Renegade agents across the Iron Curtain combine with THRUSH to destroy UNCLE and their top agents by creating a perfect imitation of Illya Kuryakin. But will those that love him realise in time to defeat the forces working against them?
Chapter 1

The profoundly leaden sky vastly increased the deep sense of misery that entered Captain Aleksandr Sergeyevich Koronin's soul as he kicked the leaves away from his boots and stared into the distance. The four horses on the top of the Brandenburg Gate seemed to be detached from their chariot in the mist, as if they were seeking some way of scaling the dismal wall that closed off the Western Sector behind them, and charging up the Unter den Linden towards the Russian Embassy standing solidly to his left. Koronin turned away and entered the Embassy by the small round-topped gate on the left of the building, flashing his credentials at the bored looking guard just inside.

He'd been in the German Democratic Republic for only six months, and considered his posting as Naval Attaché rather a coup, after what seemed like an eternity spent patrolling the Mediterranean coast on the Moskva, even though he loved the powerful ship and his position of relative seniority within the crew. However, the opportunity to serve in Naval Intelligence as an Embassy official had been too good to overlook, and Berlin too much at the crossroads of East and West to resist. As he had expected, the city and the posting lived up to their respective reputations, and life had proceeded with a swing until yesterday, when the message bearing the familiar sword and shield emblem of the KGB Third Directorate was slapped unceremoniously on his desk by Petrov, one of the clerks in the embassy lower echelons. He had opened it slowly, a certain aura of doom gathering in the quiet room as the stiff envelope revealed its contents. The name of the sender was enough to confirm his worst misgivings. Commissar Viktor Borisovitch Nikitin.

As far as he was aware, that mudak Nikitin, was not on the staff of the KGB residency in the Embassy. His mind easily and vividly recaptured the last time they had met, aboard the beloved Moskva, after she had docked for repairs on the Libyan coast what must have been nearly ten years ago. Fear had rippled through the crew like a cold freezing fog, when it was known that Commissar Nikitin from the Third Directorate, military counter-intelligence, was aboard, ready to interview and assess the men for any signs of ideological weakness. Aleksandr could see him now, sat behind the table in the board room of the ship, his papers neatly arranged, a series of brown files in alphabetical order laid out for perusal by his officious assistant, Vasilov. Throughout the so-called 'interviews', he sat just behind Nikitin, taking copious notes of what was said with a scratchy fountain pen on large pieces of grey foolscap paper; never looking up or hesitating, except to replace one large piece of paper with another.

Shevchenko was further down the list, but the Arkhangelsk and him were together; both Ks; him first, then Arkhangelsk after him. Arkhangelsk. Archangel. Koronin smiled at the thought of him and of how apt the name had appeared after the debacle with Nikitin.

The three of them had joined the Moskva at the same time; Aleksandr from Leningrad, the other two, the 'twins' as he called them, from Kiev. Superficially, they had a great deal in common. All were educated, some would say 'gifted'; all were physically very fit; Aleksandr sighed at the memory of just how fit he had been, involuntarily pulling in his rather sagging waistline at the thought. And, it appeared, all of them were destined for a rapid path to promotion within the ranks of the Soviet Navy; destined to serve the State for the foreseeable future in whatever role the State designated them to occupy.

Koronin rifled through his drawers, yanking out several files until he found what he was looking for. An old, rather battered photograph depicted three rather serious new recruits standing in front of the ship in which they were to serve together. The two blonds, one fairer than the other, and himself,
taller and darker, stood between them; like two shaven-headed bookends, he had thought them then.

The men had named Kuryakin Arkhangelsk very soon into that first year. Some said it was because of the blond hair framing his pale, fine features, or that one never heard him coming until he appeared, somewhat miraculously, in front of you; others were convinced it was because of the aloofness he exhibited towards anyone who tried to get too near. When he wasn't on duty, he led an almost monastic existence, Aleksandr recalled; endless studying of tedious scientific textbooks or reading in a bewildering array of languages. Otherwise he just seemed to be engaged in a relentless physical fitness regime, or, whenever Misha was off-duty at the same time, spending what felt like years to Koronin, playing chess. Whatever the men decided the reason for his name was, in Aleksandr's opinion it was solely his outstanding leadership qualities which separated him from the others, and in particular from his brilliant, but feckless and unreliable 'twin'.

By the time Nikitin had ripped through the ratings and begun on the officers, the morale on board ship was sinking like a depth charge; rapidly and in danger of a large explosion following. The slightest flaw in the men's background – a visit to a church, for example, or a distant relative who had expressed dubious political opinions; all were jumped on; Vasilov, the anonymous scribe, furiously recording every little indiscretion or turn of phrase, until the men were beside themselves with worry and fear. The Captain seemed either unwilling or unable to intervene, preferring to keep to his cabin. Aleksandr had seen Arkhangelsk entering the Captain's quarters, and had asked him afterwards about it. A blank stare had silenced him and he had been left standing there, knowing nothing more than he had before the meeting.

He had never known exactly how he had done it, or even what had been said in his interview with Nikitin. Whatever had happened, Koronin was utterly convinced to this day that Arkhangelsk was, to use the biblical quotation 'highly favoured'. Somehow he had used that connection to someone 'higher up', with spectacular results. When they returned from weekend shore leave, there was no trace of Nikitin, his assistant or any evidence that he had ever conducted any interviews on the Moskva. Aleksandr learnt afterwards that the loathsome KGB Commissar had been 'redeployed' as camp commandant to a Gulag a considerable distance to the East. Neither he nor Misha could prise out of their comrade exactly how it had been done, but the men were more than happy to endow him with supernatural powers for the rest of the time he was aboard, despite the look of horror that drifted across his face when he found out.

Aleksandr hurriedly stuffed the photograph back in the drawer, and picked up the phone.

'Registry. This is Captain Koronin. I'd like to request a file. The name is Mikhail Ivanovitch Shevchenko. Yes, that's a Ukrainian name, but he's a Russian national. Formerly serving as a Naval Officer on the Moskva'. Yes, I'll be taking it upstairs.'

There seemed to be a serious fuss going on at the reception desk, Napoleon thought. He came up silently behind the backs of several girls surrounding a rather portly woman, whose strident voice could be heard above the sound of the others, protesting at something or someone in increasingly loud tones. It was soon obvious who the 'someone' was.

'Well really, what sort of organisation is this, when you can't tell the men from the women!' she bawled. The object of her scorn glared back at her, his lips set like concrete across the rather flushed face as he held out a triangular badge towards her. He was surrounded by three girls from the adjacent office, who seemed to be forming a protective wall between him and the woman.

'Um, excuse me, madam, can I be of service?' he asked, gently parting the other two girls who were standing just in front of him. She turned, hurriedly pinning on the badge to her ample bosom, her
rather small eyes rapidly appraising him. 'Oh, thank goodness! A man who looks like a man! You want to take a leaf out of your colleague's book, young man' she continued looking backwards, with a shake of her head, I'm sure his barber would be able to do something for you, even with that hair!' Napoleon put his arm through hers and started to move her towards the doors before the arctic breeze emanating from the reception desk turned them all to ice.

He caught up with Kuryakin in the commissary.

'I sometimes wonder why I even bother to help people when I am subjected to abuse of that kind,' he muttered, finishing off what looked like a double portion of fruit salad and ice cream, in front of him. 'I was just helping Janet with the new computer terminal when that woman demanded a badge from me. Napoleon, do I look like one of the receptionists?' Napoleon smirked as an amusing mental image of the Russian in a tight skirt and blouse flashed through his mind.

'Janet told me you were crouching down behind the desk and she only saw the top of your head,' he replied. 'Perhaps Mrs Goldensturmer has a point.' Illya sighed, involuntarily pushing the wayward hair from his face.

'Well, unlike you, Napoleon, I haven't had five minutes to call my own since I came back from sick leave in the summer, including attending to unimportant details like that,' Illya said, a slightly superior expression showing on his normally unemotional face.

It was true, the Russian had been seconded to the computer section since the summer, working, at Waverly's insistence, on some new system which had been given ultra high classification, but in any case would have been a mystery to Napoleon had Kuryakin even attempted to explain it to him. His partner, like all the men in that section, had neglected everyone and everything because of it, in fact there had been a kind of special dispensation for 'the geek section' as they were called, to dress informally, and relax the usual fairly formal rules about clothes and hair. Especially his hair. Uncut since Tess had insisted before the Naturalisation ceremony, it was now hanging over his shirt collar and heading for his shoulders.

'Well fine, but if you want to continue with our partnership, fair damsel, perhaps you might think about a little trim, eh?'

Illya sat behind the circular table in Waverly's office, his eyes sore and dry from the endless checking of the report in front of him. The assignment had at least meant an opportunity to spend a little more time at home, at least in theory, although during the week he had frequently slept in the IT department, Napoleon refusing to come even near, complaining about the smell of unwashed bodies and the litter. Whilst spending long hours writing and re-writing programmes and wrestling, to date unsuccessfully, with the problem of secure transmission of secret information, he wished, not for the first time, that Misha was on hand to help him.

Misha; a life wasted. Or at least, Illya imagined that was the case, since he hadn't seen or heard from him since his last letter had been returned to the UNCLE offices in London, during his last few weeks there. They had managed, somehow, to maintain a constant, but rather sparse correspondence in the years after the Moskva. Shevchenko had remained in the Soviet Navy for a year after Illya had gone to Paris, and then had returned to Moscow State University to continue his studies in Mathematics and Quantum Mechanics. There had been talk of him being given permission to study at MIT in Boston even, and he had plied Kuryakin with questions about life in the West in his
flamboyant, untidy writing. Then an uncharacteristically brief, harsh note had arrived, informing him of Shevchenko's move, but in the opposite direction to the expected one.

Illya had been aware of Misha's sexuality from early on in their friendship; indeed it would have been virtually impossible to ignore it, since they shared a cramped cabin on the Moskva. The term 'Siberian virgin' conned by Marie-Laure was a remarkably apt description of himself then, he thought, although he hadn't admitted it to Napoleon; he had managed to remain in that blessed state all the way through University, mainly through ferocious commitment to work and study, and despite the amorous attentions of his second cousin Anastasiya over several long hot summers at his mother's cousin's farm in the middle of the Ukrainian countryside. Misha had no such inhibitions, at least in private.

Intellectually, he was at least Illya's equal in Mathematics and Physics, if not in other subjects, and his deficiencies were mainly due to his lack of application, as Kuryakin constantly reminded him during long off-duty hours in the cabin or during on-shore leave. In return, Misha declared that it was his mission to 'loosen up' Kuryakin, as he called it. Looking back on it, Illya thought, both 'missions' had ended in failure.

The letter from Shevchenko gave him few details. There had been an 'incident' at the University department Misha had been working in. Reading between the lines, Illya had detected the hint of a betrayal by a lover who thought to gain by it. Whatever had happened, Shevchenko had been stripped of his position, and 're-located' to the closed city of Gorky. He had been given a job in a secret facility, but at an absurdly lower level than was appropriate for a man with his qualifications and ability. Illya never discovered whether he had regained his position. It was as if a door had clanged shut on that part of his life, and on all those whom he had known then.

He frowned deeply and rubbed his eyes, wishing he could take a break from it; perhaps a little light relief with some explosives somewhere, or a long plane journey. Anything to allow his addled brain some rest from what was beginning to feel like a giant, insoluble puzzle set for him by higher beings, to work at eternally, with no end in sight.

He jerked upright as the door slid open behind him. As usual, Napoleon looked as if he hadn't a care in the world, his clothes matching his attitude as he covertly tugged at Illya's hair while sliding into the chair beside him.

'Gentlemen. Perhaps you'd like to begin with your report on the Bolt affair, Mr Solo, and then we can discuss Mr Kuryakin's progress with the Oriel programme.' Illya could see Waverly looking sideways at him through clenched eyebrows, no doubt making a comparison with his more sartorially impressive partner. However, no comment was made, yet. 'And then when we've finished with this confounded computer report, I have something to discuss with you both that our friends at Langley seem to have foisted upon us.'

The two agents gave a collective sigh. Whenever the word 'Langley' was mentioned, it was generally with a cast iron guarantee of trouble, usually directed towards the Russian side of the partnership. Waverly had been highly successful in the last few years in keeping the CIA at bay, but with a change of Director, the impact of the conflict in Vietnam and in particular, the continuing cold war with the Soviet Bloc, it was simply a matter of time before the two organisations would collide again over some issue.

Illya ran through all the possible permutations of people and plots in which anybody from Langley might share a mutual interest with UNCLE, as Napoleon began his report. Of course, they had seen him as a potential threat from the moment his size eight feet had stepped onto the tarmac at La Guardia, but in recent years, and especially since Agent Bradley Mitchell had been reassigned to
Cuba, there had been a noticeable lack of interest or activity from that quarter. He could hear Napoleon drawing his report to a close, listing the successful outcomes of the mission, and the one, rather major failure, the failure to apprehend Bolt herself.

With a major effort of will, Illya shoved thoughts both of Lee-Hua Bolt, and the ever-present threat to his family, and of the CIA, to the back of his very tired brain, and picked up his copy of the report on the new computer security programme, codenamed 'Oriel' by Wendell Rhodes, the chief of Section 17.

Before he could begin, Waverly interrupted.

'We don't need to go through the whole report, admirable though it is, Mr Kuryakin. Perhaps you can just précis the situation as it is now for those of us with less, er, technical understanding, and then give us a brief idea of any problems or possible outcomes.'

Illya could see Napoleon trying to look interested, but he could guess that he was rather more eager to hear the next item on the agenda. After explaining as simply as he could the outline of the work, he plunged on towards the present situation.

'Um, so, as you see, sir, we are still struggling to develop a key which will ensure complete protection from any attacks on the new system made by, let's say, unwelcome intruders.'

'Yes, well we will just have to keep on until we do find this key, otherwise when we switch over to this new computer system, our security will be at risk of being totally compromised, will it not?' Illya nodded tiredly, closing the fat folder with a rather louder thud than he had intended. He noticed Waverly staring at him again, this time a rather more concerned look drifting across his craggy features.

'Now,' Waverly continued, automatically reaching for his pipe, 'You had both better look at this, although it rather concerns you more directly, Mr Kuryakin, I think.' He drew out two single sheets of UNCLE headed notepaper, on which were typed a single list of names.

'As you know, gentlemen, this organisation only exists in this country because of the good relationships we have developed with both international and governmental institutions here in the United States. If you remember, we did discuss briefly attempts by the Armed Forces department to develop a closer working relationship with agents from Section 2, particularly in times of war. Now, as you know, I have resisted all attempts of this nature, as I still believe that this could compromise the independence of UNCLE as an entirely separate, global security organisation, working for world peace. However, since the change of Director, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that integrity.'

Napoleon looked up from scanning the list of names, of which one had leapt out from the page already.

'So, sir, if you don't mind my asking, what is this list of names, and how is the CIA involved?'

Waverly sucked the pipe vigorously, as if it would somehow endue him with the ability to explain the unexplainable. Napoleon glanced across at his partner, now slightly more serious looking than before, if that was possible.

'It appears, Mr Solo, that Military intelligence and the CIA are cooperating in an attempt to second, as it were, Section 2 agents into Military intelligence units for the duration of any war this country might be engaged in South East Asia.'
'And this list, sir, plucked out of the air, or what?'

'No, Mr Solo. If you look closely, you will see that all these men have something in common. They are all…'

'American citizens, some more recent than others.' Illya looked up from the sheet in his hand. Napoleon could, through years of practice, make a fairly accurate deduction of what was going on behind the thick thatch of blond.

'Exactly, Mr Kuryakin. We were asked to provide a list of every American Section Two agent, including, of course, both of you two. This was the list that came back from Langley. As you can see, these agents are requested to attend a medical next Thursday at the US Army recruitment offices, which I believe are situated not far from here.' He leaned forward slightly, as if he was disclosing something of greater secrecy. 'Of course, there is no guarantee that you will be 'drafted' as it were, Mr Kuryakin, and in the meantime, I will continue to protest most strongly both to the military authorities and to Director O'Leary at Langley.'

Waverly put down his pipe gently, and began to knock out the spent tobacco, seemingly unaware of the other two men in the room. 'In the meantime, Mr Solo, perhaps you'd like to do a little digging into exactly what is going on in Army Intelligence with regard to this so called secondment, and Mr Kuryakin, your request for five days vacation has been approved.'

Napoleon stared at his partner, whose demeanour had now miraculously changed into something approaching good humour.

'Going anywhere nice? I thought Tess was away.'

'She is. I thought I might surprise her with a flying visit, as it were,' Illya answered, getting up from the table and beginning to follow Napoleon out of the room.

'Next Friday, then, gentlemen,' Waverly continued, 'Oh, and Mr Kuryakin.' Illya turned slightly as the door began to open. 'By Friday, please, regulation length.'

'Yes sir,' the rather less good humoured reply came back, as Waverly shook his head at the retreating Russian.

Waverly sat for a while at the round table after the two agents had left, staring rather blankly at the list of Section 2 agents on the notepaper in front of him. After twenty long post war years of fending off attacks like these, he was certain in his mind that these two events, the secondment of his men and the goings on at this French mountain resort he was getting reports about, were intimately connected in some way. And knowing the CIA, it would centre round the person of one UNCLE agent in particular. He picked up his personal communicator and flicked the switch to his personal assistant's office.

'Miss Blackstone. Can you put me through to Langley? Yes, Director O'Leary. Now please.'

'Very well.'

'So, lunch?'

Kuryakin's face had not returned to the cheerful expression reserved for vacations, Napoleon noted as they entered the lift, surprisingly empty at the normally busy lunchtime period.

'Do you think these two events are connected?' Illya began suddenly, emerging from the contemplative stare into thin air that he had continued all the way down the corridor, to look at
Napoleon with a frown. Napoleon shrugged, leaning against the back of the lift and surveying his partner.

'Probably. Only I can't quite work out yet, how. Anyway, cast it out of your mind until next Friday, comrade, and concentrate on three things.'

'And what three things might those be, Napoleon?'

'In order of importance, I would say, a haircut, a vacation and a physical, at least two of which you look as if you are in desperate need of.'

Illya, surprisingly, remained silent, his face cast down, the harsh lights of the lift emphasising the sharp contours of his features, draining them of colour. Only the slight gushing sound of the lift hung in the air between them until the metal box clunked to a stop and indicated the end of their journey by the smooth drawing back of the doors. The sudden onrush of noise from the commissary seemed to jerk the Russian into awareness.

'I'm sorry Napoleon, the last few weeks, and now this nonsense with Langley seems to have rather drained me. You're right about the three things, but I would suggest the order of importance is holiday, then a very large gap before the other two, more unpleasant procedures,' he replied, smiling rather wanly as they were drawn into the jostle of the queue.

The smell of food wafting towards them seemed to revive him somewhat, breaking the melancholic mood at least for the moment. They were able to manoeuvre themselves towards a small table in the corner, away from anyone else who might think to join them. After a few minutes solely dedicated to eating, Napoleon resumed his gentle interrogation.

'So, vacation; from your comment in Waverly's room, I'm guessing Bermuda?'

'Naturally, since you already know that Therese is there. Anything else you might like to know before I go?'

'Well, let me guess. Place of residence . . . yes, I'm guessing you wouldn't have let her go unless she's being looked after, so, I would say, the Robinsons, yes?'

'How intuitive of you. I will give your regards to John and Allegra. By the way, Napoleon, when is the happy event? My calculations suggested this week.'

'Well, unlike the world of physics, dear boy, the world of babies doesn't always go according to the rules of logic, as you should know.'

Napoleon looked up, beyond his partner's head, and began to smile. 'Perhaps you can obtain the information you're looking for from the horse's mouth, so to speak,' he murmured. Illya frowned, jumping lightly to his feet as he became aware of someone behind him.

'At least someone is a gentleman round here.'

Josefina Solo plonked her tray down on the table, and gently eased herself into the vacant space. Somehow, despite her size, she still managed to appear rather elegant, Illya thought. He crouched down by the side of the table nearest to her, his head almost resting by the side of her plate.

'What are you still doing here?' he said gently, 'He hasn't got you working still, has he?'

'He doesn't have a say in it, hippy boy, as well you know. Now, disappear for a few days, and don't forget to come back with my sister, in time for the great event, and not looking like something the
cat's dragged in.' He stood up, kissed her and nodded to Napoleon, before sauntering out of the room and into the lift.

'They've allowed him out of prison for good behaviour I see,' Jo continued, picking at the sandwich in front of her as if it was threatening to poison her.

'Yeah; lucky break eh?' Napoleon answered. *He might need it*, he thought.

CHAPTER 2

The astonishing turquoise sea that Therese had described to him was sadly eclipsed by the darkness of the evening as the plane made its descent towards the horseshoe shaped island beneath. Just getting to the airport had been a complicated feat; taking Pablo to his mother and Peter's house, giving instructions to Rita about the house, the work he'd had to explain to Rhodes, all seemed to take hours, and felt like light years away from the time when a few things were thrown into a bag and he was away. And now there was Allegra to deal with.

The photographic assignment in Bermuda was a significant one, a large part of a major feature on the island.

'It's going to be a comparison of white and black Bermuda if you know what I mean,' she had told him. He had instantly thought of John, and of course, with John came Allegra.

He had met her in London, he a raw UNCLE recruit, she a postgraduate student, but unlike Illya, Allegra's background and passion, was English literature. She was from Trinidad, a striking girl, slightly taller than him, her black wiry hair separated and braided into tiny plaits across her head in traditional style. They made an unlikely couple, having very little, if anything in common on the surface, but somehow, her vibrant, Caribbean style drew him towards her, and in turn, she became addicted to his soft blond hair and sensual blue eyes, or so she told him. The affair had been long, almost a year, and was at times intense bordering on violent in character. It had ended suddenly, or rather he had ended it, telling her he was going to New York and would not be returning. But not before he had introduced her to John Robinson.

John, then another postgraduate student on a British Council scholarship, unlike Allegra, shared many interests with Illya, in particular their love of music, and especially jazz. The night Kuryakin told her he was leaving they were in a club near Covent Garden, a regular haunt of both men, where they invariably played together in a small band, Illya on sax or sometimes on the piano, and John with his beloved trumpet. He hadn't intended to pass her off to the Bermudian, but afterwards it seemed that way, and that was the way she always chose to relate it to others. After finishing University, John, with Allegra in tow, had returned to Bermuda to work in the British High Commission, and in due course they were married, three children following in quick succession. Allegra's career seemed to be in suspended animation, but recently, in a letter congratulating the Russian on his good fortune in finally, as John put it, finding someone to 'grow up with', he had revealed that his wife had begun to write her first novel, a story mirroring her own experiences as a student in London.

'I hope I'm not in it,' Illya had said, when he had rung John to ask if Therese could stay, and if he could help her with her assignment.

'Man, you could be the star attraction, for all I know,' he had replied, 'You know Allegra, keeps it to herself until there is not a damn thing you can do about it.' Illya had sighed. He knew, only too well.

She was standing in the arrivals lounge as he approached, unmistakeable in her usual combination of hot, rich colours which seemed to glow against her chocolate skin. She had not seen him to begin
with, but then suddenly had turned and spotted the Russian advancing slowly towards her, bracing himself for impact.

'Well, look at you, Nicky baby, you look like shit!' she boomed across the lounge, fortunately against the background of a calypso band which were serenading the arriving guests with a raucous rendition of 'Island, Island in the Sun'.

'As against you, Allegra, who look a million dollars,' he replied, before he was enveloped in a mass of red and orange.

'Hey, I'm sorry Nicky, you just look a little, well, washed out, yeah?' She grabbed his suitcase and began to drag him towards a small red car parked outside the airport. Illya had forgotten the old name she had always called him, Allegra refusing to use his first name as she told him it sounded like a girl's. Obviously nothing had changed in that department, though he noticed she had put on weight since their last meeting. She noticed his glance, and began to chuckle, patting her backside.

'Not so skinny as before, hon, that's three children and good living for you.'

'Doesn't say much for me, then.' She laughed; a rich, deeply tenored laugh that filled up the little car with its melody.

'You were always a skinny thing, and you ain't changed one bit; your woman is the same,' she continued, driving at a stately speed along the road, Illya aware of the giant forms of trees he was used to seeing as small bushes in people's conservatories lining the road; avocado, rubber, banana all highlighted in the sweep of the car's headlights as they sped past.

'Talking of my 'woman', does she know I'm coming?' Allegra shook her head from side to side and gave him a disparaging look, until he began to wonder when she might glance at the road again.

'You still playing your appearing and disappearing tricks then,' she said. 'No, she don't know you're headed in her direction; anyways, she's out on the town with John tonight.' Illya resisted the impulse to feel annoyed, reasoning with himself that since she didn't know he was 'headed in her direction' as Allegra had said, there was no reason why she shouldn't be out.

'I see. And just where might 'out on the town' with your husband be?' he asked, trying not to sound as irritated as he felt. Allegra began to grin.

'She not fitting into your little plan, eh honey?' she said, swerving past a couple of scooters bowling along the gently rising road leading to the capital.

'Not at all. I was just wondering…'

'Don't get all stiff-arsed Nicky hon, it just don't wash, lover. She's out singing, at Al's club down on the front. Wanna go now? Course you do. Man, you got it bad,' she whistled, smiling at the pursed lips she remembered all too well. 'John's got your sax all warmed up, he says to tell ya.'

The car pulled in off the street and jerked them to a halt. Considering her size, Allegra moved with athletic agility, and they were soon out on the main street of the town, with the soft sound of the waves on the opposite side of the road a background to the noise of those who were intent on enjoying the evening in town. Illya read the scratchy notice above the open door as Allegra exchanged words with a large man standing just within the entrance to Al's club, as it was signed. A pulsating rhythm sweeping up the stairs announced that the music was in full swing. The staircase leading down to the club was so dark, Illya was glad of the music to provide some sense of where they were going. As they reached the bottom stair he could hear the music begin to change; the rather
hectic piece of music morphed seamlessly into a more laid back Miles Davis number he knew well.

The room was quite large, with a raised platform at one end, while the remaining space heaved with shrouded figures alternately hunched and laid back over small circular tables in a manner that suggested expectation of something worth listening to. On the stage, the usual combination of drums, piano, sax and trumpet, John being one of the four instrumentalists, now launching into 'Bye Bye Blackbird'. Allegra saw the two men lock eyes and then her husband nod towards the saxophonist, who appeared to have intuited that a slight blond man would now be playing his instrument. She sighed and pulled up a chair, motioning to the waiter.

It was only during the piano improvisation that Illya began to wonder where Tess was. Robinson seemed oblivious to Illya's attempts to get his attention; he shrugged and gave himself to the instrument, at least until the number finished. As the clapping subsided he noticed that a microphone had been placed at the front of the stage, as someone murmured 'you put a spell on me' into his ear. He noticed John now, a slow smile playing about his lips as he watched the Russian.

He didn't see her until she was right in front of the mike, and as he looked up she was also suddenly aware of him too. He had drawn her gradually into the jazz sessions in the house at Grove St; listening giving way to playing then to singing. But never in public, and never looking like this. He glanced down at Allegra, who seemed to have adopted a self-satisfied look on her face. The everyday Tess, of the jeans and t-shirt, pushed back hair, had become this sensual woman in front of him. Her beautiful breasts were shown off in a tight fitting dress of a shiny, gold colour, complemented by high heels the like of which he had never seen her wear before this evening. The wild waves were twisted upon themselves on top of each other, the copper strands coiling round her head like metal thread. He was glad he had the sax in front of him to prevent any embarrassment his body might cause him in looking at her.

If she was shocked by seeing him there, she was able to deal with it better than he was, he thought. The piano introduction jerked his gaze from her, and the song began. Illya hadn't realised until she began to sing, just how deep and rich her voice was; she seemed to be able to bring out an erotic quality in the song that he somehow hadn't noticed was there before. Suddenly everyone else in the room seemed to fall away; it was just her and him, singing and playing; making love as surely as if they had laid down on the stage together.

The end of the song drew him back into the reality of the room as he felt her lips brush his forehead. 'Get you later,' she murmured rather hoarsely before whispering the name of another song, and turning back to the mike. Somehow the strain of the work on the computer, whatever nightmare was building to do with Mitchell, the medical, all seemed far away and unimportant. 'Hope so,' he whispered back.

Xxxxxx

The snow was blasted across the barren landscape, leaving bare, brown patches of ground between the sparse whiteness. For some reason, and echoing Koronin's mood, winter seemed to have come early to this normally continental climate, and late October felt more like December to the Russian. He looked down at the winding course of the Volga, cutting its way through the land in an expanse of dark blue water, moving sluggishly in the dim light of the afternoon. Koronin shuddered and turned away, tightening his seat belt as the lumbering aircraft made its final descent to the air base below.

They had flown over the city, Koronin noticing the contrasting architectural styles of the buildings laid open to his gaze; traditional and modern; the soaring tent-like feel of the medieval Archangel
Cathedral; box like structures marking the footprint of the modern apartments. Onion domes and tower blocks, opera houses and great, smoking factories on the river; all were here in this fascinating, secret city. Gorky. Shut off to foreigners, forbidden, but available to those Soviet citizens who might want to sample its beauty via the river steamers that plied the waters from April to October. Here Shevchenko lived now; and here they would bring Kuryakin to serve out the life he had so successfully shrugged off like an old skin, too restricted for comfort anymore.

The immense factory on the banks of the Oka River rose up like a wall in front of him as the car pulled up in front of the office block which stood facing the main bulk of the foundry. Here, in this palpably warm atmosphere emanating from the heat of the furnaces, massive anchor chains were produced in foundries resembling a scene from hell. Koronin had seen them being transported from the loading bays, reducing everything round them to Lilliputian dimensions by their massive presence. He had read the file, and knew that Misha now worked here, but as he stared up at the foundry, he just couldn't imagine how.

A small office had been set aside for the interview, the office workers surprised and slightly alarmed by the presence of a naval officer in their midst. Koronin dragged the hard wooden chair towards the table at one end of the room, and opened his briefcase, carefully extracting the two files, and laying them side by side on the table. He flipped open the first one, and Misha's face stared at him from the rather ancient-looking photo clipped to the first page of the report. His mind was immediately drawn back to another meeting where these files had been laid out on a different desk in a different city. His lip curled slightly when the image of Viktor Borisovitch Nikitin rose like a bad dream in front of his eyes.

Nikitin had not improved with age; in fact he looked older than his forty odd years. Aleksandr imagined that the deep lines round his face must have been permanently etched there by years of unrelenting resentment at the lowly positions he had been forced to occupy in the KGB ranks; until now, that is. With the appointment of a new Chairman, tvars like Nikitin had been promoted and now enjoyed power and the opportunity to exact revenge upon those unfortunates who had robbed them of what they imagined would be a glorious career. Koronin could tell from the beginning that Nikitin had some plan afoot, but even after it had been revealed, he couldn't decide whether the zhopa was working on some independent madness of his own, or with the full support of his masters. Whatever the truth might be, Nikitin had made the consequences of Aleksandr's non-compliance blindingly clear.

'Does your wife like her new apartment in Stalinallee?' Nikitin enquired, sotto voce, as Aleksandr's eyes became fixed intently on the few greasy strands of hair lying across Nikitin's head while the KGB officer gazed at the folder in front of him on the desk. He snapped the file shut and gave Koronin a malevolent stare, before pulling the other file open and spinning it round to face the younger man. It was a black and white photograph, but Koronin could remember the magnetic blue eyes as if the picture had suddenly, magically coloured itself in. He looked a little older, but better for it, less gaunt looking than before. Koronin smiled at the hair. A quick glance at the details on the first page raised Aleksandr's eyebrows and showed him just why Nikitin was intent on pursuing his plan to its bitter and bloody end.

'He's done quite well for himself, it seems,' Aleksandr offered, trying to ignore the implied threat of Nikitin's about his career. Nikitin slammed the file shut and fixed him with a long, hard look that made Koronin feel slightly queasy.

'Comrade Kuryakin is an enemy of the state, as is that svoloch Gutskov,' he hissed. 'He has betrayed his fatherland, turned his back on his duty, for his own selfish desires. But now, he will return, to repay the debt he owes; and this time, there will be no choice, and no going back.'
Aleksandr felt the implication of Nikitin's words slowly sink in. The man was spinning a net which, in imprisoning Kuryakin, would also implicate his closest former friends and colleagues in his entrapment. He could hear his wife's voice in his head, urging him to think of himself, of her, of his career. He knew very well, that with a new General Secretary of the Party, and more importantly, a new Chairman of the KGB, what had been given, could so easily be taken away and replaced with a posting far more unpleasant, and far more to the East of where he was now.

Koronin was aware of the existence of the organisation calling itself THRUSH; it was part of his job to monitor clandestine activity in Berlin, and the city hadn't been called 'nest of spies' by Winston Churchill for nothing. However, until he read his file, he hadn't realised that Illya Nikovetch was working for UNCLE. Now, it appeared, Nikitin had made a pact with the devil in order to achieve his paranoid desires, Koronin's role in it being to rope in Mikhail Ivanovitch.

'Your mission is really quite simple, Captain,' Nikitin continued, taking back the file and closing the cover in an ominously final way. 'You are to present Comrade Shevchenko with a simple choice; if he cooperates, then, in essence, he will be given a final chance to "redeem himself" as it were. Otherwise, then he will find himself with a one-way ticket on the Trans-Siberian express, and I think we both know where the final destination will be, don't we comrade?'

'And if I don't care to cooperate with this "mission" Koronin had said, rather quietly.

'I understand there is a posting in Vladivostock on the Arctic fleet coming up, Captain. I'm sure your wife will understand the relocation… in time.'

The grating of the office door opening startled him out of his reverie. Koronin automatically got to his feet to find Shevchenko already in front of him on the other side of the desk. Aleksandr prayed that he didn't look as shocked as he felt on seeing his former friend and officer colleague. Unlike Kuryakin, life had not improved Shevchenko's looks, in particular the wide, angry looking scar running across from his temple to his nose, bisecting his cheek in a bizarre, disturbing way. He had obviously come straight from the foundry by the look of his clothes and the lines of sweat and smut covering his face and hands. Koronin noted the evidence of hard manual labour in the developed musculature of his body, but it was hard to stop himself from staring at the ravaging scar, which dominated the formerly rather delicate features.

After what seemed like an eternity, Shevchenko spoke.

'Sasha. What an unexpected pleasure. Welcome to Krasny Yakor. Or as we workers call it – the gates of hell.' He turned away from Aleksandr's still stricken face and grabbed a chair, turning it so that he could lean with his arms resting across the back. 'Now, judging by those two files and your very smart uniform, Captain Koronin, I imagine you haven't just dropped in to reminisce on happy times past.' The scar on his face did strange things as he smiled grimly, twisting the skin on his cheek. Koronin suddenly felt the pain of the man in front of him, as if the scar was a visible sign of it, ugly and disfiguring.

'Misha, I… How did you…'

'Get my new look? Oh come now, don't tell me you're not dying to know, Sasha; you were always the nosey one, interrupting Illya and me during one of our tête à tête's, just in case you might learn something juicy.' Shevchenko's scar appeared to twist further as he smiled, a rather sad, sardonic expression covering the once handsome face. 'I'm afraid,' he continued, 'when I was sent here, someone sent a little case history with me. My comrades wanted to make it clear that they weren't interested in my kind of friendship, if you see what I mean. Molten pig iron can leave quite a scar when you haven't got any protection.'
Aleksandr winced at the thought. Perhaps Nikitin's offer was, in a sense, a once in a lifetime chance for this man, an opportunity to escape the hell of his life here. Perhaps he'd see it like that too.

'Misha, I've been sent here on behalf of... well, who sent me is not important really.' He decided that to reveal Nikitin's name in the affair might not be such a good idea. For the meantime, he kept the files shut. Shevchenko's eyes were fixed on him now; piercing, somewhat like Kuryakin's, but there was something missing in the colour of them, though he couldn't quite define it. 'I... I've been authorised to make you an offer; an offer you would be very foolish to refuse.'

He could hear the slight desperation in his voice as he began to explain, the thought of having to tell his wife about his new posting filling him with despair and driving him on to sell the deal to his former friend. 'If you agree, then you'll never have to return here, Misha, and, and... you can begin your life again – you'll be a new man.'

He was acutely aware of Shevchenko's expression as he blundered on. The scar on his former friend's face seemed to widen as he began to laugh.

'Cut the second-hand car salesman routine, Sasha. I didn't lose my brains, only my looks in the fire. No doubt someone in a department somewhere is squeezing your testicles tight enough for you to be here trying to sell this to me, but don't try and make out it's purely for my benefit. Now, in words of one syllable, what exactly do our masters require of us?

Koronin began, trying to avoid any names until he had got Shevchenko interested.

'So, I get a new face, and in return for that, I go to the USA as this as yet unidentified Russian American, and put a great big spanner in the works of some new computer system that our capitalist friends are creating, as well as, what, informing the KGB about personnel and missions in this organisation? Then, after I've created mayhem for a while, I'm allowed to disappear, having totally discredited US-Soviet relations in general, and this man's career and personal life in particular. Care to name the man and his organisation?' Shevchenko smiled again, and sat upright. 'I'm sure Illyusha would be thrilled if he knew I was heading in his direction to undo all the work he's done to make the Americans love us.'

There was a hiatus in the room, only interrupted by the scraping of Koronin's chair on the wooden floor. The two men stared at each other, Shevchenko's smile draining from his face as he noticed the ashen look of the man opposite. Suddenly, he reached across the desk and grabbed one of the files, flipping open the cover.

'No. Nyet. I cannot do this, Sasha; you surely cannot imagine I would ever do this to him!' He pulled the file towards him and stared at the photograph for a few seconds. A list of his qualifications filled the first page, most of them familiar to the Russian reading them. He flipped over the page and pulled out another set of photographs from a plastic wallet beneath.

The pictures were in colour this time. Another official looking portrait, which Shevchenko thought must have been taken a few years ago. He still looked tight, the emotionless features not giving anything away. The pictures underneath were, he guessed, quite recent, and his mouth opened slightly at the difference. The first one was obviously a wedding photograph. They looked as if they had just emerged from a church, the bride looking towards the camera with a wide smile, and the bridegroom looking at her with what Misha could only describe as rapturous love. He had his arm round her slender waist in an attempt to draw her towards him. He could see from her face that although she was looking forward, she was aware of him.

The other picture had a date on the back. It had been taken only in the summer just passed, and looked like a street in what Misha guessed was New York. The family group now seemed to have
enlarged, although Misha wondered who the little boy belonged to. But the baby was unmistakeable. Despite her age, she had the instantly recognisable piercing look of her father as she gazed at the camera over his shoulder. The woman, now with short wavy hair of an astonishing colour, was coming down the stairs as he fiddled with the lock of the door, the same happy expression on her rather delicate, exotic features. Misha put down the pictures, running his finger along the chin of the man he had known.

'Not now,' he said quietly, almost savagely.

Koronin pulled back the file, looking at the other photographs taken in the series.

'Listen, Misha. We don't have a choice here. If you don't do this, then we will both be heading East, and your destination will be worse than mine. If you do it, he won't die, he'll just… well, he'll just be doing what he probably would have done if he'd stayed here anyway. He'll be working in a laboratory, doing what he likes doing, you know that.' Shevchenko slammed down the photograph on the table and looked at Aleksandr so intently that he was forced to lower his gaze under his riveting stare.

'I don't know that, Sasha, because it's obvious from these,' he waved his hand at the photograph on the table, 'he's no longer the tight-arsed little virgin that we both knew, and I loved, all those years ago. Besides which, as we both well know, Illya Kuryakin is not going to stay put, beavering away for our glorious State, for longer than it takes him to put together an escape plan back to his very beautiful wife and children, and then where does that leave me, Sasha, eh?'

Koronin gathered up the photographs and returned them to the file, looking again at Shevchenko's agonised face as he sat opposite him, his chin now resting on the top of the chair, waiting for an answer.

