confident that he would be able to travel alone with the help of people around him. But he was glad that he would not be alone.

((O))

There was an edge there. Something in the darkness. He could feel it against his numb hands. Perhaps it was a pipe, or something jagged in the wall. It didn’t matter. It was there behind his hands, and he pushed the ropes against it and he started to rub.

He didn’t know how long it might take to get through the ropes, but it was his only option in this dark room. He thanked God that they hadn’t tied him with metal rope or chain. That would have been impossible. But perhaps, if he worked long enough, he could get his hands free.

God, he was tired, and so thirsty. His bladder was bursting, but he refused to let it go. He refused to let them come in here and find him having pissed himself on the chair. No. He held it and he tried not to think of water in any form, and he kept rubbing his tied wrists on that ragged edge.

He thought about Illya. What would Illya be doing now? He was sure it must be daytime by now, or even that a whole day had already passed and it was the next night. By now Illya would know that they were seriously overdue. He would be worried, of course. Would he be sitting in his parents’ apartment, worrying? No. He knew Illya. At the first sign of trouble he would have got himself somehow to the Kiev headquarters, regardless of whether he could be any help. He wouldn’t be able to sit back and do nothing. So what was Illya doing now? He visualised him in that headquarters, perhaps talking to other agents, perhaps – No. He had imagined Illya poring over maps, trying to locate exactly where the team was being held. That was an Illya he hadn’t known in two years. He would be going mad right now because he couldn’t pore over maps, he couldn’t go out on his own and tread the ground and make his own search. Poor Illya. His heart ached for him. He felt worse for
Illya’s helplessness right now than he did for his own.

He rubbed harder at the rough edge. Just the thought of Illya out there eating himself up with his helplessness made him work harder. They had been on such a long journey together over the last two years and he refused to have it end here at the hands of Thrush.

His mind cast back to memories of Illya before all this had happened. How blue his eyes had been. How marvellous he had looked. He had moved like a cat. Watching Illya sneaking about a Thrush building in the dead of night was like watching a cat. He could move utterly silently, he could climb anything. Napoleon would look at a sheer face and wonder how in hell to scale it, and then Illya would be at the top, pulling a knotted rope out of the back of his trousers and throwing it down to Napoleon like Rapunzel in the tower. He had always paused for a moment as his hands first touched that rope, feeling the warmth of Illya’s body in the soft fibres, a warmth that was there so fleetingly, and then cooled. Why hadn’t he realised all that time ago that he was meant to be with Illya in a much more profound way than just as partners? That they were meant to be partners in everything? He had wasted so much time.

He remembered that first day when he had realised he loved Illya so much more deeply than before. He had known that he loved him, of course. He loved him as a friend, as an amazing, scintillating, brilliant individual. But then everything had changed on one cold morning in his apartment. He remembered the bright light coming in through the window, reflected from a fresh fall of snow. He remembered the heat of the room, the crackle of the fire that he had just lit, the bright orange of the flames. And Illya sitting on the sofa in his sitting room, just sitting there, unable to see the snow or the flames or even the sun. Unable to see his hand in front of his face.

Napoleon had turned around from the fire and looked at Illya and realised that he was crying. He wasn’t making a sound. He had been all right until then. Napoleon had gone into his room that morning and helped him as he got up, helped him in the bathroom, taken him into the kitchen and made him toast and tea. He had tried to make light conversation as he always did, talking about news from headquarters, about news from the wider world, about the snow and the weather forecast. He often felt that Illya wasn’t listening, but he talked anyway.

And then he had taken him back to his little bedroom, helped him to get dressed, led him to the sofa in the living room, and crouched down to light the fire. It was already warm from the central heating, but a fire was pleasant with snow outside. Illya just sat there on the sofa, listening to what he was doing, twisting his fingers together as the only sign of his distress. And then Napoleon had glanced round again and seen how close Illya was to breaking down. He had got far too used to Illya’s face suddenly seeming to collapse and him losing his battle to stay composed.

‘Illya,’ he had said softly, and Illya didn’t respond at all. So he went over to the sofa and sat down next to his friend, and a kind of hiccup suddenly pushed its way from Illya’s mouth, and then a real sob, and his cheeks were wet with tears, the scabs of the acid burns shining with tears. So Napoleon had gently touched Illya’s face, gently swabbed away some of those tears. And Illya had turned his head towards him a little, such a terrible look of despair on his face, and Napoleon had stroked more of those tears away and then – he couldn’t help himself, couldn’t stop himself – he leant closer and ever so gently touched his lips against those salt wet trails. And Illya had sighed; a tiny, soft sigh in between those sobs. So Napoleon had kissed his cheeks again, kissing away the tears, feeling such a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, a fluttering need down there that made him want to be all around Illya, be in Illya, be part of Illya. And Napoleon had kissed his cheeks again, kissing away the tears, feeling such a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, a fluttering need down there that made him want to be all around Illya, be in Illya, be part of Illya. And he caught Illya’s lips which were salty with tears too, and kissed them softly and gently, and Illya’s response, his naked, desperate response, had made Napoleon kiss him again, harder, needfully. His arms had gone around Illya’s body, feeling the solidity and warmth of his back through his thin shirt, his fingers stroking into the hair at the back of his head. And he had kissed him and kissed him until he seemed to be drowning in Illya, and Illya
was still crying, but kissing back with such need, his tongue darting hotly into Napoleon’s mouth, tasting him, touching his teeth. He made little gasping sounds around the sobs, around the kiss, and he put his own arms around Napoleon and clung to him so hard. And then the kissing had stopped and they just held each other, Napoleon held Illya in his arms and Illya held on to him as if he were being carried from a burning building, and he sobbed.

In the darkness of that room in Kiev Napoleon pushed his wrists harder against the rough projection and rubbed and rubbed again. Every now and then he rested, he tried to pull his wrists apart, he sat there and closed his eyes and tried to process and shut away the burning pain in his skin wherever the rope sat and the projecting metal rubbed. And then he started again, rubbing, rubbing, until eventually a strand broke with a jerk, and then another, and then he was stripping the ropes from his stinging, aching wrists and his fingers were starting to tingle unbearably as blood rushed back into his hands.

He sat there for just a few minutes, catching his breath, controlling that pain, waiting until his fingers were more than frozen sausages dangling on the ends of his arms. And then he started to tackle the ropes that bound his ankles to the chair, and then the rope around his waist, and then he was free.