'Misha, he won't be coming back because he will have his daughter with him.'

Shevchenko sat up slightly, his brow in furrows, the scar crinkled on his cheek.

'What, the baby?'

'No. If you read the file, you'll find that your unemotional friend has rather put it about since you last saw him. He has another daughter with the French woman he met in Paris when he was at the Sorbonne, and there is yet another with a German UNCLE agent due at Christmas.' Shevchenko's jaw dropped slightly, and he scratched his hair and sighed.

'That can't be correct. He is very loyal, I know him. He wouldn't have betrayed her like that.'

'He didn't. It was part of some plot to create a master race of women. They obviously thought he had what they were looking for, if you see what I mean,' Koronin answered, a slight smile appearing on his lips. Shevchenko got up and turned the chair round, sitting down and pressing his back against the now correctly positioned chair.

'So, correct me if I'm wrong; Illya Nikovetch finally is bedded by, ah, I remember now, he wrote to me about her. Let me see, yes, Marie-Laure Colbert, if I'm not mistaken.' He looked up to see his thoughts affirmed in the other Russian's eyes, then continued. 'He sails off into the sunset, and she is left, pregnant, and… she doesn't tell him! So is she part of this evil organisation too, and what, she's allowing them to take the child and use her as a, what, bargaining tool?'

'Marie-Laure is dead. He knew nothing about the child until they met last Spring; you can read all the details in the file. She did work for THRUSH, but only in a vain attempt to wreak revenge on her
husband for removing the child from her, by pretending she was dead to begin with, and then putting her in some THRUSH school. Apparently, the child's mother had considerable access to her, and so, like the Kuryakin she is, the girl is now proving to be somewhat awkward. The solution to both problems is to send them both here, it seems. Besides which, they need him to do some work on, what was it, yes, quantum cryptography, which is exactly what you'll be working on at UNCLE. If he behaves, they are planning on sending him back to the Navy eventually, so I understand. With his daughter in tow, he's going to find it much more difficult to escape than on his own.'

Shevchenko allowed a wry smile to break from his lips.

'I presume that our friends in the KGB - oh, it's Nikitin isn't it?' he said, looking sharply at Koronin and receiving a reluctant nod. 'Oh I see now, he continued, 'that piz'duk Nikitin has joined forces with someone in the bird organisation to hang us all out to dry.' He shook his head and leaned back in the chair. 'Sasha. Just two things to remember before you go. Please don't think that I'm doing this with anything other than a feeling of utter disgust at that zhopa Nikitin, at you and most of all, at myself; and secondly, daughter or no daughter, Archangelsk will break free. Then when he returns, if he thinks that I have hurt his family, he will kill us all. Nikitin, you Sasha, and most certainly, me.'

CHAPTER 3

The telephone echoed round the room until Illya grabbed it, extricating himself from Therese's entangling arms, or at least enough to turn, reluctantly, from her.

'Illya?' Solo's voice sounded a strange mixture of fear and elation.

'The same. As they say in the movies, Napoleon, this better be good,' came the rather hoarse reply. Illya could feel his wife's arms snaking round his hips and her hands heading for lower regions.

'Tess. Tess. Sorry, Napoleon, you were saying?' She released him and edged up behind him, taking the receiver out of his hand and almost shouting down it.

'Has she started? When? OK. How many minutes? Gear! I'll feed Taz and then we'll be along.'

Illya rolled over onto his back and looked at her.

'Gear?' Therese pushed back the sheets slightly and sat astride him, pushing back the heavy fringe from his forehead. She stroked his chin, and then ran her hands through the rest of his hair, forming a sunray effect with it on the pillow.

'Scouse term. Your hair; let me guess. You have been holding out all this time with your smelly friends, hoping that nobody would notice. Now they've let you out, we've had five glorious days of holiday, and soon there is, let me think, a meeting? So today is the end of the road for hippy boy, eh?' She leaned over and kissed him, her hair falling over his face.

'Something like,' Illya muttered, deciding not to mention the medical and its possible implications; well, not yet. 'Excuse me, but what exactly did Napoleon say, or am I not allowed to know?'

'That's your prerogative, sweetest. As you know, unlike you, I tell all. Your best mate and my sister are just about to produce.'

'Produce what? Oh. What, now?' Illya jerked up, pushing his hair out of the way, an excited look breaking out on his face. Therese sat back, facing him.

'Now, go and get Tasiya, then get yourself a shower, shaggy, and wake up your son.' She climbed off him and plumped up the pillows behind her, crossing her legs and pulling up the sheets round her
waist. Illya slid off the bed and headed slowly towards the next room. Therese lay back on the pillows, listening to him talking to Tasiya, the babbling of the baby interspersed with deeper tones, baby talk first in French, then in Russian.

The last weeks had been unexpected, but sweeter for them being so. That was it with being married to someone from UNCLE – you never knew what was coming next, whether it be good or bad. Or worse. The past year had taught her to factor in the worst case scenario to each disappearance, and to live with it. Trouble was, it was getting harder now there were children. Anastasiya loved him when he was there. She was definitely a girl who lived for the moment. But Pablo, Therese worried about how he would cope without the man he completely idolised, and who wouldn't be able to tell him where he was going, and when or even if, he would return. Still, other families coped; military families, and others like them. She would be the enduring person in their lives; she would be there for them, day in, day out, until his return. And he would return, she was certain, one day he would return for good and there would then be no more partings.

xxxxxxxx

The plush reception area of the clinic reminded Illya of a hotel more than a hospital, apart from the ubiquitous nurse dressed in her ubiquitous white uniform staring at him from behind the desk. They had dropped Pablo off at school before heading for the clinic, Therese jumping out of the car as he pulled up at the entrance, and he following with Anastasiya a few minutes later, her little hands firmly gripping onto his hair in the usual way as he carried her into the building.

'Um, my wife just…' he began, beginning to feel like a naughty boy sent to the headmistress to explain, such was the expression on the nurse's face.

'You don't look old enough,' came the abrupt reply, the nurse looking askance at Illya, then at the baby, who was now making quite loud recitations of 'dadadad' to anyone who cared to listen. Before he could fix her with any sort of stare in return, she was signalling him towards the door. 'Fifth floor, Labor Suite,' she said, in a voice he was sure she reserved for men, and babies, of whom she disapproved.

Illya took the stairs two by two, jogging Tasiya up and down as he ran up, the baby screaming excitedly in his ear as each step was taken. Napoleon was lounging about in a small reception area as they approached, a very good-looking nurse handing him what looked like a cup of coffee in a delicate china cup. Illya thumped down onto the sofa next to him, taking off Tasiya's hat and coat and tossing them, with his own, onto the seat beside them. The baby instantly held out her arms to Napoleon and began to pull away.

'Here. Come to Uncle Poly, chicken.'

'Uncle Poly? Chicken?'

'Well at least she knows I'm an uncle and not an aunt eh, comrade?'

Illya grimaced, smiling then, as the same nurse brought over another cup of coffee in an equally delicate cup. She gathered up the coats, her attention seemingly permanently re-directed towards the Russian.

'Can I help you with anything else?' she cooed, leaning in towards him.

'No, you've already seen to all my needs,' Illya replied, with a sideways glance at the disgruntled American besides him.
'How come you're getting all the attention, when I'm the one who needs his fevered brow wiped?'
Napoleon moaned, at the same time tossing Tasiya up and down on his lap, the little girl smiling and punching the air with her hands as she gently rose and fell.

'Napoleon, why are you out here when Jo is in there?' Illya asked, taking back the baby, who immediately resumed her iron grip on his hair. 'Tasiya, nyet. Well?'

'Unlike your choice of maternity venues, this one doesn't admit fathers until after the event. Apparently, men get in the way, so Nurse Frankenstein in reception tells me.'

'Ah yes. We met. I think she thought I was Tasiya's elder brother.'

'Or possibly sister,' Napoleon replied, not giving up on his favourite theme of the moment. 'Oh, forgot to give you this,' he added, drawing what looked like a postcard out of his jacket pocket. 'The guys had a collection and Section 5 generously contributed the printing costs.' Illya frowned as he took the card from Napoleon.

'Very funny. Obviously, this is the sort of activity you described to me as 'office work' you have been occupying yourself with while I was on holiday.' The card was printed with the usual UNCLE logo at the top, with the rest printed in smaller type underneath.

Special 'Once in a lifetime' Offer

*Only available to Blond Russians with a serious hairstyle problem*

*FREE Haircut, courtesy of Frank's Italian Barber Shop*

*And generous donations from Sections 2 and 3*

*Available immediately*

*In aid of the 'Keep up the image of UNCLE' Society*

Anastasiya suddenly grabbed the card and started to wave it round, continuing her 'dadadad' mantra as she scraped the side of Illya's face. He gently unclasped the tiny hand and put the card into his pocket, casting a sidelong glare at his partner.

'Yes, well I suppose I can make use of this "once in a lifetime offer" after I return from the medical this afternoon.'

Napoleon lent back on the sofa and put his hands behind his head.

'Just when are you heading off downtown to the Army boys?' Illya shifted Tasiya onto his lap, and stroked her hair, the little girl nestling into his arm, and starting to slide into sleep, her eyes fluttering closed as her head fell towards his chest.

'The appointment is at two, so let's hope that your wife produces with her usual frighteningly efficient timing.' He lay the now sleeping Tasiya into the carrycot that he'd brought in, and covered her gently with a delicate knitted blanket. Napoleon watched him, reflecting on the Russian's journey from the rather self-contained intellectual hard man that he had been only a few years ago, to the calm, loving husband and father he now was. But still a good spy. Personal development had not harmed the quality and ruthlessness of the man in the professional execution of his job. The object of his gaze looked up and smiled.

'Are you ready for all this?' he murmured, slumping down besides Napoleon.
'Well, we're leaving all the earth mother and father of the nations stuff to you two,' Napoleon replied, flicking the Russian's blond hair with his fingers. 'Jo has engaged the services of a nanny who'll be a big help around the home.' Illya smirked slightly. He had had this conversation with Jo a few days ago.

'He thinks he's getting some long-legged bimbo to gush all over him,' she had said, showing him a curriculum vitae complete with photograph of a middle-aged woman looking out imperiously from the top of the page. 'I'm looking forward to being there when they meet.'

Before he could reply, the door flew open, revealing Therese, wearing a hospital gown, and tearing off a mask from her mouth. She stood there for a moment, looking at the two men, with the baby sleeping peacefully in her little bed between them. Two men; ruthless, cold-blooded killers when required, but today, an excited American jumping to his feet with his shy friend smiling gently at her behind him.

'Come on then, soft lad; come and see your son.'

The examination room was relatively spacious, which was as well, Mitchell thought, for what they were about to do. He flicked open the pad in front of him on the desk, the neat list extending down on the page eliciting a sardonic smile. As he glanced across at the monitor, the door to the tiny room he was now occupying was flung open and his partner slid into the chair by his side.

'Anything happening yet?' the older agent said out of the side of his mouth, without bothering to look up.

'Nope. Still, it's only a quarter before two, so guess these UNCLE boys like to leave it to the last minute, huh?' Kenneth Ellestadt, the younger agent, glanced round the room and then across at the examination room through the two way mirror in front of them.

'Pardon me for asking, Brad, but are you sure we need to be, kinda, watching all this? You gave those medic guys the list, right, so what's the problem?'

'It's not what's the problem, Ken, it is who's the problem,' Mitchell replied, patting his jacket pocket for his cigarette pack. 'And we are dealing here with a first class, red, son of a veritable bitch, so we don't take any chances, OK?' Ellestadt glanced across at Mitchell before looking at the monitor again.

He had only been in the agency for three years. His previous partner had been killed in a bungled exchange of spies in Czechoslovakia, and he had spent a few painful months recovering from his injuries in a military hospital in Berlin, before being shipped back home. The new partnership was barely three months old, the young American with an older, experienced agent who boasted a history of missions as long as your arm. Ellestadt felt safe with Mitchell, even though the guy had something approaching a mania about communists. Senator McCarthy had nothing on him that was a fact.

'Hey, Brad, they're coming in.'

The door at the end of the waiting area was now open, and about a dozen men could be seen filing in and sitting on the benches lining the back and side walls of the room. Ellestadt peered at the screen, looking for the red son of a bitch whom his partner had described, but so far, nobody stood out as looking particularly dangerous. Mitchell was now looking at the screen.

'Now, Kenneth my boy, let's see if you can pick out Mr Illya Nikovetch Kuryakin, late of the
glorious red navy, KGB or any other fucking red commie conspiracy you might care to mention.' Ellestadt cringed slightly and redoubled his gaze.

'Is that him? The tall guy, with the crew cut and the black rimmed glasses? He looks pretty mean, Brad.' Mitchell sighed and shook his head.

'Let me give you a clue. On the whole, in the glorious Soviet Union you don't get squat to eat most of the time, so they're not likely to be well-built guys like him. So look again junior, look for someone weasely this time, yeah?' Ellestadt scanned the line again. The Russians he had seen in Czechoslovakia seemed a varied bunch, not that he had gotten that close, but he guessed Mitchell knew what he was talking about. His eyes passed over a tall, handsome boy with red hair. Red hair, that was a Russian trait, but he was too tall and strong looking for a Russian. At the end of the line a slight blond was sitting. Ellestadt's mouth gaped slightly at the ponytail.

'Hey Brad' he murmured, 'you wouldn't think they'd allow that, would you?' jabbing his finger at the offending hairstyle on the screen.

'You would if it was Waverly's commie toy boy that was wearing it,' came the harsh reply.

'You don't say,' Ellestadt whistled under his breath.

xxxxxxxx

'Name?'

Illya sighed. He had realised something that had not been immediately obvious to him before, as he sat with the others in the waiting room. Not that he was old, but he estimated that he was at least five years older than any of the other so-called recruits, and definitely the only married agent. Despite digging in as many places as Napoleon had contacts, his partner had hit a very large and solid brick wall during the last, frustrating five days, before Illya's return from holiday the day before. Even Waverly had been greeted with what could only be described as a frosty reception by the new Director at Langley.

'Why don't you wait until after the physical, Alex?' O'Leary had said rather condescendingly, 'then we can have another chat if you feel it necessary.'

He had been the last to be called in. He looked at his watch, and estimated that the whole thing shouldn't take more than fifteen to thirty minutes, judging from the speed with which they had processed the others. Sadly, that would still leave enough time for him to visit Frank's on the way home.

The examination room was the usual soulless mix of an uncomfortable looking bed and some even more unpleasant looking equipment which Illya knew he should have come to terms with by now, but hadn't.

'There you are, that is Kuryakin. See what I mean, Ken. Scrawny son of a bitch.' Ellestadt watched as the Russian began to undress. He had watched people through covert devices like this before, but somehow this felt different, as if he was watching someone who was just like, off the street, not the enemy in disguise Mitchell seemed to think he was. As Kuryakin turned his back to them, Ellestadt gasped.

'Christ, Brad, look at his back!' Faint, but recognisable wheals from what Ellestadt figured must be some sort of a whip, were evident across the Russian's powerful shoulders and back, extending down to his buttocks.
'Yeah, these UNCLE boys like a bit of S and M.' Mitchell sneered.

Whatever they had done with his colleagues in Section 2, they appeared to be taking twice as long with him, Illya thought as he sighed and looked at the clock above the large mirror facing him. He had mentally switched off to a lot of it, but they were now asking for blood samples, his favourite part.

'Can I get dressed first?' he enquired, trying not to sound as annoyed as he felt. The younger of the two doctors present looked slightly alarmed and glanced worriedly towards the older man, though Illya couldn't think why they should make a fuss about it.

'Do you have to?'

'I don't have to, but I would prefer to, unless of course, you're going to take blood from some part of my anatomy other than my arm,' Illya replied tersely, giving them a glare for good measure. The older doctor shrugged, enabling him to start dressing without waiting for them to even think about changing their minds.

Illya sat down on the chair drawn up by the desk, facing the large mirror, and bent down to tie his shoe laces. The younger doctor, whose badge revealed him to be Doctor Adrian Parks MD, leaned forward to apply the tourniquet, Illya's eyes narrowed. Behind Dr Parks' left ear the tiny, but to Illya, obvious, lead from a radio receiver poked out as it ran from the ear into the collar of his shirt. He rather nervously applied the band and yanked it tight, causing the vein in Kuryakin's arm to prepare itself for the worst. Illya looked down at the vein. For some reason, perhaps from years of being in similar situations, he felt something was wrong. Glancing up he was instantly aware that Dr Parks' gaze was directed at the mirror, as if…

'Shit. He's knows we're here. That asshole has given it away. Give him the shot, now!' Mitchell bawled. Ellestadt watched in frozen horror as the scene unfolded in front of him. The other doctor, with the moustache, had already got the syringe in the Russian, before Mitchell had shouted. It was obvious now that there was something in the syringe which the medic now injected into the waiting arm. The effect was almost instantaneous. The blond's head jerked forward and his body collapsed, causing his head to catch the edge of the desk before he could be caught. The two doctors, freed, it appeared, from the charade they had previously been playing, leapt into action, hauling the limp body onto the bed, and proceeding to remove his clothing.

'What the hell…' Ellestadt muttered under his breath as he watched Mitchell pick up the pad and begin to bark orders at the medics through the microphone on the desk.

'Do the measurements first, then x-ray his jaw, and don't for God's sake forget the eyes and hair.' The younger doctor, Parks, had opened a small cupboard in the wall, and removed a set of labelled plastic bags. The now naked figure of the Russian agent lay exposed for them to begin their measuring.

'Christ, Brad, are they going to measure everything, I mean, everything?'

'Everything, Ken. Why, your dick not as long as his?' Ellestadt cringed at the crudeness of his partner and also, somehow, at the vulnerability of the man in front of them. Whatever shit was going on, he hadn't been let into the story yet. Mitchell was continuing to dictate the list down the microphone, the Parks guy scribbling down on a similar pad as he heard, his hand on the ear where the wire was coming out of.
'Brad,' Ellestadt persisted, 'Sorry if I sound kind of dense here, but what exactly is going on?'

Mitchell let go of the microphone and sat down, looking as if he was satisfied that the procedure was being carried out efficiently.

'Ken, it goes like this,' Ellestadt nodded glumly, a clammy feeling at the back of his neck alerting him to the possibility that he wouldn't particularly like what he was about to hear.

'As you know, we are fighting a war on two fronts, boy. In 'Nam, our boys are out there giving the Commies hell. And then there's the covert side of operations, understand?' Ellestadt nodded, his brow wrinkled with incomprehension.

'In order to win the war, Ken, we need intel, OK? Now, sometimes an opportunity just comes your way, an opportunity too damn good to pass up. As I told you before, I have a contact in the Russian Embassy in Berlin. Through him I've been developing a really cozy relationship with a comrade from the higher echelons of none other than the KGB itself.' Ellestadt whistled under his breath, his eyes locked on his partner's smiling face. 'Our KGB friend is now sure he has a nice little plant in the CIA, namely yours truly, Ken. Now, in order to show my new best friend how much of a good Commie I am, I need to supply him with something. Something he needs in order to make a deal with his new best Thrushie friends, if you get my drift.'

Ellestadt concentrated, trying to make his face look as if he had understood, let alone approved of what his partner had just told him. He knew about the THRUSH organisation of course, but not much. Still, he felt a little queasy when he thought about the UNCLE guy, even if he was a Soviet.

Mitchell didn't look too bothered either way. 'You see, Ken, I intend to turn this KGB son of a bitch, and if Mr Illya Nikovetch Kuryakin is the unfortunate stool pigeon in the exercise of my patriotic duty, well, so be it, Ken, so be it.'

Xxxxxxxxx

'Finished, Mr Mitchell. We're just going to patch him up, and then we'll call Mrs Kuryakin.'

Mitchell spun round towards the mirrored wall. Ellestadt's head had begun to throb, and he felt a desperate need to leave the confines of the room and his partner, in order to breathe fresh air again.

'Don't forget, Ken,' Mitchell had said, 'what you've seen this afternoon didn't happen, OK?'

'OK.'

'Now, let's have a little light relief at Mr Kuryakin's expense, shall we? Parks there is just about to ring home and tell the little lady to collect blondie because he's had a little fainting fit when he saw blood. Now, that call will go straight through to UNCLE, so guess what, everyone back at the office will know about it. Oh, and then lover boy here will have to explain to wifey what he's doing down at the Army recruitment center. It just gets better and better.'

'I didn't know he was married,' Ellestadt replied. 'Wonder what she's like.' Mitchell shrugged his shoulders.

'Probably a fellow Soviet immigrant built like a tank with a moustache. Hey, I'm not really up to specs with the Kuryakin family, in fact I don't give a shit about them. Anyways, we'll soon see, won't we?'

Illya managed to sit upright for at least one minute before an overpowering feeling of nausea swept through him, and deprived him of the excellent lunch he'd enjoyed with Therese and Anastasiya.
'I'm sorry, I'm not usually like this,' he said, cringing at the rather pathetic tone of the comment.

'It's OK, we rang your wife. She should be here any minute.' It was a nurse looking into his eyes, which momentarily confused him even further. When his stomach would allow it, he looked round the room. The dizziness enveloping his mind was making it difficult to remember exactly what had been in there before he passed out, but he knew for a fact that there had been two doctors present, neither of whom was there now. And the second easily memorable fact was that someone was watching him from behind that mirror.

As Tess walked in, the baby wriggling in her arms, he also remembered that she had not been told about the medical. The smell of her perfume made his stomach lurch slightly, and he glanced up at her, hoping she might not ask too many questions too soon. For some reason, Tasiya, who Therese had now shifted onto her hip, let out a piercing scream and began to cry.

'Alright,' she whispered, 'Napoleon told me at least the bare details in the cab'. He looked up to see his partner lounging on the wall opposite, a look of barely concealed amusement spreading slowly across his face.

'Now, this is what I would call a fairly extreme way to avoid a haircut, comrade.' Illya glanced at his watch.

'Napoleon, instead of making unhelpful comments, I would be grateful if you could just help me stand.' He saw Solo grimace and come closer, until he was crouching down by his side.

'Mirror, someone behind,' Illya murmured into his partner's ear as he was hauled to his feet. Napoleon appeared not to have heard, but started to thank the nurse for her help and firmly move his partner to the door.

In the corridor, Napoleon loosened his grip.

'Tess, take him home and I'll be back directly. I just have a little medical inspection of my own to do, if you catch my drift.' Therese looked a little surprised, but Illya was already moving towards the exit as fast as his rather unsteady feet would take him.

The movement of the cab was nearly enough to cause another bout of vomiting, though it did save him from any attempt at having to explain himself. He felt grateful for the sight of the familiar door and then of the familiar bed to sink into. For what felt like the twentieth time that afternoon, his clothes were removed from him, but this time by a friendly face.

'Now, go to sleep, and I'll wake you when Napoleon arrives, OK?' He nodded gratefully, pulling at the band holding his hair back as he started to drift off to sleep. It was only then that he felt the missing hair.

CHAPTER 4

The low rumbling of thunder could be heard gathering force as it headed over the Pyrenees, an angry giant complaining about being disturbed at his dinner, growing nearer, and louder as the dark clouds deepened.

Phillipe Rondeau stood on the station platform at Pau, staring into the distance at the mountain range, now revving itself up for a full blown thunderstorm. As if to confirm its intentions, there was a tremendous crack of lightning across the tops of the peaks, which danced between them in sinister flashing arcs. He shuddered and turned up his collar, clutching the umbrella tighter as he noticed the train approaching. After the usual screech of brakes and the rapid opening of doors, he saw through
the crowd the person for whom he was waiting.

He was short in stature; Rondeau thought 'squat' described him perfectly, with a flat, Slavic face poking out from under the rather incongruous trilby hat perched on his head. He was carrying a small suitcase and, in his other hand, an official looking briefcase banged against the rather drab overcoat keeping off the now rather heavy rain. Rondeau pushed through the remaining passengers in front of the man and stopped in front of him, as the visitor wearily plonked his suitcase on the platform.

'Bonsoir, Monsieur Nikitin. Bienvenue à France.'

Nikitin stared coldly at him, ignoring the outstretched hand.

'Bonsoir, Monsieur. On y va?'

Rondeau sighed. His ignorance of French customs, and the curt demand to go, were what he expected of an ignorant Russian peasant like Nikitin. Perhaps all Russians were like him, although Marie-Laure's student lover seemed on a different plane to the unpleasant little man walking by his side towards the big Citröen parked in the car park in front of the station. Not that he had ever met Kuryakin; just knowing that Pascale was his, was enough. It was enough to make him quite comfortable in working with this Russian cretin, in order to get the girl off his hands, and also to further his own considerable ambitions within the organisation. Destroying one of UNCLE's top operatives would just be the finishing touch to what he hoped was going to be a very illustrious career.

The hydraulic suspension of the car caused the car to rise up like an inflating balloon as Rondeau turned the ignition key, and they swung out of the car park and onto the road out of the town towards the mountains. Nikitin looked rather like a shrunken dwarf in the large front seat, and Rondeau noticed that he had fallen asleep before they began to climb up towards the lower slopes. The roads were relatively clear of snow, and were busy, even in the early evening, with cars bringing tired skiers back from the slopes to the warmth of their hotels and lodges. The car sped away from the mêlée below, smoothly gripping the winding road as it coiled round the side of the darkening mass above them. Nikitin seemed totally oblivious to the loud thunderclaps and lightning cracks that lit up the sky, only waking up with a great snort as the car came to a halt at the bottom of a gaunt mountain range only accessible by means of a private cable car. On top of the roof of the station where one of the cable cars stood waiting, a large sign was posted.

La Retraite d'hiver. Privée. Entrée interdit.

'Winter Retreat. A fitting name for somewhere so remote, Monsieur Rondeau,' Nikitin said rather sarcastically, Rondeau thought.

'Ah oui, bien sûr,' Rondeau replied, 'It's an ideal place for 'Visage,' don't you think? But you will see, monsieur, you will see.'

They left the Citröen parked in the small private car park and trudged towards the waiting cable car, Rondeau picking up a small telephone just inside the cable station, speaking to an unknown person above. Nikitin stared up at the building which nestled into the top of the mountain.

La Retraite d'hiver was built in an alpine chalet style, but its large modern picture windows looking across the mountain range gave it a rather modern, streamlined appearance, at odds with the natural backdrop of the Pyrenees behind. Nikitin couldn't see how such a programme as Visage could be carried out in a building even this size, but no doubt all would be revealed in due course. He for one would be glad of a meal and some vodka after such a long journey.
He gripped the attaché case tightly, mentally sifting its contents. Ten years of waiting were nearly over; ten years endlessly churning over his hatred of those who had contributed to his downfall, waiting for the opportunity that he knew one day would be presented to him. Even with his new position in the 1st Directorate, though, he had thought that his plan would be too difficult to carry out. However, a chance lead, when conducting extensive intelligence about Kuryakin, had brought information about the girl, and brought him to Rondeau, and THRUSH. His superiors might be prepared to sanction his plan, particularly if Kuryakin could be persuaded to continue the work that dirty guluboi Shevchenko had so regrettably had to abandon when he had been removed from his post at the Institute, and particularly if UNCLE New York could be penetrated. Besides, he had help now from right at the heart of American Intelligence. But after that, eventually, Nikitin had plans for Illya Nikovetch. And his daughter.

Rondeau motioned him towards the waiting cable car, and once inside, pressed a button on the side nearest the door. The car immediately jerked into action, gaining speed as it clanked up towards the first pylon on its journey upwards.

'I'm sure that you're very tired after your long journey from Moscow, so let's get our little arrangement perfectly sorted out before anyone else gets involved, eh, Comrade Nikitin?'

Rondeau suddenly smashed his hand against a large red button on the side of the car, instantly bringing it to a juddering halt, the gondola gently swinging on the hook holding it to the cable. Nikitin pressed himself back against the window of the car, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at the tall man with the slicked back dark hair facing him. He put down the attaché case with a thud.

'Monsieur Nikitin, permit me to lay out the situation, as it were,' Rondeau began. 'In the complex above your head, is the most ambitious programme THRUSH have mounted in the last ten years. If successful, it will guarantee us enduring and total penetration of the UNCLE security system, and ultimately, the destruction of UNCLE as an organisation of any serious standing in the world. Against this, your pathetic little attempt at revenge pales into insignificance.' Rondeau flicked some imaginary dust off his immaculate coat, and continued.

'However, on examining your proposals, it seems that there are several very attractive possibilities that THRUSH would be interested in exploring, namely the use of the man you have mentioned in your report, and of course, the destruction of Illya Kuryakin.' The very name made Nikitin's lips twitch, and he began to shift his weight from one leg to another.

'If what you have told me is correct, Dr Rondeau, then my 'pathetic little attempt at revenge' as you so charmingly put it, may very well be of great benefit to both of us. As you have noted, I have the perfect specimen for you, in fact the only person who could possibly carry out the task you expect him to. In return, you can give me the means of bringing an enemy of the state to a just end.'

Rondeau laughed, his face a picture of utter contempt.

'Please don't insult my intelligence,' he murmured out of the window. 'He is your enemy, Nikitin, and it is your paranoid wish to punish him that is driving your little arrangement with THRUSH. So, please don't suggest that your government is somehow sponsoring his homecoming or is that desperately keen to see him return. I know perfectly well that he has been given honourable discharge from the Navy and that he is now an American citizen.'

Nikitin flushed a rather unhealthy looking shade of red, his eyes slightly bulging from his flat face.

'This has nothing to do with the Soviet Navy,' he hissed. 'Besides which, if you had read the report carefully, you would have seen that I have established a very productive relationship with an agent of
Rondeau hit the button again, bringing the cable car to life once more.

'Let me make myself absolutely clear,' he said coldly. 'You will provide a man who, after undergoing our programme, will be able to infiltrate UNCLE New York, as a perfect replica of our Mr Kuryakin. You will also provide, through your contact in Berlin, precise information about Mr Kuryakin's, let us say, 'physical attributes', down to the last scar and pimple. The replacement Kuryakin will infiltrate the UNCLE computer system, giving us permanent access to their security systems. While they are then suffering terminal meltdown as an organisation, he will continue to provide very useful intelligence to us both. Meanwhile, the real Illya Kuryakin will be repatriated, together with his daughter, and in a very special way, my dear Nikitin, the continuance of her life will be the condition for his compliance, and her presence with him in the Soviet Union will cause him to think very carefully before attempting to escape his 'new life'. Meanwhile his wife will no doubt be devastated by feelings of betrayal when she discovers that her husband is in fact the homosexual everyone thought he was, but knowing women as I do, she will soon find another, more reliable partner.'

The cable car juddered across the final pylon and came to rest within the upper cable car station immediately below the house. Rondeau swung the door open, and picked up Nikitin's bag. As he bent down, he felt his arm grasped in an iron grip.

'Kuryakin's compliance will never be gained by a threat, even one as personal as the one you so generously are providing,' he murmured. 'Please don't concern yourself with him. I can assure you that once he has been repatriated, we have more permanent plans for comrade Kuryakin; ones that do not depend upon his compliance.' Nikitin released his grip, picked up the attaché case, and exited the cable car, leaving Rondeau, for once, silent.
The classroom was spacious, a series of low windows at the side looking out towards the wild coast which they were taken to when necessary, when some training had to be endured. There never seemed the chance to run along the pebbles, or try to skim the smooth flat stones into the rough grey sea below the endless grey sky. Indeed, the concept of recreation, play, or anything else that other seven year olds enjoyed, seemed an altogether alien concept to those responsible for these children.

Pascale carefully opened her exercise book, and picked up the pencil she had carefully sharpened before leaving the little space in the dormitory that was hers. On the cover of the book her name had been neatly written by her teacher. Pascale Rondeau. She longed to turn the pencil round, and rub out the hated name, replacing it with another. She looked up at the clock above the blackboard at the front of the classroom. Only a few hours and she would regain her space, at least for a short while before the occupations of the evening began. Then she could take out and look at her most precious possessions. Take them out, look at them, then hide them away, well away from them.

She glanced at the adjacent desks. The boy next to her, an American called Dale, glared back at her, his snub nose tilted upwards disapprovingly. Beyond him, a girl, a Russian called Nadia, was writing furiously in her exercise book, her short reddish hair hanging forward like a curtain between herself and others as she wrote. A Russian girl. Pascale was Russian too, at least partly. Instantly, her mother's image appeared before her, the last, the very last time they had been together.

It had been in Paris, last February, a cold, wet week that they had spent together. Miserable weather, but the week had been special, a time that now, looking back, seemed intense and warm to the little girl. Her mother seemed to be trying to force as much as she could into every moment they were together; as if she already knew that this would be the last time. They had dashed through rain-soaked streets, maman pointing out places that seemed to have significance for her; that she wanted Pascale to know about.

'Regarde, cherie,' she had said excitedly when they stood outside the Sorbonne, staring up at what looked to Pascale as just another large, serious looking grey building. 'Ceci le bâtiment où j'ai vu ton papa pour le premier temps.' It didn't look a particularly interesting place to meet someone for the first time, but Pascale could see that it meant a great deal to maman, so she tried to look excited too. They had gone to several other places too, before, in a crowded café by the side of the Seine, her mother had given her a small, fabric covered box.

The fabric was striped, green and cream, in very fine lines, making Pascale's eyes feel strange as she looked at them. One side of the lid was hinged with green fabric, allowing the box to open easily, revealing its contents.

A slightly battered ring, with a tiny pink stone in a cabochon setting, lay on top of what looked like a letter and some photographs. Pascale had picked up the ring and stared at the pretty stone, noticing her mother's face as she glanced up at her.

'He gave me that before he went to England,' she had said quietly. 'It was just a little gift to him, but I hoped that it meant more.' Maman had told her that papa had not known about the baby, and that it was important she knew. She still remembered the moment she had looked at his face the first time. She had returned the ring back to the box and pulled out the photographs.

It was a very small, black and white portrait which her mother had told her was for a 'carte d'identité'. The short, very blond hair framed a wide, serious face, which seemed to be slightly frowning at the camera. The rather narrow top lip was firmly anchored to the wider lower lip, as if he
was not going to speak unless he absolutely had to. She had felt a little scared of him, until maman had showed her the second, slightly larger photograph. Unusually, it was in colour, which was rare then, maman said. He was sitting on some grass, and it looked like summer, the sun lighting him up, making him look happy and relaxed. His hair was much longer, falling forward in a thick soft sheaf from what must have been an attempt to comb it backwards and make it behave. He had loosened his shirt and was tie-less, but what Pascale noticed most of all, missing from the first photograph, was the shy smile illuminating his features, making him look at once handsome and gentle.

'This was the last summer,' her mother murmured rather sadly, as if the season had ended that year and never returned. She had talked then at length about him, trying to paint a picture of the man in the photograph for the little girl, but it felt rather unreal, as if he would always just be two-dimensional, like the photo, never real, like the man she thought had been papa.

Pascale curled her lip at the thought of that papa. She remembered the journey he had insisted she make with him, the day he had taken her away from maman until she had finally found her again. He had thrown a few things into a small case, and she had grabbed her nounours, the little bear being the only thing faintly resembling a toy that she had owned since that time, and that not for long. He had lied to her then, telling her that they would see maman soon, that it was just a holiday; and he had continued to lie ever since. For a very short time, she had lived with him at that house in the mountains, with a nurse who acted more like a jailer, frightening Pascale with barely concealed threats, and leaving her alone with little to do for long periods, except stare out of the window at the far distant mountain range. Eventually, she had been moved to this school in England, and there her mother had found her.

Though Pascale had no real idea of how a proper school was run, having been at Broadlands since she was nearly six, she vaguely remembered her kindergarten in Paris, the bright colours and kind faces, and her room in their apartment, with its little armoire filled with pretty dresses and her drawers of ribbons and slides for her hair. The contrast with her present home was harsh and extreme.

It was apparent from the beginning, even to a very little girl, that the children were there for a purpose beyond the purely educational. From being left alone for hours in the mountains, here, every waking minute seemed filled with some sort of task or training exercise. The gentle comfort of her room at home was replaced by a long dull dormitory, which Pascale soon began to think of as resembling somewhere soldiers might sleep in. Each bed was curtained, monastic style, giving the only privacy available in which to spend the limited time she had to herself each day.

To begin with, she had not been allowed anything she could claim as being hers, even Gaston, the teddy bear. She remembered the woman showing them the dormitory, helping her unpack her little suitcase, piling most of her clothes, and Gaston, to one side, with the chilling words, 'You will most certainly not be needing those.' She had cried bitterly when they had been taken away, and her remaining clothes eventually replaced with a dull grey uniform, a strange bird symbol embroidered on the cardigan and the jacket. Her hair, which maman had braided every day with pretty ribbons to match her dresses, had been cut short, a horrible grip holding back the hair from her sad, tear-stained face. When she thought of those days, those before she found maman and knew about her real papa, a quiet rage would grow in her.

The day maman had come marked a sort of turning point. It was the day when Pascale determined that she would fight them and that she would one day leave and find maman and papa, perhaps even bring them together in some wonderful way. After maman had given her the box, this belief grew in her, despite being told that her mother had no idea where papa was. The news of her mother's death exploded her dreams, and she had spent a few nightmarish days thinking that he would come and that she would be returned to the hateful house on top of the mountain. When that didn't happen, she began to believe again, spending precious time every day staring at the photograph of the blond man,
and praying devoutly that somehow, and in some miraculous way, they would find each other.

Pascale had learned many things at the school, and one of them was how to hide precious possessions. After Gaston, she had determined that if she ever had anything of her own again, she would make sure that none of them would lay hands on it. When maman had given her the box, she had spent the journey back to England planning in her mind where it might be hidden. Maman had also given her some beads, sparkling and diamond-like, enclosed in a tiny case that fitted neatly inside the fabric box.

'Remember, ma chère, whatever happens, when you say these words, you will never be alone,' her mother had urged. La Rosaire. All the prayers of the church that they had whispered together were there: Notre pere: Je crois: Gloire a dieu: Salut Marie. She had promised her mother that she would say them, even without the beads, and she had kept her promise. By some miracle, after patient searching, she had found a part of the floorboard under her bed loosened by some work that had been done in the room. The board had been sawn to expose wiring, and if removed, revealed a very small space near the wall, just the right size for a small, fabric covered box. She had found some old sacking in a shed in the grounds, and after secreting a pair of scissors in her uniform, she had obtained a long strip of the material with which to wind round the box, thus camouflaging it in case her little hidey hole was discovered. There were regular searches of the children's lockers and beds, but, to date, the little box remained safe.

Pascale looked up, as she heard the projector screen being unfurled by their teacher, Mr Young. She breathed a deep sigh of relief to see that Mr Turner was helping him today. Although Pascale had taken a vow not to like any of her teachers because they worked for them, it was really difficult to apply this blanket condemnation to Mr Turner. He hadn't been at the school very long, and Pascale had liked his funny curly hair and his quiet, gentle voice right from the first lesson they had shared. Mr Turner, unlike every other teacher in the school, never shouted when she made a mistake, or, even worse, hit her, in fact he had actually stopped Miss Milliband from administering the hard leather strap she used to beat Pascale when she had refused to kick and punch another, younger child, in a training session.

Mr Turner had told her that she was, in his words 'top of the pops' at French and Russian, and that her German was a close second to Fritz Winter, who was Austrian, so that didn't really count anyway. Pascale didn't really understand what 'top of the pops' meant, but it sounded good, and she longed to tell him that Papa spoke lots of languages too. Sometimes, she caught him looking at her closely, and once she asked him.

'Oh, you just look a little like a friend of mine,' he replied, 'Same colour eyes,' and had smiled his twinkly smile at her. She frowned at the thought of it. She needed to be careful; Mr Turner seemed good, but she knew she couldn't trust anybody here.

Mr Turner was fiddling around with a film projector at the back of the classroom, while Mr Young made a loud sound on the desk with a ruler he had in his hand.

'Open your exercise books; new page please. Now, please copy out the notes carefully, and underline all headings.' Pascale groaned slightly. At least part of every day seemed to consist of endless, boring copying out of sets of instructions or rules, or information about various people. Last week they had spent five days writing out laborious instructions about how to make various types of explosive devices, which they then had to assemble in the afternoon, using their notes. The American boy, Dale, who always found this hard, had snatched her book from her, giving her a hard shove which had caused her to knock over the assembled materials in the laboratory. For that, much to his amusement, she had been beaten round the legs and buttocks by Miss Fortesque, until she had cried out in pain and anguish. Obviously, today, from the title, it was to be the 'information about people'
type of boring notes.

_U.N.C.L.E._

She heard a slightly indrawn breath behind her and looked round. It was Mr Turner, but whatever had caused him to make the noise, he seemed to have recovered from it, and gave her a barely noticeable wink, making her blush slightly and turn back to her work. Mr Young was continuing at a rapid pace.

**Section 2 – Enforcement.**

Pascale started to copy down the usually boring introductory paragraph, explaining all about this organisation with the funny name. It sounded a little like the United Nations, but seemed to do different things. She stifled a yawn and kept going, thinking of the little box snuggling in its secret place; wondering what papa was doing at this precise moment. She often played what she thought of as a kind of game, managing to copy and think her own thoughts at the same time. She tried to imagine him doing different things at different times. When she woke up and was being herded towards the communal showers, she imagined him in a shower, the blond hair wet and hanging over his face, like on the picture. When she was eating the rather bland food served up on the long trestle tables at school, she imagined him sitting at a table somewhere, eating something lovely, like the strawberry _glace maman_ had bought for her at the café in Paris. She had often thought about what he might do for a job, and concluded that he must be someone doing very clever things at a university somewhere, from what her mother had told her. Playing this game had made him come alive for her, and sharpened her desire to see if all her fantasies had any basis of truth in them.

_Napoleon Solo Section 2 No 1_

Pascale carefully copied the name. It was a very funny one, and she thought he must have a maman and papa who liked France to give it to him. Perhaps it wasn’t his real name, although when they wrote notes about people, they usually made a list of any other names they used as well. Pascale thought it might be fun to have another name to go by, perhaps a Russian name, like papa. Mr Young continued to write a great long description of this man. Pascale noticed him muttering under his breath as he did so, frequently breaking the chalk as he underlined various aspects of this man’s personality traits. Finally, he finished, at least for the time being, and turned round, fixing the children with an angry, unpleasant stare.

‘In a short time, we’re going to have a film about this man and his partner, whom you’re also going to be making notes about.’ He put his chalk down on the table and continued to stare at them. Pascale shuddered under his gaze, but was determined not to let him stare her down. She noticed Nadia looking at her shoes, her face rather red, while Dale was still finishing off his notes in his appalling, spidery writing. Mr Young continued, his voice taking on a ranting tone.

‘This man, and his partner are the kind of people whom you are being trained to eradicate,’ he said. "Eradicate", children, means to wipe out, to destroy completely, to remove from the face of the earth. This man and his partner are standing between us and a future where THRUSH will dictate the course of history for the next thousand years.’ His voice seemed to be going up an octave as he warmed to his subject, reminding Pascale of the horrible films they had watched about those men in Germany and especially about the man with the moustache who seemed to be always shouting. She began to writhe slightly in her seat, and was suddenly aware of a warm hand on her shoulder giving her a very slight squeeze. She decided not to turn round.

There was obviously going to be a slight pause in the writing, so that the film could be shown before they had to write notes about the other man. Pascale wondered what his name was going to be, and where in the world he might come from. She could hear Mr Turner clicking various switches as Mr
Young turned off the lights, and large blinds automatically rolled down from the ceiling, blocking out the day. There was a whirring sound, followed by the appearance of the bird symbol she hated.

The film began outside what looked like a shop. Various people seemed to be going about their business on the street, and Pascale wondered how this connected to this terrible organisation that they had just been told about. A disembodied voice suddenly began to speak.

'This unassuming shop hides one of the four entrances to the organisation known as U.N.C.L.E., the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Today, children, we are going to study two of its top agents. Look, here comes our first subject, Mr Napoleon Solo. Don't be fooled by his appearance, children. Underneath that smooth smile lies the heart of a ruthless killer, who will stop at nothing to destroy our organisation.'

Pascale leaned forward slightly to see the man she had written about coming to life on the screen. The camera had obviously followed him along the street. Pascale thought he looked fun, but she noticed he seemed to spend a lot of time looking at other people, especially ladies. She liked the funny dimple in his chin and the way his hair was sort of sharp looking. Pascale concluded that he would be a nice person to go shopping with; someone who might take out a little girl for a nice meal and buy her toys and ribbons. She glanced sideways and heard Bernard Smith, that nasty English boy who pulled the little plaits she had managed to grow so carefully, saying under his breath, 'I'm going to slit his throat.' She looked away, and saw Mr Turner looking towards her as the film continued, a slightly nervous expression playing across his normally placid face.

As she looked behind her, she heard the commentator continue,

'And now children, let's meet an equally nasty and dangerous person, whom I think you should want to put on top of your "UNCLE agents to kill" list. Look, here he comes out of the shop, on his way to another mission against our organisation, I have no doubt.'

Pascale turned to face the screen to see a man emerging from the door and walking up the steps towards the street above. The film froze at this point, then seemed to enlarge the face to unmistakable proportions.

'This children, is Illya Nikovetch Kuryakin, late of the Russian Navy and Cambridge University. Look at his face and see there the expression of a cunning, ruthless assassin who enjoys killing our agents to satisfy his lust for murder and power. It would be a service to humanity, children, to rid the world of this man.'

Pascale was not aware of the chair being upended and falling beneath the table onto the floor until her head made contact, enabling her to utter the scream which had already formed in her throat. There was a commotion as the other children fell away and she felt Mr Turner's arms lifting her up towards him and moving with her out of the classroom. Through the blur she heard him talking, fresh air was mentioned, then she found herself being carried through another, empty classroom down the corridor, and then at last, outside into the garden. She cringed slightly, expecting punishment for her behaviour, but for once, nothing happened. She was gently placed on a bench underneath a large tree, quite a distance from the school and the shocking film.

Mr Turner started to dab something cold on Pascal's head, smiling at her as she sat, her legs dangling over the bench.

'All right?' She noticed him look round rather furtively, before he continued, 'It was a bit of a shock seeing your papa like that, wasn't it, and I'm sorry I had to pull your chair out. I thought perhaps now was the time for us to have a little talk.'
Pascale started up a little and stared at him. He suddenly wanted to laugh at her expression. It was as if someone he knew very well was sitting there, but strangely smaller, and feminine of course. The intense blue eyes were his, and her lips, pulled into a taut line, his too. She had her mother's colouring and hair, but all else was pure Kuryakin. He suddenly realised that he had never sent back any description of her. As far as he knew, her father had no idea what she looked like, or what sort of child she was.

'Monsieur Turner' she began timidly, 'I . . . um, you know papa?' she looked so bewildered, he started to smile.

'Yes, Pascale, I know your papa very well. And I'm sorry that you had to learn more about him from that silly film. Please don't believe a word of it, will you? Believe me, he's . . ., well, he's a really nice man.' It sounded a little pathetic, but she was only seven, even if these monsters here treated them like miniature assassins in the making.

There was a short lull in the conversation while they both took in the turn events had taken in the last hour. Fernando watched the little girl's face turning from confusion, her little Kuryakin brain computing what was going on and arriving at an answer. She sat up slightly, and pursing her lips, began.

'Please tell me if I am wrong, Monsieur Turner. Maman told me that I was not to trust anybody here, but I think that if you are a friend of papa's then he will expect me to trust you, non?' Fernando nodded, smiling at her wide open eyes and the two little braids swinging about on her shoulders as she talked.

'Yes, you can trust me, Pascale,' he continued in French. 'My real name is Fernando McCaffery. I work for UNCLE, that organisation you and your companions are making all those notes about. I've been sent to find out about you, and about the school here, and then, to bring you home.' Pascale looked up, tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

'You mean, Monsieur Fernando, that papa wants me to . . . to come home?' She looked away a minute, then adding, 'Where is home? Does he live in Russia?' Fernando smiled, and squeezed her hand.

'No, Pascale, he lives in New York; you know, where the film was taken? He has a lovely house, with lots of room, and . . .' he stopped, suddenly, painfully aware of what she knew nothing about. Breathing in deeply, he continued.

'Pascale, when you meet your papa, you will be able to talk to him about your maman, and what happened, you understand?' Pascale nodded, fixing him with the same blue eyes he marvelled at when they had first met. 'But you need to understand something else, and I think he will want you to know this.' He held her hand, momentarily glancing across the field to check for signs of any movement from the school.

'Your papa is married, chérie. He married a lovely woman called Thérèse, and they have a baby girl who is called Anastasiya. Before your mother died, she met your papa and Thérèse and they became friends again. And, chère fille, your mother helped baby Anastasiya to be born.'

To Fernando's consternation, the little girl looked away, a deep frown on her face. He decided not to say any more, waiting for her to somehow take in the tumultuous information before he continued. After what seemed like an eternity, she suddenly drew closer to him and put her arm round his waist.

'Monsieur Fernando, do you think that papa and his wife and baby will want me? Perhaps they will
want other babies and there will be no room for a big girl.' The tears, already brimming, burst over, running down her serious face onto her neck. Fernando hurriedly reached into his pocket, bringing out a very large, white handkerchief, with which he proceeded to dab Pascale's tears.

'Listen, Pascale. Papa and Thérèse have already made room for you… in their hearts as well as their home, cherie. I assure you, they are looking forward to you coming, especially my… well, actually, Thérèse is my sister, so I suppose that makes me your uncle, doesn't it?' he smiled, willing the little girl to believe him.

'Vous êtes mon oncle?' The eyes, already widened, seemed to increase in size as she stared up, beginning to resemble huge blue saucers in her tear-stained face. However, she began to look a little calmer now, so Fernando, after a little pause, pressed on.

'Um, that's not all. You also have a brother; I suppose he must be about the same age as you.' Fernando began to cast about in his mind for Pablo's birthday as Pascale's face, if it were possible, assumed an even more amazed expression.

'So, Mons…. I mean, Oncle Fernando, I have… ' and she began to count on her fingers, 'papa, then, mama' (she decided to use the term "mama" because using maman was too painful), 'une soeur, le bébé Anastasiya, and un frère, who is called . . ?'

'He's called Pablo, cherie. Your papa and mama are adopting him because his own parents died.' Fernando replied, wondering if she should know this. This last fact, however, seemed to help. Her face brightened and she said, triumphantly, 'Ah bon! Then, if they have Pablo, perhaps they will be happy to have me too?' Fernando smiled. The old Kuryakin logic was asserting itself.

'Yes, absolutely. You'll be, well, like twins, won't you?' Fernando added, feeling rather pleased with himself at the idea. Pascale gave him an Illya look.

'Peut-être. When is his birthday?' Fernando smiled. She was already, in a very logical fashion, working out her place in the family.

'Um, I think it's 24th May. Yes, it is, 24th May,' he replied. Pascale sat back on the seat and crossed her arms, a classic Kuryakin glare on her face. Fernando frowned, wondering what terrible faux-pas he had committed, and whether he would have to pay for it when 'mama and papa' heard.

'What time was he born?' came the next, rather surprising question.

'Um, I have no idea, Pascale. Is it important?' Fernando replied, trying to work out why on earth she should want to know. The familiar lips pursed again as she turned to him, a rather superior expression set on her face that he recognised well.

'Because 24th May is my birthday too, oncle, and I need to know who the eldest of the twins is.' Fernando nearly burst out laughing, but managed to somehow strangle his expression into a look of mild amusement.

'Well, when you get home, I'm sure that papa can sort out who is the eldest,' he said, smiling. 'You will like your brother, I'm sure,' he added, still wanting to laugh at the serious little girl at his side. He stood up, looking at his watch, then crouched down by the side of Pascale.

'Now, we have to return to school. Listen carefully, Pascale. For now, we have to play our parts, you understand. None of what I told you must be repeated, and you will have to be very careful and very
patient, and very brave. I will let you know what we are going to do when I've talked…'

'When you've talked to papa?' Pascale said excitedly, grabbing his hand. 'Oh, uncle Fernando, can you tell him… can you tell him, Pascale sends her love?' Fernando could feel her whole body shaking with excitement. He nodded slowly.

'Yes, I'll make sure he knows,' he said, taking her hand, and beginning the slow walk back to school with her, across the lawn.

CHAPTER 6

'Illya. Illya, wake up, it's time to get up.'

He woke up with a great shudder, nearly colliding heads with Thérèse as she leaned over him.

'Steady. There's time,' she said, rather more gently, stroking back the hair from his stricken face. She was in her usual home outfit of jeans, but, as befitting the season, the t-shirt had a bright purple jumper added on top. He could hear Anastasiya wailing from the next room, and a thunderous knocking on the front door made him wonder how on earth he had stayed asleep for so long.

'I thought Napoleon was coming round,' he managed to say dazedly, before sitting upright and swinging his legs onto the floor.

'He did come round, but you were sleeping the sleep of the ages, so he left you a message instead.' He looked up expectantly, trying to engage his brain in what was going on. The knocking continued, but now he could hear equally thunderous footsteps running down the stairs too.

'What is going on, World War Three?'

'It's only Marv. Pablo's friend. Remember?'

He remembered. Marvin Rota. An enormous boy of Italian extraction who had become his son's best friend and virtual slave after Pablo had dealt with a particularly nasty bully who had made Marvin's life miserable. Luckily, Pablo had not revealed how he had dealt with 'Zits' as the unfortunate bully was named, but Illya suspected it was to do with a particularly effective method Illya himself had perfected of reducing someone to a bawling cry-baby begging for mercy by the artful manoeuvring of two of their fingers. Since that time 'Marv' seemed to have virtually moved in.

'So, what was the message?'

'What message? Oh, Napoleon. He said the meeting is at eleven. Be there at nine or thereabouts and he'll reveal all. Oh, and the new coffee shop opposite Frank's serves great cappuccinos. Does any of this make sense?'

'Perfect.' He hauled himself to his feet and headed for the shower.

XXXXXXXX

Breakfast was in full swing by the time Illya managed to get downstairs. He had chosen his clothes carefully, determined to put the last few months of 'geek outfits' as Napoleon had termed them, behind him, and dress for the occasion.

'Hi, Mr Kuryakin. You look swell this morning. My pa says red ties are swell, 'specially with a dark suit.'
'Thank you, Marvin. Your father has excellent taste.' He could already see Therese beginning to grin at the conversation. Marvin filled the end of the kitchen table, Pablo sitting at right angles, looking minute by comparison. They were both engaged in eating what looked like enormous bowls of porridge. Thérèse was attempting to shovel more porridge into a very messy looking Anastasiya at the other end of the table, well away, but not far away enough away from anyone within missile range.

'Going anywhere important this morning, Mr Kuryakin?' Marvin managed to say between mouthfuls in his rather deep, husky voice. 'This is swell porridge, Mrs Kuryakin. My pa says always start the day with a big breakfast. Hey, dive, Pab my boy, missile being launched.' The two boys immediately began to laugh and make strange sounds resembling gunfire as Tasiya attempted to grab the spoon from her mother and lob the porridge towards them.

Illya leaned against the counter top and began to eat some toast as quickly as he could.

'Boys, you're making her worse,' Therese scolded, looking down the table at them. 'And I hope you're not thinking of going out with wet hair like that.' Illya had wrenched his hair back into a tight pony tail after the shower, and he could feel it dripping slightly inside his shirt as he backed away from the horribly food encrusted child who claimed to be his daughter at the far end of the table.

'Well it won't matter in a few minutes time, will it, once I reach the comparative sanity of Uncle Frank's,' he said, glaring affectionately at the boys, who now seemed to have started on a vast tower of toast and jam.

'Uncle Frank is a hero, dad. Did you know he was in Normandy at D Day?' The very words 'D Day' resulted in an eruption of machine gun noises combined with a few vaguely German sounding words being shouted by the boys at each other.

'Mr Portelli is a swell guy. And a swell barber too, Mr Kuryakin. He does a swell crew cut,' Marvin managed to get in over the noise.

'Thank you Marvin. I'll keep it in mind.'

Thérèse ran up the stairs as he was going out, the raucous noises continuing down below.

'Does he ever use any other adjective except "swell"?' he said, as she pushed his fur hat down over the wet hair.

'He's a lovely boy, and he thinks the world of you, Mr Kuryakin,' she said with Marvin's gruff, deep voice. Illya opened the door and then turned towards her.

'When sanity is resumed tonight, we'll talk, alright? Don't worry about the Vietnam thing, it's . . . just a silly mistake.' He could see that she didn't believe him, but he felt he had to say something to allay her fears.

'Yes, well that's easy to say. Now, go and be nice to Frank, and I'll clean up the aftermath of D-Day down below.'

'Je t'adore, cherie.'

'Oui, Je sais ça.' Oh Illyusha, I nearly forgot.' Therese put her hand on his in a gentle gesture that made him reluctant to leave. 'Could you call in at Rudi's tonight? Sabi has something for you to sign, and, sorry, come back here first and collect the parcel which I'll leave on the table here, d'accord?'

'Where will you be, then?'
'Well, Brenda, you know, Napoleon's new girl, is having Tasiya while I sort out the pictures of Bermuda at that big studio in Chelsea which my friend runs, remember?'

'Vaguely. I lead such a quiet life in comparison to you.'

'Funny Russian. Go; get a haircut, have a good day.'

Thérèse ran to the window and watched him walk down the road, his usual swift strides carrying him away from her towards something about which she felt clammy at the back of the neck. A crescendo of noise and the smash of a broken plate followed by Tasiya's piercing yell tore her attention back and away, and she buried the anxiety building within her, at least until the evening, when, with his return, these same dark thoughts would return with him as surely as the dark freezing evening would follow the now bright, cold day.

Xxxxxxxxxx

'He's in there; I'll bring in coffee.' Illya began to peel off his coat and hat, searching inside his collar for the tiny hairs that were making his neck so itchy. Connie smiled at him from behind the little work station where she had installed a rather superior coffee maker. Since the summer they'd occupied a slightly larger set of offices, with its own small conference room, in which Illya could just see Napoleon sorting through a set of what looked like photographs of somebody's anatomy.

He looked up as Illya walked in, closely followed by Connie and the coffee.

'Here's a very smart stranger who says he's your partner,' she said from behind him, coming round and leaving the coffee on a little table at the side of the room. Napoleon smiled laconically and picked up one of the cups of coffee.

'Yes, I just about recognise him by the pointy ears,' he replied, his head to one side.

Illya smirked at him and picked up the other coffee as Connie shut the door. Putting down his coffee for a moment, he picked up one of the photographs and frowned at it.

'This is me.'

'You could say that. Actually these are all you, comrade, in all your glory, from top to toe.' Illya began to sift through the pictures. In remarkable detail, he had indeed been photographed literally from the top of his head to his toes, including detailed pictures of his hands and other, more intimate parts of his anatomy.

'Gee, I'd never noticed that you had that tattoo there,' Napoleon murmured, handing Illya a close up of his pubic region. The top few centimetres of hair had been shaved, to reveal a small, monochrome hammer and sickle, with the word 'Moskva' in a tiny scroll over the top.

'Normally you wouldn't,' Kuryakin replied, frowning. 'A souvenir of the Russian Navy. So, are you going to tell me how you got hold of these, Napoleon?' Solo put down his coffee and sat down next to Illya.

'Of course, but first of all, can you go over exactly what happened before the Army called up mom and asked her to come over and collect junior?'

Illya, in precise detail, recounted everything that had happened up until the moment when Dr Parks had looked towards the mirror.

'I knew something was wrong, Napoleon. The medical had taken far too long for a start; I'm
convincing they even took photographs of my eyes under the pretext of examining them for glaucoma,' Illya began. 'Then Parks became agitated when I asked them if I could get dressed.'

'Yes, well, they didn't want the hassle of having to undress you again,' Solo replied.

'Anyway, he started to apply the tourniquet, and as he leaned over, I saw he was wearing a wire. It didn't take a genius to work out that he was in touch with someone, and when he looked at the mirror, it was obvious. The rest happened rather suddenly; whoever was behind the glass realised that I had tumbled to whatever was going on. They were supposed to be taking some bloods, but as far as I remember it, something went in rather than out,' Illya said, putting down the photograph of the tattooed skin. 'I can't really remember anything else, until that nurse was holding a sick bowl in front of me, what, two hours later.'

Napoleon looked at his watch, and pushed some of the photographs to the side, laying out a series of new pictures of what looked like samples in plastic bags. The remaining photo was of a piece of paper, upon which was written a series of measurements.

'OK. After Tess took you home, I went back to the office for a few supplies, and then returned to our Army friends. All I can say is that security at that place is not of the best, which is fortunate for us. I was able to gain entry by persuading the duty sergeant I was from UNCLE checking up on our guys. Once I'd gained entry, it's truly amazing where one can go with a doctor's coat on.'

'So you just took copies of all these with that little camera you just happened to have on you.'

'Exactly, mon ami. What is even more interesting, Illya, is who came in to collect the goodies.' Illya looked up and removed the glasses with which he'd been examining the photograph of the measurements.

'Let me guess. Could it be my number one fan, late of Cuba?'

'The same. Now what I would really like to know is, why on earth should Mr Bradley Mitchell be watching you being subjected to a highly invasive so called 'medical' examination, including samples of your hair from various parts of your body, comrade, a series of detailed measurements of every part of you, and a set of photographs of every bump, scar and mole that you possess?'

'Well perhaps all will become clearer after the meeting with Waverly,' Illya replied, sighing. 'I believe he's been on to Langley, so perhaps they know what their own agents are doing, even if we don't.'

'In the case of Brad Mitchell, that's unlikely,' Napoleon replied.

Illya nodded. Having his hair cut just before a meeting always made him feel more exposed somehow, as if he couldn't hide behind it. He touched it and ran his hand down the back of his head towards his now exposed neck.

'By the way, Napoleon; thank you for warning me about Carlo.' Napoleon looked up and grinned.

'Oh yes, Frank's nephew. Thought you'd like him. Did Frank tell you he's straight from Vidal Sassoon's, pronounced 'Vidal' to rhyme with 'Tidal' of course, as Frank would.'

'I was subjected to a fifteen minute discussion of the condition of my hair and what styles would suit the shape of my face, before he even put the scissors to it.'

'Well consider that payback for you not warning me about Brenda.'

'Napoleon, you didn't seriously imagine your wife would employ, as she put it, "some bimbo who
would gush all over you" as your nanny, did you?"

'Perhaps not, but how would you like a female version of Master Sergeant Randall McElroy taking command in your house?' Napoleon complained, looking up as Connie stood there.

'Mr Waverly is waiting, so you boys had better skedaddle with all your snaps.'

'Thanks Connie,' Napoleon said, getting up and fetching a yellow legal pad and a pen from the side table. 'Now remember, oh partner mine, no agreeing to anything rash, right?'

Xxxxxx

Illya was relieved that Napoleon chose not to lay out every photograph he had managed to duplicate in the Army offices the previous day.

'What I can't work out, sir, is why they should want all this stuff in such detail too, and, more importantly, why Mitchell is involved,' Napoleon had added, as Waverly glanced at one or two of the less embarrassing images.

'Well, I'm almost certain that the photographs that were taken of Mr Kuryakin are connected with all this,' Waverly replied, turning to the screen behind him and then spinning the table towards them, on which lay the deceptively anonymous manila folders for their perusal; 'Although to what degree Mr Mitchell is involved will be something needing to be investigated.'

'I realise this is all rather personal, Mr Kuryakin,' he continued, 'But since it impinges on this possible mission, I'm afraid it will have to be discussed, if only between these four walls.' Napoleon guessed what was coming.

Illya had been non-committal, bordering on brusquely silent regarding the subject of his eldest daughter, although he had revealed the contents of Marie-Laure's letter to Napoleon after they had returned from Mallorca. Napoleon knew from Jo that Thérèse had tried to encourage him to talk about her, but the subject remained firmly off the agenda until it had been forced into public by the intelligence Waverly had received from England. Completely calmly, Waverly began with a few photographs of what looked like a rather fine alpine chalet style house, set high up in a mountain range unfamiliar to him.

'This is "La Retraite", obviously named, as you can see. It appears to be a rather superior kind of hotel specialising in some sort of beauty treatments for those who have the time and money to afford them.' Napoleon refrained from making any smart asides after looking at the rather strained face of his partner, who was now feeling the back of his neck in a classic Kuryakin anxiety statement, Solo thought.

'The hotel is situated in the Pyrenees, near Pau.' He saw Illya nodding, starting to peer into the manila folder without the aid of his glasses.

'They're in the office,' Napoleon whispered, receiving an annoyed frown back from the Russian.

'Well, you'll have to explain it to me for once,' the terse reply came back. Waverly coughed and looked sharply across the table.

'If you are patient, I'll explain what you need to know, Mr Kuryakin, then you can peruse the documents once you return to your office,' he barked slightly at the now rather chastened Russian.

The screen now revealed the images of two men, the photograph taken in what looked like one of the reception rooms of the hotel.
'Ah, if I'm not mistaken, Monsieur Philippe Rondeau, THRUSH's own makeover man,' Napoleon exclaimed. 'Illya?'

'As Mitchell would say, 'got it in one', Illya replied, frowning. 'What is he doing there, I wonder? He's hardly into facepacks and massage, unless…'

'There are more complex procedures being performed,' Napoleon finished the sentence, rubbing his pen across his chin as he stared at the other man in the photograph.

'Precisely, Mr Solo. The man with him is one Erik Funk, one-time plastic surgeon to the stars, until that young girl died under his hands, as you can see from the report in your folders,' Waverly continued, motioning towards the files with his pipe.

'Ahh yes, I read about him in one of Jo's magazines,' Napoleon added, 'The article referred to him as 'Funkinstein' if I remember,' he said, trying to ignore his partner's raised eyebrows.

'It looks as if Mr Funk has joined forces with Rondeau, for some purpose not immediately apparent to us,' Waverly said, turning back to face the other two men across the table. Illya continued to stare at the screen, and in particular at the French doctor's image. Marie-Laure had talked scathingly of him when Illya was with her, giving him no indication of anything but utter contempt for Rondeau as a doctor and as a man. He shook his head at how naïve he had been to accept the news of her forthcoming marriage so easily, without thinking that there could be another, more worrying reason for her liaison with Rondeau. Still, he would make amends.

'Well, there must be some sort of hidden surgical facility,' he said. 'They could be taking their agents there for treatment.'

'Possibly, Mr Kuryakin, but we'll let Mr Solo worry about that. Your mission is to attempt to unravel the possible connections between THRUSH, the KGB first directorate, and our friends at Langley. If we get this wrong, there could be a major international incident which would cause UNCLE serious damage.'

'The KGB? How is the KGB involved?' Illya said, staring at Waverly.

'Ahh yes. It appears that there could be some possible cooperation between the two organisations,' Waverly said. 'A worrying thought, I would say, gentlemen.'

Napoleon leaned back into his chair and surveyed the back of his partner's head. He wondered why he'd never noticed the blond double crown before, making the hair swirl slightly across his head before finding its way downwards towards the now exposed neck.

'So, how exactly would you like us to proceed, sir?' Napoleon ventured, glancing across at his partner. 'I presume that one of the objects is to bring Miss Kuryakin back here?' Illya looked back at Napoleon, a strange mixture of affection and annoyance on the normally impassive face. Waverly pressed another button and the image of the two doctors was replaced by another.

'Naturally, Mr Solo. Contrary to what seems to be passing for truth in this organisation, I have never actually forbidden any agent to marry or have children. Indeed,' he smiled, 'Dorothy gave birth to our first son, Douglas, when I was still active in the SOE, and of course, your wife, Mr Solo, was born when Val was still an agent.' Napoleon leaned across to Illya's ear.

'Douglas. Now there's a name for your next offspring, comrade. Douglas Kuryakin. Got a certain ring to it, ey?' he whispered.

'I think three children and another to provide for is enough for the time being, thank you,' came the
muttered reply.

'Uh-hum.' Waverly coughed and stamped down his finger on the button controlling the screen.

Napoleon smiled broadly. The picture was a close-up, a detailed image of a little girl of no more than seven or eight, he thought. She looked as if she was trying very hard to look her best; a nervous smile played across the delicate features, and her shoulders were pushed back, almost to attention.

'Cute,' Napoleon whispered into Illya's ear. 'She's got your 'butter wouldn't melt in the mouth' look, comrade.' Illya shrugged, and Napoleon noticed he was avoiding looking properly at the photograph.

'How did you get this?' Illya said rather abruptly to Waverly.

The old man looked rather affectionately at the earnest Russian, and then turned to look at the image.

'I'm sure you will want to know what has been happening to your little girl in the last few years, Mr Kuryakin,' Waverly said. 'We had some intelligence about a school in England and we sent Mr McCaffery there undercover. He had hoped to bring Miss, er . . . Kuryakin back to New York, but THRUSH central requested her removal to La Retraite into the custody of Dr Rondeau. Mr McCaffery was able to persuade the people in England to allow him to escort her. It may be possible that we can take her out of the equation if you see what I mean, before you gentlemen visit 'La Retraite', but otherwise, you will have to factor her in to your investigation.'

'Can't Fer – Mr McCaffery bring Pascale back?' Napoleon asked, slightly surprised that his partner remained silent, his thoughts unguessable.

'Yes, that would have been a lot more convenient, but we need to keep Mr McCaffery in place for the time being. He's providing us with a lot of very useful information about the running of these THRUSH so-called schools,' Waverly replied. 'Besides, he has informed us that the school has requested his return forthwith.'

Illya shrugged slightly, in fact, Napoleon felt that he had almost shivered. Whatever was wrong, Napoleon committed the moment to memory for further investigation once they were in a more suitable environment. Kuryakin deliberately looked away from the photograph of the little girl, towards Waverly.

'I'm confident, Mr Solo, that there is a connection between Mr Kuryakin's daughter and whatever is going on at this place,' Waverly said. 'It is highly likely that THRUSH are using Miss Kuryakin as a bait for her father, for a reason not entirely clear at the moment. However…'

'I must go. I have a… duty to go,' Illya said in a rather mechanical voice.

He felt the cut hairs inside his collar screaming at him to yank them out of the way, and had to force himself not to tear off his shirt and scratch his neck. He could sense the reactions of the other two men to his lack of feeling towards his daughter, and longed to tell them to mind their own business and keep out of his life, at the same time as desperately wanting Napoleon to help him sort out why he should feel this way about the little girl on the screen. He sighed, forced his hands onto his knees, and looked up.

'I'm sorry sir. What I meant was…'

'I know what you meant, Mr Kuryakin,' Waverly said quietly. 'Whatever you feel or do not feel about this little girl, I can assure you that Mr McCaffery tells me she feels a great deal for you.'

Illya looked down, feeling his face redden uncharacteristically. He was aware of the illogicality of his
feelings; he loved Pablo, and his love was unaffected by problems of blood or race. With Tasiya, well, he loved her because she was part of himself and Tess; wonderful, mysterious. And he imagined he would love Sabi's baby too, even though when he thought about it, it made his brow furrow. But this little girl, how would she fit into things? He felt Napoleon's hand imperceptibly touching him, and didn't have to look up to know what look he would have on his face.

'Well, I hope you're not planning to just turn up at the front gate, as it were,' Napoleon continued, trying to lighten the rather strange mood in the room, his partner almost hanging his head and Waverly staring at the Russian with a mixture of his usual acerbic glint and a look of real compassion.

'Hardly, Mr Solo. It's clear that this would put Mr Kuryakin in a very dangerous position, and render him virtually ineffectual in helping his daughter or discovering exactly what is going on at this place. No, I suggest that while Mr Kuryakin attempts to gain entry to the complex in a clandestine manner, you, Mr Solo adopt a more high-profile approach to the place.'

Napoleon raised his eyebrows fractionally.

'Oh, in what way, sir?'

'Well, I would have thought that was obvious, Mr Solo. This is a centre of beauty therapy is it not? I suppose you had better book yourself in for some sort of treatment under some false persona. And you'd better take a companion. Mr Kuryakin may need all the help he can get, and if the worst comes to the worse, Miss Dancer can bring Miss Kuryakin home.'

XXXXXXXXXX

'Coffee, lots of it, Connie, and page Miss Dancer for me will you?'

Napoleon had followed his partner along the corridor almost at a run to keep up with the Russian’s furious pace. He had got hold of his arm as they got into their offices, but not before Illya had torn off his jacket and tie, followed quickly by his shirt.

'What are you doing?' Napoleon asked, as Kuryakin ran through from their small conference room into their shared office. Napoleon could hear him pulling open a drawer in his desk then slamming it shut as he returned.

'Look'. Illya put on the clean shirt and then grabbed its predecessor, showing Napoleon the collar. 'That's why I never go there on the way to the office.'

'You never go there on the way to anywhere, at least not very often, comrade,' Napoleon replied, wondering why the Russian was getting so agitated over something he cared so little about. Illya feigned deafness, throwing himself onto one of the new easy chairs in the corner of the room, where Connie had placed a pot of coffee and three cups and saucers. Napoleon poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down by the table, surveying the lounging figure of his partner.

'Now, are you going to tell Uncle Napoleon, or do I have to put my foot on your now unhairy Russian neck?' Illya glanced round, his look exactly matching the puzzled expression of the little girl they had just been staring at on Waverly’s screen.

'You're too good at it.'

'Good at what?'

'Reading my mind.'
'Well, let me see. You are worried that when you meet your new daughter, who of course is actually your oldest daughter, you won't feel the same towards her that you feel for the others, even for your as yet unborn other daughter. Right so far?'

'Depressingly accurate.'

'But, because of what happened last summer, you feel your usual sense of old-fashioned duty towards the girl, and, yes, Tess, let's see, Tess is enthusiastic about her coming.'

'Am I really that obvious? I'm beginning to worry about myself now.'

'You're not that obvious, well, only to those that know you well.' Napoleon poured a second cup of coffee and handed it to the now smiling Russian.

'Illya, trust your wife. That's what you married her for, isn't it? To sort you out when you have these fits of melancholia which your race are prone to.'

'Very funny.' Illya frowned, then smiled again, rather ruefully. 'Much as I am loathe to admit it, you appear to be right again. Thérèse has told me that I will love her when we meet, although how she knows that, I have no idea.'

'Well, I suggest that you trust the admirable instincts of your better half, and concentrate on how we are going to arrive back here in one piece with your latest progeny,' Napoleon replied, as the door opened.

'Just in time, my dear April. Coffee?'

CHAPTER 7

The large Citroen waited in the airport car park as the small turbo-prop aeroplane thudded down onto the tarmac in the distance. Phillipe Rondeau glanced at his watch cursorily and pushed the heavy door open, shuddering a little at the harshness of the winter wind swirling about the dingy grey expanse between him and the airport entrance.

He imagined that it wouldn't be difficult to recognise the man he had decided to meet in person, rather than send some minion to collect. The journey back to 'La Retraite' would give him an opportunity to test Nikitin's assertion that Mikhail Ivanovitch Shevchenko was perhaps the only one who could replace Kuryakin. Since the meeting with Nikitin, THRUSH had amassed a considerable amount of background information on the Russian UNCLE agent, and he had been impressed by the programme which had been devised for Shevchenko. He knew that surgery, however intricate and advanced, would only create the superficial layer, literally and figuratively in the attempt to deceive, and ultimately destroy UNCLE, and Kuryakin. In order to be truly effective, Shevchenko had to imitate not just the body, but the very soul of his former friend.

The attendant at the Air France desk assured him that the flight from Paris would be passing through customs shortly, but despite that, Rondeau began to pace the small airport arrivals lounge, as if he were waiting for some long lost love to arrive. His pacing was temporarily halted by a woman and a little girl barging into him on their way to the departures lounge. The woman, a rather attractive brunette, had apologised profusely, but the little girl had given him a sullen glare, reminding him suddenly of Pascale.

As he watched them disappear through the gate, he gave a heavy sigh at the thought of having to see her again. His mind rewound to images of her mother, and their marriage, now a thankfully distant memory. With the benefit of hindsight, he could see now that from the moment they had met, there
had been something missing from the relationship. He had always assumed that women found him irresistible, and that Marie-Laure's anxious desperation to marry was for that reason, and also because she was carrying his child. He had never considered that fidelity on his part was a necessary part of their marriage, and when the child had been born, looking as she did, he realised that he was being used as a convenient way for Marie-Laure to keep her. He remembered looking at Pascale's piercing blue eyes, their very colour mocking him for ever imagining he was anything but the financial provider for the sham that was la famille Rondeau.

It had been a sweet revenge to fabricate their deaths, and then, when she had discovered them to be alive, to draw Marie-Laure into the organisation using the child as a condition of her commitment. He had acknowledged her brilliance, but had shrugged when he heard of her death, his only concern being that he might have to take responsibility for the child with his name. When Nikitin's psychopathic plan began to merge with the broader aims of the Visage programme, he could hardly believe his good fortune. In one complicated but achievable action, the father and daughter could be eliminated, UNCLE terminally compromised, and his own standing in THRUSH be immeasurably improved. Since the Bolt fiasco, a power vacuum was forming at THRUSH central; one which he, Phillipe Rondeau, had every intention of filling. Now the next, major part of the plan was unfolding; Shevchenko would shortly begin the programme to prepare for the exchange, the girl had been sent for, and would be arriving shortly. It only now required the third pawn to be moved into position for the game to begin.

Rondeau was suddenly aware of someone standing near.

'Monsieur Rondeau?'

He turned to find a man of the same height but slighter build, staring at him in an unnerving fashion, his grey, rather badly fitting clothes marking him out immediately as an eastern European.

'Ah, bonsoir Messieurs. C'était un bon voyage?'

Vasilov, as Rondeau was told it would be, was obviously not cognizant of either French manners or small talk. He nodded curtly, then spoke quietly to the smaller man beside him, before thrusting some papers into Rondeau's hands, and then gliding away without further comment.

Rondeau stared at the man who was now standing directly in front of him, like some stray animal waiting to be taken away to a good home. He at once found himself being drawn to examine the man's face with its hideous scar, longing to touch it in some preliminary examination. The face of the other Russian flashed momentarily through his mind, forcing him to compare them.

His experience at once told him that, even at a first glance, they were remarkably similar. He supposed that their shared heritage, the Slavic features they had in common, were helpful to him, but there were also facial similarities that excited him and made him grab the other man's arm and begin to march him out of the building. Rondeau was relieved that Shevchenko seemed to be virtually mute, just giving him a faint glare as they walked towards the car, then just sinking into the front seat with an air of resignation, as Rondeau threw it into gear and roared off. Apart from the papers, he was only in possession of a small canvas shoulder bag, the sum total of his worldly goods.

After a very long half-hour of silence, Rondeau decided to attempt a conversation. After all, he needed to assess the voice, if nothing else. He had listened to a number of recordings of Kuryakin as the technicians made notes on its tone and accent. This was one area where Shevchenko would have to learn to imitate the rather English refinement of his former comrade's voice.

'So, Monsieur Shevchenko, have you been briefed as to what will happen when we arrive?' he began, remembering from his file, that Shevchenko, like Kuryakin, was fluent in several languages.
'Oui.'

Rondeau sighed. He wondered whether all Russians were this morose. Perhaps the women were a little more fun than the dour male examples he had met so far. He presumed Kuryakin would be the same, although the more recent photographs he had looked at showed a rather more bohemian character than the tight lipped misery sitting next to him.

Shevchenko's mood somehow communicated itself to Rondeau and forced a stony silence to prevail in the car until they reached the cable car station below 'La Retraite'. The Russian sat passively in the car until Rondeau opened the door to release him, then, without comment, followed him towards the cable car.