He stood, swaying a little, head aching, eyes blinking blindly in the darkness. Then he threw caution to the wind and stepped over to the wall and he opened his trousers and relieved himself at last. That felt so good, better even than the moment when his wrists had come free. And then he started to feel about the room, searching for a light switch, the door, anything to help him out of here.

He found no switch, but he discovered that the room was small, box-like, cluttered with shelves on one side. At last he found the door, and he put his hand on the handle and turned it. His heart seemed to flop over. They must have been certain of the ropes, because the door wasn’t locked. Napoleon opened the door a crack and the light from the corridor blinded him, dim as it was. He had spent so long in darkness. He stood there blinking until he could properly see, and then he crept into the corridor outside.
Illya could hardly believe he was leaving the Soviet Union like this, without Napoleon, not knowing if Napoleon were alive or dead, on his way to an operation he had never imagined having without Napoleon at his side. He stood there in the airport at Boryspil listening to all the sounds around him, itching to open his communicator again and call headquarters. But they would call as soon as they knew anything. They had promised that. And on the off chance that Napoleon arrived back at the apartment while there was no one there Illya had very carefully written him a note, using a ruler and his mother’s watchful eye to be sure it was legible, and left it where Napoleon would find it.

Patriotic music was playing through loudspeakers as he stood there, moving restlessly from foot to foot. People all around him were milling and talking. Cases made dull thumps and dragging noises on the floor. There was tobacco smoke in the air, some of it from his father, who was having one last cigarette before boarding. And then the patriotic music quietened but didn’t quite go away, and a voice droned in Russian, giving the last call for boarding their flight.

Illya’s stomach clenched. He shuffled his feet a little and tapped his cane on the hard floor and said, ‘Tato?’

“Yes, I have almost finished, Illya,” his father said easily.

Illya tried not to show his impatience. He knew his father couldn’t be rushed over his smoking, but the staff at U.N.C.L.E. had pulled out all the stops to secure their travel documents and he really didn’t want to miss their scheduled flight.

He turned his attention to his mother instead. Her hand had been on his arm all this time, and her upset felt thick in the air. So he turned to her and hugged her, breathing the scent of her and taking in the feel of her. Finally he said, ‘Don’t worry, mama. It will all be fine. I’m sorry you couldn’t come, but I will speak to you on the phone.’

‘I will pray for this operation to work, Illya,’ she told him tearfully. ‘I will make every prayer there is. For my boy to see.’

‘I know,’ he said. He had no belief in prayer, but he hugged his mother all the same.

‘And you will come back sooner,’ she pressed him, her arms tight about him. ‘Don’t leave it so many years again, Illyusha, please. Come back very soon.’

‘I will,’ he promised, kissing her on the cheeks. ‘I promise I will. I love you, mama, but I must go. We cannot miss this flight. Please look after Napoleon if – when he comes home.’

‘Of course I will,’ she said, then she said more softly, ‘I will give him your love, Illyushenka, and I’m sure he will be flying to you very soon.’

He kissed his mother’s cheek again, appreciating her offer to pass on his love more than he could hope to express. If Napoleon were dead...

He gave his mother a final hug, inhaling her scent deeply into his lungs, and said rather pensively, ‘Yes, I’m sure. Goodbye, mama. I love you. Tato, can you help me? Where do we go?’

He wished he could see his mother’s face, but he was glad he couldn’t see her crying. Just touching his hand to her face and feeling her tears was enough. So he took his father’s arm and followed him, and her soft weeping was lost in the crowded noises around him. His father was a nervous but very
attentive guide, telling him constantly what might be in his way and what was happening. He missed Napoleon’s calm guidance.

‘Here, Illya, the desk,’ his father murmured, steering him a little to the left. ‘Now we are queuing.’

Illya left it all to his father, except when he produced his U.N.C.L.E. identification and answered a few curious questions from the man checking them in. And then he was being led through into the cold of the airfield, hearing the sounds of aircraft engines and other vehicles, hearing the wind cutting against the edge of the building behind him and feeling the spattering of a few flakes of snow against his face. He smelt fuel and rubber and cold, and the tip of the cane vibrated as he passed it over the concrete underfoot. Then his cane clattered against the metal stairs just before his father mentioned them, and then he was climbing, taking his last lung full of Ukrainian air, and stepping into the enclosed space of the aircraft. He let out a sigh. It had been so good to be home.

((O))

It had been simple enough to creep through the corridors of the deserted facility, find the other U.N.C.L.E. agents, and release them from their bonds. The other agents had been beaten as he had, but not so badly that they couldn’t travel. As a parting shot one of the Ukrainian agents smashed up every remaining piece of equipment they came across on their way out. Napoleon couldn’t blame him, because he had been pretty badly beaten, but he wished that the man spoke enough English for Napoleon to impress on him the importance of getting out quietly. The place seemed deserted, but it was stupid to take chances.

They arrived back at the Kiev headquarters with the satisfaction of having accomplished their mission, although Napoleon would have rather have accomplished it with fewer bruises. He sat in a reclining chair in the place’s small first aid room with a rather lovely Ukrainian lady dabbing stinging antiseptic onto his cuts, hissing at the pain. How much better it would feel to be sitting there with Illya next to him. No doubt Illya would be teasing him mercilessly about getting captured, but still, it would be so much better to have him there.

The door clicked open and Napoleon glanced sideways to see Dmitry Belousov looking in.

‘Ah, Mr Solo! I heard that you had returned,’ the man said with a broad smile, coming in through the door and looking between Napoleon and the other battered agents. He spoke swiftly to the other men in his own language, then looked back at Napoleon and asked, ‘You have heard the news, no? About Tovarisch Kuryakin?’

Napoleon straightened up instantly, earning a tut from the Ukrainian woman who was busy applying bandages to his damaged wrists.

‘The news? What news?’

‘Oh! Then you haven’t. Mr Solo, Illya received his call from the clinic.’

‘What?’ He tried to pull his wrists away from the woman and got a torrent of incomprehensible words from her.

‘Now, Mr Solo, sit still, sit still,’ Dmitry told him firmly. He pulled up a chair and sat down. ‘You hold still for this beautiful lady and I will tell you, yes? Illya has been called to his operation in Munich. They have found him another cornea. So, he has gone.’
Napoleon’s heart was thudding so hard his battered ribs hurt. He couldn’t believe it.

‘Illya’s gone? Alone?’