'Your preparation is scheduled to last for about two months,' Rondeau began again pompously, as the cable car swung upwards. 'That will take us to about mid-January. Mr Kuryakin will come when he finds out that his daughter is here. Then it is hoped you will begin your time with UNCLE shortly after.' Shevchenko stared out at the mountains, now covered with a fresh, clean looking layer of snow, and shuddered involuntarily. He had consented, he supposed, to this lunatic scheme for his own selfish reasons. And then there was Kuryakin.

'And what about Illya Nikovetch, what will happen to him?' he said finally, looking down.

Rondeau turned towards him, his face a cruel mixture of disgust and pity.

'Dr Kuryakin? My dear Shevchenko, I would have thought you would have realised by now, that it is essential for your future well-being that Kuryakin Mark 1 is taken to a place beyond finding by UNCLE, or anyone else for that matter. We wouldn't want two Illya Kuryakins running around now, would we?' Rondeau sighed and looked away. If it was up to him, Kuryakin would be killed the moment he reached La Retraite, but in order to gain Shevchenko, THRUSH had agreed to Nikitin's psychopathic desires, and that was that.

The car clanged itself still and the two figures emerged into the upper cable car station. Shevchenko was surprised by the absence of guards until he became aware of the sophisticated looking series of cameras pointing at them from all angles as they walked towards what looked like metal lift doors at the end of the cable car station. Somewhat miraculously, they slid open and swallowed up the two men into a large metal box-like lift, sliding closed behind them and ascending at a fast speed without any button having to be pushed.

'You'll find that here technology is on a new level,' Rondeau said rather condescendingly, as the lift continued to ascend at a slightly stomach churning speed. Predictably, Shevchenko thought, the doors slid open smoothly to reveal a large foyer type area, the whole end wall being taken up with a huge expanse of glass enabling the whole mountain range to be viewed in its stunning magnificence.

The room had the feel of a large, luxurious hotel, with an extensive desk area, behind which lay a series of pigeonholes, each with their own key, or rather what looked like a card neatly arranged in each section. Shevchenko smiled slightly. The concept of a key was obviously way below the level of technology here. Behind the façade of the hotel reception area lay another room, the door slightly ajar, revealing what looked like a set of squares with a number in each, on which could be seen lights flashing. Shevchenko noticed that the reflection of television monitors could be seen in the white plastic of the squares. It was obviously some sort of security room; high security by the look of it. Shevchenko suddenly thought of Illya. He would want to know what was in that room, he thought. The thought filled him with disgust, as the realisation that he was trying to think like Kuryakin dawned upon him.

A very attractive girl in a purple suit with 'La Retraite' embroidered on the pocket of her white
blouse, reached behind her and handed Rondeau one of the plastic cards. She seemed unaffected by Shevchenko's appearance, as if she was used to seeing damaged and disfigured people on a daily basis, just smiling at Rondeau and speaking in a rather husky voice,

'Numero 12'.

Rondeau jerked his head towards a similarly dressed man behind the desk. Shevchenko wondered what the point of the uniform and indeed this whole place was, before he noticed a number of mainly women sitting in the lounge area by the panoramic window. There was obviously a front to this whole THRSUH organisation here, and it was concerned with beauty, the getting of beauty, he supposed. Some of the women seemed to be wearing ski-wear, and he noticed out of the window, another ski-lift climbing the steep slope towards a further, circular building on the summit above.

At the side of the lounge area, which was reached by going down a few steps, there was a large, curved bar, behind which a barman was dispensing interesting looking cocktails, to the people who were perched round the curve. A short, slight man with brown hair styled into a flat top, and thick framed glasses, was engaged in conversation with the barman, who Mikhail thought looked quite interesting. The American's body language at once alerted the Russian to his sexual orientation. Hearing the rather booming tones of Rondeau's voice made him spin round and stare at them from across the room.

'Erik Funk. My colleague. I'm sure you'll find him very amusing,' Rondeau murmured as the man in question began to saunter across the room towards them.

Mikhail could almost feel his eyes like thin blue drills going up and down his body; lingering on his face.

'Well, hi there,' Funk gushed, coming up close. 'I presume this is our little Russian project. He's not as beautiful as the original, but we can make a pretty neat copy, don't you think, Phillipe?' Rondeau shrugged, curling his lip at the flowery gestures of the smaller man. Funk seemed to lose interest as quickly as he had found it, his gaze distracted by a number of women who waved to him from the lounge. Eventually, he turned back, a slightly bored expression passing across his face, instantly replaced by a wide, false smile.

The man in the purple suit had come up beside them and Rondeau handed him the key.

'Now, please get plenty of rest, my dear fellow,' he said, barely glancing at Shevchenko; 'Erik will want to do some preliminary measurements before we get our hands on the information from New York, then we can begin the real work.' Mikhail grimaced, distracted by a sudden noise at the lift doors. A very attractive looking man with short curly hair was leading a little girl across towards the reception desk. The girl held on to his hand as if she thought she might be spun away into a black hole if she let go. Mikhail stared at the girl as she came towards him. She was quite delicate, but there was a look of steely determination in her face which reminded him of someone, strangely. He looked at her more closely, drawn by the vivid azure of her eyes as she stopped in front of them. He noticed that Rondeau had swung round to face her, a hard, nasty look covering his face.

'Pascale. Bienvenue a La Retraite'.

Funk bent down towards the girl.

'Well, hello Pascale. Aren't you going to give your papa a kiss?' he asked, looking towards Rondeau. Pascale's lip quivered, and she glanced furtively towards the man with the curly hair before she spoke.
"Monsieur, he is not my father. I want to go to my papa, please. Is he here?"

It was suddenly obvious to Mikhail who 'papa' was. He could see it in the set of her lips, and above all in the eyes which looked suspiciously from one man to the other, then back to the man she obviously trusted. And she was here to bring him into their hands.

Rondeau glared at the girl, making no attempt to touch her or even come closer.

'Ooh, you'll see him soon enough,' he sniggered. 'Until then, I'm sure your teacher here can keep you occupied, and,' he added, 'out of my sight'. Mikhail noticed the teacher nodding encouragingly towards the little girl, as they were led away towards the lift again. He cast his mind back to the conversation with Sasha about Archangelsk and the French woman. It seemed a low thing to lure him here with this little girl, but Shevchenko knew that it would work. He would come, and then the diabolical scheme would begin.

They joined the girl and her teacher in the lift. It was soon apparent that the bedrooms were situated immediately above the floor they had been on, which, he imagined, must also include a restaurant and other facilities for après ski. The rooms were arranged off a curving corridor, each having a view of the mountains around, above and below them. The closed-circuit system naturally extended to this floor, and, Mikhail guessed, to the bedrooms as well. Mikhail saw the girl and her teacher being taken further down the corridor, her face a mixture of fear and fortitude as she glanced back towards him. The purple-suited receptionist handed Misha the card, and tapped in a code on the keypad of the door, which swung open to the room beyond. There was obviously more than one method of entering, it appeared.

A thin file lay on a side table facing the bed. Before Misha could say anything, the receptionist had disappeared, so he assumed that everything he needed to know was contained between its covers. He dropped the small satchel he had been permitted to leave with, and sat on the end of the bed. There was no outward sign of who was running this organisation on the file, just the name of the place, 'La Retraite'. Inside, there was a general guide to the hotel, its facilities, restaurant opening times, and a list of the ski runs in order of difficulty. A separate folder detailed the facilities of the health and fitness suite and the availability of other, more extreme beauty treatments; to any outsider, the place was as it appeared in the folder – a rather exclusive hotel with facilities, for rather rich men and women wishing to improve their looks, and enjoy the après ski. Shevchenko heaved himself rather wearily off the bed and walked towards the door. There was no obvious lock or even a slot on the inside, and the door remained resolutely closed to his attempts to turn the handle. For him at least, the place was turning out to be every bit as much of a prison as his last abode. Despairingly, he flung down the file and lay down on the bed to wait for whatever his new masters had planned for him.

xxxxxxxxx

Illya turned up the collar of his normally warm coat against the harsh wind blowing across from the East River, glad of the heavy fur hat now that he had far less hair to insulate him against the New York winter. The house at Grove St, though dark and silent, felt welcoming, the smell of the newly polished floor accentuated by the warmth of the central heating, as he skidded slightly along the hall and opened the door to the front room.

The package, carefully wrapped, sat on the elegant shaker sideboard on the wall facing the large front window. It was not hard to work out what it might contain. Illya grabbed it and retreated back to the front door, wriggling back into his shoes, and resetting the alarms before he ran down the steps and away round the corner.

Rudi opened the door and pulled him inside, dusting off the snow which had begun to fall quite heavily, from Illya's coat, yanking off his hat, and gushing admiration of the new haircut, much to its
owner's chagrin. Illya followed him through to the back room of the house, where Sabi lay on the sofa.

The 'Deutche Haus' as she called it, was decorated in the flamboyant style of the 'Queen of Section 12'. The room Illya entered was painted in a rich Chinese red colour, the curtains a beautiful pattern of reds, cream and gold. Huge abstract paintings covered the walls, and the sofa on which his colleague now lay, was adorned with an interesting selection of cushions of all shapes and sizes.

'Darling, come here' she smiled, pulling herself up into a sitting position and patting the sofa by her side. Illya suddenly felt rather embarrassed, pushing the parcel towards her as if he was a five year old visiting a distant relative. She gazed at him with her beautiful blue-grey eyes, understanding his awkwardness, putting her hand round his neck and kissing him tenderly.

'Alright?' Sabi murmured. Illya sighed and nodded, looking up as the door was flung open. Ingo entered, his great size filling the room suddenly, as he carefully lowered a great tray of tea and cake onto the coffee table in front of them. Rudi had followed him in, and began to arrange the cups and saucers on the tray, handing Illya a large slice of what looked like a rich continental cream cake. Illya glanced momentarily in Ingo's direction before gratefully demolishing it, much to Sabi's amusement.

'Ingo has told us how hard you are working out in the new gym, darling,' Sabi said, sipping her tea.

'Mm,' Illya mumbled, his mouth still full of cake. 'There is now no escape from your countryman's attentions.'

Rudi and Ingo had fitted into life in New York seamlessly, Ingo proudly masterminding and running the new gym on the extra floor that had been constructed on the UNCLE building that summer. Having the extra space now meant that as well as the larger training pool, a smaller, therapeutic pool had been added, which was used for agents returning to fitness after injury. Sabi loved the clever wall on one side of the gym, undetectably opaque from the exterior, but to those inside, providing a perfect view across the city.

The small world of UNCLE New York had rippled with the news of her pregnancy, and who was responsible for it. The girls had been tremendously supportive, even starting to give her things for the baby. She had not said anything about the baby's father until Illya had made it known very publicly one day in the gym.

He had been playing basketball in one of the courts, and after the game, the men had poured out of the court to find the girls coming out of one of the rooms after some exercise class. Darryl Moore had dug Illya in the ribs.

'You were on that mission with Sabi, and all those girls, weren't you? Don't you know who the father is? We heard it could be the President, or some other top guy.' Illya had frowned, looking at Sabi standing looking at him.

'As a matter of fact, Darryl, I know for certain, not that it's anyone's business, that it is not the President,' Illya replied. Darryl smiled at the Russian. He had had a fondness for Kuryakin since he had carried him away from Master Sergeant McElroy that dreadful night earlier in the year, and besides which, he had a doll of a wife. Nothing that Kuryakin said could upset or surprise him now, for certain. The Russian seemingly murmured something in the direction of the gorgeous Sabi, and then turned again to Darryl.

'How d'you know then?' Darryl said, looking at the others, who were now standing around waiting to hear the latest episode of the hottest gossip in the office since Solo announced his engagement to the fabulous Josefina, queen of the legal department.
'I know, because I am the father. Satisfied?' Sabi's eyes widened, then, as everyone else seemed frozen to the spot, she spoke.

'You see, it's as you said, Darryl,' she said, 'a top guy.'

'Go away, boys, and leave us to talk for a while,' she urged, watching the Russian devouring the last piece of cake. They backed out, shutting the door behind them, as Sabi got up and went towards the little desk in the corner of the room. Illya finished eating and lay back on the sofa.

'Tess said that you wanted me to sign something,' he said. He had guessed what it might be. She came back with a document, which she gave him.

'There's a copy for you, of course, if you decide to sign it,' she said simply, as he read.

It was a will. Of course they all had to have them, bearing in mind the line of work they undertook, and he had changed his several times during the last year. But it still seemed strange and sad to see her will in front of him. Of course the main change related to the baby, and Illya's role in her life.

'If you agree, I want to name you as the baby's legal father and, in the event of anything happening…' Sabi added, 'that you will adopt Katya, with Tess of course.' Looking at his face, she went on, 'Of course, I've talked about it with Tess and she is very happy that you sign, darling.' He reached over for the pen and signed; his neat writing, Illya Nikovetch Kuryakin.

'Katya?' he said, smiling.

'Katerina of course, after Kat,' she said, rather sadly, then brightening, as she added, 'Do you think it is a good choice for your daughter?' He looked at her earnest face, the strikingly blonde hair now grown out to her usual spiky style, suiting her sharp, pretty features.

'Yes, perfect. At least I'll be pretty sure what she's going to look like this time,' he added. 'Tasiya was a bit of a surprise, and then…' He suddenly thought of the other daughter, Pascale. What was she really like? Was she like her mother, or did she resemble him? He sighed at the thought of the three little girls, with their three different lives, all connected to him. Sabi had put her hand on his arm.

'You mustn't worry about it,' she said. 'The other girl. You will bring her back, and she will join the family; Tess will see to it.' He smiled ruefully.

'Mm. It's a good job I have her to clean up after me, isn't it?' Sabi laughed, and then returned the document to the desk, before sitting down again.

'Sabi,' he began tentatively, 'I may not be here for the… birth. I'm sorry.' She smiled at his earnest, sweet face, made even younger looking by the short fringe which now framed it.

'Ja, Napoleon has told me this when I came in the other day to see Dr Shearer.' Illya grimaced at the gynaecologist's name, not sorry that in missing the birth, he would miss meeting the detestable doctor again.

'We're not going immediately. There is some preparation to do, of course, and I have to finish off some work in Section 17 so we'll probably be going just after Christmas. Um, when are you…'

'My date is 24 December, weinacht, darling. Perhaps she'll come on time and you can see her before you go, ja? You know, Illyusha, you don't have to be there if you don't want to.' Her voice trailed off, her eyes downcast. Illya sighed, suddenly aware that in thinking of his own feelings, he had ignored hers. For some unknown reason he had blurted out about the baby at the gym, not giving her any real chance to agree or disagree to his disclosure. In order to give birth to this child of his, she
had put her own career on hold, incurred the disapproval of many at UNCLE, and now would face years of difficulties as she sought to combine a dangerous and uncertain career with bringing up a child on her own.

He looked down, and felt her grasp his face and turn it towards her.

'Leibling, it is OK,’ she said gently, pulling him towards her. 'Katya and I, we will have Rudi and Ingo to help us, and my girl will have her big Kuryakin family just round the corner to go and play with, yes?' Illya smiled, remembering the scene at the breakfast table the day before.

'She can join the multitude Tess seems to attract from all quarters,’ he said. 'I have to squeeze in at the table on some mornings.' Sabi laughed, holding her belly. 'Oh ja, Tess likes her big family, darling. No doubt there will be more at the table soon, eh?’

'Not if I have anything to do with it,' Illya mumbled, a delicious, but worrying memory of the nights in Bermuda beginning to surface in the recesses of his mind.

Sabi smiled knowingly. 'We'll see, darling,' she said, stroking his hair.

He carried the dirty crockery back along the corridor to the kitchen, where Rudi and Ingo, incongruously, were preparing what looked to Illya like a rather interesting looking meal. Ingo relieved Illya of the tray, handing him a sheet of paper in return, the contents of which were depressingly familiar to the agent.

'An extra mile tomorrow to make up for all that cake,' the enormous German muttered, turning back to his chopping board. 'We have a programme to complete before you go, nicht wahr?' Illya nodded glumly and glanced at the sheet. The diet was what Napoleon called, the 'big and strong plan', clearly stipulating what was to be eaten, and when, over the next few weeks. Illya groaned at the thought of the vodka bottle being consigned to a nether region once Tess saw the plan.

Rudi put his arm round Illya's waist, and pulled the Russian slightly towards him.

'Listen, Illyusha, Ingo and I will be here for Sabi and the baby, won't we, big boy?' Illya noticed Ingo beaming at Rudi, and not for the first time wondered exactly what the nature of their relationship was.

'Yes, I know, and thank you, both of you. I'm sure she will be utterly spoiled by the time I return,' he replied, smiling at the odd pair. Rudi released him from his grip and took his hand in a rather affectionate way, his unusual green eyes becoming rather more serious as he looked at him.

'Illya, make sure you return with the glamour boy looks intact, OK? And don't mess with Erik Funk; he's very clever, but he's, what do you say in English?’ He said a word in German, Ingo making a kind of guttural grunt in reply.

'Twisted. The word is twisted,’ Illya said. 'And how do you know about Funk? I had the impression that our missions were not supposed to be for general discussion, Rudi,’ he added, rather fiercely.

Rudi pouted his lips and lent against the kitchen unit.

'Don't go all sulky, Illyusha, even though you look absolutely heavenly when you pull that face,' Rudi answered. 'Napoleon and April came down to consult me about the trip. I had to know about where they were going, and I showed them the article in Vanity Fair. Don't forget, darling, I'm in the same business as that monster, if you know what I mean. Whatever you're going to do there, Illyusha, just do it, and get out of there fast, OK?’
Chapter 3

Napoleon Solo rolled over underneath the soft sheets, reaching out into a rather disappointingly cold side of the bed where he thought Josefina should be and where she obviously wasn't now. He frowned and opened his eyes. A distant sound of banging from the kitchen reminded him that this was a definitely a day off, but also the last day before the mission to France began. It was also the day he had, in a rash moment, agreed to have 'the family' round.

He slid off the bed and grabbed the rather luxurious gown the Kuryakins had bought him for Christmas, the soft, thick towelling, replacing the coolness of the sheets against his body as he tramped along the corridor towards the kitchen. Jo was already fully dressed, and engaged in what looked like a catering exercise of military proportions, assisted, of course, by their nanny, Brenda, drafted in on her day off for the event.

'Don't just stand there admiring yourself, lover, go and do something useful,' Jo said without turning round. 'How about practising your nappy changing skills?'

He came up close behind her, and put his arms round her waist, nibbling her ear, which was now exposed after she had returned the other day with a new hairstyle, a sort of elfin crop which seemed to accentuate her beautiful eyes, now balefully staring at him as she twisted round.

'I love it when you talk dirty,' he whispered, ignoring Brenda behind him as he made his best effort to kiss her.

'Go. Change nappy. Son,' she said between kisses, gently pushing him away, a smile drifting across her face as she shook her head at him. Napoleon turned, smiling at Brenda and sauntered off towards the baby's room.

He had been in here since birth, Brenda insisting that he needed to 'have a routine', despite Therese's frowns on the subject. Unlike his more demanding cousin, however, Fabian Joseph Solo was turning out to be a very amenable baby. Napoleon stared down at his son, happily lying in his cot waiting for someone to pick him up, but not making a fuss about it. At nearly four months, it was already clear that he was going to have the McCaffery curly hair, and his aunt's electric brown eyes. Napoleon lowered his head towards the baby, who began to reach up and gurgle as his eyes focused on his father.

'Come on then, caro mio, if your uncle Illya can do this, then so can I.'

xxxxxxxxxx

The dining table had been extended to its fullest capacity for the meal, and filled the room, with just enough space to squeeze into place round its edge. Napoleon began to uncork and decant the wine, the deep red liquid swirling down the neck and into the wide flat bottom of the decanter with a satisfying glug, until it lay quietly breathing, waiting to be poured.

Most of the guests had arrived, only the Kuryakins absent. Marina and Peter were engaged in a serious conversation with Gabriel, who looked remarkably smart by his usual standards; Napoleon recognised a suit once worn by the Russian now gracing the similar frame of his brother-in-law. Josefina, dressed in an exciting lime green dress, had now obviously left the final preparations to Brenda, who had turned out to be a rather excellent cook, as well as a chillingly efficient nanny, Napoleon mused.
'Where is the mob?' Napoleon whispered to Jo as he handed out the aperitifs, glancing at himself in the mirror above the fireplace to confirm that his rather smart suit was looking as good on him as he thought it was.

'Yes, you look fantastic, and they're just calling in on Sabi on the way, to let the children see the baby.'

He raised his eyebrows slightly and nodded. 'The baby from UNCLE' as Katya Klose was being called at the office, had been born on time in the end, in the early hours of Christmas Eve morning. Illya had said very little about it, but Tess had filled in the details over dinner at Grove St. on Christmas Day.

'Actually' she murmured in his ear, 'Mr. Shearer was really quite nice to yours truly, even if I did have to give him a few nudges in the direction of being civil. He even let him stay for the birth, how about that?' Napoleon could see his partner scowling at him from the other side of dining table.

'Hear that you and Bernie Shearer are now big buddies,' Napoleon said, now inviting a really serious frown from behind the huge plate of roast turkey and vegetables.

'Oh, don't take any notice, and of course he loved the baby at first sight. Honestly, Napoleon, she is absolutely gorgeous, and a dead ringer for old misery over there. And Sabi, she was so happy, it was . . . well, it's not what any of us wanted, but it's turned out well, hasn't it?' Napoleon smiled at her. He wondered whether he had ever met anyone who would have been able to turn such a difficult situation to good like she had. After talking to Therese for a few minutes, situations that had once appeared impossible or intolerable even, seemed to change into something bearable, if not desirable. Not for the first time he decided that some guardian angel somewhere must have dropped her down just for the Russian to find.

The door bell insistently ringing reminded Napoleon that 'the mob' included an extra member today. As he glanced into the monitor showing the exterior door, it was completely eclipsed by two young faces pressed into the screen. A familiar voice could be heard, then a familiar face looking apologetically into the screen.

'Sorry, Napoleon, you would think they hadn't seen this sort of thing ever before.' Napoleon pressed the door release button, and within seconds it seemed, they were at the door, the two boys at the front, followed by his partner, wife and baby.

'Hello, Mr Solo. That's a swell TV security device you have there. Wow, what a swell apartment, Pab!' Napoleon flattened himself against the wall as the boys rushed past, their loud voices intermingling with Peter's burr and Marina's lighter voice as they reached the lounge.

'Are you sure this is alright?' Illya said, Tasiya already bawling at what sounded like the top of her voice as she heard her grandparents. 'Tasiya, be quiet for a minute!' Illya insisted, the little girl now matching his stare with her own diminutive version. Solo took the writhing baby from her father's arms. She immediately stopped shouting, and began to explore his face with her hands, firmly re-arranging his hair, then starting to gurgle with pleasure at her handiwork.

'Does she ever stop?' Napoleon asked, gratefully handing her over to her mother, Tasiya instantly calming down at, it appeared, just one look from Therese.

Napoleon looked at his partner, now leaning against the wall, his eyes half-closed. It had been a wise decision to delay the mission until now. He had always felt that Illya had not recovered sufficiently from the near fatal illness he had suffered at Ms Bolt's hands in the summer, and, having the last few months more or less fully devoted to the computer project had enabled him to adjust to this rather
sudden expansion of his family. His mind was immediately cast back to a much younger Illya, in the room he occupied at UNCLE when he first came to New York, then in his first, tiny apartment, before Solo had strong armed him into buying the first floor at Grove St. Not for the first time he wondered whether Kuryakin's legendary monkish behaviour and lifestyle were actually chosen or just the result of someone who was looking for something else and just hadn't found it.

Ingo's programme had also done its work. They both had passed the fitness test at the end of it, despite the fact that he was sure Ingo had upped the standard, and as far as he was concerned, he had never felt fitter in his life. Kuryakin had also volunteered for extra training in the pool including what looked like to Napoleon as some fairly dangerous scuba diving activities. He had seen them dragging him out of the water a couple of times, and Napoleon was sure he wouldn't have been sharing those experiences when he got home.

They wandered into Napoleon's study, where the baby was fast asleep in a little carry cot on the floor. Illya sat down next to the cot, and gently stroked the side of the baby's face.

'Fabian Solo, you are the image of your aunt, and your cousin is the image of her aunt. There must be a paper in that somewhere.' Napoleon smirked. Trust the Russian to be trying to work out some scientific explanation for what he imagined was just genetics playing interesting games with them all.

'Are you ready for tomorrow?' Napoleon said, lying back in the large leather chair by his desk. 'Remember, contact me before you enter the building. Hopefully, I'll have had time to disable at least some of the security devices by then.' Illya sat up and crossed his legs.

'You may, but from what Fernando says, it sounds like a pretty sophisticated system. He hasn't been able to even give us a floor plan beyond the top two stories.'

Yes, well that may be because he's looking after your daughter, in case you'd forgotten,' Napoleon replied, looking at the now slightly edgy Russian.

'I'm well aware of that, Napoleon. We're lucky that THRUSH allowed him to stay that long, but it sounds as if Rondeau doesn't want to be bothered with her. I am a little surprised, to be honest, that they've been so patient.' Napoleon frowned at the comment.

'Well, presumably they're prepared to wait for you, comrade, and if the KGB is involved, then I guess there might be a little trip back East planned, yes?'

Illya combed his fingers through his now rather shaggy hair.

'I think it's more than that, Napoleon. It doesn't feel like KGB standard practice to me, and besides, they wouldn't normally work with an organisation like THRUSH, whatever you think. If it is KGB, then perhaps it's more like someone working on their own. A little bit like . . .'

'Like Brad Mitchell? You think Mitchell is KGB?' Illya shook his head.

'No. I must admit I did think that after the debacle with the photos, but that doesn't feel right either. What I meant was that Mitchell works very much on the edge; on the border of what is acceptable to Langley, which is saying something. If it works, then they're happy, and as far as I know, it has worked so far, or they don't know about the things he's done that don't work. If there is a KGB agent involved, perhaps he's working in the same way. If he succeeds in whatever is planned, then they will be happy, if he doesn't . . .'

'Then it's hello Camp Stalin.'

'Or something a little cleaner and quicker than 'Camp Stalin', wherever that is. Honestly, Napoleon,
you've been watching too many spy films,' Illya said, smiling. 'Sadly these places don't have such interesting names.' Illya got up from the floor and stretched his legs, walking towards the window and looking out across the city, now grey with a wet fog drifting across from the sea.

'No, I think they're waiting because something else is going on, something connected with all this, with the photographs, with Mitchell, and I suppose, with the KGB. From looking at the external photographs of that place, and from what Fernando has told us, I'm convinced that there's another floor underneath the ones Fernando has seen.'

Napoleon pursed his lips and closed his eyes slightly.

'I think so, too. Fernando said that they came in from the ski lift and then he had the distinct impression from the time the elevator took between floors, that they had somehow missed a floor on the way up.'

'Precisely. So while you're trying to improve on nature, Napoleon, I'll be trying to find out exactly what is going on down there.' Illya turned round and Napoleon was struck by the hardness of his expression.

'Listen,' he continued rather tersely, 'You will have to bring the girl with you, or get April to bring her. It may not be possible for me to deal with her and find this floor, particularly if I have to . . .'

'Blow it up?' Napoleon said nothing for a moment, before getting to his feet and facing his partner.

'You can't keep running away from her, you know. It's not her fault, and besides which, you owe Marie-Laure, if I remember rightly.' Illya frowned, his eyes narrowing slightly.

'There is a difference between duty and love, Napoleon,' he replied, and turned back to survey the grey world outside.

The meal was a wonderful mixture of cultures, some Spanish dishes, a selection of tapas, miniature rolled tortilla, olives, little spicy sausages, and other delicious appetisers, then a splendid Beef Wellington, the rosiness of the beef oozing out of the pastry crust, and finally, at the boys' request, a very English dessert of 'trifle'; layers of squashed fruit soaked sponge, custard and cream, dotted with cherries and almonds. Napoleon noticed Marvin being quite reserved in his portions, the boy actually being quite charming at the table, and offering to clear up and even wash up afterwards.

'Ingo has got him in his programme,' Therese whispered, as the boys started to clear the plates from the table. 'He's running a fitness club for children in the Village now at St Clare's Church hall. Remember it?' Napoleon did. It was the scene of the Kuryakin wedding reception; an event which introduced him to Irish dancing, Ukrainian wedding customs, and a very large cousin of Therese's called Roisin. His feet were only now recovering, he was sure. What he had also noticed, was that Therese had also been eating small, verging on tiny, portions of food.

'Are you feeling OK?' he ventured, looking at her face, which he decided looked a little pale.

'Of course. I'm just trying not to overeat, that's all,' she said rather sharply, turning away instantly towards her mother-in-law sitting next to her. Napoleon caught Marina's gaze, guessing that the same thoughts were passing through her mind.

Therese silently got up from the table and discreetly left the room, not before Napoleon noticed Marina following her. He shrugged and consigned it to the area of his consciousness known as 'women's problems'.
'How many months?' Therese spun round to face her mother-in-law, looking worried with the look she'd seen a hundred times on her husband's face. She turned back and sat down gently on the side of the bed.

'I thought morning sickness was what it says it is, for the mornings,' she said flatly. Marina looked down at her. It had been hard to tell she was pregnant at all with Tasiya, and yet looking at her now, she appeared at a guess, five months. Marina frowned, counting back the weeks. That would be when Illya was still recovering from whatever he had picked up when they were in Mallorca.

'I'm three months. I know, we must be completely stupid, and I don't want you to tell him, please. I know he doesn't want any more children, and besides, he's going away tomorrow. It wouldn't be fair.'

'May I?'

Therese lay down on the bed. Marina gently examined her, then helped her up.

'I can't know for sure at this stage, Theresa, but bearing in mind your family history, and the size for your dates . . . .'

Therese looked at her, then covering her face with her hands, starting to cry.

'Oh no, please don't, no it can't be . . .' She sobbed into Marina's arms, Marina catching the ends of phrases which gave her a clear impression of what her son's reaction might be to the news.

'Stop, Theresa, stop,' she gently urged, reaching out for some tissue to wipe her daughter in law's stained face. They sat together on the edge of the bed, Marina hoping that nobody, especially Illya, had heard the noise from the bedroom.

'Listen. What he says, and what he really feels can be two quite different things, as you must know by now,' she murmured into the abundant wavy hair. It may be a little, let's say, unplanned, but it is as much his responsibility as yours, and he must take responsibility for it. I'm surprised he hasn't noticed,' she added, smiling encouragingly at the distraught looking Therese.

'So am I. I've worn pyjamas for the past few weeks,' she replied, starting to smile despite herself. 'He's so tired doing all this training, the preparation and also the computer stuff, he's usually asleep by the time his head hits the pillow.'

'Well, I cannot tell you how to run your life, Theresa,' Marina said, 'I will not say anything until I am told of course, and I will do anything I can to help you, as you know. Oh, one thing,' she said, as they got up to leave. 'Bernard Shearer. He is a formidable expert in the obstetric care of twins. Formidable.'

'Another good reason not to say anything,' Therese grinned.

xxxxxxx

'Are you trying to hide something from me?'

Therese blanched at the words, looking down to avoid his stare.

'What do you mean?'

'You still haven't taken off your coat and have been hiding some things in the refrigerator.' Therese laughed, turning round to see the face of her husband, in interrogation mode, standing behind her.
'You're going away tomorrow; you couldn't possibly eat another portion of trifle now. Think of all that careful dieting you've been doing over the past six weeks.'

'Ah, well, this week has been a carbohydrate loading week, so I'm allowed.' Therese shut the fridge door and flattened herself against it.

'No. Not one more mouthful. Now, since I presume it's an early start tomorrow, you had better get a shower and get to bed, beatle boy.'

'As a matter of fact, I don't have to leave until the afternoon,' Illya said laconically, giving her a rather worried look out of the corner of his eyes.

He turned away and after a few fairly quiet minutes, she heard the shower start to gush. Tess breathed in deeply and started to take off her coat. She glanced down at her body, drawn to its changing shape by her conversation with Marina that afternoon. She had tried to wear clothes that had not been too tight, and she had thought he hadn't noticed, but now, she wasn't so sure. Only one night remained. When he returned, hopefully with Pascale, then she would tell him. Suddenly that seemed a really bad idea. Then there would be two children to find out about, possibly three if Marina was right. And she knew in her heart, that Marina was right.

She trudged upstairs, hoping that she could get into her pyjamas before he returned. She had managed the bottom half when she felt his arms round her. He pulled her gently onto the bed and held her for a few minutes.

'So, I repeat, Teresita, are you trying to hide something from me?' The blue eyes were so startling in the dim light, she couldn't pull her gaze away from him in time before he saw her expression.

'How long?'

'Three months. I'm afraid it must have been your little surprise visit to Bermuda,' she whispered. 'I'm so sorry, darling. I know . . . it's not what you want.'

He lay her back on the bed, and lay next to her, his arm slightly crooked so that he could look at her properly.

'I suppose you thought wearing those,' he fingered the pyjamas, 'would fool me,' he murmured, shaking his head, the wet hair slightly dripping onto her breasts.

'I, um, thought you might be upset, so I thought . . .'

'You thought wrong, corazon. Besides, you seem to be much bigger than last time. Growing an elephant in there are we?' He looked at her face, then collapsed back on the bed, his eyes closed.

'In the Soviet Union, you would be awarded the Motherhood medal 2nd Class,' he said, beginning to smile faintly. Therese sat up and leaned over him, trying to somehow preserve the moment of touching him, of loving him, until he returned.

'And what is that for?'

'That would be for women who have produced at least five children. If we include Pascale and Pablo, Tasiya of course, plus the two that we are likely to have soon, that will qualify you. Of course, to get the Mother Hero medal, you will have to have at least ten children.'

Therese pulled him towards her and held his head in her hands.
'Come back soon amado; come back to us, all of us,' she whispered.

CHAPTER 9

Heathrow airport seemed so tantalisingly near one of his favourite cities, Napoleon thought morosely, as he sipped his rather tasteless coffee, and yet today, it might as well have been a thousand miles from London for all he was likely to see of it. He glanced at April sitting opposite him, her long lashes hiding the surreptitious looks she continued to dart round the restaurant at the other executive class passengers passing the time before their flights.

'Are you sure he's going to be here? I can't wait to see him,' she said brightly, her bright red lips wickedly pouting in his direction.

'Not exactly here, since he's obviously not travelling with the affluent, but we should catch sight of him at the desk if we go now,' he replied, admiring her rather Jackie Kennedy pale grey Chanel suit and matching pillbox hat that set off her auburn hair perfectly.

As they walked towards the door, Napoleon caught sight of himself in its reflection. For once, the disguise was one he was actually not embarrassed about. His clothes were very similar to those he would normally choose if he were trying to impress someone, but Rudi had added some classy accessories that suggested, if not shrieked, wealth at anyone who knew anything about it. April had been similarly clad, her high heels, handbag and jewellery evidence that Mr and Mrs Brett Falconer were rich Americans looking for a few days' luxurious pampering.

The comparatively civilised atmosphere of the executive restaurant gave way to the usual chaos in the airport terminal. They had virtually completed their check in at the B.E.A. desk before Napoleon felt his ribs being dug.

'I can see him now. Oh my God, you didn't tell me he was coming like that, did you?' April whispered, stifling a laugh.

'That's because I didn't know,' Napoleon replied, a smile playing about his lips. 'But I should have figured it when he told me he was flying into Lourdes.'

A long line had formed at the check-in opposite, the name of the airline unfamiliar to either of the agents, but from the clientele forming the queue, obviously a charter flight for pilgrims to the French shrine. A large proportion of the pilgrims seemed to be nuns of a dozen different orders, judging from the variety of habits on display, Napoleon thought. The noise of their chatting was bordering on deafening, the sisters' Irish accents easily discernible even above the usual airport roar. Interspersed in the line were a number of priests, all wearing the badly fitting black suit and wide clerical collar standard among the clergy. And interspersed with all of them, stood the Russian.

Unlike the secular priests in the line, he was wearing the habit of a Franciscan friar, the brown clothes skimming his ankles to reveal a pair of worn looking brown sandals just showing behind the very battered looking brown leather suitcase that he had dumped by his side. The white cord with the three knots on the part hanging down was tied across his slender waist, and this, together with his hair, surprisingly short considering what he had looked like only a few days before, gave him the appearance of a rather angelic nineteen year old. It was obvious from the fussing of the sisters near him, that Napoleon wasn't the only one that thought so.

'He looks cute, doesn't he?' April whispered.

'Yes, he seems to be going down well with the sisters, too,' Solo smirked, as Kuryakin finally looked round and noticed them, a rather superior smile now making him look even more cherubic. Napoleon
shook his head, then shifted his gaze towards the departure area, Illya appearing not to have noticed, as a rather buxom sister in a blue habit began to steer him towards the check-in desk.

'Did he see us?' April asked, putting her arm in Napoleon's and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

'Oh yes, he saw us. We'll meet up with our little brother in a few minutes, if he can escape from his fan club, that is.'

The newspaper stand was bustling, the noises of excited families and intense businessmen punctuated by the usual robotic announcements in French and English on the loudspeakers throughout the airy room. Napoleon spun the carousel hosting the 'international' newspapers towards him and reached down for a copy of the 'International Herald Tribune', at the same time as a pair of sandaled feet padded to a halt the other side of the stand.

'Anything to confess?' he murmured, glancing at April, now powdering her nose in a rather ostentatious way, conveniently directing her mirror in Kuryakin's direction.

'I think you'll find that's my line, Napoleon,' the curt reply came back. Napoleon checked that there was no-one particularly near, before half-turning towards the Russian.

'Nice haircut. Didn't go for the full tonsure then, brother?' Illya grimaced, his lips clamped tightly together across his face.

'I was ambushed by Carlo at Rudi's when I went to see the girls before I left. He seems to see me as some sort of mission, worryingly.'

Napoleon grinned. 'No, he sees you as some sort of boyfriend, I think.' Illya stared at him.

'Don't be ridiculous.' Napoleon sighed. Somehow the Russian never did get just how attractive he was to the girls and the boys.

'Did you notice anyone?'

'No. The flight from New York was unremarkable, and unless our avian friends have taken the veil, I can't say that anyone has appeared to stand out on our little pilgrimage flight either. In fact, it feels a little too quiet for my liking,' Illya replied, glancing again round the airport lounge, just in case anyone might suddenly wonder why a flashy American was talking to a Franciscan friar. But it happened, especially in airports.

'Well, if there is anybody here, then they're only going to be looking for one person, and they're not going to want to stand in your way, are they?'

'True. Hopefully, my interesting disguise will make it harder for me to be spotted in the crowd,' Illya replied, 'And why I should stop talking to you now in case I am recognised and then they start looking at you two as well.' He glanced across at his partner, taking in the ostentatious hand luggage and the abundant gold jewellery that adorned both of the agents.

'I see that as usual you get the role of the rich playboy, whereas I . . . .'

'Play a role which perfectly suits you, comrade. A man of the people,' Napoleon smirked, feeling the roughness of his partner's habit between his fingers. Illya looked down momentarily at the three heavy knots on the cord hanging down from his waist. Perhaps his partner wouldn't think he was quite so suited to the role if he knew what Therese had told him. He had a sudden desire to share the news with the man so close to him, and momentarily laid his hand on his partner's arm.
'What happened?' Illya's left hand was bandaged across the fleshy part, a faint red stain already showing through. He frowned, distracted from his thoughts by it.

'O, that. I did it when I was washing up this morning. The glass smashed in my hand and cut through this' he said, pointing to the part of his hand near the thumb.