‘Oh, I think his father went with him. The office arranged travel documents for them both.’ Dmitry patted a hand down on his shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, Mr Solo. I’m sure he’s in good hands. You sit there and get yourself patched up, yes?’

‘No.’ Napoleon put his hands on the hands of the woman tending to him and said very carefully in Russian, ‘No. Thank you. I will be all right now. I have to go.’

She protested, but he stood and shook his head and thanked her again, and left the room.

He wanted to go straight to the airport. God, he wanted so badly to go straight to Illya, but he couldn’t. He took Dmitry by the arm and said, ‘Tovarisch Belousov, can you act as translator? Are you busy?’

The man looked at his watch and shrugged. ‘I can be available for a little while. You want to see Kobevko, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Napoleon said.

What he really wanted was to just walk out, but he couldn’t. The weight of his position as the New York CEA weighed heavily on him. He had seen the duties at the Kiev headquarters as a useful way to allow him into the country with Illya, but now they were an annoyance. He couldn’t just leave. He had to finish off what he had come here for. But he intended to make sure he could finish as fast as possible.

He spent half an hour with Kobevko trying to arrange to fit all he had meant to do into a packed day today and tomorrow. He got people working on securing his tickets for travel as soon as his duties were complete. He spent the rest of the day aching, his wounds throbbing, going through documents and talking to agents and trying to get as much done as possible. And then he returned to Illya’s parents’ apartment, exhausted.

Illya’s mother was there, and the first thing she did was to pass on Illya’s love in very careful English, and then she handed him Illya’s note. Napoleon held it in his hands, feeling like a lovesick fool. He ran his eyes over Illya’s words, smiling at the way the bottoms of the letters were cut off by the ruler he had used to keep his writing straight. Illya’s handwriting had become a strange mixture of extremely precise and wayward. The dots of his Is and crosses for his Ts were never quite in the right place, but each word was very carefully spaced by the exact width of his little finger. He had formed every letter with great care, and he had signed the note with great care, simply, with IK.

Napoleon took that note off into the bedroom and pulled out the new communicator he had been given, and opened a channel to Illya.

‘Illya, it’s me,’ he said as soon as Illya answered, and he heard Illya’s sigh plainly through the microphone.

‘Napoleon, you great, blundering, stupid – ’

‘Well, I love you too, darling,’ Napoleon said ironically. ‘Where are you, Illya? Are you in the air?’

‘Moskva – er – Moscow,’ Illya said, and he sounded tired, his accent thicker than usual. ‘Waiting for our flight. Did you get my note?’
'Yeah, your mother gave it to me, but they told me at headquarters that you’d had the call. I’m sorry I wasn’t there, Illya. I’m so sorry.'

‘Well, where were you, anyway?’ Illya growled. ‘I suppose you got yourself tied up?’

Napoleon laughed. ‘I was tied to a chair in a dark room, Illya. They beat me up a bit then left me there, but I managed to get out.’

‘Are you all right?’ Illya asked, and he wasn’t entirely successful at keeping his level of concern from his voice.

‘Yeah, I’m all right. I’ve just got a nice new crop of bruises for you to discover. Listen, Illya. I’ve arranged everything I needed to do at the Kiev office to fit into tomorrow. And as soon as I’m done I will be on a flight, I promise. I will be at your side, okay?’

He heard Illya laugh softly. ‘I know you will, Napoleon. Don’t worry about me. I have my father here and he’s looking after me very well. I will be perfectly all right. And perhaps when you get to me I’ll be able to see you.’

‘I hope I’ll be there sooner than that,’ Napoleon said very seriously.

He heard the voice of Illya’s father in the background then, saying something in Ukrainian.

‘Listen, Napoleon, I have to go,’ Illya said. ‘We have just enough time for a meal before the next flight. I will call you again, all right? I’ll call you from Munich.’

‘Any time, day or night,’ Napoleon said.

‘Any time,’ Illya echoed.

‘Have a safe flight, Illya.’

That was as close to endearments as Napoleon dared get, with Illya sitting in a public airport and Napoleon having not yet swept the apartment for bugs. He lay back on the bed and capped the communicator. He felt enormously tired and he ached in so many places. His wrists were burning and itching where he had abraded the skin in wearing through those ropes. He wanted to just lie there and sleep, but really he needed to go back out into the apartment, to be social with Illya’s mother, to share dinner with her, to share concerns about Illya with her in a mixture of Russian and English. It would be nice, sometimes, to just forget every responsibility.

He felt a sudden surge of longing for those old days when Illya had been able to see and he had been so very free, it seemed. He had still been tied to his work, of course. He was never free from that. But he had gone out with a different woman every week, sometimes every night. He had passed through a rainbow of dazzling smiles and dresses and names. He hadn’t had to think so much about everything; about keeping his apartment rigidly in order so Illya could find things, about putting things in the right place in the refrigerator, about always looking out for Illya when he was guiding him, about giving him lifts, about making sure he was all right.

He immediately hated himself. He loved Illya. He was just so tired and so sore. He never wanted to be apart from Illya, and he chided himself furiously for that moment of feeling that Illya was a burden, even if those thoughts would never go further than his own head. It was just that he was tired, and they were so close to an end to all of this. So close to Illya being able to see…

He had to keep a rein on that too. He knew Illya wouldn’t be miraculously cured with this one operation. He knew he would still have a severe visual impairment, he would still be totally blind in
one eye, that his other eye would fluctuate greatly before it settled, if the transplant worked at all. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach thinking about what would happen if the transplant didn’t work. Sick to think of what that would do to Illya. For the first time in a long time he wondered how it would be to retire; how perhaps if the operation didn’t work he would throw away his job and just accept a reduced income, and live for Illya.

God, he was tired. He rested his head on the pillow and closed his eyes, and then suddenly he was waking up, looking up into Illya’s blue eyes, and he gasped. It was Illya’s mother bending over him, touching his shoulder, asking, ‘You wake, yes? I have dinner.’

‘Oh,’ he said, rubbing his eyes. ‘Oh. Yes. Thank you.’

He looked at his watch, tried to work out where Illya would be by now, tried to get his brain back into gear. He imagined Illya sitting in a seat in an aircraft cabin, with his father, travelling to the most important event of his life, and he itched with every fibre of his being to be there.

‘Yes, thank you,’ he said again. ‘I will be out in just a moment. Thank you.’

((O))

It was odd for Illya, being in a hotel room with his father instead of with Napoleon. He had grown so used to either managing alone or having someone with him who was so used to his blindness that it almost didn’t matter. With his father he was neither one nor the other. He could not just forge ahead and do things independently because his father stepped in, but his father wasn’t so used to any of this and didn’t know how best to help, and Illya was left in a frustrating kind of limbo.

‘Listen, tato, I am all right,’ he said as his father fussed around him when they stepped into their hotel room. They had gone straight from the airport to the clinic, where his health check had been passed with flying colours, and he was booked in for his operation the next morning. He could hardly believe that it was going to happen this time.

‘Let me show you around the bathroom,’ his father said to him. ‘Shall I tell you where everything stands in the room?’

‘All I need for now is to know where a chair or my bed is,’ Illya said rather impatiently, ‘because I’m tired and I’d really like to sit down.’

‘Now, Illyushka,’ his father chided him, putting a hand on his arm. ‘You always did get crochety when you were tired. I suppose you don’t remember when you were a baby. Your mother would try to get you to sleep and the more tired you were the more you fought it. It was as if you hated going into oblivion like that.’

‘No, of course I don’t remember that,’ Illya muttered.

‘Well, come over here and sit down, then, and when you’ve had a rest we can go to the dining room, have lunch, yes? There is an armchair here by the window, Illya. It’s near to the radiator, so it will be warm. Come here.’

So Illya took his father’s arm and followed him to sit down in the chair. The upholstery smelt of cigarette smoke, and he leant back into the cushions and closed his eyes tiredly.
‘I’m sorry, tato,’ he said after a few minutes of silence. ‘I’m sorry. I am tired, and – I suppose I’m nervous too. It’s been a very long few days and – Well, I hardly know when we began any more. I don’t even know what time it is.’

‘It is almost one in the afternoon, local time,’ his father told him. ‘You must let me change your watch, Illya. I know, I almost don’t know which way I’m facing, we left Kyiv so fast, and all that time sitting in airports, and flying through the night… But it is past lunchtime and you must be strong tomorrow, so in a minute we will go and eat.’

Illya breathed out slowly, rolling his cane between his palms and feeling the tip turning in the pile of the carpet. His mind felt as though it were buzzing with all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. It had taken a ridiculously long time to get here to Munich, and the vibration and white noise of the aircraft were still in his head. The stress of the hours building up to visiting the clinic had been enormous and now that part of the ordeal was over he was like a puppet whose strings had been cut. He felt as though he could sleep for a year, but he was hungry too.

‘Yes,’ he said after a long moment. ‘Let’s go and eat, tato. I will pay. American dollars will go further here than roubles, and I have a credit card. Let’s go and eat.’

‘All right, Illya,’ his father said. ‘Come, take my arm.’

So Illya followed his father down to the hotel restaurant and sat at a table, and his father quietly told Illya a little about where he was sitting and what was on the table. Then his father said to him in a low voice, ‘I have not been in Germany in over twenty years, Illya, and you know why I was here then. The things I saw…’

‘Tato,’ Illya said softly. ‘It’s better to talk about these things in our room. Can you read the menu to me?’

‘I never did learn very much German, Illya,’ his father said awkwardly.

‘Well, never mind. You can read it anyway, and I can translate and I will order for us. I’m quite fluent.’

His father was silent, and after a while Illya asked, ‘Tato?’

‘Illyusha, am I not allowed to spend a moment silently amazed at the brain of my little boy?’ his father asked fondly.

Illya smiled in a rather embarrassed way. ‘Well, I can’t see you, tato. I can’t read your expression if you’re silent. Come on, read the menu. I’m hungry.’

‘Well, you must eat well. You’re only allowed a light snack this evening, remember, so you will eat your big meal now.’

So they ate and drank tall half-litres of beer, and then went back to the cosy room. Illya lay down on his bed with his book, but his father was restless and walked about the room, standing near the window, tapping his fingers, making huffing sounds.

‘Tato, I am the one who is supposed to be nervous,’ Illya said at last, and his father came back across the room to him and sat on his bed.

‘Are you nervous, Illyushenka?’ he asked, putting a hand on Illya’s shoulder.

Illya gave a brittle laugh. ‘Tato, I am terrified.’
His father’s hand pressured on his shoulder then, and stroked a little. Then he said, ‘Sit up, Illyushenka. Let me hug you.’

So Illya sat up and his father’s arms folded around him, and he sat like that for a little while, smelling the scent of stale cigarette smoke in his clothes and feeling the warm solidity of his body. He had a little falling feeling then at the thought of seeing his father’s face, if he could see when he woke from the operation. He had been imagining him all this time as he had last seen him, years ago. But he would look different. Everything would look different. And Napoleon…

He pressed his face a little harder against his father’s shoulder. Eventually his father released him, stroked his arm again, then said, ‘I am looking at my watch, Illya. It is half past two here, so it will be an hour earlier in Kyiv. You should contact your Napoleon, yes? I am going to take a bath after all of that travel, and perhaps afterwards we can go for a walk about the city.’

Illya was so grateful to his father for that little bit of tact that put him out of the room while he called Napoleon. He had tried several times earlier but his partner had always been busy, and he desperately wanted to tell him about the check up appointment. He waited until he could hear the taps running in the en suite bathroom, and then he assembled his communicator and opened a channel.

‘Napoleon, are you free?’ he asked.

‘What is it you said to me once, mon cher?’ Napoleon’s voice came filtered through the speaker. He sounded very far away, and tired. ‘No man is free who has to work for a living? Well, I’m working, but I’m alone right now, so I’m available. You’re safely in Munich, I guess?’

‘Yes, safely in Munich. We landed this morning. I tried calling you earlier but I couldn’t get you. Napoleon, I have passed the medical. The operation is scheduled for eight a.m. tomorrow morning.’

‘So early,’ Napoleon said rather wistfully, but then he said, ‘But you passed the medical, Illya! That’s wonderful. Listen, I will be getting on a plane the first chance I get, but it won’t be until very late. I’m going to have to stay in headquarters most of the evening, and then it’s a case of what flights are available once I’m done. I don’t know that I’ll be there before you go in, but hell, if I can sit on the pilot and make him fly faster, I’ll do it. I want to be there with you.’

‘Napoleon, I will be perfectly fine,’ Illya assured him. ‘I’m a big boy. My father will be there with me, and you know I don’t need hand-holding. I have been through plenty of operations.’