_He had the glass in the water, the other breakfast things stacked neatly, when she had said,_

'_And have you told your mother about Pascale?_'

_He had gripped the glass so hard that it had somehow crushed in his hand, a part of it, like a knife slicing into the thick fleshy part of the flesh beneath his thumb. The sink had instantly begun to turn a bright, watery red as he realised what had happened and yanked his hand out of the bowl. Tess had been there in seconds with a tea towel, winding it round, and forcing him to sit down while she examined the wound._

_She had wanted him to go to hospital, but he had refused. In the end, she had steri-stripped it reluctantly, padding and bandaging it with an expertise he didn't know she possessed._

_'If you grow up in a large family, you need to be good at these things. You'll see,' she said, taping up the bandage. He decided that it wasn't serious enough for him to delay, just a nuisance for a few days until it healed. And she obviously knew the answer to her question now._

_'Do you want me to tell her?' Tess said as she made him the tea she had insisted he have before he went to Sabi's._

_'That doesn't seem fair, but since in my mother's eyes you can do no wrong, perhaps it might be better coming from you. Then I can look forward to the lecture when I return.' She had laughed, then growing serious, had said,_

_'No, there won't be a lecture, because she will love Pascale; and so will you.'_

_'Illya? Are you OK?' His thoughts were suddenly shoved back into the present by his partner's touch. He found that he was gripping Napoleon's arm so tight it was beginning to hurt. He let go suddenly, glancing round to check that no-one had witnessed his slip._

_'I said, are you OK? Is there something on your mind?' Illya gazed at his friend for a few moments._

_'Napoleon, I know I say this a lot, but, if . . .well, make sure that the family are alright if I'm delayed, won't you? I mean all the family,' he mumbled. Napoleon frowned._

_'Don't. You can do that yourself when you get back. Besides, comrade, you'll be adding to the mob soon, won't you?' Napoleon had missed it, but April saw the Russian blanch momentarily, a shocked look blending away into the usual self-controlled expression she knew well._

_'You know,' Napoleon continued, 'your daughter, Pascale?' Illya sighed._

_'Oh yes, her,' he replied._

xxxxxxx

The first class accommodation on the aeroplane fitted its description, and Napoleon was rather sad that the flight to Paris was so short. He imagined his partner's journey on the charter flight to Lourdes. He had certainly looked the part; comfortable amongst the pilgrims, the intenseness of his character suiting the role he had chosen to play. Napoleon wondered, not for the first time, whether it
all was play-acting, or whether a subtle, slow change was taking place in his partner's soul.

'Did you notice his face when you spoke to him?' Napoleon jumped as April dug him in the ribs. He looked at her, puzzled at her comment. April smiled and shook her head.

'I can't believe you didn't notice. When you made that crack about adding to the family, he went as white as a sheet.'

'That's because he's convinced himself that Pascale is one Kuryakin too many,' Napoleon replied, suddenly not sure that it was the right answer. April smiled again and shook her head pityingly.

'You guys. How long have you known him? Jeez, I'd have thought now you're practically one big family, you'd be better at this. No, I think it's something else; something 'home-made' if you take my drift,' April continued, cocking her head to one side as she surveyed the familiar, handsome face of the man beside her. Napoleon sat back slightly and closed his eyes.

'Something happened on Sunday with Tess, but I didn't . . . .' He pursed his lips and looked at April.

'You surely don't think . . .'

'I surely do think, but you could find out for sure; you know, do what you two do now. Ask your wives, then talk to each other.' April raised her eyebrows fractionally, then lay back on the headrest and closed her eyes.

Napoleon got out of his seat and headed for the toilet. As he got up, a man two rows down stepped into the aisle ahead of him. Something about the familiar bulge in his jacket riveted Solo's gaze. By the time Napoleon reached the toilet cubicle, it was showing engaged. After what seemed like an inordinately long time, the door began to open. Without considering the wisdom of the move, Napoleon lunged forward, forcing the other man back and into the cubicle, and slamming the door behind him before anyone else might wonder what was going on.

With his free hand he forced the other man against the wall, squeezing his windpipe until his eyes began to bulge slightly, his hands desperately scrambling to free his throat from the iron grasp it had been placed in. Napoleon brought the full weight of his body to bear on the other man, whilst tearing open his jacket and yanking the gun out of its holster, and, with a deft throw, lobbing it behind him onto the floor. After another few seconds of squeezing, the victim sank gracefully to the ground, his brain finally finding the lack of oxygen too much to bear.

Napoleon leaned back and put the gun on the shelf next to the door. He leaned forward to search through the man's pockets, but the gun had already told him the answer to his questions about the man's identity. All the hallmarks of the typical low-ranking THRUSH agent were there; the fake identity cards, the gun, a THRUSH standard issue Luger pistol, usually used for jobs where a small firearm was more appropriate. And lastly, a small capsule concealed behind the button on the inside of his jacket. Napoleon pulled off the capsule, and ran a glass of water from the tap.

'Perfect timing,' he muttered, as the agent slowly began to gain consciousness. Putting one hand behind his neck, he forced the tablet into the slightly open mouth, and, yanking the man's head back, poured the water into his mouth and shut it firmly. After a paroxysm of coughing, the THRUSH agent collapsed again, this time permanently.

Napoleon opened the door fractionally, praying that there was not a queue of people to witness his exit, but, to his good fortune, the area outside the cubicle was deserted. He slipped out of the door and shut it. Out of his wallet he pulled a small sticky label declaring 'Out of order' which he pasted onto the door, after placing a small piece of what looked like gum on the frame before he shut it. Looking round, he plastered a confident smile on his face, and sauntered back to his seat.
April looked up as he sat down, reading the furtive look on his face instantly.

'Guess you didn't phone the wife,' she murmured.

'What? Oh, no, I didn't quite squeeze that in,' he replied, 'on account of a slight problem with a little feathered friend two rows back.' April glanced back, seeing the empty seat immediately. The adjacent passengers were looking suitably blank, so it seemed that he was travelling alone.

'Where is he?' she whispered, affecting to lean her head on his shoulder and gaze into his eyes.

'Er, he was feeling a little airsick, so I found something on his jacket to take away his nausea,' Solo replied. April's eyes widened fractionally, but since there appeared to be no ensuing chaos on the plane, she relaxed her grip on his arm and sunk back into her seat. Napoleon turned and put his lips close to her ear. 'The only thing which concerns me is that he was in the john a mighty long time before, shall we say, 'I couldn't wait any longer.'

XXXXXXXX

Misha placed the saxophone carefully back on its stand and stood up.

'Very good. In fact, your playing is bordering on excellent now, Mr Shevchenko.' He gazed at the man leaning against the wall facing him. He was just one of a large handful of so-called 'teachers' that had been coaching him intensively since he arrived. He wasn't surprised to learn that the list of Illya's interests and accomplishments was quite long, although some of them had come as a surprise to him. The scientific background wasn't a problem, as they all knew, and Misha already had a facility with languages which only needed sharpening with some intensive tuition in some of the languages his tutors thought might be necessary, if not vital, to his cover. The music was also deemed essential if he was to be convincing, particularly in his spare time. What concerned him most were two questions. First, how he would know enough of the intimate details of Illyusha's life to make him appear believable to his colleagues, his friends, and most of all, his wife, and secondly, how he could possibly undertake any espionage work as Illya Kuryakin for UNCLE. When he questioned the tutors he worked with, they had all said the same. It was all in hand, and he was not to concern himself with it, only to concentrate on the work he had been given to do.

Besides the language work and the music, he spent what seemed like endless hours perfecting the voice and expressions of his former friend. It was a jarringly uncomfortable task and every time he embarked on it, feelings of guilt and betrayal flushed through him like a giant wave, conjuring up images of their friendship on board the Moskva, and even further back, their childhood in Kiev. It was painfully easy to remember the boy they called his 'twin'. Misha knew that Illya's brother had died at birth because his mother had told him, even telling him when he was naughty, that she would ask Dr Kuryakina if she could adopt him. When first Misha's father, then his mother had been killed during the terrible events of 1941, Illya's mother had indeed virtually adopted him, preventing him from being transported to Germany on one occasion by hiding him on the ward of the hospital, his blond hair covered in bandages. It seemed the most despicable betrayal of the mother as well as the son, and his heart had lurched when he heard that she was also living in New York. Compared to this, the pain of the surgery he had undergone seemed trifling.

During the last weeks, he had also seen Kuryakin's little girl in the corridor leading to the rooms he had been using for his so-called 'studies'. She was usually with the curly-haired teacher at first, but in the last few weeks, he had been absent, replaced with a rather severe looking woman. He had noticed the change in the child, even from their brief meetings. The spirited defiance of that first occasion had given way slowly to a sad acceptance of her life at 'La Retraite', which was evident even by the way she walked and held her body. Her wait for the father she longed to see was proving a very long one for the little girl, and she now rarely smiled or even acknowledged his
greeting as he passed. He found himself longing for Illya to finally get there for her sake if not his own.

Those feelings became particularly acute when he saw her being wheeled along the corridor on a trolley towards one of the theatres, a still, small form at the mercy of the gowned figures whom he had glimpsed through the theatre doors. For the life of him, he could not imagine what operation they were about to perform, and of course, no-one was prepared to share that information with him either.

In the last few days, however, there had been a sudden flurry of activity, and he had finally been summoned by Rondeau to his office, situated on the same floor as the training rooms, and the surgical suite he had spent so many painful hours in, under the unsparing knife of Erik Funk.

Rondeau's office was spacious and spoke of his future ambitions rather than his present role in the organisation known as THRUSH, Misha thought. There were several rooms in the suite; a small secretary's office leading to a larger examination room, adjacent to which lay Rondeau's private office, a large, panelled room with what looked like the latest and most expensive range of executive furniture Shevchenko had ever seen. On one wall, a large map of the world was displayed, with various places marked in a series of colour coded pins. The desk was actually two inter-connecting desks, the side one covered in a series of monitors of the operating theatres and examination rooms of the floor. It appeared that his treatment was not the only surgery being conducted in the unit.

Rondeau noticed Misha staring at the monitors as he sat opposite the surgeon, who was lounging in a rather opulent leather chair behind the larger of the two desks.

'Yes, we are not just engaged on your programme, as you must have worked out,' he said, glancing at the screens. 'Unfortunately, your former friend and his colleagues at UNCLE are responsible for considerable damage to our agents which we are trying to rectify, besides which there are a few other little programmes of our own that we are developing here,' he continued rather smugly, waving at the screens in a rather affected manner. 'Yes, Mr Kuryakin, as you know by now I am sure, is somewhat of an expert in blowing up things, together with the people who just happen to be there at the time of course.'

'You're surely not holding him personally responsible for their injuries, are you?' Misha replied, already tiring of the Frenchman's unpleasant, arrogant manner. 'Presumably he's given instructions by UNCLE and he carries them out.' Rondeau sniffed at him, then returned his gaze to the papers in front of him, obviously some sort of report of Misha's progress.

'I have no real interest in Mr Kuryakin beyond his use as a source of information which will enable you to successfully infiltrate UNCLE New York,' Rondeau replied, without looking up. He gathered up the papers and returned them to the folder on the desk, then gazed at the bandaged figure in front of him.

'This report seems to suggest that you have made excellent progress in all areas,' he announced, as if Misha was about to graduate from High School. 'Erik tells me that the scars have healed well, and the bandages can be removed tomorrow.'

Conflicting feelings of relief and fear rushed through Misha like some unpleasant viscous liquid, making his heart pick up a beat and his stomach churn with the thought. Immediately after the first operations, he had been allowed no opportunity to see himself, even the mirrors in his room being removed, his fingers telling him that only his lips and eyes were visible to anyone looking. Subsequent operations had even changed his lips and ears, until he had stopped feeling, or even trying to look at his reflection in anything shiny that he passed by on his way to yet more change. And of course he knew the outcome already. A replacement face; his own vanished as if he had never existed, to be replaced by a replica of the man whom he had loved and now was willingly
conspiring to destroy. He forced his gaze back to Rondeau, conscious of his cruel stare.

'I hope you're not regretting our generous offer,' Rondeau murmured, directing a casual sneer towards the Russian. 'Just remember, Shevchenko, when you start to have those unpleasant feelings of remorse and melancholia your race so often indulges in; just remember what you looked like, and where you were, before you willingly consented to this programme.' Rondeau stood up suddenly, causing Misha to similarly leap to his feet in response.

'Oh, by the way,' Rondeau added, as if it were unimportant, 'tomorrow, as well as being the day that you begin life as Illya Kuryakin, will also be the day when the final stage of your preparation begins.' Misha frowned, as much as he was able behind the bandages. Rondeau pressed a button underneath the desk and Misha could hear the door opening behind him.

'Naturally, UNCLE is anxious to find out about our little operation, as we hoped they might be. So much so, Mr Shevchenko, they are sending their top agent to poke his nose in where he is definitely not wanted. And where Mr Napoleon Solo goes, Mr Illya Kuryakin follows.'

xxxxxxxx

The convent stood at the end of a rather steep hill at the edge of the famous town and Illya stood for a few minutes taking in the view of the 'domaine', as the part of Lourdes containing the shrine church, the grotto itself, and its adjacent baths was known, before turning and pulling the bell to summon help.

In order to perfect his disguise he had had to enlist his brother in law's help, and Gabriel, as he had thought, asked no questions beyond the absolutely necessary ones.

'If you are going to Lourdes, go as a lay brother, not a priest. That will prevent any difficulties with Mass or Confession,' he had said, smiling, as he helped Illya with the intricacies of the Franciscan habit. Illya had had to reveal his destination in order to find somewhere suitable to stay for the few days he needed to, while his partner infiltrated the hotel complex, the damaged hand making it impossible for him to contemplate any skiing until it was absolutely necessary. He had not bothered to remind Gabriel to say nothing to Tess. Since his near breakdown after the incident with McElroy, he had met regularly with his brother in law, the bond of trust established on that evening, deepening.

'Ah Frère Pascal, bienvenue a Lourdes.' Illya wondered again why he had chosen that name, as he shook hands with a cheerful looking nun at the door of the convent. So unlike the New York Friary, this place was a large, two story house with the long rectangular casement windows, shutters and slate roof traditional in this region; familiar images of familiar saints glancing at them as he followed the sister down the corridor of the guesthouse to his room.

'Vespers is at five, brother, but you can say the office in your room if you are too tired,' the nun, whose name turned out to be Sister Marie-Josephine, informed him, giving him an encouraging smile.

'Merci bien, ma soeur,' Illya replied, relieved once the door had closed quietly behind him, and he had sunk gratefully onto the narrow bed in the corner of the room.

He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, the evening sun casting long, sword-like shadows across the white room. The shape of the window threw back Illya's mind to the house at Grove St, though the cool simplicity here was in marked contrast to the glowing colours and adorned walls of his distant home. He glanced at his watch, imagining what must be happening there mid-morning; an image of Anastasiya filled his mind, sleeping in the big pram outside, underneath the loggia his Irish relatives had built on the back of the house. Then baby Katya, also sleeping in her little cot, safe
amongst her unconventional family in the 'German house'. A frown settled as his mind passed to his third daughter, now much closer, at least in distance if nothing else.

He sat up and swung his feet back onto the floor. The battered suitcase lay on the floor at the end of the bed, its innocent appearance belying its contents. Illya felt suddenly a little uncomfortable as he thought of what lay within. He lifted the case and put it carefully on the bed, unlocked and slid the catches open.

Underneath the usual travelling impedimenta he had packed a very different change of clothes. The black jacket, trousers and turtle neck jumper all spoke of a different vocation than the one he appeared to be following at the moment. He slid the bottom of the suitcase gently aside. Underneath, neatly packed, lay his knife, his beloved Walther PPK, and a selection of explosives. He forced himself to check them in the usual manner, trying not to think about the brutal contrast they made with the place he was in. He returned everything to its rightful place and locked the case, shoving it under the bed, before withdrawing his communicator from its hiding place underneath his habit.

'Napoleon?'

There was a pause before Solo's voice replied.

'God, where are you? You haven't left Lourdes yet, have you?' Illya sighed, raising his eyebrows.

'Of course not. I . . . just thought I would check up on you in case you'd made my job even harder than it's going to be.'

'Well gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, brother. I presume from your superior attitude that you're safely ensconced wherever they put people like you, and that nothing happened on the flight down.'

'Um, no, nothing at all, which is making me feel ever more jumpy by the minute. I'm staying in the guesthouse of the Poor Clares as a matter of fact,' Illya added, trying to make it sound more comfortable than it looked. There was no clever comment in return, usually signalling that something more serious was about to be mentioned.

'So tell me what happened on your flight.'

'Very perceptive of you, Brother. Yes, well I did have a little problem. The bathroom was occupied with a feathered friend, so I had to exercise some pest control, as it were.'

'Do you think he spotted you?' Illya said, a frown beginning to form on his forehead, as he glanced at his watch.

'Well, he was in there quite a long time before I joined him,' Solo replied, 'so I rather think the answer is yes, and, unfortunately, that he communicated that fact to his masters.' Illya sighed loudly, and sat down on the bed.

'So, what are you going to do? No doubt, if you've been identified, they will think I am not far behind. Listen Napoleon, if you think the risk is too great, don't . . .'

'Now, you're not going to do us out of our beauty treatments, are you?' There was a slight pause, the usual bantering suddenly coming to a close. 'I cannot allow you to enter that building without backup, Illya. I have a little Plan B I may put into operation, and so you may get a little more help than you thought. I'll catch you tomorrow morning and bring you up to speed once I've phoned home. That'll give you plenty of time for your prayers.'
'We may need them,' Illya replied gravely. He replaced the top of the communicator and shoved it into his shorts pocket, picking up the office book Gabriel had spent some time explaining to him before he left.

The ordered arrangement of the prayers, psalms and readings felt strangely appealing, a reflection of the life of those who said them day in, day out. He thought of his own increasingly chaotic life in comparison. Set against the life of these religious men and women, it seemed uncontrolled and dangerously impulsive. He suddenly realised that all of his children were the result of impetuous behaviour; Pascale, the daughter he had yet to meet, the result of his giving in to Marie-Laure after years of self-control and discipline; Pablo, a spontaneous reaction on his part to Tess's disposition to collect every waif and stray that came her way. Even their own children, both Tasiya and the unborn ones were the direct result of Illya Kuryakin acting on the spur of the moment.

And yet, to imagine continuing as he had been before, felt unbearable. The sheer unpredictability of his job at UNCLE filled him with excitement, motivated him every time he started out on another mission; to remove his family from that equation now seemed wrong, unbalanced. However crazy their life together was, it was the concrete reality of his family, rather than the more abstract principle of saving the world, or restoring peace and safety to mankind, that now drove him on. He would survive for them, and having them would make him succeed. He smiled as he realised that Napoleon, his closest friend and the only partner he would ever wish to have, could now be counted as part of that increasingly large family unit. And at the still centre of that family, the person who made it possible for it all to work, the very centre of his life, was Therese. Opening the book, for the first time in many years, he began, slowly, to ask God's blessings on each of the people he loved, one by one.

CHAPTER 10

Napoleon wrenched the big Citroen round the increasing number of winding roads which cut their way through the Pyrenean valley towns beyond Pau. The mountains dominated the landscape on both sides, glowering down, in jagged black forms softened by the increasingly heavy snowfall.

'So, you're going to come in the top way with Illya, while I get a new husband already,' April mused, looking at her image in the car mirror, then glancing at the man sitting next to her, as the car smoothly dealt with the ascent of the road towards their destination.

'Yeah, I'm afraid so,' Napoleon smiled. 'That's the movie business for you; just can't do commitment.'

'Yes, well don't get carried away with the role, handsome. I guess I'll just have to explain that you got delayed on a shoot.' She looked down at the outfit she had changed into for the journey from the luxurious hotel at Pau they had spent the night in, to the mountain resort they were now heading towards. The black trousers and high boots felt more comfortable than her suit and high heels in this environment, but she had preserved the appearance of wealth in the thick gold and black jacket and the still abundant jewellery she had adorned herself with. Her hair felt uncomfortably stiff though, styled into a backcombed flick on her shoulders and then sprayed until it felt like a helmet on her head.

As she studied Napoleon, April realised that they were slowing down. A small town came into view, a line of grey, sharply pitched roofs lining the road, with a selection of shops, the quintessentially French combination of bar, boulangerie and boucherie in evidence, slightly set back to protect the inhabitants from being covered in snow and slush as the steady stream of cars and lorries thundered through. Napoleon turned the car off the road and parked in the town square, opposite the Bureau de la Poste. April waited until the big car settled itself down onto the parking space, its hydraulic system slowly exhaling like a strange sea creature. It seemed pointless enquiring why they had stopped,
since she could see Napoleon was waiting for someone. Without turning towards her, he glanced in
the mirror and said,

'OK, so this is the change of plan. After consulting the folks back home, we think that the chances of
my cover being blown by our friend on the plane are too high to risk me waltzing into the hotel as
your husband, however attractive that idea might be.' April grinned at his self-confidence as she
gradually became aware of a figure coming slowly towards them.

'So, we get a quickie divorce and I go it alone?' she murmured.

'No. You know what it's like among the movie fraternity nowadays, Mrs Falconer,' Napoleon
replied. 'We split up, you get another guy.' A sudden rap on the April's side of the car momentarily
startled her. She spun round in her seat and wound down the car window.

'Hi there, Mrs Falconer, will I do?'

'Sure, Darryl, I was ready to discard the older model anyway,' April replied, opening the car door to
a freezing blast of air from outside that matched the one directed at her from the adjacent seat.

xxxxxxxxx

The Lorry driver on the road between Lourdes and Tarbes had only been mildly amused that a friar
should want a lift in the middle of winter, but Illya was thankful that he asked few questions beyond
the obvious ones, and that the heater in the lorry was efficient enough to warm his frozen toes. He
decided that in another life, if he had decided to become a religious, it would be Benedictine, for the
shoes alone.

He had been relieved when Napoleon had told him of the changed plans, he supposed for
Napoleon's sake, but also, if he were honest, for his own. He was used to working in touch with his
partner, but often alone. However, this time, there were so many uncertainties about it, so many
imponderables; the chances of something going wrong seemed high. At least with Napoleon by his
side there could be some flexibility in the operation. Napoleon's plan, outlined to him the evening
before as he sat outside the baths at Lourdes, seemed relatively sensible, though gruelling, at least to
begin with.

He had found plenty of skiing parties heading up towards the resorts, their cars laden with equipment
on heavy roof racks, their tyres ready for the uncertainties of the mountain passes as they sped out of
the town. A group of four had stopped almost as soon as he had stuck up his thumb on the road.
They were British, upper class girls heading towards one of the ski resorts in the Haute Pyrenees, to
spend the season as chalet maids. He could see them looking him up and down as he gazed into the
car, not so subtly nudging each other and giving each other sidelong glances which he decided to
ignore if it would get him a lift. They had wedged him in between the back two, named Hermione
and Susan, and sped off before he could even tell them where he was going.

'We've never had a monk in here before;' the girl called Susan began. Illya could imagine where this
conversation was going.

'Friar. I'm a friar,' he said, wondering why he'd bothered, as the other girl got hold of the end of his
girdle and started swinging it around.

'You don't look like one of Robin Hood's merry men,' the other girl, Hermione, joined in, giving him
a rather full-on look with her piercing green eyes. Her hair reminded him of Josefina's and also, he
thought suddenly of his daughter, Anastasiya's. It was very long and tied back in a high ponytail
which swung round as she talked. Illya tried not to think of the ponytail he still had lying in the
'Um, where are you girls going?' he asked, trying to change the subject to something less embarrassing. The girl at the front turned round. She had a very round, cheerful face with delightful cherry lips and pink cheeks, giving her the appearance of a modern day Snow White.

'Saint Laurent,' she replied. 'Any good to you, Brother?' Illya got the impression that the form of address was meant respectfully, because she knew how.

'Um, that would be perfect,' he said, smiling. 'Er, I'm meeting my parents there for a short holiday before I return...'

'To Sherwood forest?' Hermione burst in again, the other girls obviously beginning to tire of her joke as much as Illya had.

'No, to Toulouse,' he said witheringly. There was silence for a few minutes before he leaned forward to speak to the girl in front again, called Alice.

'I wondered, Alice, that is, if you don't mind, if I could change at your place? My parents are very opposed to my, er, vocation, and I try not to meet them dressed like this,' he ventured, wondering if it was a good idea. He needed to ditch the habit and change into the clothes in the suitcase before evening, and preferably not anywhere too public. The girls went through the usual nods and winks again before Alice said,

'Of course, Brother...?'

'Pascal, Brother Pascal.' Alice grinned at him. She glanced across at Julia, driving the car, and guessed she would also be wondering what he looked like without the habit. Well, they were going to find out now.

The time passed fairly quickly in conversation about England, skiing and why on earth Brother Pascal had become a friar. Illya lied smoothly, hoping his reasons for becoming a religious sounded at least barely plausible. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the mountains as they finally skidded to a halt outside a large chalet at the top of the village. It was built in the alpine style, with a very large, overhanging roof, and an attractive balcony running round three sides. The girls explained that the guests were not arriving until the next day, giving them time to clean the house and stock it before their arrival.

Illya clambered out of the car after Susan, conscious that Hermione was very close behind him. Something about her made him slightly uneasy, but he shrugged and consigned it to the back of his mind until he had a little more peace to think it over. After a few trips in and out of the house, helping to carry their equipment, he was allowed to take his suitcase into a small bedroom upstairs at the back of the house to change, whilst the girls made some tea. He shut the door gratefully behind him and locked it, before hauling out his communicator.

Napoleon answered immediately. Illya could hear the rather tinny sounds of a car's engine and guessed that his partner was negotiating the bends in a less than suitable vehicle.

'Before the little change of plan, I had a superb car, nice clothes, a charming companion and the chance of a few days R and R courtesy of THRUSH. Now, I'll be lucky to survive this drive, never mind a little midnight trek and a ride down on top of some cable car,' he moaned. Illya grinned, feeling quite cheerful all of a sudden.

'So, where are you?' Illya hesitated, but he'd had the worst end of the mission so far; he didn't feel
that bad about sharing his comparatively small share of good luck with his partner.

'Um, actually, I'm just changing in a rather nice chalet at the top of the town, then I'm just going to have tea with the girls.'

'What girls?' Illya could hear the accusing tone rising in his partner's voice, as he had predicted.

'Er, I hitched a lift at Tarbes and well, there were four English chalet maids just coming along the same road, so...'

'Oh, very convenient. Well, don't get carried away with the tea and scones. You need to be ready to go at six. Got the location?'

'Yes, Napoleon, I'll be there. Kuryakin out.' Illya lay the communicator down on the bed and began to take off the rough habit. The hem had soaked up some of the snow on the path, and he was relieved to remove it. He glanced at his watch and then opened the case, exchanging his shorts for a pair of thin, but warm black trousers and his black turtle neck. With much relief, he finally pulled on a warm pair of socks and some light walking boots. Everything else, apart from his knife, which he concealed under his trousers, was left in the case, ready to be transferred to more suitable containers when the two agents met up.

He turned round and glanced at himself in the mirror before going out, feeling a little more comfortable in the black clothes. As he went towards the door he was aware of a slight scuffling noise, then the unmistakeable creak of someone's step on the staircase. He went back to the suitcase and opened it, retrieving his gun and tucking it into his trousers, before putting on the jacket he'd left on the bed. His mind systematically assessed the women, one by one. It was impossible to know if one, or any of them, was not what they seemed. Bearing in mind what had happened to Napoleon on the plane, it would be as well to exercise extreme caution, he thought. He locked the suitcase and, opening the wardrobe door, put it inside, locking it and taking the key. It wasn't much protection, but hopefully, he wouldn't be here much longer.

The corridor and stairs were empty when he opened the door. He clattered down the stairs, not wanting them to think he was anything but a harmless young Frenchman worried about meeting his parents. They were all in the kitchen area of the chalet, which lead directly into a large dining cum sitting area, with a long oak table and chairs and a sofa and armchairs immediately under the large window with magnificent views of the mountains. As he came in, they all turned, their faces an interesting mix of surprise and, in the case of Hermione, a rather intent, bordering on sexual, look.

'Well, hello, and don't you scrub up well,' she said seductively, receiving a rather annoyed glare from Alice. Illya frowned and sat down at the table, now set out for what looked familiar to him as a typical English afternoon tea. All the girls now pulled out chairs and gathered round, Alice pouring the tea and Susan helping him to a large piece of a fruit cake which he presumed they must have brought with them from England.

'We usually bring a selection of English things because the guests like them,' Julia said, reading his expression well. 'Do you like this sort of thing?' He nodded between bites, remembering that he'd already told them he had spent a year at a Franciscan friary in Sussex, and loved the English and their quaint customs.

After helping himself to a rather delicious Eccles cake and a couple of scones, he decided that enough was enough.

'I'm sorry girls, but I have to be going now,' he mumbled, wiping the crumbs from his mouth. 'My parents will be waiting for me, and my mother gets anxious if I'm late.' Hermione, who had
somehow managed to move her chair closer and closer to his own, put her arm on his shoulders. The other girls seemed unaware, but Illya could feel her beginning to run her fingers through the hair at the back of his head and neck. He pushed his chair back rather suddenly and stood up, forcing her to draw back her hand.

'Perhaps we'll see you around then, Pascal,' Alice said, looking rather disappointed at his sudden departure. He felt Hermione standing very close behind him again, her breath now on his ear as she leaned in closer.

'Yes, Pascal, that would be really fun,' she breathed, somehow making the word 'fun' sound anything but. Illya backed away as quickly as he could and ran up the stairs to retrieve his suitcase. An event which had felt rather fortuitous seemed to be taking on a rather more sinister turn, he reflected, as he dragged the suitcase out of the wardrobe and headed downstairs. He shook his head, telling himself that the girl was just doing what girls did; the kind of thing he hadn't even noticed for years, and now if he did notice it, he firmly ignored.

They were all standing by the door as he came down, obviously expecting something. Illya shrugged and surrendered himself to a kind of combination of a traditional French farewell mixed in with a few English hugs. Keeping firmly hold of the suitcase, he eventually stumbled from the Chalet, and began to make his way to the rendezvous point.

'Wow, he was gorgeous!' Julia groaned, leaning against the door, after they had waved him down the road until he disappeared from sight.

'Specially in black, with that hair!' Susan sighed. 'I bet he looks even better . . .'

'Girls! Don't forget he's a monk, or friar or whatever, so that probably means he's a . . .' They all began to giggle, then suddenly Alice looked round. 'Hey, where's Hermione? She was here a minute ago.'

'Perhaps she's gone after him,' Julia said, rather bitterly. 'She was all over him at tea, didn't you see? Running her hand through his hair as if she owned him; I bet he decided to leave because of that!' They stood together momentarily, then wandered back to the kitchen, where the remains of the tea now stood in disarray on the table.

'That's typical of her, disappearing when the work needs to be done,' Alice complained.

'Well, you let her come,' Julia said, starting to stack the dishes. 'I mean, we all know each other from school, but none of us really know her, do we?'

'Don't blame me,' Alice replied petulantly, pulling a face, 'If you remember, we got the jobs through that friend of Daddy's, and he asked us if we'd take a friend of his daughter's along too. I could hardly say no, could I?'

'What friend?' Julia said, throwing herself down on the sofa. She was inwardly kicking herself that she hadn't asked him what hotel he was staying at. Too late, now.

'Oh, you know Jules. That creepy Frenchman Daddy's always on the phone to. What's his name? Rondeau. That's it. Phillipe Rondeau.'

Xxxxxx

Napoleon looked at his watch for the fifth time since he had parked the little Renault at the back of the church in St Laurent. Illya hadn't indicated that he was having any trouble with the girls he had managed to get picked up by, but it was so unlike the Russian to be late, Solo wondered whether
something had already gone wrong. If it got much later, they would have very little time to rest between the mountain trek they were about to embark on, and the descent down to La Retraite the next morning. He glanced in the mirror of the car and glimpsed his partner, walking rapidly round the corner of the church and almost running towards the car.

The back door of the car was hastily wrenched open and Kuryakin almost threw himself onto the back seat, slamming the door behind him. Napoleon continued to sit nonchalantly, enjoying his cigarette, until, after a few very obviously disapproving coughs later, the Russian spoke.

'Napoleon, look in your mirror and tell me if there is a girl with long red hair anywhere near.' Solo looked in the mirror, checking in the wing mirrors for good measure.

'Nope. You're safe. Your celibate lifestyle obviously didn't deter them then,' he said, glancing back surreptitiously at the still recumbent form of his partner, now glowering on the back seat. Illya slowly sat up and leaned back on the seat, turning round just to make sure Hermione was not in sight.

'I'm sorry I was late,' he began. 'It appears that either she has a crush on me, or more likely, she is not the innocent young lady I first took her for.' Napoleon turned round fully in his seat and regarded his partner.

'Well, we can only hope that they think we're going to come in from the bottom, as anyone sane might do,' he said, 'rather than attempt to work our way down from the top, as it were, a plan which feels more and more insane by the minute.' Illya smiled sweetly, beginning to take off his jacket, and laying his gun on the seat.

'Well I think your plan is rather good, Napoleon,' he said coyly, inviting a cuff round the ear, which he deftly avoided, before opening the car door again.

In the boot of the little car, their equipment had been stored, only the skis strapped on the roof rack. Illya removed the two rucksacks and pulled out the thicker padded skiing clothes which he noticed Napoleon was already changed into. Shoving his suitcase onto the back seat, he wriggled himself into the clothes, then began to transfer the explosives into one of the rucksacks. They had gone through this routine so many times in their partnership; it felt smooth and efficient, no words needing to be said until they stood together beside the car, ready to go. The skis were of the short, cross-country variety, only needed till they arrived at the altitude station known as Pla de Ciel, above La Retraite. Napoleon drove the car as far along the road as he could, before parking it in a small clearing, shielded by a copice of fir trees.

The evening chill had already asserted itself by the time they began the hike. Once they had left the road, the darkness, broken by the watery glow of the moon, became dense and unrelenting, the only noises being the regular swish of the skis on the snow paths and the occasional hoot of owls or other predatory birds in the adjacent forests. Illya could feel the cut on his hand begin to ache slightly in the cold, despite the insulation of his gloves. He looked ahead, Napoleon's torch, fastened to his head, casting a long thin blade of light through the trees in front of them. He had deferred to his partner in the plan, as Solo had planned the route and studied it beforehand. After what seemed like a long time, he stopped, silently handing Illya a drink of something which produced an almost immediate sense of warmth and wellbeing in the Russian. The occasional word soon lapsed into silence as they ploughed their way through the evening turning to night.

It was only when they stopped finally, that Illya realised he was at the limits of exhaustion. Focused only on the trek, he would have forced his body on for at least a little way further, but once Napoleon had signalled him to stop, he sank gratefully to the ground, wondering if his legs would ever have the strength to help him stand again.
'Come on, we have to pitch the tent,' a voice whispered in his ear. He nodded, then rolled over and got up rather shakily. Fortunately, the tent was of a construction which seemed to erect itself, and after throwing in the sleeping bags, he summoned the energy to take off his boots and slide inside. A useful, but rather unappetising high energy bar was shoved in his direction, followed by another drink of the delightful concoction he was yet to know the name of.

He was drifting off to sleep when Napoleon began.

'Feeling OK?' He forced himself to open his eyes slightly, aware that his partner was lying only centimetres away.

'Fine. It was a good hike. Now, if you don't mind . . .'

'April thought you had something on your mind at the airport.' Illya sighed. He was definitely getting too transparent for his own good.

'Um, sort of.'

'Sort of. Sort of what?' Illya sighed again, and put his hands behind his head.

'We may be, um, adding to the family again.'

'Well I know that, so why . . .'

'No, not Pascale. I mean us, Therese and I.' He could almost feel Napoleon grinning in the dark.

'So, that will be, let's see, starting with the eldest . . .'

'Yes, thank you Napoleon for reminding me just how many children I have or are about to have,' Illya sighed, 'but of course, Katya doesn't live with us, so they'll only be seven of us at home, at least for now.'

There was a confused pause; Illya could sense Napoleon's brain doing the mathematics and coming up with the wrong answer. He turned to signal sleep, but not before a hand had pulled him back again.

'Just a minute. Seven? Just care to explain that, comrade, before you drop off, and leave me wondering all night?' Illya smiled and sat up slightly, just able to make out the familiar form of his partner close by.

'Think Napoleon. I am a twin. Tessy is a twin. Even a totally unmathematical brain such as yours could at least compute the odds of . . .'

'Twins. You're having twins? Jeez. Twins.' There was a further silence, only punctuated by the occasional night sound, of owls hooting, or a sudden flurry of wings of some other predator intent on its prey. Illya heard his partner breathe deeply, feeling the atmosphere in the tent change slightly.

'Good job you're going to make mega-bucks on this computer thingumy then, when it works.' Illya jerked slightly and sat up.

'What do you mean?' he said rather fiercely, staring at the dark form in front of him.

'Calm down. The old man was obviously saving the good news for when you actually got the thing working. They're going to pay you a share of what they make when they sell it to our friends at Langley, apparently, so you can stop worrying about how you're going to send all those little
Kuryakins through school and college’.

‘Well, I'm not holding my breath, seeing that, at the last attempt, I didn't have the slightest idea how to make it work,’ Illya muttered.

Napoleon could sense his partner frowning in the dark even though he could only vaguely make out the blond hair faintly glowing in the darkness. With a barely concealed sigh, Illya lay down again and turned over, obviously signalling an end to the conversation.

Napoleon scrabbled around for the pen torch he had put by the side of the sleeping bag, and, switching it on, directed the beam onto his partner. He had already dropped into a deep sleep, his arms characteristically above his head in a position he had seen adopted by his baby daughter on more than one occasion. It seemed hardly believable that the man lying there could be the father of six children. The pale, fine features, in the strange shadows the torch threw, suggested the face of someone more innocent, less burdened.

He lay down and switched off the torch, contemplating what the next day would bring. A meeting with the little girl Pascale, certainly, something the Russian seemed to fear more than the actual mission itself. And what else? The answer to the mystery of the photographs, and an explanation of just what was going on at La Retraite and who was involved? Possibly. There was something about this mission that made Napoleon feel deeply uneasy, as if there were hidden layers that would be drawn back abruptly, exposing them all to unforeseen dangers. He turned over, and, unlike the man lying next to him, fell into a restless, uneasy sleep.
Chapter 4

The telephone's piercing interruption to the room's silence was brief. Phillipe Rondeau grabbed the handset, already fairly certain who would be at the other end of the line.

'Rondeau,' he said curtly, leaning back into his chair and surveying the room in front of him with a satisfied sniff. It was adequate for his needs à ce moment.

'You'll be pleased to know that your little blond friend is on his way to see you; at least that's where I presume he's going,' the rather drawling female voice began. Rondeau curled his lip at the awful way these English girls spoke French, with their long, deep vowel sounds. Still, the THRUSH school in England was at last beginning to produce a few more intelligent operatives than some of the cretins he'd had to work with in Paris, and Hermione Pilkington was one of the better ones.

'You presume? Pourquoi? Did you not follow him?'

'Of course, but he gave me the slip. He's very, how do you say, sournois.'

'Bien sûr, he is very devious, as you say. So devious that he will not fail to find his way into the little web we've spun just for him,' Rondeau replied. There was a deep, satisfied sigh from the other end of the line.

'And when he's firmly stuck, I'm going to have such fun with him,' Hermione murmured.

For the second time in a week, Napoleon rolled over to find the person he was expecting to be there had disappeared. He frowned and looked at his watch. There were still two hours before dawn, enough time for them to reach the circular restaurant and cable car station at Pla de Ciel, before the first of the staff came up from La Retraite. Fernando had given them detailed information on the goings on of both the hotel and the restaurant above, which acted as both an access point for the various ski runs, and also as an après-ski facility for the guests. As it was staffed from La Retraite, the cable car was used very early in the morning to bring those working at Le ciel bleu, as the restaurant was called, up from the hotel. And if one cable car went up, then another must come down.

He found Illya outside, sitting crouched under a large fir, his head down on his arms, which were folded round his body, embryo like. Napoleon stamped slightly on the ground and began to walk towards him; eliciting the response he'd hoped for in the raised head and alerted body.