‘I know,’ Napoleon said gently, ‘but I still want to be with you. I’ll be there when you wake up, I pro-’

‘Do not make promises that you might not be able to keep,’ Illya cut across him. ‘I know you will be there when you can be. That is enough. Are you alone, Napoleon?’

‘Yes, I’ve borrowed a little office and I’m all alone.’

‘Then, I love you, Napoleon,’ he said earnestly. ‘Don’t worry about me. I love you, and I know you will be here when you can.’

‘I would like to be able to kiss you before you went down,’ Napoleon said wistfully.

‘You wouldn’t be able to anyway,’ Illya replied pragmatically. ‘I will be surrounded by medical staff. I must go, Napoleon,’ he said as he heard the taps stop running in the bathroom. ‘I think my father is finishing in the bath. We are going to take a walk around in a little while, but I will call you this evening – or you call me when you are free. And I will see you tomorrow. Perhaps I will really
‘From your lips to God’s ears,’ Napoleon said, and Illya smiled. He didn’t believe in God and he
didn’t think Napoleon really did either, but his lover had sounded so sincere that he believed him.
‘All right, Mr Kuryakin. Are you feeling okay?’

Illya blinked into the white haze around him and smiled at the voice of Dr Bruner. He felt pleasantly relaxed and sleepy. There was a cannula in the back of his hand and the pre-med was already in his system. He had been so wound up before that his hands were shaking, but now everything felt just fine.

‘Oh, yes, I’m very good,’ he murmured. ‘Good morning, Dr Bruner.’

The man’s hand touched his shoulder and shook it in a friendly way. ‘Good morning, Mr Kuryakin. I see you’re feeling nice and relaxed. Well, I’ve just come in to check on you, and I’m going to put a mark on your skin above your right eye, to be sure that we know what we’re doing. Just hold still a moment.’

And his hand touched Illya’s forehead, and there was the cold wet of a marker pen drawing what felt like an arrow on his skin, and that made him feel like laughing.

‘Don’t take out the wrong eye,’ he murmured.

‘Of course not,’ Bruner reassured him. ‘Now, I’m going to leave you with the nurse and go down to theatre to scrub in. You’ll be down with me in a few minutes.’

‘Thank you,’ Illya said, smiling rather dreamily. ‘You’re very kind.’

He listened to the man leaving the room and listened to all the other little sounds around him. The scent of the room was all antiseptic. The sounds were the sharp little taps and clicks of hard floors and hard surfaces. He wondered vaguely where his cane had been put, and wondered if he would need it afterwards. He pressed the palms of his hands and his fingers against the cotton of the sheets and felt how clean and firm the bed was underneath him. He felt as if he were floating.

He turned his head to listen to a slight rustle of fabric, and asked, ‘Tato?’

‘I’m still here, Illyusha,’ his father said. There was a quick movement and then his father’s fingers curling into his. Illya squeezed on those fingers, feeling their warmth, feeling the slight roughness of his father’s fingertips and the strength of his hand. A little surge of longing rose in him, a regret that those weren’t Napoleon’s fingers in his.

‘Tato, can I have my communicator?’ he asked, and his father pressed it into his hand.

Illya assembled it clumsily and opened up a channel. ‘Napoleon?’

The response was immediate. ‘Illya? Are you okay?’

‘Mmm-hmm,’ he replied. ‘I’m about to go down, Napoleon. I wanted to call...’

‘Oh, well I’m – about twenty minutes out of Munich, Illya,’ Napoleon said quickly. ‘I’m very close.’

‘Tired?’
‘Very, but I’m all right. I grabbed bits of sleep on the plane. I’ll be there when you wake up, Illya. I’ll come straight to the clinic, and I’ll be there when you wake up. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ Illya said, and became aware of a woman’s voice, her hand touching his arm. She was speaking to him in German, and he said, ‘Oh, Napoleon, they’re about to take me down and I have to give this back to tato.’

‘Keep me on the channel, Illya,’ Napoleon said. ‘Give it to your father but keep me on, okay? By hook or by crook I’ll be there.’

So Illya handed the communicator over and told his father sleepily to keep it open, and how to close it once he was in surgery. His father’s hand closed around his again and he lay still as he was transferred onto a gurney. The thing began to rumble across the floor, the vibration pushing up into his back and legs and the back of his head, and he watched the flicker of lights on the ceiling above him.

‘Tato,’ he said, but his father’s hand was still there. It was there until doors clattered, and then the gurney stopped for a moment and his father’s lips pressed onto his forehead, and Illya smiled. ‘Thank you, tato,’ he said. ‘Thank you, Napoleon. I love you both, you know.’

He wasn’t sure if he were speaking in English or Ukrainian or perhaps even German, but he heard Napoleon reply, and his father stroked his hand, and then he was being taken through the doors and the anaesthetist was speaking very clearly to him in German and asking him to count backwards from a hundred, and he began to count and –

– he was waking up, and his throat felt sore and his eye felt weirdly numb. He was nauseous and everything seemed odd. He made a strange, rasping noise, and Napoleon’s voice said, ‘Hey, Illya. It’s about time you woke up. How’re you feeling?’

He tried to speak, and coughed, and Napoleon said, ‘You can have a little water, Illya. Just a little, okay? They don’t want you to throw up.’

Illya sipped at the cup that Napoleon put to his lips and smiled. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Well, just in case. We don’t want you straining the stitches.’

And then Illya blinked and realised that he was looking into the familiar white blur on one side, but his right eye was totally dark. It was covered with something. He lifted a hand vaguely and Napoleon caught hold of it and said, ‘No, don’t touch. The doctor will check it tomorrow. You’re not to remove the patch.’

‘I know,’ Illya murmured. He remembered all of the pre-op literature, but tomorrow seemed so long to wait. ‘Does he know how it went?’

‘He’s very pleased,’ Napoleon assured him. ‘It took a little longer than expected but it all went well. He told you that in the recovery room, remember?’

‘Oh.’ Illya had no memory at all of the recovery room, just of waking up here. ‘Is my father here?’

‘He’s here, Illya,’ Napoleon assured him. ‘He’s just not paying attention because we’re speaking English.’ Then he said in a louder voice, ‘Er – Nikolay Ivanovitch.’

‘Tato,’ Illya said, reaching out a hand, and he heard footsteps on the hard floor and then his father’s hand closed around his.
Illushenka, how do you feel?’ his father asked, and Illya smiled.