'What exactly are you doing?' he said, squatting down by his partner's side, as the Russian's head slowly turned towards him.

'I'm sorry if I worried you,' Illya replied, a rather sad expression flitting across his face. 'I needed to clear my head of... of things.' Napoleon sat down, leaning against the tree.

'And, is your head clear of 'things' now?' Kuryakin nodded dumbly, looking down. Napoleon could see a deep frown on his face, the look he had seen many times when Illya was still in the process of sorting things out in his head. He got hold of the Russian agent's shoulders and gently pulled him round to face him.

'Illya, stop it. Whatever has happened, you cannot undo now. Besides, I think it kinda suits you.'
‘What suits me?’ Illya replied, looking suddenly like a confused teenager again. This was the look that drove the girls wild, Solo remembered, smiling.

‘Well, marriage obviously, but all the kids, sort of makes you less . . .’

‘Introverted?’ Illya smiled rather shyly. ‘That’s what Tessy says. She claims that having the United Nations in our house will make me less self-centred. Of course I wasn’t aware I was self-centred, but perhaps that’s my problem.’

‘You’re not self-centred exactly.’ Napoleon hesitated, trying to pick the right words. ‘Just, well, I guess you’re just very focused, that’s all.’

‘So focused, that I don’t seem to be aware of anyone else, you mean.’

‘Yes, well, Abe, we need to be focused on the task ahead, then you can look forward to heading back to the bosom of your family, if you take my drift.’ Illya grinned, to Napoleon’s relief. They started to walk back to the tent, Napoleon stretching his legs to get the feeling back into them.

‘I estimate that we should reach the altitude station about forty five minutes before the first cable car arrives,’ Napoleon said, heaving his rucksack onto his back and adjusting the torch. ‘That should give us time to position ourselves on the roof of the cable car station, and take a free ride down with someone, without attracting any notice. The trickiest bit will be gaining a foothold on the roof of the hotel as the cable car docks.’ Illya nodded, strapping on his rucksack and pulling on his hat, at once extinguishing the faint glow his hair always made in the dark.

As they were about to set off, Napoleon felt a hand grip his arm.

‘Abe?’

‘Oh, come on now. All that Mass attendance and you still don’t know the story yet?’ He paused, and looked upwards, as if the stars were helping him remember.

‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.’

Illya stared at him in the darkness. ‘Napoleon, I’m impressed!’ he said.

Napoleon shrugged his shoulders and started to move off along the snow-laid path between the trees.

xxxxx

From their vantage point, it was easy to see, through the binoculars, the panoramic windows and wide, steeply pitched roof of La Retraite, with its rows of dormer windows, half-way down the mountain, the small village and altitude station of La Pla de Ciel immediately ahead, the circular form of the restaurant and the equally circular cable car station immediately below it. On the edge of the forest they removed their skis, and carried them through the tiny sleeping village towards the restaurant, now dark and uninviting, like a large, black flying saucer settled on the edge of the mountain. Napoleon supposed that when open, and in daylight, the view across the mountain range and down to the hotel below must be stunning. Now, however, they would have to settle for a rooftop panorama.

It was still over half an hour before the first cable car would start to come up, and when they would go down hopefully, with whoever was returning to La Retraite. Through the locked doors of the station, they could see the empty cable cars lined up round the circular platform of the station, rather
like any ride at a fun fair; the small purple and white cars with their doors open, ready to absorb the crowds of excited skiers going upwards, and exhausted ones returning to the comfort of the hotel below. Illya stuffed his gloves in his trouser pockets and drew out his gun.

'A After Hermione, I'm not taking any chances,' he muttered.

They had hidden their skis amongst others left overnight at the station, not needing them for the last, and most dangerous part of the journey. Napoleon, behind his partner, tapped his shoulder and signalled as steps crunched on the new snow in the distance. Torchlight danced along the road towards them as they pressed themselves onto the curving wall out of sight of the light, and the man holding it. Illya holstered his gun and put his gloves on again as they heard the clank of the lock and the sound of the doors being opened and fastened back.

'Very obliging of him' Illya murmured, moving forward slowly.

'Yes, well, they're not expecting two joy-riders at this time in the morning,' Napoleon replied, holding his partner back slightly. 'Just give him a chance to get in his kiosk and then we can make our entrance.' They crept forward noiselessly, keeping the station master in their sights until he disappeared into a small ticket office at the far end of the curved platform. Following the exact steps of his partner, Napoleon reached the other end of the platform, just in time to see the Russian's feet disappearing up towards the shuttered concrete roof just above the cars, shielding the cable mechanism from the car below. He heaved himself up onto the top of a cable car, and hence to the roof, finding Illya lying on the flat roof immediately above the first car, in a position rather like someone watching TV on their living room floor.

'Enjoying yourself?' Solo gasped, crouching down beside him. Illya looked round, the familiar wolfish expression firmly planted. He frowned, looking at Solo's rucksack.

'Got anything to eat, or even better, drink? What was that drink anyway?' Napoleon groaned.

'When you get down there,' he whispered, pointing down the mountain, 'I'm sure April will have organised something a little better than an energy bar, and a drink of UNCLE No 4.'

'Was that No 4? Remind me to congratulate Simpkins in Section 15,' Illya replied cheerfully, holding out his hand like a little boy waiting for a treat.

They were just finishing the drink when there was a loud whirring sound from above them and the cars clanked together momentarily. Napoleon shoved the empty containers in the rucksack and hoisted it on his back, before dropping down on the ground beside Kuryakin. He indicated the immense steel girder connecting the car to the cable mechanism above, and swung himself onto the girder, easily clambering down the metal pegs on its side towards the top of the car. At the bottom, he swung lightly onto the roof and then signalled Illya to follow, the Russian climbing down and jumping lightly onto the roof so quickly, he reminded Napoleon of a large, black monkey.

Almost immediately, they were jolted forward by the action of the cable car arriving at the back of the line. About a dozen men and women alighted from the car, most of them subdued by the earliness of the day, talking in low tones as they walked out of the station towards the restaurant entrance. Solo looked at his watch. He was glad of the warmth of his clothes and boots as they lay on the roof almost motionless, two indistinguishable dark forms merged between the black roof of the car and the darkness of the early dawn.

Illya lay his face down on the roof again and began to drum his fingers silently on its hard, cold surface. He willed someone to come, preferably very soon. He needed to have no more time to think, only to act, to get on with whatever was going to happen and to live through it. He felt the warmth of
Napoleon's body next to his, strangely comforting in this frozen moment between the long hike and the real action ahead. He felt his hat being pulled back, his ear exposed.

'Know which window to go through?' Napoleon's voice whispered. He nodded, pulling the hat back down firmly over his head. Before he could regain his grip on the girder, he felt the car move slightly as someone jumped into it and slammed the door across. Illya grabbed the girder, pulling himself up to give Napoleon more room. Almost immediately the car began to swing round the platform, heading out towards the dawn and the hotel beneath it.

As they swung out into the sky there was a blast of freezing air which made both agents gasp in pain, as they clung to the swinging girder. Illya pulled himself up until he was hugging the steel, and looked behind him to see Solo following suit. They were now almost face to face either side of the girder, Illya looking towards the hotel and Napoleon back to the restaurant.

'You'll have to come round,' Illya gasped, as they shuddered through the first pylon, 'otherwise you'll never get off.' Napoleon nodded, and began to inch his way round, Illya moving to accommodate him by his side. Illya counted another two pylons to endure, then a straightening off for the run into the hotel.

The roof tip virtually skimmed the top of the cable mechanism before it dipped below to form the station which ran along the side of the hotel before the cars continued down to the hotel car park at the base of the mountain. The room they were aiming for was the sixth to the left of the cable car station, but luckily on the lower of the two banks of windows which jutted from the roof on their side of the hotel. Illya could feel his ice pick just behind his head, ready to be pulled out and rammed into the nearest roof tile he could anchor himself to. One more pylon juddered by above them, the hotel now looming nearer and nearer, its shape lit up by the rosiness of the approaching dawn. Illya breathed deeply and reached for his pick, aware that Solo was tensed by his side. He was going to have to jump first and clear a space for his partner, otherwise Solo would be trapped inside the hotel station, and at the mercy of several THRUSH guards he had no doubt.

Illya had mentally counted the seconds between the pylons, and knew he had twenty more before he needed to jump. He reached back for the pick and readied himself, inching to the left of the girder and standing more upright to give himself spring. Suddenly the roof was there and he leapt forward and upwards, his arm raised up. As his body landed against the roof his arm arced forward and rammed the pick into a space between the hard grey slates. There was a shattering sound before the pick found a hold and he was left suspended on the roof as several slates slid by him. He could hear a more ominous sound to his right as Napoleon's pick slid dangerously through several slates before stopping. He could see the American dangling over the roof, struggling to find a foothold. Illya frantically tore off a couple of slates below his pick and, clinging onto the roof, wrenched the ice pick out and attached it lower. Sliding down the all too smooth slates, he stretched himself until Solo could grab his leg and haul himself over the edge to safety. For what seemed like a long time they both lay flat against the roof, grateful for its grey unyielding support. Illya turned his head towards his partner. Napoleon appeared unharmed by his ordeal, even managing a kind of savage smile in the Russian's direction.

'Owe you one,' he gasped.

Using the broad guttering, they began to edge along the roof, trying not to put too much weight on it. Illya glanced back and saw Napoleon indicating something further along, with his head. A thick rope lay dangling down the roof, inviting them to safety above. The Russian agent reached the rope first and began to swing himself up towards the window, glancing downwards at his partner clinging on below. As he got closer, Illya saw a head he didn't immediately recognise dart out of the window and then disappear. Momentarily, he felt a slight stab of uncertainty. If it wasn't a friendly face at the top
of the rope, there was little he could do but go on and face that person, but in that case, what about Napoleon? He swallowed hard, and kept climbing. Whoever was at the top, he really had no choice but to continue.

The window frame, open wide to the sky, was now just above him. Holding on to the rope with one hand and his legs, he reached down and pulled out his knife, putting it between his teeth. With one final push, he heaved his feet onto the sill, and jumped down into the room, at the same time wrenching the knife from his mouth and readying it in his hand.

'Whoa, it's OK, Mr Kuryakin, friend not foe!' Illya groaned and sat down in a heap on the floor. Darryl Moore leaned anxiously over him, his broad flat face creased in an anxious frown. It was no wonder that he had not recognised the American when his head had appeared at the window; his skin was now a deep golden tan, courtesy of someone in Rudi's department, Illya supposed, his normally light brown hair a rather oily looking black, swept back smoothly from his forehead.

'What are you doing here?' Illya said, not meaning to sound as rude as he did.

'He's my lover, Illya, that's what he's doing.' Illya glanced up as April crouched down by his side, pulled off his hat, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Illya smiled wanly, too tired to work out exactly what was going on.

'Mind if I join the party?' In the fuss over Illya's entrance, they had all forgotten his partner. Napoleon scrambled in at the window and sat down next to the exhausted Russian.

'I see you two took the scenic route,' April said, glancing out of the window, then shutting it after Darryl had hurriedly pulled up the rope.

'Yes, next time I'm going first class and coming in through the front door,' Illya grumbled. 'This must have been the most convoluted and uncomfortable journey I've ever taken in my life.'

April went over and hauled him up under his armpits, sitting him in a large armchair while she took off his boots.

'Poor baby,' she cooed, stroking his hair back from his face. 'Still never mind, Aunty April's got a nice hot bath waiting, and a big breakfast.' Illya could already see his partner making his usual face when he wasn't the centre of attention.

'And before you start, Napoleon, Illya has had a far worse journey here; you can take a shower and then I might give you a massage if you're a good boy.' Napoleon sighed and began to undress, while April continued to minister to the Russian.

Darryl leapt forward and began to haul Napoleon towards the sofa as if he was a over-large teddy bear that needed putting away in the toy box.

'Thank you, Darryl, I think I can manage,' Napoleon said, glaring at his partner, now reduced to his underwear. April had piled their filthy clothes into a large plastic bag, but as she turned, Illya had somehow leapt to his feet and was heading for the bathroom.

'I'm very grateful, April, but I think I can manage,' he said, rubbing his rather bristly chin. He slammed the door behind him and sat down again on the side of the bath. If he was honest, he had welcomed her help, even if it was at Napoleon's expense. He needed to recuperate before going any further, and especially before meeting anyone else, especially close female relatives.

She must have run the bath when Darryl had seen him at the bottom of the rope. At any rate, he was extremely grateful. It felt as if it been an eternity since he last washed properly; his hair felt and
looked dirty and dishevelled, and he needed a shave badly. As he sank gratefully into the foamy water, his eyes began to close, just for a few moments, he thought.

'Don't go to sleep in there, comrade, otherwise I might have to join you.' Napoleon was leaning over him, a towel round his waist. He had obviously had his shower and was having a shave from the white foam plastered round his face. Illya sat upright suddenly, aware that the water was now rather tepid.

'I had no idea, I . . .'

'Obviously. Might I suggest you wash your hair under the shower and wake yourself up, at least for long enough to eat your breakfast, then you can have a nice long sleep before tonight's continuing adventures of UNCLE folk,' Napoleon said, looking at him in the mirror as he shaved. Illya smiled rather ruefully and hauled himself out of the bath and into the shower. It was true the powerful spray was more refreshing and he began to feel a little more like himself as he scrubbed away at his hair. He joined Napoleon at the double sink and began to shave.

'So, since there don't seem to be any alarms going off, do you think we've got away with it?' Illya said, swishing the razor in the sinkful of hot water and scraping it gratefully across his chin.

'Possibly, although since we haven't a clue what's really going on, it's difficult to assess the situation properly.' Solo replied. 'So I guess we just have to be grateful, if they know we're here, that they're letting us use their very luxurious facilities.'

The overpowering smell of breakfast invaded the room, provoking Illya to finish his shave in record time. The sight of the food on the trolley distracted him momentarily from the realisation that his clothes had disappeared and the towel was now his only garment.

'Um, I hate to bring it up, but I don't think this will be adequate for what we have planned,' he said, noticing that Napoleon was also in exactly the same predicament.

'Eat your breakfast, sleep, and then you can get dressed,' April said, throwing two white bathrobes at them.

The breakfast was superb, a wonderful selection of croissant, pastries and brioche, perfectly complimented by strong fresh coffee and a jug of freshly squeezed juice. Nevertheless, Illya felt the weight of his exhaustion bearing down on him as he demolished the food. Unusually, Napoleon appeared to be fresher, tired but not as tired as his partner. Illya could feel his eyes drooping, until the cup was taken from his hand, and he was half carried to the large, soft bed behind them.

'I . . .'

'Jeez, does he fall asleep that quickly? It's a miracle he's got all those kids if he's like that.' Darryl lent over the recumbent form of the Russian, then gently covered him with a blanket lying on the end of the bed.

'He's got a lot on his mind, Darryl,' Napoleon replied, looking at April. 'I'm sure he can manage to keep awake when he needs to.' April came over and surveyed the sleeping Russian, her arm intertwined in Napoleon's.

'Was I right?' she said softly. Solo smiled.

'Yes. That was obviously one of the times when he was able to stay awake,' he said. 'Only I think the result was a little more than he expected.' April frowned momentarily, before putting her hand to her mouth to prevent herself laughing.
'Oh my God!' she said, 'you don't mean . . .' 

'Yes indeed, a double helping of little Kuryakins is coming his way sometime soon,' he replied. They looked at Darryl, who had obviously no idea what they were talking about. Then suddenly his eyes lit up with comprehension. 

'Jeez! You don't mean . . .wow! Just wait till the guys hear about this!' he burst out. 'Wow!' 

xxxxxx

CHAPTER 12

'Illya Kuryakin, earth to Illya Kuryakin, come in.' Napoleon sat back comfortably in the wide armchair, and replaced his martini on the side table conveniently drawn up for such use. There was an imperceptible ripple of the blanket under which the familiar form of his partner lay. He reached for a small cushion behind his back and lobbed it across towards the blond head just showing at the top of the bed.

'Thank you, Napoleon, you have such a way of getting your point across,' the muffled reply came, before the blanket started to heave and the Russian slid to a sitting position at the side of the bed.

Illya glanced at his watch, and stared at his partner in disbelief.

'Why did you let me sleep for so long?' he said, scratching his head, and standing up, taking in the room and his fully dressed partner with bleary blue eyes.

'Because you needed to,' Napoleon replied, sipping his drink and surveying his partner over the top of his glass. 'Anyway, there's plenty of time. Dinner is about to be served, so you've time to go and make yourself respectable for our little after-dinner foray into the deepest, darkest recesses of fortress THRUSH.' Illya shook his head a little.

'Um, and what exactly do I have to put on?' he said, looking round the room expectantly.

'Jeez, Illya, is my name Therese? Go into the bathroom and I'll lay out your trousseau, my lord,' Napoleon replied, pushing him forwards with a soft shove. Illya glared at him from underneath the wildly disarrayed blond hair, and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Napoleon opened the wardrobe nearest the bed and pulled out a pair of black trousers and a soft, grey, long sleeved cashmere polo shirt. April had made the purchases in Pau, before their journey to the hotel, with guidance from Napoleon. He pulled open the drawers by the side and added underwear, plus Illya's holster and gun. He noticed, however, the favourite knife just showing underneath the pillow, Illya's hand wrapped round it, as if it were a favourite toy he had taken to bed.

Napoleon moved away from the clothes and sat down at a table which had been placed at the other end of the spacious bedroom. The ground plans of the hotel were laid out for study, Fernando's notes in his neat, Italic writing, down the sides of the paper, with lines pointing to various key installations. It looked as if they would have to disable, or at least partly disable the security network round the lift area, if they were to have any hope at all of penetrating the hidden floor with any degree of surprise. There appeared to be no other entrance than the lift, and he wasn't sure even then whether they would be able to figure how to make the lift stop at the appropriate floor. He pored over the plan, trying to imagine what the topography of the floor might be like, but it was impossible to guess. If Rondeau was involved, then he imagined it must involve some sort of surgical unit, perhaps a ward, and some laboratories, but beyond that, the intelligence about the place was absolutely minimal, bordering on non-existent. Whatever was going on, THRUSH had worked very hard indeed to keep
it as secret as UNCLE itself.

'Mm, looks like we'll have to be lucky with the security systems.' Napoleon had been so focused on the plan, he hadn't been aware of his partner until he found him standing next to him. He looked greatly refreshed, his face less drawn and tired than it had when he had looked at Napoleon the night before in the forest.

'Yes, you could say that,' Napoleon replied. 'Well, we'll look at it with April after dinner. They've been doing a bit of scouting around today while you've been having your beauty sleep, so they might be able to give us a little help, particularly with that,' he said, pointing at the room behind the desk in the hotel foyer.

Illya turned away and began to get dressed, managing to scramble into his clothes before the door connecting the room with another, slightly larger one, flew open, and April and Darryl stood there, a heavily laden trolley lurking behind them, its tureens drawing Illya like a lure to a very large, willing fish. He hastily ran his fingers through his hair and started to move forward at the same time as stepping into his shoes somehow, managing to arrive in the room before Napoleon.

'Food, it's very motivating,' Napoleon murmured into Darryl's ear as the young American watched the Russian help himself to an extraordinary serving of food and carry it to the table.

'What?' Illya said to the other three agents, his face a picture of childhood innocence, blue eyes wide and slightly sparkling in the glow of the lamps. April sighed happily, and sat down at the table.

'Back to normal then, I see,' she said.

Later, after Illya and Darryl had engaged in, to April, a hideous competition involving who could eat the most after dinner mints in thirty seconds, Solo and Kuryakin had retired to the bathroom while the dinner things were removed. The hotel boy appeared unsuspicious, since April and Darryl had eaten at lunch time in one of the towns in the valley, and had only been amused spectators at the feast, apart from the after dinner mints, that was. Darryl, slightly green from the effects of the so-called competition, went to fetch the plan from the other room and release the other two from their hiding place. Unlike him, the Russian seemed totally unaffected by his vast meal; in fact, he seemed to be in a rather good mood.

'Ah, Darryl,' he said, smiling rather unexpectedly, 'the fun starts now.' And before Darryl could reply, he levered himself down from the vanity unit he had been sitting on top of cross-legged, rather like a kind of black leprechaun, and sauntered out of the room.

Napoleon grinned at the expression of the younger man.

'He needs to get on with it now,' he whispered, as they followed Illya. 'This has been going on too long.' Darryl nodded, even though he wasn't entirely sure what Solo was referring to exactly. As usual, they only told him what he needed to know, and that wasn't much, although this briefing might answer a few questions that had been forming in his mind over the last few days.

It was true, in the bathroom, Illya had been in a happier state of mind, but Napoleon knew him better than to think that the worries that had exhausted him so much were now consigned to the rubbish bin of his mind. As they heard Darryl approaching, Illya had asked,

'Darryl; do you think he's ready for this assignment?' Napoleon had shrugged, looking at himself in the mirror and re-combing the immaculate hair as the Russian agent sat, like Buddha, behind him.

'He's had the training, and he needs the experience,' he had replied. 'I think he's dependable.'
'Dependable can get you killed,' Kuryakin had replied, frowning. 'He needs to be adaptable, quick thinking, inventive; you know . . .'

'Like you, you mean,' Solo had said, turning to face his partner. 'Well, if it's any comfort, partner, he told me that he sees you as a sort of role model.' Illya had groaned and muttered 'oh dear', before Darryl had burst through the door.

'I hate to have to ask this of you, April, but . . .'

'You want me to seduce the night clerk.' April pursed her lips and gave Napoleon a withering look. 'It's a little bit late to start that,' she said, leaning back on the chair. Napoleon glanced at his partner, the Russian slightly shrugging his shoulders and starting to open his mouth to say something, before April continued, 'So it's a good job I started the other day. Henri and I have an assignation tonight, when hubby here is out of the way, of course.' Illya smiled at Napoleon's expression. He should have known she would be on the case, he thought. He wondered just what they should ask Darryl to do, the worry of Pascale beginning to surface in his mind.

'Um, my main concern is how easy it's going to be to actually get onto the hidden floor,' Illya said, putting his elbows on the table and resting his chin on his hands. If we take out the security guards in that office, then, from the look of these photos you took, Darryl, it doesn't seem at all clear to me just how exactly that system is operated.' Napoleon sat up, a slightly self-confident look spreading across his face that Illya knew well. 'But it looks as if Napoleon is going to tell us,' he said, sighing.

Solo arched his eyebrows, and then leaned backwards and pulled something from his jacket pocket. It was a clip of what looked like darts of the sleeping variety.

'So how will that help?' Illya asked a little wearily now, taking the clip and starting to investigate its contents. 'Oh, these are . . . what are these?' Napoleon took them back and gingerly drew one of the tiny darts out of the clip.

'No doubt you will remember the Dormiben drug I extracted from Bolt's factory last year?' he began, keeping his partner in his gaze.

'Just a little,' Illya replied slightly sarcastically. The name projected multiple images into his mind; Tess, in her dressing gown mechanically denying she knew anything about the Bolt woman, and that fat German oaf Wolfgang Baumgartner turning the gun on Napoleon in the Pharmaceutical factory; then the whole ghastly conversation with Norman Shearer, when he had tried to persuade Illya to agree to the abortion of their baby.

'Anyway, the boys in the ballistics lab came up with this one, based on the said drug,' Napoleon rushed on, not wishing to dwell on what he knew was going through his partner's mind. 'It doesn't have the long-term effects of the original, but the victims are receptive to suggestion for about four hours, hopefully,' he added; 'enough time for them to send us winging on our way down to whatever awaits us below.' Illya picked up the dart and looked at it closely.

'Mm. This could have some interesting uses,' he said, raising his eyebrows. Napoleon was relieved he seemed to have regained his previously jocular mood, and gently removed the dart from his partner's hand.

'Don't get any ideas. Now, the rest is a little less easy to plan, seeing that we're not altogether sure what is going on yet. However, I guess that we need to ensure two things, ladies and gentlemen.' April frowned and interrupted him.

'Which are…?'
'I would have thought that was obvious. One, we need to remove Miss Kuryakin from danger; that will be your job, Darryl. As soon as we find her, you need to get her down the mountain and out, OK? April will be otherwise occupied to begin with, and we need her experience to get people out, or cause a diversion, if we have to start a little fire.' Darryl visibly straightened in his chair, his eyes glued on Illya.

'I can handle that,' he said, 'in fact it'll be an honour to escort your little girl to safety, sir.' Illya grimaced slightly and looked down, but not before his partner had noticed. Trying to stop himself grinning at the almost puppy-dog devotion of the tall American agent for the Russian, he continued. 'And of course, the other part is up to me.'

'And that is . . . ?' Illya asked.

'To stop you falling into the rather unpleasant hands of whoever seems to want you, you dumb Russian,' Solo replied.

At three a.m. precisely, Darryl and April emerged out of the bedroom part of the suite to find the other two men standing waiting for them, or Napoleon was standing waiting for them, Illya being absorbed with examining the wiring of the tiny closed circuit television camera that was hidden in the frame of the large abstract painting hung on one wall.

'How did you . . . ?' Darryl leapt forward, anxious to impress.

'Well, it was a little tricky, but I reversed those wires there . . .' Napoleon frowned, switching off from the conversation before it got too technical.

'Darryl's got a degree in Electrical Engineering, and it came in useful,' April said, arranging her hair in a seductive sweep across her forehead. 'He managed to make it look as if the whole system along this corridor had shorted out. They've been trying to fix it for days.'

'Ah hum,' Napoleon coughed loudly, glancing at his watch. 'Time to go boys.' Darryl took the camera carefully from Illya and replaced it in the frame, sliding a minute piece of glass across to conceal it again. He seemed overjoyed that the Russian had complimented him on his work, a slight grin animating his features as they opened the door.

April left first, heading down the corridor towards the lifts. The three men shut the door behind her and Napoleon consulted his watch again.

'Give her five minutes and then we can get into position,' Solo murmured, switching off the light. The darkness of the room suddenly heightened the tension, the moonlight picking up the edges of their features and the glow of Illya's hair as he stood facing his partner. Napoleon could see the slightly agitated shadow of the young American agent dwarfing the Russian, his breathing rather loud and rapid in the stillness of the night. Illya, by contrast was utterly still, his head slightly lowered, no sound emanating whatsoever from his frozen frame.

Napoleon inhaled deeply and checked his watch, gently nudging his partner's arm. Seamlessly, the Russian's head came up and he opened the door what appeared to be a minute amount, indicating Darryl forward with his head, and smoothly opening it further as the American slipped through. Seconds later, after an imperceptible knock, the other two joined him in the corridor. Darryl pointed out the cameras, also out of action thanks to his short-circuiting work, as they moved swiftly along the corridor towards the stairs. The corridor lights were on, dimmed for the night, but no-one appeared either in the corridors or on the stairs. As they approached the reception and ground floor
area, they knew from the plan that the stairs would begin to fan out, giving anyone behind the reception desk a clear view of any guest not using the lift.

Darryl, who was leading, put out his hand at the last curve of the corridor, knowing what was coming next. He was wearing a rather garish striped silk dressing gown over his other clothes, which he hoped might be enough to persuade anyone about at this hour that he was just a lost American, looking for his wife. He could see April and the desk clerk, Henri behind the bar, the reception desk empty and the door to the security room closed. Signalling to Napoleon and Illya, he advanced towards the desk.

'Found yourself a nice Frenchie boy then, have you, Darleen?' he whispered in his best Californian accent, trying not to laugh as the clerk yanked himself away from April and pinned himself to the wall, causing the faint clanking of several bottles who were in the way.

'Go back to bed, Brett, honey, before you tire out the two brain cells you're having to engage coming down here,' April said laconically, starting to drape herself round the terrified night clerk.

'You cheap bitch!' Darryl hissed, pushing her out of the way, and, with one punch, flooring the clerk, who appeared to submit rather gratefully to his inevitable punishment, sinking rather elegantly to the floor without further comment.

'Good shot, Darryl!' April murmured, watching as the other two agents crept down the stairs and round the corner of the curved bar. Now, let's have a little disagreement shall we, just enough to bring the boys out to see what's going on.'

She grabbed a bottle of vodka from the bar behind her and proceeded to smash it on the bar, brandishing it in front of Darryl's nose as the door of the security room was flung open. Napoleon was aware of his sleeve being tugged.

'That was a whole bottle of Stoli she just smashed!' an anguished voice said in his ear.

The security guards appeared at the door to see a woman wearing an extremely low cut black dress threatening a tall, slimy looking man with a jagged broken bottle.

'Get back, you mad bitch!' Darryl began, leaning forward in a slightly Neanderthal posture, his arms protectively in front of his trousers as she began to swing the bottle dangerously near.

'You stop me, you freaking ape!' she half shrieked, half whispered back, strutting towards him on tottering heels she was desperate to exchange for the pumps in her bag.

'Qu'est-ce que c'est? Ah, mon dieu, monsieur-dame, qu'est-ce vous faites?!!'

They both stopped as if frozen, and glanced round at the first security guard, a tall, dark complexioned man with brown hair who had run over to them, leaving his companion lurking behind him in front of the reception desk. April could see Illya squirming round the dark edge of the room towards the desk, trying to get behind the second guard. Darryl followed her glance and jerked his head towards the first guard, a particularly stupid expression on his face.

'What's your problem?' he grunted. 'Don't speak English?'

'Of course, he doesn't, shit-face!' April yelled back, warming to her role. 'He is French!'

The second security guard now moved forward slowly as Darryl grabbed the arm of his partner. Illya caught him as he collapsed from the chop to his neck, dragging him round the back of the desk, and into the security room. His partner spun round, quick enough to see the legs of his colleague.
disappearing round the end of the reception desk, but not quick enough to prevent the dart from entering his neck. He lurched back towards Darryl, who supported him while he slowly sank to the ground.

'Get up.' Solo stood in front of him, holstersing his gun as he spoke. Darryl's eyes widened as the guard immediately got to his feet and stood directly in front of Napoleon, seemingly inert, waiting.

'Now go into the control room. You haven't heard any disturbance. Everything is fine,' he said in even, perfect French. The guard turned mechanically and walked towards the room, apparently unaware of any other thing or person around him. Darryl stripped off his gown and threw it behind the bar, expertly covering the clerk, as two shoes flew over to join it. April lent over the sink of the bar, ran some water, and then turned. Her makeup was now a black smear round her eyes, giving her a slightly bizarre panda look.

'I'm staying here with him. Short of you punching me, this is the next best thing I could think of,' she whispered, pointing to her eyes. Tell Napoleon to use Channel T to contact me, it'll avoid problems with the frequencies they're using here.' She leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek. 'Now, good luck with those two.'

Darryl grinned, feeling torn between wanting to stay with April and what he had wanted to do for so long; to work with Solo and Kuryakin. Since Sabi Klose was on desk duty for the next few months, and her partner Fernandes had been sent to Brazil until she returned to active service, he had finally been given the opportunity, and he was damn sure he was not going to blow it at the first attempt. He ran round the back of the desk and through the door, which the other two had left open fractionally for him.

'Oh, there you are. April in place?' Solo was lounging on the desk at the side of the room, while Kuryakin was systematically checking the monitors of the ground floor, winding back the tapes and deleting the last few minutes from their record. He seemed to have finished by the time Darryl arrived, looking up and smiling encouragingly at the younger agent.

'It's a shame I don't have time to look at the previous security footage of this floor, but, it may be worth just flicking through the different rooms and corridors so we've got an idea of what it looks like, topographically,' Illya said, glancing at Napoleon.

'OK, but we haven't got long. We need to move in about five minutes, no more,' Napoleon replied, coming over to the bank of three monitors which Darryl presumed the guard had told them were connected to the mysterious floor below them. Illya motioned to a piece of paper and a pencil on the desk.

'Jot down the order of the rooms, will you, so we've at least got some kind of map' he said, sitting on an office chair, and pushing it back so that Darryl could sit beside him.

There was a bank of switches immediately below the monitors, and it was relatively simple, even without the guard's help, to flick between the various cameras located on the floor. The first views were of the area immediately outside the lift shaft, and the corridors leading off from it. Surprisingly, it seemed devoid of guards, although Illya assumed that they were either in a guard room near the lift shaft, or that they had felt no need to guard such an impenetrable place. He flicked the main switch a couple of times. The first of a series of rooms which reminded him of UNCLE HQ in New York flickered onto the screens. The first room was a guard room, with bunks on each side, enough for about eight guards. He frowned as he counted two guards who appeared to be sleeping heavily, their still bodies turned away from the camera. He shrugged and looked towards Napoleon.

'Perhaps the others are prowling around somewhere,' Solo said.
'Well, we should see them hopefully, if we keep looking,' Illya replied, glancing at the other two rooms in the set, which appeared to be offices of some sort, the last one a particularly large and grand looking one with superior furniture and a large screen on one wall. A door led from that office to another room. Illya hurriedly snapped on the next three rooms, his stomach churning slightly at what he expected to see in the next room, a medical examination area.

'Ten to one that's Rondeau's office,' Napoleon said. 'Looks suitably ostentatious.' Illya nodded and continued flicking through a further set of less expensively fitted offices and examination rooms, Darryl hurriedly sketching out a rough plan as he went. After about the third set there was, as expected, a suite of operating rooms, all well equipped by the look of them, leading, finally, to a small ward. Strangely, it was completely empty.

'I think that's the end of that corridor,' Illya whispered. 'I'll just have a . . . yes, this is the other corridor.' The other set of rooms looked decidedly less medical. There was a set of what could only be described as classrooms, including, Illya saw to his amazement, a room with musical instruments in it and one with banks of tape-recorders and other, more technical equipment. Finally, after what looked like a large kitchen and dining area, some bedrooms appeared on the monitors. Napoleon leaned forward, guessing who might be revealed any minute.

The first, rather basically furnished room, was shared by two women, their uniforms neatly folded on the chairs by their beds. Illya flicked the direction to the other side of that corridor, where a similar room revealed a similar set up, this time of men.

'It's still not very well guarded,' he murmured to Napoleon, reverting back to the women's side of the corridor. Napoleon drew up a chair the other side of Illya to give him a better view.

'Do you not think it's a little, how shall I say, empty?' he said quietly. Illya glanced at him, his own thoughts echoed in his partner's question. Without answering he flicked the switch to what he was sure were the last set of rooms. He counted three bedrooms down one side, all empty.

'So that means there should be three this side,' he said, almost to himself.

'And that Rondeau and Funk must be in the hotel somewhere,' Napoleon interrupted. Illya frowned, and clicked to show the last three bedrooms. The first was empty, like the others opposite it. Strangely, in the second, the close-circuit system didn't seem to work, the screen showing only a grey haze, as Illya forced his gaze towards the last screen. Unmistakeably, the figure underneath the blankets in this room was a child.

Napoleon refrained from nudging his partner or saying anything immediately. Illya leaned over to Darryl's plan, and, taking his pen from him, wrote a neat 'P' in the box Darryl had drawn, before switching off the monitors and standing up.

'Shall we go?' he said, putting on his rucksack, and taking out his gun. Napoleon raised his eyebrows fractionally at Darryl and picked up the map.

'Sit down,' he said firmly to the guard. 'You have seen nothing. Nothing has happened. Now, turn off the security on the floor below, and send us down.' Darryl and Solo grabbed the unconscious guard and dragged him into a small adjacent room full of filing cabinets, shutting the door firmly and following Kuryakin out of the office and down towards the lifts.

Napoleon glanced round the room, conscious that April was nowhere to be seen. The guard had obviously followed orders and the lift door was already open as they approached it, the three men just having enough time to enter before the door shut behind them and the lift began to move rapidly downwards. In a matter of seconds, the lift had arrived at its destination, the door revealing the lobby
they had looked at only minutes before in the security room.

'This is too easy. I'm beginning to have a bad feeling in my bones about this,' Napoleon murmured in his partner's ear, as they stopped at the junction of the two corridors.

'Quite. The only people that appear to be here are six guards and one little girl,' Kuryakin replied tersely. 'Why don't you and Darryl have a quick look in the medical side of the establishment, while I …'

'Ten minutes only, OK? We'll meet you outside Pascale's room.' Illya nodded and moved down the corridor carefully, past the guards' rooms.

The room was identical to all the others, the last one on the left before a blank end wall. As Illya walked past the adjacent room, he wondered, yet again, why it had been disconnected from the security system. He hesitated at the door, then moved on; it was enough to deal with what awaited him next door. He felt stupidly nervous as his hand grasped the door knob, gently turning it.

Thankfully, the door didn't appear to be locked, which was strange in itself, but at least he wouldn't have to introduce himself to his daughter by blowing the door down.

The bed was on the far side of the room, the room no different to that of the guards, Illya thought with disgust. A vivid image of Pablo's room filled his mind; the warm, apricot coloured walls filled with posters and photographs, crowded with the usual assortment of boys' toys, musical instruments and books, and lately, with Pablo's own paintings. He smiled briefly at the numerous times he had run up the stairs when the noise had got to deafening pitch, to find Pablo and Marvin engaged in World War II in the bedroom, or, the more precious moments of sharing a book with his son, the boy's face looking up at his as he read, with an expression of love that had moved and amazed him in equal measures.

He breathed in and approached the bed, kneeling down and wondering how he could wake her without the usual screams girls seemed to make when anything surprising or frightening happened.

But as he forced himself to finally look at her, with a sigh she turned over and opened her eyes.

'Papa?'

He nodded dumbly, as she sat up, and without ceremony, dragged him towards her and hugged him, her small body pushed into his as if they were mysteriously joined and could not now be separated.

He let the rucksack fall onto the bed as they sat there together for a few, silent moments, Illya slowly stroking her soft hair as she clung to him. Eventually, he reached out and put on the light by the side of the bed.

He had rehearsed what he would say, but even he had thought the words sounded like orders; to get ready, that they were leaving and that she had to go with another stranger back to a place where she would know no-one at all. But her instinctive reaction to him had pushed all that out of his mind, and instead he pushed her back gently, enabling her to sit on his lap while he spoke to her in gentle, warm tones.

'Did I frighten you?' he began, smiling a little at his own nervousness.

'Oh no, papa, I knew you would have to come like this. I've . . . I've been trying to prepare . . .' She suddenly drew his face towards hers and began to kiss him, rubbing her face on his. 'You'll think I am a little baby,' she said, starting to sob, 'but I . . . I thought you weren't . . .' He drew her towards him and held her tightly.

'I'm so sorry, Pascale,' he murmured. 'Papa took far too long to find you; far too long.'
'A very touching reunion, Dr Kuryakin. Still, you'll have plenty of time to get to know each other where you're going. Plenty of time.'

Illya felt Pascale go rigid in his arms as he jerked his head up towards the figure standing in the doorway. Phillipe Rondeau stood with his arms crossed, a slight sneer animating his face, as he stepped into the room. Illya could see two guards behind him, who he imagined must have come from the hotel. He could have probably taken out at least one of the guards if they came a little nearer, but with Pascale clenching to him, with her here, he couldn't risk the possibility of her being hurt, or of witnessing such violence, and they knew that. He kissed Pascale on the cheek and stood up, his hands over his head.

Surprisingly, the little girl got out of the bed and stood by his side calmly. He glanced down at her, a smile coming to his lips as he saw her expression. Her glare was icy, directed at the man standing opposite them. Rondeau signalled the guards, who came forward and roughly turned him round, yanking his holster and gun off his shoulders, and wrenching his arms behind his back to cuff them.

'Search him and take off his shoes,' Rondeau ordered, as the guards began to systematically search the Russian, removing the contents of his jacket and his knife which had been strapped to his ankle. From around his waist, the second guard removed some metal ankle restraints, which he clamped onto Illya's legs, before standing back behind his partner.

'Isn't this a bit over the top?' Illya said archly, moving his legs the tiny amount they would go without the chain between them pulling him back.

'Not for you, my dear Kuryakin,' Rondeau said. 'Your reputation precedes you. Without your, shall we say, "contribution", our plan will be incomplete, and when we have finished with you, I'm afraid that you are being traded to someone who is most anxious to see you again.'

Illya frowned. 'Traded? For what?' Rondeau came a little nearer, more confident that the man in front of him was safely shackled and so unable to inflict a similar injury to the one Rondeau had seen on the guard above.

'Not for what, Kuryakin,' Rondeau said, frowning at the glare the little girl continued to direct towards him. 'Rather for whom,' he said. Illya felt Pascale's little hand holding his cuffed ones. He wondered what on earth had happened to Napoleon and Darryl, or even to April. He had been captured practically as soon as he had entered the building, his colleagues were absolutely nowhere to be seen, and he still had absolutely no idea what was really going on.

'Say goodnight to Papa, Pascale,' Rondeau said, motioning the guards towards the Russian. 'And don't worry, you'll be seeing a lot more of him from now on.'

CHAPTER 13

Napoleon rubbed his head and turned over, as far as the shackles holding his feet and hands would allow him to. He could see Illya similarly chained in the bed on the other side of the room, minus, it appeared, any of his clothes, a blue jumpsuit replacing the clothes he had been wearing the night before. There was no sign of either Darryl or April.

'Illya. Illya!' he almost shouted, wondering how much time had elapsed since he and Darryl had been darted, as they had investigated the rooms along the other corridor. The Russian immediately turned over. He had obviously been awake, but silent, and, by the look of him, untouched apart from the removal of his clothes.

'You OK?' Napoleon asked, trying to get himself into a comfortable position and failing.
'Yes, fine.' There was a silence as they both took in what had happened.

'You know, I still have no idea how they knew we were coming. . .' 

'And, what the hell this is all about,' Napoleon added. Illya glanced down at his jumpsuit with disdain, and began to recount the details of the night.

They had dragged him away from Pascale and along the corridor to a large examination room, where they had stripped him of his clothes in a rather careful way, Illya thought, as if they were important. Nothing more was done. He had been brought to this room, Solo already occupying it by the time he arrived.

'I estimate by the feeling in my stomach, that it must be about seven or eight o'clock,' Illya said, lying on his back, so that means that anytime soon . . .'

His sentence was ended by the door being flung open. Four guards entered, followed, to Illya's amazement, by Hermione Pilkington.

'Well hello, Brother, or should I say Dr?' she began, sitting down on the bed as the guards rolled in a trolley with what looked like breakfast for one.

'Mr is fine, Hermione,' Illya said, pursing his lips as she started to run her hands through his hair. She was wearing extremely tight fitting black trousers, with a bright green polo neck jumper on top, a wide, shiny black belt skimming her hips and matching the shiny black boots on her feet. The red hair was now loose, cascading down her back. Compared to Tess's hair, Illya thought, it looked somehow fake; straight and unnaturally coloured, like a red curtain across her shoulders.

She appeared to lose interest in Illya, to his great relief, as she turned and saw his partner lying facing her.

'Mm. A real man,' she started, kneeling down and smoothing Napoleon's hair off his forehead. He raised his eyebrows at his partner, before giving her a flashing smile. She signalled to the guards to release him, while she drew the trolley nearer.

'Now, Napoleon dear,' she said, 'it's time for breakfast. And then, we'll see if we can get you all cleaned up for Hermione to play with.'

As Napoleon sat up, he saw that they were preparing to take Illya out of the room, applying the handcuffs and shackles that he had worn in the bed as well. Illya glanced fondly at the breakfast tray, before he was yanked forward and half-dragged out.

'I don't suppose you'd care to tell me where they're taking him,' Napoleon ventured, as she wound a napkin round his neck, and reached for the plate on the trolley.

'Well, I wouldn't, Napoleon darling. Except that I can say you won't be seeing him much before this evening. They really have a lot to get through, and in such a short time, darling. Still, that gives us all day to have fun, doesn't it?'

Xxxxxx

It felt like hours before Illya arrived in the examination room, the shackles making walking slow and laborious. Thankfully, there was a similar tray awaiting him there, but without Hermione to assist, he thought gratefully. A mannish female guard shoved him forward to the table and chair, where he just about managed to sit down without falling over.
'Well, are you going to feed me, or am I allowed to have these taken off?' he said impatiently, shaking his arms. Before she could reply, the door opened, and Rondeau entered, with Pascale.

'Your daughter has been making a lot of fuss about seeing you, so I thought she could assist you with your breakfast, since I'm not prepared to release you, yet,' he said, pushing the little girl forward. She was dressed in rather mundane clothes, a kind of boring old fashioned school uniform Illya knew Thérèse would want to replace with the clothes he'd found secreted in a wardrobe at the top of their house. She ran forward joyfully and kissed him, whispering 'Bonjour Papa' before winding the napkin round his neck and pouring coffee into the cup provided.

'Thank you, Pascale,' he said, as she carefully helped him to sip the coffee, and then broke the croissant up into tiny pieces, spreading butter and apricot jam on each, before lifting the plate and feeding them to him.

He found himself enjoying the breakfast, despite the situation he found himself in. Pascale was so attentive; it was hard not to feel an immediate attachment to her. He reflected on what seemed now his brutish behaviour towards her, and his wife's constant assurances that all would be well. Once again she had been proved right, but as the problem of Pascale waned, so the danger of his position here seemed to intensify. They allowed him to be unshackled to take a shower and shave, bringing him a fresh jumpsuit and underwear. Illya looked at himself in the large mirror behind the sink. He thought of Napoleon and Hermione and what she had planned for his partner; at least he was still alive, which suggested that they needed the American for something.

When he returned to the examination room, he found that Pascale had disappeared, to be replaced by the altogether more unpleasant Erik Funk. Illya remembered Rudi's conversation with him about Funk, and the word 'crooked' being used in its most unpleasant connotation. The table had been replaced by a larger one, upon which was an assortment of unpleasant looking loaded syringes. At the back of the bed a smaller table had been set up with a large tape recorder. They were obviously expecting him to divulge something, he presumed information about UNCLE. He looked scathingly at the syringes as the guards began to undo his shackles.

'It will take you a very long time, bordering on never, to get me to give you information on UNCLE,' he said wearily, staring at the technician drawing up the syringes.

'Oh, we know that, Dr Kuryakin,' Rondeau said, indicating the guards to hold him firmly. 'It's not that information we want; it's something far more personal.' Illya frowned as they began to strip off the jumpsuit.

'Take it all off' Funk ordered in a rather high-pitched voice. 'I need to see if I've missed anything.' He obviously had some photographs in his hand, which he seemed to be comparing with Kuryakin. Illya reluctantly stripped off, glad that it delayed the needles a little bit longer at least.

Funk came nearer, starting to run his hand over the Russian agent's back. Illya could feel his breath very close, as if the man wanted him to be aware of his body near Illya's own. He gritted his teeth and looked down, trying to see what exactly the photographs were.

'You have lovely skin,' Funk murmured in his ear; someone's been doing some work on you.' Illya grunted, thinking of the evenings he had spent with soft hands working across his body until he had drifted into sleep with the sheer ecstasy of her touch. Suddenly, Funk turned away and slammed the photographs down on the table.

'It's no good, I have to do a direct comparison, body to body. I can't compare him to photographs,' he said, prancing around, as Illya attempted to locate his underwear with his feet. He turned round and grabbed the clothes, grasping Illya's wrist with a surprisingly strong grip.
'No, you don't, my pretty boy,' he hissed. Illya clenched his fists, longing to bring them up under Funk's jaw. As he closed his left hand, he felt the new scar on the base of the thumb.

'D'accord. Alright,' Rondeau said, picking up the phone and speaking into it, then walking across to Kuryakin. 'You wanted to know exactly what all this was about, Dr Kuryakin,' he began, waving his hand around. 'Well, you will see for yourself. You may have noticed that our facility is somewhat empty; yes, I can see from your face that you did. We knew that you would find a way to infiltrate this place, and I congratulate you on how well you did. It was fascinating following your every move from that fateful afternoon of your US Army medical to the moment you came out of the lift's doors down there,' he indicated with his hand.

He walked over to Illya and touched the side of his head.

'You might have noticed that a little hair was missing after your medical. Under all this,' he said, rubbing the skin above Illya's ear, 'we placed a tiny wire, just underneath the skin. It has been helping us track you ever since. Because your part of the programme is so important, it was considered worthwhile moving the rest of our work to another place. So now, Dr Kuryakin, there is only you and . . .' as the door opened, and Illya turned, 'oh, another you, Dr Kuryakin.'

XXXXXXXXXX

It was obviously the evening, fairly late, Napoleon thought, as they carried his partner into the room, and shackled him to the bed.

'Don't waste your breath trying to wake him, you won't be able to,' the guard had said, almost as an aside as he left. Surprisingly, Napoleon had been left unshackled after an eventful day with Hermione. It was fairly hard going trying to keep her off him all day, but at least she didn't seem to want to either hurt him, or try and find out anything from him. She had given him a fairly long and vigorous massage session, followed by a thorough, verging on slightly sadistic manicure. It gave him time to think about Illya and what exactly was going on, but he couldn't quite work out Hermione's role in all this, nor his, if it came to it.

His partner had obviously had a rougher day. He had a butterfly vent in his arm, suggesting drugs had been used for some purpose, and that they hadn't finished yet. His face looked slightly flushed, and the calmness of the previous night had been replaced by a look of extreme pain, as if he had experienced something which had seriously disturbed him. Solo hoped that they hadn't tortured the little girl in an effort to gain his partner's compliance.

For a while, he sat by his partner's bed, looking at the face of the man he knew better than any other. They had shared many other, similar places to this before, in similar situations of captivity and the ever present possibility of that day, that night, being their last together. Soaking a handkerchief in the small metal sink, he started to wipe his partner's face, as if whatever pain the Russian had experienced, could be expunged in the cleansing action of the cloth. At some point in the night he had woken up stiff, realising he was asleep knelt by the side of Kuryakin's bed, his arm slung protectively over his partner's body. Illya's face retained the same, tortured expression as before.

In the morning, they had removed the Russian before he awoke. What had been an amusing day with Hermione now became hours to be got through before Illya would return, if he did. Despite being taken to various rooms in the complex for 'fun' as she called it, Napoleon caught no sight of the other two agents, or even any other guards for that matter. The so-called treatment he was receiving seemed almost an obscenely enjoyable flip side to whatever his partner was enduring.

On the third day, in the afternoon, he was given the chance he had been waiting for. As he lay face down on a table waiting for the now tedious set of treatments to begin, he heard her swear as
whatever she was holding crashed to the ground smashing its contents across the floor.

'Problem?' Solo began, noticing the guard leaving the room.

'Nothing to concern yourself with, Napoleon dear,' she had said, turning away from him towards the trolley holding her equipment. Napoleon rolled off the other side of the bed, and with a great grunt, shoved it towards Hermione. The table slid across the polished floor of the room, pinning her between the trolley and itself. As Solo ran across the room, dodging the broken glass, Hermione wrenched the trolley away and slid between the bed and the wall, her face alive with a kind of predatory grin. Trying to ignore the fact that he was naked, and that she was a woman, Napoleon grabbed her by her long ponytail and pulled her down, yanking her arms behind her back and then sitting astride her as she attempted to kick him with her flailing legs. Conveniently, there was a long cotton belt lying on the trolley which he used to tie her hands together, before reaching across to grab a large wad of cotton wool and ramming it into Hermione's now screaming mouth. The effect was almost instantaneous, reducing the screams to mere muffled gurgles. Hauling her over his shoulder, he threw her down on the bed, tying her down with the straps which she had, he thought, so stupidly omitted to use with him.

After quickly dressing, he glanced round the room. The adjoining door was a small changing room, which he estimated would just take a bed of the size she was lying on. Releasing the wheels, he manoeuvred the trolley into the room and shut the door, sprinting to the other door, as he heard the guard approaching the larger room.

The guard entered the room obviously carrying something in a jar for Hermione, which hit the floor as Napoleon chopped his neck, adding to the now ocean of glass and cream. He dragged the guard across the room, and hastily removed his clothing and gun, thankful that he was of similar build and height, depositing him in the changing area on the floor next to the table.

'Sorry to miss this afternoon's session,' he said, leaning over the now incandescent faced Hermione. He shut the door and locked it before struggling into the guard's uniform and then going over to the trolley, now forlornly stranded amidst the glass shards in the middle of the room. There were one or two useful objects he thought he might be able to utilise which he stuffed into his pocket before quietly opening the door and heading down the corridor.

He had no real idea where he was going, except that he was sure they must be holding Illya in the same corridor as the one he was on, rather than the one containing the bedrooms and the classrooms. Napoleon felt slightly more confident now that he was armed, and at least didn't look too obvious to any security cameras that may be watching him. He kept his head down, away from the cameras, and forced himself to walk slowly up the corridor, listening briefly at each door for any familiar sounds, or indeed any sounds at all. After a couple of empty rooms, he recognised a familiar voice. Breathing a relieved sigh, he opened the door.

Illya was standing in the middle of what was obviously an examination room. As Solo entered, he could have sworn that Kuryakin didn't recognise him. The Russian's face suddenly seemed to register who he was, but not before a look of fleeting horror crossed the familiar features. Astonishingly, he was wearing the clothes April had provided what seemed like a million nights previously, rather than the shapeless blue jumpsuit Napoleon had last seen him in.

'Napoleon, um, I thought you were . . .'

'Improving on nature? I decided to give it a miss this afternoon. Besides, I think you'll find Hermione's tied up with one of the guards,' Napoleon said, wandering across to where a bank of tape recorders were re-winding.
'What's this? Recording your life story, comrade?' he said, aware that the Russian still hadn't moved from his original position of frozen shock in the middle of the room.

The tape finally clunked still, and Napoleon pressed the 'play' button, the large reel, with a small jerk, starting again in the opposite direction. After the usual tape noises, a voice with a pronounced French accent began to speak.

'Ilya, can you hear me?' There was a slight pause, before the clear reply of his partner was heard.

'Yes.' Rondeau, as Napoleon assumed the voice belonged to, then began to speak again. Napoleon readied himself to hear the usual mantra that THRUSH used to extract information from agents, and expected to hear the usual, controlled answers from the Russian. However, these questions were entirely unexpected.

'Now, Ilyia, tell us your favourite names for Thérèse. You must have a name you call her when you're, for instance, making love to her?'

Napoleon was so taken aback by the question, he was unaware that the other man in the room had flattened himself against the wall and was staring at the open door into the corridor. Ilyia's voice could now be heard on the tape; he sounded distressed, as if he knew the information was deeply personal and was not to be uttered to others.

'I . . . Teresita, mi amado,' he began, the Spanish words of love sounding acutely incongruous in the cold, steel room. Napoleon frowned, then froze, suddenly aware that there were others listening, too.

'Bravo, Monsieur Solo. I see you have escaped the gentle touch of Hermione . . . for now.' Napoleon slowly turned round, the slow grin on his face replaced by a shocked stare as he took in the scene unfolding before him.

Phillipe Rondeau, the disembodied voice now taking physical shape, stood before him, two guards either side of the doorway. It was the other figure next to him, between the two guards, that made his stomach suddenly lurch. His partner stood there, his lips a pale line across the even paler face.

'Ilyia?' Napoleon started, feeling his heart racing away from him as he quickly glanced from one man to the other.

Forcing himself to recover as quickly as he could from the shock, Solo glanced at the two men. The first Ilyia looked exactly as the Russian had appeared when they had left the bedroom a few nights before. Napoleon remembered Ilyia telling him how carefully they had removed his clothes; it was now obvious why. His hair was the exact style it had been, and he had heard the man. He sounded like his partner. The only difference was his expression; the man pressed against the wall looked frightened to death, but of what, or of whom, Napoleon wondered.

He glanced back at the man who he now knew was his partner, standing between the two guards. He looked as if he had just had a shower, his hair, what remained of it, was still damp, his face newly shaven. Napoleon grimaced at the cheap looking clothes he was wearing; shapeless trousers made of thick looking material hung off his slim frame, the grey shirt and nondescript tie showing beneath the lumpy jacket making him appear rather delicate beneath their crude cut. He was clutching a large, thick overcoat and what looked like a poor imitation of the beautiful fur hat Solo could remember hanging in the hall at Grove St. A canvas shoulder bag just about managed to hang on his more muscular shoulders; Napoleon wondered what it contained for the now obvious journey he was about to make.

Napoleon fought to regain his composure as he raised his hands above his head and allowed another
guard, who had come round the back of the strange group, to relieve him of his weapon. He exchanged glances with Kuryakin, the Russian's face set, but obviously glad to see his partner. He seemed remarkably passive, Napoleon thought, allowing himself to be pushed around by the guards, as they pulled out two chairs, forcing Illya into one and Napoleon into the other, before closing the door and standing to attention by it. Rondeau walked over to the other Illya and leaned against the wall by him.

'So, Mr Solo, you now understand, at least in part, our little programme,' he began, a nasty little smile beginning to form on his lips. 'It was a pity you escaped when you did and found us; I had hoped to try our new model out on you as a, how do you put it, a 'test run', but of course you had to come blundering in. Still, what do you think of him, Mr Solo? Why don't you ask him something and see how convincing you find his answers? Ask him something about his childhood, for instance. You know, something Dr Kuryakin there has never told even you, before now. I can assure you that our new model is an expert.'

The chairs they were sitting on had been placed near enough for the two agents to be within touching distance of each other. Looking at his partner, Napoleon continued to wonder about the obvious pain now apparent on the Russian's face. It seemed too intense even for this. What was it that was troubling him so much that he seemed almost physically weighed down by it? He glanced across at Rondeau, wanting to take a swing at him.

'How come he knows so much?' he whispered to the now sombre looking Kuryakin. Illya looked up, his eyes full of pain.

'Because he was part of my childhood,' he replied, hoarsely.

Napoleon's memory started to sift through what he knew of Illya as a child. He knew a lot more since Marina had moved to New York, but there were still huge gaps which the Russian chose not to discuss, or at least not with him. He knew that Kuryakin had a dead twin, and no other really close relatives, not ones that had really shared his childhood for any significant time. The names of people from his University days could hardly be classed as childhood friends, either. It had to be someone who he had known from Kiev . . . Napoleon stared closely at his partner and then across the room at the uncomfortable replica of his closest friend standing opposite him.

'So, Misha, what does it feel like to betray your best friend?' he said icily, receiving confirmation of his guess from both Russians simultaneously.

Rondeau began to clap his hands slowly, several times.

'Well done, Mr Solo. You are more astute than I took you for.' He shoved the man by his side forward, making him stand near Solo. Before Napoleon could get up, he felt an iron grip on his arm.

'Don't,' he heard Illya say fiercely. 'It's not his fault. He's every bit a pawn in this man's game as we are.' The two Russians looked at each other, holding each other's gaze. Napoleon could see the one he knew was called Misha move forward fractionally to be closer to Illya.

'Hurt them in any way and I will kill you.' Misha nodded, his eyes matching the original's in shape, but, Napoleon thought, lacking the intensity of Kuryakin's blend of bluey-greyness.

'Hate to have to mention it, Rondeau, but this hoary little scheme was a dismal failure last time you tried it,' Napoleon said, trying to sound more laid back than he felt. He continued to look at Misha, perturbed by how perfectly similar he was to Kuryakin. The memory of the photographs taken at the medical now exploded into his mind. It seemed so obvious now, but not then. No doubt this man shared all the other scars and marks that Kuryakin had amassed over the years too. It was, all in all, a
spectacular job. Napoleon had never seen a photograph of Misha, but he guessed they had looked alike from what Illya had told him, particularly of their time in the Navy. The photographs, and now the detailed tape-recordings of Illya's personal memories, together with what THRUSH already had about Illya's professional life, added up to a pretty chilling prospect.

'Oh, this is completely different from the "hoary little scheme" you so aptly described, Mr Solo,' Rondeau replied. 'In fact, Mr Shevchenko here has provided us with a unique opportunity to compromise the security of your organisation fatally, and, as an added bonus, to utterly destroy the careers of its most illustrious agents.'

There was obviously to be no quick execution then, Napoleon thought. He could see that Illya was going somewhere soon, and he could guess where, but what about his own destiny? As if to answer the questions now flooding into his mind, there was a sharp rap at the door.

Hermione entered, half dragging someone Napoleon immediately recognised. Pascale was wearing a similarly poor quality set of clothing, also suggesting a visit to somewhere very cold. She shoved her forward in front of her and threw the coat and little bag on the table behind her, Pascal immediately running towards her father and embracing him. Napoleon was intensely relieved by Kuryakin's loving response, as he allowed her to sit on his knee and cling to him. Hermione glanced down at the two Kuryakins with a look of unconcealed disdain. Napoleon could feel a kind of venomous aura heading in his direction from the woman, as she turned towards him. Before he could prepare himself, she had raised her hand and given him a hard slap across the face.

'Is he mine?' she said, turning to Rondeau. He walked over and grabbed her wrist, twisting it until she winced with the pain.

'Remember, cherie,' he hissed, 'you can have fun with him, as you say, but only until the indicated time. Then, it's as we arranged.' Napoleon frowned, not particularly liking the sound of what was planned for him, or who was going to be doing it.

'Um, sorry to interrupt, Rondeau, but I'm still a little hazy as to the details of your grand scheme,' he said, raising his hand as if he was the boy in class who didn't quite get it.

'Napoleon, it goes like this.' Napoleon was momentarily startled by Illya's voice, as his partner had remained silent for so long. He sat up slightly, still holding onto Pascale, who buried her head further into his shoulder. 'Um, let's see. Misha has been traded for me, because someone who knows us both, realises that only he has the technical knowledge to understand the Oriel programme, and also physically is very close to me. No doubt that same person threatened Misha with the usual destination offered to those in our beloved homeland who don't quite toe the line, as it were.' He looked at Napoleon and then at Rondeau, who seemed to be enjoying watching the Russian explain.

'In order to make another version of me, Dr Rondeau and his colleague needed detailed photographs, which they were able to obtain from none other than Mr Bradley Mitchell, CIA, via a source I haven't worked out yet, and, I presume through our KGB mystery man.'

'Illyusha, it was Sasha.' They were all surprised by the sudden interruption, particularly since it was like hearing Kuryakin speaking again.

'Shit up' Rondeau said, shoving Misha. 'We don't want to give Mr Kuryakin too much help now, do we?' Illya frowned, looking at Misha.

'Me, you Misha, and now Sasha.' He sat back, a look spreading across his face suggesting he understood the plot now, and it appalled him. A few moments passed before he looked at Rondeau and said very slowly, 'Viktor Borisovitch Nikitin.'
'Precisely, Kuryakin, you are a clever man,' Rondeau replied.

'So, Mitchell is KGB?' Napoleon said, wondering when this bizarre conversation would end.

'No, Napoleon. You remember I thought that to begin with, but as I said before, this is not the KGB’s *modus operandi*. I would guess that Nikitin is operating alone at the moment, and has set up some sort of relationship with Mitchell through Sasha for his own reasons.'

'And they are?' Illya smiled, a sad, wistful smile, directed partly at Misha. 'Oh, they go back a long, long way, Napoleon. Men like him have long memories. He has bided his time, waiting for when he reached a position to draw in his net. Obviously that time is now.' Napoleon could see that Rondeau's amusement at the scene was coming to an end.

'Um, just one little thing,' he said. 'These two' he motioned towards Illya and Pascale; 'what happens when they escape from wherever they're headed and join old Misha here back at UNCLE New York?' Rondeau sniffed, shaking his head. Before he could speak, Illya murmured, 'Don't ask Napoleon, please, not in front of Pascale.' Napoleon frowned, but not before a cruel smile had played across Rondeau's face.

'Oh, I thought you might wonder how it is you find your partner so cooperative,' he smirked. He walked across and pulled the little girl round, and off Illya's lap, wrenching up the little blouse she was wearing until the top of a recent operation scar could be seen on her chest.

'You see that, Mr Solo,' he said. 'I am only too well aware of Mr Kuryakin's annoying habit of escaping. So we thought that this time we might make it a little bit more trickier for him.' He let the girl's clothes fall down, and she sank back into her father's arms. Napoleon noticed that Illya had his hands over her ears as Rondeau continued to talk.

'I presume you are familiar with the heart pacemaker,' he said. Napoleon nodded, a rather unpleasant idea beginning to form in his mind. 'Little Pascale here of course, has a perfectly good heart. We’ve just added a little device to it. If her father decides to do anything rash, then, with this little control here,' he held up a small box, with a switch, 'all we need to do is press, and Bof! No more Pascale.'

Suddenly, there was a terrible noise from an unexpected quarter.

'Svoloch!' Misha bellowed and launched himself at Rondeau, the two men hitting the floor and rolling over, Misha putting in a couple of well aimed blows to Rondeau's head before he was yanked back and held tight by the guards. Napoleon leapt to his feet, only to look into the barrel of a small Beretta pistol.

'Sit down, big boy,' he heard Hermione whisper, 'I don't want to have fun with damaged goods.' He sat down again, aware that Misha was now on the floor, the two guards aiming their weapons towards his legs.

A furious Rondeau mopped his now blood soaked face with some swabs from the trolley behind them. Napoleon hadn't noticed before then the row of drawn syringes lying waiting. He turned round to see Rondeau now standing over Misha's prostrate form on the floor.

'Ah, Mikhail Ivanovitch, I would have thought you had learnt your lesson by now,' he said, glancing at himself in the mirror.

'What lesson?' Misha asked, now quiet.

'Oh, what Kuryakin here also didn't learn. That passion, too much of it, can land you into a great deal of trouble,' Rondeau answered, looking at Pascale. She had sat up by now, and was looking at
Napoleon.

'Pascale,' Illya murmured, 'may I introduce Uncle Napoleon.' The little girl's face at once lit up. 'Uncle Napoleon likes girls, Pascale, and I'm sure he will spoil you rotten when we get home.' Napoleon grinned, taking the little girl's hand and kissing it.

'Enchanté, mademoiselle,' he whispered, before Rondeau turned towards them, signalling the guards to hold down Misha on the floor.

'Like your twin, Kuryakin, you're living in a fantasy world if you think you will ever see your wife and other children again, let alone your partner here. But, before you accuse me of being an unfeeling brute, perhaps Miss Pilkington here would like to just step outside with Pascale for a few moments while I just take care of a few final details.'

Napoleon and Illya glanced at each other, and then at Misha. With three guards in the room and Hermione also armed in the corridor, it would prove to be an extremely bloody outcome if they tried anything. Signalling to the remaining guard to handcuff the two UNCLE agents, Rondeau walked across the room and drew out a large hammer from a cupboard on the wall.

'Sometimes in surgery,' he began, 'one has to do somewhat cruder things to achieve success. This is an orthopaedic hammer, gentlemen. It's usually used on such thing as bunions in the feet, you understand.' The two guards, at Rondeau's command, dragged the terrified looking Misha onto the bed in front of the cupboard, and fastened the restraints over his body, leaving his legs free. Illya began to struggle with his handcuffs, receiving a blow from the other guard, a narrow stream of blood making its way from the cropped hair on the top of his head, to his face.

'By the way,' Napoleon whispered, there is one way to tell you two apart.' Illya looked at him with a slightly dazed look which he took to be as a result of the blow.

'And what is that, fluency in languages, greater chess-playing skill?' he replied, smiling faintly. Napoleon shook his head.

'Double crown. On your thick head, comrade. Double crown.' Illya raised his eyebrows, and then looked across at Misha. Rondeau had donned some surgical scrubs over his immaculate suit, but other than the clothes, he had made no attempt to observe surgical procedures.

'I don't like the look of this,' Napoleon murmured. 'After spending so much time and money on making him almost a perfect replica of you, why is he now going to take a swing at him with that?' Illya licked the blood off the side of his mouth and edged the chair a little nearer.

'I think we're just about to find out,' he said. 'Rondeau can't help himself. He's one of those.' Rondeau came towards the table and then turned to the silent agents.

'I imagine you're wondering why I should be doing this,' he said, ignoring the desperate looks of the man beneath him. 'Mr Shevchenko here has been wondering, Kuryakin, how he could possibly carry out your role in Section 2, especially since you will be without your illustrious partner for the foreseeable future.' Illya nodded.

'I was wondering how he'd do it, considering he used to hate all that macho kind of thing,' Illya said, suddenly remembering Misha's fussing over him whenever he sustained any even slight injury aboard the Moskva.

'We need Mr Shevchenko's brain, not his brawn,' Rondeau continued. All the physical training he's undertaken, the surgery, is so that UNCLE will recognise his body. But it only needs to be a first
impression, if you see what I mean,' he added.

'I don't,' Illya said blankly. Rondeau sniffed, then turned back to Misha with the hammer. 'As you all know, gentlemen, there are only four ways to leave Section 2.'

'Death, resignation, age, and . . .' Illya said, his face stricken as with a crash, Rondeau brought down the hammer several times on Misha's ankle.

'Injury,' Rondeau said, but the word was lost in the screaming of the man on the bed.
No matter how many times she told herself that she had slept alone for over twenty years and not felt cold, Thérèse shuddered as she turned over and placed her arm where he should be. The bedside table clock insisted on reminding her it was now six o'clock, the alarm exactly coinciding with the beginnings of a roar from the room next door.

She blew out her cheeks, pushing back her hair and forcing herself to a sitting position at the side of the bed. Since the evening before Illya left, when they had had the 'Mother Hero' conversation, as she thought of it now, she had abandoned all efforts to try and disguise her condition, which seemed to become more obvious as each day passed. Despite the fact that it was only two weeks since they'd left, she felt as if someone had found a hole in her back and was slowly blowing her up like a balloon.

'Thérèse, come on, get back here and give me a hand,' Thérèse muttered to herself as she found Tasiya in full rant in her room. She sighed, and dragged the baby out from the bombshell of her cot. Anastasiya had discovered that if she jumped up and down enough, holding onto the bars for support, she could dislodge the cot base and so escape by crawling through the gap. 'Your father will think you are very clever, but I think you are very naughty,' she whispered into the baby's thick auburn hair. It had suddenly started to grow long and thick, becoming slightly darker as she approached her first birthday. Strangely, it was only when Thérèse had been holding her down while Frankie attempted to trim the errant locks that she noticed the double crown.

'Look, not only is she as awkward as him about her hair, she's got his swirly crowns too,' she'd said, tracing the writhing red hair round the top of her daughter's bobbing head.

They had noticed that the house next to the Kuryakin's home was for sale. It was smaller than Illya and Thérèse's, without the extra floor at the top and the basement, the couple who owned it similar in age to the McDonalds and now moving closer to their family in upstate New York. Marina had looked round the house with Thérèse only days after Illya had left, and had loved it immediately. But turning to Thérèse as they were coming out, her face had fallen slightly.

'I suppose buying this house would be out of the question,' she had said.

'Why? You love it, and Peter will love it if you do.' She had suddenly smiled, making Thérèse start to giggle until she had to sit down she was laughing so much.

'Oh, he'll get used to it,' she had gasped. 'Besides, he's not here, and we are, and that's that!' She had folded her hands, and then burst out laughing again at the thought of what his face would look like when she told him.
She had also visited UNCLE that week. Unlike her sister, she had no reason to go there apart from occasional social visits, when she would usually stay in the foyer at the top entrance, never going through that ridiculous Tailor's entrance with that horrible swinging round door that made her feel she was in some cheap fairground ride. But now, Marina had persuaded her to see the person who topped Illya's 'Doctors to loathe' list, and like Marina's house, he had had no say in the decision either.

'Do come in Mrs Kuryakin,' he had said, appearing to be genuinely pleased to see her. 'Marina has told me about your possible condition. Shall we have a look? Then I'll be able to confirm her opinion.' He didn't mention Illya and she decided to draw a line over what had happened with Tasiya, who sat imperiously staring at him in her pushchair, until he had remarked on her similarity to her father.

'Yes, they're alike in lots of ways,' she had said, smiling, which had seemed to break the ice a little between them. Of course, the results of the examination were as she had expected, and he had warned her that extra care would be required.

'When your husband returns, perhaps I should have a word with him about future family planning,' he murmured into the notes on his desk.

'You can try,' Thérèse replied, smiling again.

She had called in to see Connie on her way out. It was strange being in their office, when they were so clearly not there, and it was obvious Connie felt that too.

'You're not!' she had cried, when Thérèse had come in.

'I am, and probably, no, I think most certainly . . .' She held up two fingers in front of the other woman. Connie had gasped and done a little dance.

'Gee whizz, double trouble; does he know?' Thérèse had nodded, and they had spent a few amusing minutes discussing the various permutations of gender and appearance of a McCaffery-Kuryakin combination. As she was going, Thérèse had hesitantly asked her if she had heard anything. She had shaken her head.

'No, I'd tell you if I'd heard, but there's been nothing. Nada.'

Peter helped her out of the house with the pushchair, and they trundled their way down to St Clare's, Marvin and Pablo running on ahead, having recently been recruited as altar boys by Gabriel. Thérèse hadn't told Gabi about the pregnancy, and she could see him looking intently at her during Mass. At communion, she leaned towards him and whispered 'twins'. He gave her a wry smile and then looked up, his face suddenly changing.

Thérèse got up from the altar and turned to see a man standing at the back of the church she recognised. Joel Henry worked in Section 19, a whole new section concerned with pastoral and spiritual oversight of UNCLE employees. Since the start of the Vietnam War, the experience of giving bad news via a telegram delivered by a cab driver had impacted on other agencies. Recently UNCLE had re-evaluated this whole area, and appointed Henry, a Baptist lay preacher in a previous existence, to head up the Section. Now he stood at the back of the church, waiting for her, she knew it.

She kept walking steadily up the aisle, past where Marina sat holding Tasiya, until she reached him. She could hear the communion hymn beginning, and people moving past her in a slow procession forward, away from the two figures standing at the back. Taking a deep breath inwards, she took his
arm and led him towards the small foyer at the west end of the church.

'Mrs Kuryakin. My name is Henry, Joel Henry, from...'

'I know where you're from, Mr Henry' Thérèse interrupted. 'And I know why you're here.' He didn't react, just motioned her to sit on one of the pews which were fastened to the edge of the walls.

'May I call you Thérèse?' he asked. She nodded, looking into his eyes to try to read their news before it was out of his lips.

'Is he dead?' she said at last. He grabbed her hand suddenly and shook his head. 'Oh, no, ma'am, he's alive, he's alive,' Henry said urgently, realising that he had waited too long to give the news. 'He's alive, but there are injuries,' he said obliquely, looking down. Thérèse withdrew her hand and stood up.

'Mr Henry, I appreciate you coming, but you're not helping if you don't tell me clearly what is wrong,' she said. I may not look like it, but I'm strong enough to take the news, whatever it may be. So please, spit it out, and no messing about.' She could hear her accent becoming stronger as she spoke, Henry's eyes widening. Thérèse sat down and waited for him to begin again.

'Mr Kuryakin is alive, and is being flown back to New York. We expect him to arrive this afternoon about fifteen hundred hours, when he'll be transferred to medical for evaluation.' After this rather formal report, he looked closely at her and hesitated. 'I have to tell you, Thérèse, that the injuries he sustained to his leg, well, let's put it like this, it's unlikely he'll be able to continue in Section 2.'

Thérèse turned away. The relief of finding out he was alive was now overshadowed by this news. They had discussed it several times, but it had always seemed to be something which felt unreal, as if what she had seen happening to other agents couldn't happen to her beautiful Russian. She knew that it was his work in that Section, and in particular his partnership with Napoleon that drove him on, defined him. The other work, in comparison was pale; stimulating, academic, but ultimately for another part of his life, when he was beyond working in the section he loved.

Thinking of Illya's 'husband', as she called him, shocked her into a sudden thought.

'And Napoleon?' she said, staring at Henry's face. He frowned, knowing of the family connection.

'Um, Mr Solo is listed missing. As yet, we have no report of his whereabouts. None at all.'

XXXXXXXX

He looked smaller than normal and very fragile lying there, the usual medical impedimenta coming out of various parts of his body, and what looked like a large cage protecting his right leg, which she could see was covered in a thick, white cast. Thérèse hoped she would never get used to the sight of him like this, and prayed that perhaps this would be the last, at least for a long while, of what felt like many visits she had made to this particular room.

She had been given a clear, bordering on brutal, picture of his present state by Brian Pearson, the surgeon who was waiting for her when she arrived. He had emptied a number of x-ray films onto the table in front of them, and then, selecting one, had slammed it onto the light box behind his head, to indicate to Thérèse the extent of the damage. She cringed slightly at the sight of the smashed bones, imagining his pain, his face before her as she stared at the image on the wall. He had outlined the injuries, the problems involved in treating them, and what he thought might be the likely outcome.

'I don't want to be overly pessimistic, Mrs Kuryakin, but I think you need to understand that he's in for a long rehabilitation period, and I'd be failing you if I didn't tell you that he's probably going to
walk with a limp, if he's lucky, well, for the foreseeable future, I guess.'

Thérèse sat down at the desk, still looking at the film. She was so used to dealing with film, and had dozens of pictures of Illya. She couldn't imagine wanting to keep this one.

'So he is out of Section 2, right?' she said baldly, now directing her gaze at the man opposite.

'Oh, most certainly. Waverly's had a look at the films and has my report on his desk. There's no way he'll ever be able to function as an enforcement agent again.'

Thérèse sat down by the bed and leaned over towards the blond head on the pillow. He was obviously sedated, but breathing by himself; long deep breaths, his mouth slightly open. She ran her finger through his hair and round his ear, noticing how crinkly it felt, as if it had been cut out from something larger. Thérèse sighed and kissed his cool cheek, then ran her hand down his shoulder towards his arm. He was lying slightly on his side, the exposed arm, bent at the elbow, on top of the sheet. As Therese grasped his hand, she could see him standing at the sink washing up the morning he left. Looking at the cage, she imagined never seeing him running down the stairs again, or coming in, his face red with perspiration, after some particularly exhausting race through the streets at some ungodly hour. From the moment whoever, or whatever had inflicted the injury on his leg, both their lives had been immediately and utterly changed.

She lifted his hand and brought it to her face.

'Oh Illyusha, I'm so, so sorry,' she murmured. Something about the hand, as she grasped it, felt wrong. Slowly, she turned it over and stared at the open palm and the long, tapering fingers drooping laxly across hers. It was entirely unmarked; as if the accident with the glass, and the wound it had inflicted, had never existed. Thérèse felt the blood rush to her head as she leaned over and carefully turned his head. Her finger pushed through the tangled hair and slowly traced round the whorl of a single crown.

xxxxxx

The rocking of the train eventually sent Pascale to sleep as Illya stared through the window at the vast landscape that was Russia. He felt uncomfortable and grubby now after two solid days travelling, their only chance of sleep being on the narrow seats of the Aeroflot Ilyushin in which they had flown from Paris to Moscow, and then, after several miserable hours in the middle of the night in the Shevemetyero Airport, on the more comfortable seats of the train heading to their final destination.

Gorky. Illya sighed deeply at the thought of the great city, which he had wanted to visit so much in his youth, but now dreaded as much as any other prison he had ever inhabited. And this enforced journey to the city where he would work and live now, seemed only the stuff of nightmares rather than dreams. He looked across at the face of one of the three impassive men who had accompanied them from La Retraite, in rotation never leaving their side, passing the small control box between them as they took it in turns to supervise their captives.

Illya shifted Pascale's weight on his shoulder and put his hand in his trouser pocket. As they had left, before he had been pulled away towards the array of syringes behind him, Napoleon had grasped the Russian, embracing him and at the same time sliding something into his trousers as he held him tight.

'Bet you a bottle of Stoli I get back before you,' Solo had said fiercely. Illya had nodded, before he was forced back onto the chair, Pascale anxiously trying to wipe the blood off his head and face with a little handkerchief she had in her pocket. He mentally toasted his partner, at the same time wondering where on earth he was now, and in what condition.
There was a sudden lurch, and Illya felt the train begin to slow down, as Pascale woke up and climbed onto his lap.