‘Groggy, but I’m all right.’ He pushed his hands against the mattress, trying to sit up a little, and said, ‘I just want to get out of here now.’

He had spoken in Ukrainian, but his actions were quite plain, and Napoleon pressed a hand onto his shoulder, saying, ‘Hey, you stay lying down for now. You’ve got a cannula in your hand, don’t forget. I’ll go fetch the doctor, okay? He’ll be able to tell you how the surgery went and when you’re going to be able to go home. It will probably be tomorrow. You just lie there.’

Illya rested his head back against the softness of the pillow, rather grateful for that softness, because it was very disorientating recovering from anaesthetic without sight to steady him. Perhaps it was better to lie still for now. He listened to Napoleon’s footsteps leaving the room and he turned his head towards his father.

‘Tato, thank you for being here,’ he said.

His father’s hand squeezed on his. ‘Of course, Illya. Of course I would be here with you.’

Illya didn’t quite know what to say. He felt ridiculously emotional all of a sudden, and he moved his other hand to press it over his father’s, then said, ‘Tato, why don’t you go and telephone to mama? Tell her how the surgery went. She must be so worried. Don’t worry about the cost. You can use my credit card.’

His father’s hand moved a little under his and then he stroked the hair back from Illya’s forehead with great tenderness. Illya felt a kind of silent understanding. Then his father said, ‘Yes, Illya, I’ll go and phone her. She asked to know.’

So then Illya was left in the room alone. He had the strangest feeling that he was going to cry, and he didn’t want anyone to see him being so stupid. He lay there and bit his lip and tried to control that ridiculous urge, and at last he moved his hand tentatively to touch the hard plastic shield and tape that covered his eye. It was a strange, tremulous feeling. Underneath there was his new cornea, harvested from someone who had died, probably some poor German person who had died too young. Man or woman, someone who had lost their life suddenly, unexpectedly. The thought made that stupid urge to cry rise again.

Perhaps when that shield was removed he would see. Perhaps he would be able to look in a mirror and actually see his own eye, his own face. He felt sick at the thought of it. His stomach lurched. It was so strange, so odd, so much to hold in his mind. He was glad that he was alone, because he felt as if he were whirling, falling. He hardly knew what he felt, and he didn’t want anyone to see him falling apart when he should be so happy. He didn’t know what would happen when that shield was removed, and he was still so scared.

((O))

‘There now, Mr Kuryakin. We’re very pleased with your progress,’ said the voice of Dr Bruner as Napoleon led Illya to a chair. ‘Yes, sit down there, and we’ll get that shield off your eye, and we shall see what you can see, yes?’

Illya felt sick. The drugs had left his system after a long day and night in the clinic, so he could no longer blame them for the way that he felt. His eye felt odd still, a little sore, as if there were grit in it,
but he could manage that pain. He was just so nervous of what would happen when Dr Bruner removed the shield. Napoleon and his father were both standing there waiting to know, and he could hardly control his fear.

‘Now, you know not to expect a miracle, Mr Kuryakin,’ Bruner told him, pressing a hand over Illya’s where it lay on the arm of the chair. That kind touch made Illya smile, just a little. ‘There is not going to be a let there be light moment. Your cornea was so occluded that there will be a difference, but you won’t be playing tennis today, yes?’

‘Yes, I know,’ Illya said, painfully aware that his voice was rather shaky. ‘I understand.’

He heard Napoleon step a little closer, and then Napoleon’s hand was on his arm.

‘All right,’ Bruner said, leaning in. ‘A little pull on this tape. Yes, that’s the worst bit, isn’t it?’ he asked as Illya winced. ‘Nothing compares to tape on hair. But now – yes –’

And he lifted away the patch, the darkness was taken away, and Illya gasped.

‘Illya?’ Napoleon asked.

‘Well, it looks clean and clear,’ Bruner said, swabbing lightly at the corner of Illya’s eye.

‘Illya?’ Napoleon asked again.

Stiffly, Illya turned his head to Napoleon’s voice. He didn’t know what to say, because there was – oh god, there was colour in front of him, and shapes, and – god, he looked up and there was the pink shape of Napoleon’s face, dark smudges for his eyes and lips, the dark of his hair. He reached out a hand tentatively, touched it to Napoleon’s cheek, felt what he could see. And he was crying. He couldn’t stop himself from crying. He sat there and wept, and felt Napoleon’s hand in his and his father’s hand taking his other, and he jerked out, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...’

Dr Bruner stayed very quiet, and Illya appreciated that moment of near privacy. He struggled to choke back the sobs and blinked his eyes open and closed and reached for a handkerchief. Then Napoleon grabbed his wrist and said, ‘Don’t rub that eye, Illya.’

He let Napoleon pat away the tears, and he swallowed and accepted a little glass of water, then he cleared his throat because he knew there was a small audience waiting so eagerly, and he said, ‘I can see colours and shapes. There’s – It’s very blurred. Milky.’ He blinked again and looked around. ‘I – I can see shapes in the room. I can see where everyone is standing. It’s – it’s amazing.’

‘That’s very good, Mr Kuryakin,’ Bruner said in a tone of deep satisfaction. ‘Now, if you’re ready I’d like to run you through a few tests just to check the extent of your vision. Remember it will fluctuate day to day as it heals. I would expect significant improvement from what you’re seeing now, but some days will be better than others. You’ll probably find that eye quite sensitive to light for a while, and I want you to wear glasses in the day time to protect it from any blows. At night you must continue to wear the shield. So, are you ready for my tests?’

Illya drew in a deep breath, and nodded.

((O))
Napoleon found himself just staring. They had gone back to the hotel and Illya’s father had excused himself in a wonderful moment of tact, so he and Illya were alone in their room. Illya had taken off his sunglasses, and Napoleon was just staring at his eye. It was so strange, so amazing, to see the blue of his iris after so long. So amazing to see the dark hole of his pupil, a wonderful dark hole that would let in light and colour. He just stared at the vibrant blue licks of flame that he had missed for so long, and marvelled at the beauty. He could see where the new cornea abutted the old because the remaining parts were still milky and damaged. He could just make out the tiny stitches, almost invisible little dashes around the circumference of the graft. Illya’s eye wasn’t just as it had been before all of this, but it was something like his eye again instead of a milky pearl. It was incredible.

He reached out a hand to stroke Illya’s cheek and Illya’s eye tracked the movement. It was amazing. He found himself speechless.

‘Well, are you just going to sit there and stare at me?’ Illya asked after a while.

Napoleon shook his head. ‘No, I – I just don’t know what to say. How is it now? How much can you see?’

Illya’s mouth contorted a little. ‘It’s blurry, milky. I can see where you are, I can see colours. It’s – Well, I know it’s not 20/20 vision, but I never expected that. I can tell where the window is. I can tell where the door is because it’s a dark colour against light.’

Napoleon smiled. Illya was right. It was nothing like 20/20 vision, but it was so much more than he had possessed before.

‘Well, we should do your steroid drops and your antibiotic drops, and then I guess we should go get some dinner, yes?’

Illya donned his sunglasses, but then he reached out to stroke his fingers lightly down Napoleon’s cheek, then leant forward to kiss him softly on the lips.

‘Can’t we just do this?’ he asked. ‘Lots of this?’

Napoleon gently caught his hand.

‘Not too much of this, no,’ he said ruefully. ‘No bending, no heavy lifting, no strenuous exercise, remember?’

Illya sighed. ‘Would it really have to be so strenuous?’

‘I’m not risking it,’ Napoleon said firmly. ‘Besides, how on earth would we explain to Dr Bruner if anything happened?’

Illya sinuously moved his fingertips down Napoleon’s cheek again, onto his neck, flicking open the top button of his shirt and tickling across his collarbone. He followed his fingers with his lips, kissing delicately along that prominent bone.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked, his voice dark and rich with need.

‘I – I’m sure,’ Napoleon said, but his voice was wavering.

Illya opened a few more buttons, swirling his tongue into the sparse hair about one stiff nipple, lightly tracing his fingers over Napoleon’s face again.

‘Illya… Oh – god...’
Illya was gently drawing the shirt from his shoulders, nudging his nose against Napoleon’s chest. He
ingered his fingers about Napoleon’s wrist and lifted one arm, moving feeling fingers down the
underneath of his arm to brush through the hair of his armpit. Napoleon sighed.

‘You smell so good,’ Illya said. ‘You always smell so good, Napoleon. How can I be expected to
help myself when you are such a palette of wonderful scents, when your skin feels like this? Even
when I’m not touching you I can smell you. Do you know that sometimes when I’m sitting near you
I imagine you’re wearing nothing at all, because I can’t see your clothes, I can just smell you and
hear you.’

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said warningly. ‘No bending. No strenuous exercise. No – Jesus ...’

Illya had flicked open his fly and slipped his hand in and he was touching him, touching him with
those incredible, firm, confident fingers, and Napoleon was already growing hard. He couldn’t do
anything but grow hard with Illya touching him like this.

‘All right,’ he said suddenly, firmly, catching Illya’s wrists and lifting them away from his body.
‘All right,’ he said more softly. ‘You win, but on my terms.’

He held Illya’s wrists firmly and surprised him with a kiss on the nose. Illya couldn’t see half so
much with the dark glasses dimming his small amount of restored vision.

‘Will you sit still nicely and behave?’ he asked.

‘What are you going to do?’ Illya asked suspiciously.

‘I’m going to undress you,’ Napoleon said, knowing Illya didn’t like to be kept in the dark literally or
figuratively.

‘Well, I can undress myself,’ Illya said pragmatically, trying to pull his wrists from Napoleon’s grip.
Napoleon didn’t relent.

‘You can, but I’m going to.’

So he pushed Illya’s hands gently to his sides and began to work on his clothes, unknotting his tie
and tossing it aside, opening the shirt button by button, teasing the Russian just as seductively with
tongue and fingers as Illya had done to him. He undid his trousers and pulled them down together
with his underpants, and smiled at the burgeoning hardness there.

‘Lie down, dear,’ he said. ‘Lie down and relax.’

He kissed Illya’s forehead, smiling at the slightly mutinous look that softened when he lightly
brushed his fingers over Illya’s cock.

‘Well, if I must be so passive,’ Illya grumbled after a moment, and lay back on the bed, folding his
arms behind his head and looking, although Napoleon would never say it aloud, like a rather
disgruntled angel.

‘All you’re missing is a tilted halo,’ he murmured, and Illya asked, ‘What?’

‘Nothing at all,’ Napoleon promised him, and he straddled Illya’s slim hips and started to cover his
beautiful torso in soft kisses, moving downward ever so slowly until his lips were brushing stiff hair,
and then kissing and licking up the hard length of his cock, and swallowing him into his mouth. Illya
moaned aloud and Napoleon laid a hand softly on his chest, removing his mouth long enough to say,
‘Nothing strenuous, dear.’ He kissed the cherry tip of Illya’s cock and flicked his tongue over the slit
and Illya sighed, and Napoleon smiled. ‘That’s it. Gently, softly, and –’

And he took Illya into his mouth again, sucking him, lacing his fingers over the cool skin of his balls, stroking his thighs, and all the while taking Illya’s length deep into his throat, feeling the suppressed energy in Illya’s muscles like a horse waiting to race, sucking and compressing and manipulating until Illya’s hips were trying to buck under Napoleon’s restraining hands, until he came with a juddering cry and then sank back onto the bed with a long, satiated sigh.

Napoleon swallowed and waited until Illya’s cock softened and slipped from between his lips, then he kissed his lover softly on the cheek and went into the bathroom to deal with his own hard and needful erection. When he returned Illya was still lying splayed on the bed, a picture of debauchery with his legs loose and wide and his arms above his head and a smile on his face.

‘You feeling okay?’ Napoleon asked, coming to sit back down on the edge of the bed by Illya’s hip.

‘How’s that eye?’

‘I’m feeling just fine,’ Illya said with that grin still on his face, ‘and the eye feels fine too.’ He lifted his sunglasses and blinked and asked, ‘Care to take a look?’

Napoleon bent close to inspect the eye and the new cornea and the tiny stitches. Illya’s pupil was beautifully contracted in the light, his iris was blue, and although there was a little redness in the white of his eye it was no different to before.

‘It looks perfect,’ he said. He stroked his hand over Illya’s eyebrow and forehead then pushed his sunglasses back down and kissed him on the cheek. ‘So now I will sort out your eye drops, like I meant to in the first place, and then we will go get dinner.’

((O))

Illya spent the night trying to sleep through the maddening itch and the sensation of sand in his right eye. His hand kept moving reflexively to itch, and then either Napoleon would catch it or he would touch the shield protecting the eye, and he would grit his teeth and just try to bear it. When Napoleon woke with him he kissed Illya and stroked his cheek to distract him from the feeling until he slipped back into sleep, but when Napoleon slept through his discomfort Illya just lay there grinding his teeth or slipping his fingers over the pages of a book, trying anything to take his mind away from the feeling. Eventually Napoleon went out to an all-night chemist’s and brought him back allergy medicine, and the sweet, bitter liquid helped soothe him into a proper sleep.

He woke gently to the sensation of Napoleon’s hand lightly stroking his shoulder and arm, and he blinked against the gritty, sticky feeling in his eye and mumbled something, before reaching up to touch the eye shield.

‘Well, I made it through the night, just,’ he said rather grimly, and Napoleon kissed his shoulder where his fingers had been just a moment before.

‘Just,’ Napoleon murmured. ‘It’s almost ten a.m., Illya. I thought you’d appreciate sleeping in, but you need your eye drops before it gets too late.’

Illya blinked again a few times and pushed himself up in bed against the pillows, yawning.

‘And how’s little Fritz this morning?’ Napoleon asked stroking his fingers near Illya’s eye shield.
Illya grimaced. ‘Napoleon, I have told you, you cannot name my new cornea. It’s – it’s morbid.’

He had dealt with death frequently as an active agent, but this was different. He didn’t want to keep thinking on how someone had died, how he was looking through this dead person’s cornea. He wanted to move forward with his own life now that it had changed so much.

‘All right,’ Napoleon conceded, stroking him again. ‘Then, how’s the eye? Let’s have a look.’

Illya squeezed his hand and kissed his knuckles, then he let go and pushed up the eye shield. As the light flooded in he gasped.

‘Illya, what is it?’ Napoleon asked instantly.

Illya turned his head towards his lover’s voice and a world of light and colour moved before him. It was astonishing. Yesterday’s milkiness had cleared, and he was looking straight at Napoleon’s face.

‘I – I – ’ Illya began. He didn’t know what to say. He just stared.

‘Illya, are you looking at me?’ Napoleon asked tentatively.

Illya reached out a hand towards Napoleon’s face, misjudging the distance for a moment because he didn’t have stereo vision. But then he caught Napoleon’s cheek, traced his fingers over the red of his lips; saw his own fingers tracing over Napoleon’s lips. Everything was unfocussed. He was seeing an odd, wavering double image. But there was Napoleon’s mouth, there were his eyes, there was the dark of his hair, and he could even make out the way it fell in strands across his forehead.

‘Oh – Bozhe miy,’ he said. ‘Oh, Napoleon...’

‘Illya, are you looking at me?’ Napoleon repeated, but Illya dropped his hand and turned towards the side of the bed. He looked down at the coloured covers, at the beige carpet. He stood and turned his head, seeing the window with its long patterned drapes, and he moved towards it, holding a hand out because he couldn’t quite believe that what he was seeing was real. His fingers hit the curtains, pushed them aside, and he winced at the bright light from outside.

‘Illya, your sunglasses,’ Napoleon said, coming to him quickly. ‘Put your sunglasses on. It’s a sunny day.’

‘I – know,’ Illya said in amazement, turning his head up, down, left and right.

He could see a street out there, the shapes of cars, the tallness of trees with dark, bare branches. He could see the blue of the sky, and in it a painfully bright centre of burning light. He pressed his fingertips to the glass which had been warmed by the sun and for a moment he felt as if he were falling as the close sense of the solid glass vied with the deep and wide world he could see on the other side of what had used to be an impenetrable barrier. He was overcome by the curious feeling that he had to touch it all to know that it was real. It was real, he knew it was real, but still his hands itched to touch what he saw.

‘Illya, your glasses,’ Napoleon said, pressing them into his hand, and Illya slipped them on, sighing with some relief as the glare of the sun lessened.

‘I can see the sun, Napoleon. I can see the sun!’ he laughed in amazement, lifting a hand and feeling the heat in the concavity of his palm. ‘Let’s get dressed, Napoleon. Let’s go outside. I want to go out and see Munich. I want to see everything.’

Napoleon laughed from somewhere behind him. ‘You will see everything,’ he promised. ‘First your
eye drops. Then breakfast. Then we will go and see what you can see.’

Illya turned away from the window and stepped back across the room, taking great care, staring at everything. Napoleon’s wallet was a dark lump on top of the chest of drawers and he picked it up and opened it. He drew out the bright yellow U.N.C.L.E. card and brought it close to his face. The black letters were little spiders that crawled over the front of the card, but he brought it closer to his eyes and gaped as recognisable letters wavered into view.

‘I – I can read,’ he faltered. He stared. It was incredible. Those letters were like loved friends he hadn’t seen for many years. He touched his fingertips to the black shapes. ‘Napoleon, I am reading your name. I couldn’t manage a normal book but I can read your name!’

‘Well, you can get large print books, you know,’ Napoleon told him, coming over to him again, sounding as if he were laughing and trying not to cry all at once. He put his hands on Illya’s shoulders from behind, kissed the tip of his ear, and then just held him as Illya continued to stare in wonder at those letters.

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said. ‘Illya.’

His voice drifted to Illya as if from far away, he was staring so intently at those letters. But he put the card down and let Napoleon turn him around, and he looked into his face as Napoleon bent just a little to kiss him on the lips. It was so amazing, so strange. He let himself fall into the kiss, let himself feel the wonder and the softness of Napoleon’s lips against his.

‘Illya,’ Napoleon said as they came apart at last.

He laid a hand on Illya’s cheek, stroked him from temple to jawline, and Illya watched the minute movements in his expression, looked into the beautiful brown of his eyes, saw his nose, and his lips flushed by kissing.

‘So you can see the sun, huh?’ Napoleon asked softly. ‘You can read my name?’

‘Yes,’ Illya said with such deep feeling. ‘And you,’ he continued, looking straight into his lover’s eyes, lifting his hand to touch Napoleon’s face again. ‘Yes, I can see your face, my dear Napoleon. Yes, I can see everything I need to see.’

END

Chapter End Notes

I have been fighting with this ending for days. Corneal transplant doesn't result in a miracle recovery. It can take a year and a half or more for vision to settle, and corrective lenses will probably be needed. I know people want Illya to be able to see perfectly, but it just wouldn't happen. But I have written bits that come after this, that follow Illya to a year later and his second transplant. I will probably tidy them up and upload them as a separate scrap for people to read if they want to. They just don't fit on the end of this story.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!