'Is it much further, papa?' she asked, rubbing the stubbly hair on top of his head backwards and forwards until it stood on end.

'No, and thank you, Pascale, that's quite enough,' he said, taking her hand off his head and sitting her next to him. The end of the long station platform began to appear outside the window, as their guard signalled to them to get up. As Illya reached for their bags above their heads, he caught sight of himself reflected in the window, as the station proper slid into sight. A slight man in badly-fitting clothes with a little girl by his side stared back at him through the grimy window. The sight was jarring, as if the man he had been had slid away just as easily as the train had eased itself into the station, and been replaced by someone he could hardly recognise.

'This way, comrade.' The term, used so often by his partner to tease him, now reminded him painfully of the American. Gripping Pascale's hand tightly, Illya edged his way along the packed corridor of the train towards the waiting door at the end. In a past life, opportunities like this would have been seized upon; he saw himself disappearing into the crowd, the guard forcing his way through in a vain attempt to catch the elusive agent. But now, the idea of leaving the little girl in order to make his escape was unthinkable; if there was to be an escape, it would have to be together, or not at all.

Even if he couldn't see it, Illya knew that one of the two men who now stood either side of them on the platform, had the device which could kill his daughter at the flick of a switch. He could tell that others on the station platform knew who the men were, but were wise enough to keep their heads down and their expressions neutral as they were pushed towards a nondescript little office at the side of the station. Illya felt his daughter tugging at his coat sleeve as they stood outside, one of the men having disappeared, presumably to announce their arrival to whoever was waiting inside.

He looked down. The little girl looked grey with tiredness, her clothes creased, one plait half-undone. He knelt down and put his arm round her waist.

'Ve have to be patient,' he whispered. 'We will go home; Papa will find a way, cherie.' She managed a tired smile and stroked his face.

'Oui, papa, bien sûr.'

The apartment was on the third of a five floor block. Illya threw down the papers he had signed on the table and carried Pascale from the box-like sitting room into the equally small bedroom, laying her gently on the bed in the corner, and undressing her carefully. He laid the soiled clothes on the floor and pulled a nightdress he had found on the bed over her head. She seemed limp, like a soft rag doll in his arms. He covered her with the stiff sheet and blankets and quietly retreated to the room he had left. Finding the metal framed glasses they had given him, he switched on the light by the table, and gathered up the papers.

_Name: Mikhail Ivanovitch Belenkin. Age: 30_

_Place of work: Lenin Institute. Grade 5b: No 3 Laboratory._

_Name: Polina Mikhailovna Belenkin. Age: 7_

_School: No 4: Yaroslavsky Street._

A new life, like the names on the papers, was laid out for them, expunging the past. Illya threw down
his glasses on the papers, switched off the light and returned to the bedroom. Later, waking up suddenly in the night with a barely suppressed groan, he was surprised to find that a smaller body was pressed to his own, and smaller hands stroked his head until he sank into a long, fitful sleep.

The front door of the house seemed even harder than usual to push open that morning, which was understandable when Pete looked through the letterbox.

'Hey man, move your ass, I need a leak,' he shouted through the gap at the recumbent figure the other side of the heavy, brightly painted door. There was a deep grumbling followed by a scuffling noise as an unsteady figure heaved himself to his feet and stood flattened against the wall as Pete shoved the door back.

'Peace, my boy.' Pete shook his head as the other man held up two fingers then stumbled after him as the door slammed shut behind them.

In 'the family', as Pete liked to refer to it, a constantly changing group that lived in the four story wooden house off Golden Gate Park, one never quite knew who might be tripped out in one of the bedrooms, or even slumped behind the door like this new guy was. That English chick with the super long red hair, who Pete called 'Boudicca' after she showed him a picture of the Celtic tribal leader in some great battle with the Romans they had a zillion years ago in England, had turned up again a month ago, with this guy in tow. He had looked pretty straight to begin with, though you wouldn't have known it to look at him now.

He had been introduced as Tony DiSanctis, a dropped out intelligence officer out of Vietnam who had done a tour of duty which had fucked his mind. Boudicca had picked him up in Europe, she'd said, but he was definitely an American, by his accent. He seemed out of it from the beginning, either stoned on vodka or tripped out on speed or LSD. Boudicca seemed to have no shortage of cash, and they spent most days either in the bedroom or visiting friends in the Haight, or driving about the northern coast of California in a beat up station wagon she had come by and which stood parked up at the front of the house.

'Where's Min?' Pete said, slightly turning to see if DiSanctis was still upright behind him. 'Min' was DiSanctis' name for Boudicca. He stood outside the bathroom as Pete went inside, and then followed him, dog like, into the rather squalid kitchen at the back of the house. DiSanctis had on a pair of thin, purple flares, topped by a long kaftan of an assortment of swirling colours, the garment incongruously finished off by a yellow velvet waistcoat that he'd seen Boudicca or 'Min' bringing in from some thrift store on the Haight. His hair, grown out from the slick style he'd arrived with, had been hacked across his forehead to give him a look resembling Sonny Bono on acid Pete thought, as he filled up the kettle and slammed it on the stove.

DiSanctis dragged out a chair from the table and slumped down on it.

'She's gone to check out some grass from a guy at the Spirogyra,' he muttered. The Spirogyra was a music cum coffee shop which they all frequented, where it was easy to pick up tickets for gigs or, for cost price, a joint or some LSD tablets. Pete used drugs from time to time, but mainly at weekends when he wasn't working or to help him compose more interesting music than he had managed so far in his career. He poured boiling water into a large brown teapot, and then pushed one of the mugs of tea towards the other man.

'How long you planning to stay?' he said, as DiSanctis sipped the tea out of a mug which said 'Best teacher in the world' on it.
'No idea,' he replied drowsily. 'Guess till the Army come calling. S'pose we'll head on up to Canada then.' Pete sighed and pulled out a chair opposite him, sweeping away the detritus of some other meal that some other member of the 'family' had consumed.

Pete wondered just how much more this guy could take before having a really bad trip and ending up at the clinic, like most of them had from time to time. He had seen Boudicca giving him some shot in his arm a few weeks back, but, from the look of him, he didn't act like a junkie, and there were no tell-tale marks on his arms, apart from a couple. Perhaps he had some other condition that needed IV medication, Pete thought. He leaned backwards and pulled out his acoustic guitar which had been wedged behind the chair waiting for him to return. At the sound of the first few chords, DiSanctis seemed to go into a sort of trance, starting to mumble something below his breath Pete found difficult to understand. He stopped playing and leaned closer to the other man, trying to fathom what he was trying to say.

'Sorry, what did you say, man? You're ill?' DiSanctis continued mumbling away, the words constantly repeated. Pete put down the guitar and pulled him back slightly. Two words only repeated again and again until Pete thought he understood. A foreign name; like 'ill' but more.

'OK I've got it. Tell Illya, that's it? And who the fuck is Illya?'

DiSanctis had barely nodded before Pete heard the front door slam and Boudicca stood in the kitchen between them.

'Been looking after Tony for me, Peter?' she said suspiciously, calling him by his full name in her rather refined, drawling English accent. Pete jumped to his feet as DiSanctis' head turned rather vaguely in her direction. She almost ran upstairs with the shopping bag she was carrying, returning in what felt like seconds, and grabbing DiSanctis' arm, started to drag him out of the kitchen towards the stairs.

'I'll deal with him now, thanks,' she said over her shoulder. Pete heard their footsteps on the stairs, followed shortly by the door to their bedroom opening and slamming shut. He shrugged and picked up the guitar again, starting to strum through a few chords.

'Tell Illya,' he murmured to himself over the guitar. 'Tell Illya. Kinda good name for a song.'

CHAPTER 15

Steel corridors. Steel lifts. Steel coloured rooms. Boring! Thérèse thought, as she walked along the one leading to the medical section. She had tortured herself for a week with a hundred different explanations as to why her husband seemed to lack a scar and a double crown on his head and now she desperately wanted a resolution to her fears.

In every other respect he was almost exactly as he should be, although she did notice he was unnaturally charming with the nurses and with Brian Pearson in particular. He had regained consciousness the next day after she had seen him, and within a week he was already tube-free and even sitting out of bed, the leg supported on a large stool in front of him. He had been warm and loving towards her, though she had caught him looking at her closely when she turned from talking to a nurse, as if he hadn't seen her before and was taking her in for the first time all over again.

The children had visited the day before. Pablo had rushed to his side, eagerly taking out a whole selection of paintings and drawings from a little portfolio he had brought with him; each piece of paper lovingly placed in front of the man whose opinion mattered more than teachers or even his mother's. Illya had carefully scrutinised each one, giving his opinion in a detailed way that Thérèse was mildly surprised by. It was Anastasiya's reaction to her father which had really worried her,
forcing her back to considering the strange feeling building somewhere in her gut and refusing to go away.

The little girl had been sitting in her pushchair while Pablo had shown the pictures, a frown of concentration on her face as she had pummelled her pink bunny a few times and then threw it down on the floor. Thérèse had picked it up with a smile and gave it back to her, the bunny being snatched with an iron grip and then hurled across the room.

'Tasiya, for goodness sake!' Thérèse scolded, picking the discarded bunny up and lying it next to Illya. 'Here, come and sit on daddy and give him a love,' she whispered to the baby. Normally, this was the signal for a few minutes of mutual admiration between father and daughter, as Tasiya locked on to Illya's hair and moved in for a big kiss. This time, for no reason whatever Thérèse could see, it was different.

She lifted her up towards her father, noticing a slight crease of worry drifting across his eyes as the baby came nearer. He grasped hold of her waist gently, her fat legs pounding his as she tried to stay upright in his grasp. Without warning, she seemed to go rigid, her arms punching out in front of her and her face reddening. A huge roar erupted from her mouth and she began to struggle in his grasp, writhing and screaming until her mother rescued her.

'Tasiya! Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?' Thérèse murmured into the baby's hair, turning away from Illya and rocking the now sobbing baby until eventually her head dropped forward and she fell into an immediate sleep.

Pablo, without needing to be told, let down the back of the pushchair, and Thérèse laid the now exhausted looking baby in, covering her with a blanket.

'I'm so sorry darling, I don't know what came over her,' she said, turning back to a now worried looking Illya. 'She'll be alright when you come home; I expect it's just this place she doesn't like.' Pablo nodded vehemently in agreement, looking as worried as his father as he gently moved the pushchair back and forth to rock his sister into deeper sleep.

She hadn't brought Anastasiya in again, nervous of another screaming session. As she approached the room, familiar chords of a familiar song assailed her. He had taken her to see the Beatles' film 'A hard day's night' the summer of their marriage. Thérèse remembered sitting in the cinema, and glancing at the man next to her. He had turned and smiled, his hair glinting in the darkness. The song she could hear had begun to play as he had leant forward and kissed her. If I fell. A few days afterwards, he had somehow learnt the song and had sung it to her before the guitar was hastily put aside as she pulled him to the floor.

Thérèse saw that the door to Illya's room was slightly ajar and that there was someone in the room with him. She pushed the door open a little and stood in the doorway. He was lying on the top of the bed, the guitar slung easily across him as he played. Brian Pearson sat on the bed, his back to Thérèse. She could see him in profile, a gentle, easy smile on his face as he listened. Something about the position of the two men, their relationship with each other, made Thérèse's heart beat a little faster.

'Am I interrupting anything?' she finally said. Pearson jumped as if she had prodded him with something electric, spinning round, his face reddening. Illya put his hand across the strings, a frozen stare choking the words and music into silence. 'No. Of course not. Brian, er, Dr Pearson was just going.' Pearson backed away, and disappeared out of the door, but not before Thérèse had seen him give Illya a long look of what she could only describe as intense longing. He turned towards her, pushing the guitar down the bed.
'I think he fancies you,' she said, a forced, false smile plastered across her face. For a moment he said nothing.

'No, I don't think so,' he replied unconvincingly, looking at the door as if he hoped Pearson would return any minute, and as if he wanted him to.

Thérèse forced herself to sit down next to him. She felt rather dizzy, her mind whirling with images and memories of the last two weeks. The man in front of her felt like a strange reflection of the one who had laid beside her and stroked her swollen belly what felt like a lifetime ago. In most respects he was Illya, but somehow, something was slightly jarred, as if she was looking at a photographic image where someone had moved just before the camera clicked.

There was a faint knock at the door and they both looked up. Thérèse saw relief in his face, as if he could escape from whatever questions she might want to ply him with. Alexander Waverly appeared in the doorway, his brow contracted when he saw that Illya was not alone. Thérèse got up, hardly glancing at her husband.

'I'll go,' she said.

'Um, Mrs Kuryakin, I wondered if you could come and see me on Saturday. About eleven o'clock?' Thérèse stared at him.

'Er, I suppose so. I'll have to ask Marina to have the children, but, yes, that would be alright.'

'No, could you find someone else? I'm sorry, but Dr Kuryakina won't be available at that time,' he said, rather gruffly, she thought. She had no idea how he knew that, unless of course she was doing something for UNCLE that Thérèse didn't know about. She shrugged. That wouldn't surprise her; the bloody organisation had taken over her life, she wasn't surprised it was happening to other people, too. She got up and started to walk to the door before she forgot that she hadn't even kissed Illya goodbye. Turning round, she leaned over and, choking back any black thoughts she might have, kissed him.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured, pulling away from her. She shook her head and, without looking at Waverly, left the room.

Waverly shut the door after her and then came over to the side of the bed and sat down, taking Thérèse's place. There was a hiatus in the room, Waverly not appearing to be in a hurry to begin the conversation, and the Russian tense as he lay on the bed; his head now back on the pillow with his eyes partially closed. After a few more silent minutes, Waverly spoke.

'Now, Mr Shevchenko, perhaps you'll tell me exactly what you are doing here, and, if you don't mind, the precise whereabouts of our two agents.'

Waverly must have known she had an appointment with Bernard Shearer, Thérèse reasoned with herself, as she left his office. He had shaken his head at her after taking her blood pressure, and looking at her slightly swollen ankles.

'I have a lot on my mind,' she had snapped, uncharacteristically, not caring if he was offended.

'I am well aware of your husband's condition,' he had replied smoothly, 'but your welfare is my prime concern, and if this does not improve I will insist you are admitted,' he had added, as if that would somehow make everything alright again, she thought. The thought of being in this place filled her with horror and she had promised to take more rests when Tasiya was with Brenda. Jo had
insisted on the arrangement, Brenda collecting the 'red devil' as she called her four afternoons a week, the 'red devil' seeming happier to be with Brenda than with her own father.

Strangely, Illya's room was empty. She looked round, noticing a pile of folders now occupying the bedside table, his glasses on top.

'Stuff sent down from 17,' the nurse said, coming up behind her. Thérèse presumed by '17' she meant the section where Illya had been spending so much time before he went away. Obviously, the injury wasn't going to prevent him working, even if it wasn't the work he really wanted to do. 'He's gone down to Mr Waverly's office,' she continued, rolling her arms round in a circular motion to indicate his mode of transport. Therese smiled and left the room, heading for the nearest lift.

She could see a number of people staring at her as she walked swiftly towards the outer office of Waverly's suite. She had chosen to wear her brightest outfit, a batik printed loose shirt in wild, hot colours which Illya had bought her in Bermuda, over some rather classy maternity trousers she had inherited from Jo, the whole ensemble topped off by a matching scarf which she had wound round her head, African style, her growing hair corkscrewing out of the top of it, like brown foam. She tossed her head and stuck out her chin at 'the suits', as she called them, and swept into the outer room of Waverly's office suite.

'You dancing?' Thérèse jerked round to face a smiling Fernando. She rushed forward and dragged him towards her, her hands gripping his rather long, curly hair as she clung on tightly. She could feel him gently push her back, a look of concern making the normally sunny features more serious. They sat down together on the long leather couch, Fernando scanning his sister.

'You look good, sis. I can see the Russian has been up to his tricks again, by the size of you,' he said, glancing at her now obviously bulging abdomen. Thérèse stared at him, holding his chin in her hand now.

'I've missed you Nando,' she said quietly. 'I'm so glad you're back; so glad.' Fernando frowned. Her mood seemed at variance with the bright outfit she wore; the normally animated expression had been replaced by one that suggested a great burden was being shouldered.

'Look, I'm sorry about Illya,' he said, holding her hand, 'but he'll cope, and at least he's not . . .'

'What, Fernando?' she hissed sharply. 'At least he's not dead? No, he's not dead. But he's not the same man who left over a month ago, either. They've done something to him, and nobody else seems to notice, nobody, not even Waverly!' she bawled, leaping to her feet as, it appeared with perfect timing, the door opened and Waverly stood there.

'Are you alright, Mrs Kuryakin?' Waverly said calmly, looking beyond Thérèse to her brother behind her.

'Oh I'm fine, absolutely great!' Therese shouted, feeling a dull headache starting behind her temples. She felt Fernando grab her arm and start to propel her into Waverly's room.

Round the table the others stared at her with a sort of mutual concern which enraged her further. Marina sat, rather pale looking, to her left, with Waverly facing her, the scudding clouds behind him reflecting the mood of the room. And to her right Illya sat in the wheelchair, his leg propped up on the chair that she imagined he would normally sit on when he and Napoleon were in here. Fernando drew up another chair next to Illya, his usual buoyant mood deflated by the now rather oppressive atmosphere. Thérèse took some deep breaths, knowing that she had to calm down. Illya seemed to be trying hard not to look in her direction, while Marina's gaze seemed riveted to her son.
'Shall we begin,' Waverly said, 'so we can at least dispel some of the tension that seems to have developed in this room?' They all stared at each other, then at him, as he pressed a button under the desk and the wall revealed the screen behind it.

'I don't think there's much point beating about the bush over this,' Waverly began, as a picture of 'La Retraite' filled the screen. 'In this place, Mrs Kuryakin . . .'

'Call me Thérèse. Please,' Thérèse said, needing him to be less formal.

'Very well. In this place, um, Thérèse, THRUSH conceived and carried out a plan of replacing your husband with another man who would be as near perfect a replica of Mr Kuryakin as they could possibly create, trading the real Mr Kuryakin in, as it were, to what appears to be a KGB agent in return for who they considered to be the closest fit to his physique, personality and attributes, namely, Mr Shevchenko here.'

Thérèse forced herself to stare at the man next to her without retching. He was also breathing deeply, his face averted, while Marina had assumed a stare that was so painfully like her son's Thérèse couldn't bear to look at her. 'I won't go into huge detail about why, except to say that we think it is connected with the work on the UNCLE computer system that your husband has been engaged upon so ably for the last few months,' Waverly continued, his gaze now fixed on Thérèse. 'When Mr Kuryakin and Mr Solo embarked on this mission, we had hoped that there would be fewer difficulties than have occurred. However, due to unforeseen complications, we were unable to extricate Miss Kuryakin from the place, or prevent Mr Solo from disappearing in quite the way that he has.'

'Just a minute,' Thérèse said, staring at Waverly. 'Are you saying that Illya knew this, this swap was going to take place, and is now in the Soviet Union, with Pascale?' She closed her eyes momentarily, and then fixed them on Waverly in order to not lose her equilibrium.

'Not exactly,' Waverly said calmly, 'He had no idea that THRUSH had involved Mr Shevchenko here in making a replica. He knew there was a risk of him being sent East, as it were, but not accompanied by his daughter. It was vital that we discovered the nature of the plot being devised, you see.' Before she could leave her seat and throw something at him, Marina intervened.

'So, Alexander, you allowed my son to submit himself to that so-called examination by the Army, knowing that intimate photographs would be passed to THRUSH by someone you obviously know of, and then, you ordered him on a mission which from the beginning he was expected to fail, allowing himself to be taken by these people and what - traded like a common slave to someone who I do not think has his best interests at heart!' she said, in icy tones, her gaze now levelled on Waverly. 'And what is to become of him now, Alexander, or is he one of your "unforeseen complications" to be written off and left to die in some gulag your organisation has no way of reaching?' Thérèse watched as the hand nearest her own on the next seat shook violently, Marina's emotionless face setting as hard as concrete.

'Of course not,' Waverly said, his voice slightly hardened. 'I have no intention of writing him off, or Mr Solo for that matter.' He regained his composure again before turning to the screen, which was now showing a photograph of a city Thérèse didn't recognise. 'Normally, information of this kind would be undisclosed to those outside UNCLE, but, in this situation, I will make an exception, Ladies.'

Therese ignored the patronising tone and stared at the photograph. The spires of the churches alone signified Russia or another part of Eastern Europe in the soviet bloc.

'This is Gorky,' Waverly started again. 'As Dr Kuryakina will know, it is what's known as a closed
Thérèse stared at the stranger with her husband's face, turning over his name in her mind. Shevchenko. Why had he been chosen, she wondered, apart from presumably knowing as much as Illya about this computer programme.

'What is your first name?' she asked him suddenly, finding it almost unbearable to even look at him. He turned round. Thérèse thought that he looked on the verge of tears. She tried to think of any time she'd ever seen Illya like that and drew a blank.

'It's Mikhail. Misha,' he said simply. Thérèse skidded her chair round and drew it up to him, forcing herself not to let out the deep scream that she could feel tearing itself through her body.

'Misha!' she said, in a husky, low voice she hardly recognised herself. 'You were his best friend!' Forgetting her intentions, she jumped to her feet and began to hit him before Fernando dragged her back to her chair and held her down.

'Calm down!' he said fiercely in her ear. 'This won't help Illya or you, so stop it now!' She looked up at him, and then wrenched her hand away.

'Theresa, Fernando is right. Besides, I have the feeling that Misha has had little choice in the matter' Marina murmured. There was a silence in the room, punctuated by Thérèse's heavy, sob-like breathing.

'I did have a choice. Long ago I had choices. He warned me about, what did he say, ah yes, 'letting my heart rule my head'. Well, I let it, and he has paid for my stupidity.' Misha stared downwards. He felt a hand on his chin, forcing his head up and making him look into exquisite caramel coloured eyes.

'Can you help, can you help bring him back?' He continued to stare, her face now becoming more composed as she allowed his gaze. He imagined her slimmer, as she had been in the wedding photographs; she looked like one of those lively Cuban girls he'd seen in films dancing salsa all night or perhaps in one of those incredible tiered Spanish dresses, dancing flamenco to some heady Spanish beat. He tried to imagine the ice-cold Kuryakin with this fiery girl. Perhaps that was it; he had come near her, and like some radiant fire, she had warmed his soul.

'Yes, of course,' he choked. 'He will come back, I promise you.' Thérèse sat back, aware that Waverly wanted to say more.

'If we are to bring Mr Solo, Mr Kuryakin and his daughter back, we will need your help, all of you,' he said, looking across the table. 'It is absolutely essential that THRUSH think their plan is proceeding according to plan, and that Mr Shevchenko here is constructing his, what did you call it?'

'Er, a Trojan horse, sir.'

'Exactly Mr Kur- Mr Shevchenko. I am hoping that if both his mother and his wife appear convinced of his authenticity, then perhaps everyone else here will believe it. We can't, under any circumstances, have any rumours circulating that might get back to THRUSH, and beyond. Our aim is to flush out the perpetrators of this crime from both ends as it were, and then bring our people home, sooner rather than later, I would hope.'
Fernando had sat forward then, noticing Waverly's gaze diverting to his side of the table.

'Mr McCaffery,' he began, the image of a rather good looking woman with long red hair filling the screen, 'I am hoping you will be able to help us track down Mr Solo. This is Miss Hermione Pilkington, late of your former school at Broadlands. We know that Miss Pilkington followed Mr Kuryakin for some of his journey, and was probably at La Retraite, though, as I said before, I lost contact with Mr Kuryakin just after he had arrived there. Perhaps if you can find her, you can find Mr Solo too, and soon. We may need him to help Mr Kuryakin and his daughter.' Fernando looked at the picture, deciding that on second looking, she seemed rather harsh, her features sharp and fake.

'Excuse me for asking, sir, but did Mr Solo know about the mission, I mean about the swap?' Waverly sighed, glancing at the two women.

'No. If Mr Solo is alive, then I presume that the reason they haven't killed him is that in some way they want to bring greater embarrassment upon UNCLE,' he ruminated, drawing out his pipe.

Thérèse got up and walked round a little. Her back was beginning to ache, and she suddenly felt very tired. Waverly looked at her, frowning.

'I do hope that this will not prove to be too difficult for you,' he said to her rather kindly, 'I wouldn't want to risk the safe delivery of, was it twins I heard?'

'Yes, that's why I look like the side of a house already,' Thérèse replied. She stood behind Misha and put her arms on his shoulders, keeping her eyes on the single crown to remember exactly why she was doing this. 'No, we can do it. There's only one person I can think of that has tumbled to him already, I'm afraid.' Waverly had stuck in his pipe, and was now sucking it furiously. He frowned deeply and pulled it out.

'And who might that be?' he said, rather anxiously.

'Anastasiya. She bellows for England every time he goes within six yards of her,' Thérèse said, beginning to smile. Waverly smiled, putting his pipe down on the rack.

'Ah yes, there's something of the animal instinct in young children, I believe,' he murmured.

Thérèse sat down, trying to reflect a little more calmly on the last few moments. 'Um, I can see why no-one else should know about all this,' she said, 'but, well, what about Jo? I mean, she works for your lot, and, well, I think she might tumble to Misha here, don't you agree?'

Waverly's face was set, and she knew the answer before it was uttered.

'I understand what you are saying, my dear, but I must insist that no-one, not even Mrs Solo, is told. It is up to you all, I'm afraid, to support Mr Shevchenko here in this. From what he has told me, it is absolutely certain that he will be contacted by at least one of the players in this very dangerous game, and if we are to keep Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin alive long enough to retrieve them, and avoid UNCLE being compromised by this fiendish plan, then it is essential that no-one, even your sister, suspects. Do you understand?'

Thérèse nodded, sighing. The thought of lying to Jo made her feel very uncomfortable. All of a sudden she felt an intense need to know Misha better, perhaps even to learn more about the enigmatic man she had married and now longed for so much it was beginning to induce a hot, dizzy feeling inside her.

'So, when are you coming home, darling?' she murmured, looking into the sad eyes next to hers. 'We've got a lot of work to do if you're going to be in any way convincing.' He began to frown, a
hint of a smile returning to his lips.

'Oh, why, what have I done wrong already?' Misha asked.

'For a start off, being nice to the nurses – big mistake,' Thérèse replied.

CHAPTER 16

The U-bahn as efficiently as ever deposited Aleksandr on time at a place he could hardly forget. Alexanderplatz, a broad oasis of concrete dominated by the rapidly proceeding construction of the Fernsehturm TV mast on one end, loomed up to greet him as he walked briskly out of the station. He plonked himself down disconsolately on the edge of the fountain at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the gigantic tower and absent-mindedly splashing his hand in the icy water.

The message had been clear, and he was surprised by it, considering that usually his means of communicating with Ivan, as his contact was known, was by means of a series of dead letter boxes in the Tiergarten, not out in the open here at Alex. As he waited, now standing stamping his feet against the cold of a Berlin February, equally chilling doubts began to seep into his mind. How he had been drawn into this fiasco he still could not fathom, but it was a fact that he was now caught between this 'Ivan' and Nikitin, acting as their go-between in some convoluted plot that had drawn in both Kuryakin and Shevchenko, and now threatened to engulf them all.

Marienkirche, Alexanderplatz. 1400 hours. Thursday 14 February.

He had not even told his wife of the message, which was unusual. Deep within him, he blamed her for encouraging him to do as Nikitin had insisted, rather than facing up to the tvar as Kuryakin had all those years ago. A deep depression settled over him as he tried to imagine what kind of 'mission' he was now going to have to carry out.

Out of the corner of his vision he noticed a man walking towards the Marienkirche at the corner of Alexanderplatz. Something about him, unnoticeable to others, Sasha thought, but not to him, made him keep the man in his sights until he had entered the church. Getting up from the fountain, he walked across the piazza and entered the building.

He had never been in this place before, and felt uncomfortable in its shaded quiet. The man was sitting at the front of the church on a pew, perfectly still, apparently contemplating something from which he didn't care to be disturbed. Aleksandr sat down at the back, glancing behind him at the baroque organ which seemed to fill the west wall of the ancient building. As he turned back, he realised that the man had disappeared. Getting up, he forced himself not to run up the aisle, at the same time trying to imagine how the other man had managed to disappear quite so easily. As he reached the front pew, the small, manilla envelope just poking from out of a leather covered hassock on the pew seat seemed to shriek at him. Sitting down, he gently pulled at the envelope, and as noiselessly as possible, opened it.

Ivan will be in the Neue Wache on 15 March at 1400 hours. He would like Sergei to show him round the memorial to victims of fascism and militarism.

Koronin's heart sunk into his comfortable leather boots at the message. Until this moment, he had just been a messenger, passing coded messages between the two people known only as Ivan and Sergei. He knew perfectly well that Sergei was Nikitin, but was far hazier about the man known as Ivan. As far as he understood it, he was a mole working for the Americans, but that was the extent of his knowledge, and he was glad it was that way. Now he was being drawn into the net and, like the fly he was, there was no way he could struggle out. He thought about the Neue Wache, a former guardhouse on the Unter den Linden, in the East Sector, and within spitting distance of the Soviet
Embassy. Whoever Ivan was, he was taking an immense risk in meeting anyone, never mind Nikitin, in such a place. Aleksandr stuffed the envelope into his greatcoat pocket, and, with a quick glance round, walked slowly back down the aisle and out into the biting air of a Berlin February day.

'Hurry up, or we're going to be late.' Illya adjusted his tie and pulled on his jacket, glancing at himself in the little bedroom mirror. He noticed that the already baggy trousers seemed to be slightly baggier, and frowned at the figure in the mirror. Making sure that there was enough food for both of them had meant either joining lengthy queues at various food shops, or relying on Madam Markova, which he seemed to be doing more and more recently. If there were any shortages, then he had put the little girl first. He reasoned with himself that he had been used to this before he came to the West, and hopefully, he could make up for it when he returned.

Pascale, or Polina as she was known here, had adjusted astonishingly well to the life they were now leading. Unaware, at least she hadn't referred to it, of the mortal danger lurking inside her, she had told her father in a commanding tone on the first day, what their strategy for escape was to be.

'It is very important, Papa, that they do not suspect we are trying to escape,' she had said, as they inspected the tiny flat, with its sparse, plain furnishings, Illya spending some time checking for, and taking apart the bugs and cameras it contained. It appeared that everything their captors deemed necessary for living as a Soviet citizen had been provided, including sets of clothes, basic cooking equipment, and even school books for Pascale. 'When we have shown them that we have accepted our life here, then they will be off their guard, and we can make our getaway,' she had said triumphantly over breakfast, Illya trying not to look too depressed at the thought of how long this might take.

'Mm. Well, we’ll see,' he had said, darkly, staring at the rather thin porridge he had made for them and thinking of muffins and Tess. He had looked up to see such a loving expression on her face that he had smiled and nodded. He could hear Napoleon saying 'smart kid' or something like, and another frown had pierced his smile at the thought.

'Are you thinking of someone . . .at home, Papa?' she had said quietly, a look of concern clouding her face and making him think of those little black and white photographs of himself at her age.

'Well actually, I was thinking of Uncle Napoleon, mon petit chou,' he had replied.

To say that the mission had not gone as expected was something of an understatement, Illya thought, as he came out of the bedroom. He was still coming to terms with discovering that his childhood friend now had taken his place at UNCLE, and what was worse, was with his wife and children. Not for the first time he wished that Waverly had listened, and allowed him to tell Napoleon what had been planned. He smiled grimly to himself as he reflected on just what his partner thought of his so apparently willing capitulation to his captors. Still, perhaps Pascale's plan was not so far off the mark. He had been ordered to stay put for as long as it took to both discover the conspirators, and to gain evidence of who exactly they were working for, if anyone. Up to now, Rondeau and Funk had escaped scot free as far as he knew, and even if Misha had been turned by Waverly, Illya was certain that he would not know if Nikitin was actually working for the KGB or not, and what exactly Mitchell was up to. And then there was Napoleon. It was obvious that they were taking him somewhere, but Illya could only hazard a guess as to the reason. He sat down on the chair in the tiny lobby and started to put on his boots, but not before he felt a sharp tug through his hair.

'Ouch. Pascale, what you are doing?' Pascale was wearing a little white blouse with her red pioneer scarf tied round her neck, her now slightly longer plaits fastened up round her head, peasant fashion. It made him think of his mother suddenly, the same slightly flat face and sharp, slightly tilted nose.
Her appearance wasn't the only thing that reminded him. She was attempting to drag a rather wet comb through his hair, smoothing it down with her hands as she worked, the excess water beginning to make tiny rivulets down his forehead.

'Your hair is very, how do you say in English, indiscipliné. Anya will not like it, papa.'

'It is not unruly, only too short. And why should I be concerned what Anya thinks?' Illya replied in amazement.

'Because Madame Markova thinks you will be a suitable husband for Anya, papa, and so you will try to be a little more presentable tonight, n'est-ce pas?' Illya sighed, going into the bathroom and wiping his forehead with a towel.

'I am married, Pascale. I have no intention of committing bigamy in the near future, even for UNCLE,' Illya said, as he noticed she was holding something carefully wrapped up in brown paper by her side.

'Papa, it is part of the plan,' she insisted, pushing the package towards him as he turned the lights off and opened the front door of the apartment. 'It's a lacquer box, you know. Comrade Slavin gave it to me at the baker's shop for running errands for a week after school. Look, it has a nice scene.' She took it back momentarily and, unwrapping the paper, lifted it up for him to see. It was a rather narrow oblong box, with a traditional black Russian lacquered wood design. On the lid, a rather idyllic farming scene was underscored with the words, in Russian, 'Protecting the Soviet crops.'

'Very romantic. If I didn't know better, Comrade Polina, I'd suspect that you have become a model Soviet citizen,' Illya muttered, as Pascale carefully wrapped up the box and handed it back to him, before putting her hand in his for the walk across the corridor to the Markova's apartment.

'I am trained for assignments like this one, Papa, don't forget,' she had said seriously. 'Of course you will not be required to marry Anya, but I think we need to know who in the Markov family is a spy, don't we?' Illya stopped suddenly and knelt down in front of her.

'What do you mean?' he said quietly, looking at Pascale's face, a small copy of his own. She was quiet for a few moments, then she came closer, putting her arms round his jacket and laying her head on his chest.

'I saw the men on the train with the little box, papa,' she whispered. 'I know it is something to do with this.' She pointed to her chest. 'I have been thinking. I think that they need to be near me to make it work. The only people near us here, papa, are the Markovs.' Illya held her closely and kissed her head.

'Oh, Pascale,' he whispered.

'It is alright, papa,' she murmured. 'I am sorry I have caused all this trouble.' Illya stood up and grasped her hand. 'You are not to blame, lapin.'

He knocked on the door several times, the sound echoing in the hallway between the apartments. He felt Pascale squeeze his hand as the door opened, revealing the large figure of Madam Markova's son, Dmitri, filling the doorway. Illya could see his Komsomol badge on the lapel of his jacket as he felt the teenager's gaze spread over him like a damp fog.

'Oh, it's you. You had better come in, Comrade Belenkin, and Polina, of course,' he added, brightening somewhat when he saw the bright red neckerchief Pascale was wearing. Illya tried not to frown as Pascale marched into the living room ahead of him. He could hear Madam Markova
banging pans in the kitchen, his stomach glad he had come, even if the rest of him was less enthusiastic. Anya Markova was engaged in putting the finishing touches to setting the small table which had been erected in the middle of the room. They had met fairly often during the last month, especially since Anya was a colleague, working in the same laboratory as Illya, but on a different project. He had accompanied her to a couple of concerts over the last few weeks, and she had persuaded him to join the chamber orchestra where she played violin, managing to provide him with an oboe for the task. She was a stark contrast to the heavy set Elena Fedorenko, his last Soviet girlfriend, being tall and slim, with darkish blonde long hair usually tied back or hidden under a headscarf, and clear blue eyes somewhat like his own.

She was intelligent, but there was a blandness about her that made it easy for Illya to pretend interest, but not to feel any. What worried him, however, was the nature of her feelings for him. As she smiled and came over, kissing him formally and talking to Pascale, Illya was aware of Dmitri Markov's presence in the room behind him.

Dimitri encapsulated everything Illya despised about the Soviet system, even though he found Marxism a perfectly reasonable political philosophy and had often cringed at the attitudes of many Americans he had listened to, preferring to keep his opinions to himself. He had seen other young men like him in his childhood, then wearing a different uniform with a crooked cross instead of the hammer and sickle. It was the mindless following of a political system that appalled him, with its all-pervading grip over people's lives.

'Have you received your orders yet?' he began, knowing from personal experience that he would soon be starting his national service. Dmitri straightened, as if he had already been given some military command.

'I report to Sevastopol in April,' he said stiffly, giving Illya a rather supercilious glare. 'Where did you serve, comrade?' For once, it was a fairly easy question to answer without making up something.

'I served in the navy, Dmitri, but I was given leave to continue my education,' he said, truthfully, watching Anya eyeing up the present in his hand. She came across, interrupting what could have become a rather difficult conversation, sliding her arm into his. He could see Pascale nodding to him, and so groaning inwardly, he proffered the package. She ripped open the paper and with a delighted sigh, ran her fingers along the lacquered box.

'Oh, it is lovely,' she murmured, gazing at him, 'I'll use it for my Komsomol badges.'

'How sensible,' Illya replied, cringing inwardly at her, and thinking of their bedroom at home, the large multi-compartmented wardrobe spilling Tess's collection of jewellery and scarves every time he opened it. He took a long inward breath and tried to re-focus on the task in hand. If his intrepid daughter was right, then one of the three people they were dining with had the means of killing her. It was a sobering thought, and one that made him reconsider Pascale's plan. He smiled weakly at Anya as Madame Markova sailed into the room.

She was a tall, thick set woman of indeterminate years, who wore the traditional Russian widow's costume of black, her headscarf perpetually in place. She had taken a fancy to Illya from the first few days of their arrival, with an obvious agenda in mind for the slight blond which she had pursued vigorously from day one.

'Ah, Mikhail Ivanovitch, you look as if you haven't eaten for a week!' Illya knew what was coming next. 'You need a wife, my boy, to put flesh on those bones.' He could see Anya blushing from behind her napkin, while Pascale beamed at them both.

'Yes, Madame, papa has been alone for too long, haven't you papa?' Illya glared a little at her, as
Madame Markova rushed from the room, returning with steaming bowls of soup.

'Mmm, Shchi, with carrots?' Illya said, smiling at the thick traditional soup in front of him, a large slab of rye bread accompanying its reassuring familiarity. The meal continued in rather splendid form, with a wonderful shashlik and potato pancakes all washed down with a honey drink which Illya had forgotten about and which now filled his mind with a kaleidoscope of childhood images, inducing pain and pleasure in equal measure.

The meal over, Madam Markova began to clear the table, barking out instructions to Dmitri and Pascale in a way which Illya knew would lead to the room being left unoccupied of anyone except Anya and himself. He helped her to return the table to its folded down position on one wall, and reluctantly sat down on the sofa, his lips pursing themselves shut in anticipation of what was to come. Anya immediately joined him, leaving the small leather shoulder bag that she normally wore, hanging on one of the chairs now pushed into the table, behind the sofa.

Illya groaned. He felt like a teenager on his first date, not, he thought wryly, that he had ever had a date as a teenager, but if it was as painful as this, he was glad. Anya's rather thick glasses remained cemented on, giving her face a rather cow-like expression as she turned towards him, her eyes appearing huge behind the magnifying effect of the spectacle lenses.

'Mikhail Ivanovitch,' she said rather breathlessly, bringing her hand up to touch his now relatively well-behaved dry hair, 'um, was the outcome of your last set of calculations successful?' Illya's eyes widened. He could imagine Napoleon's ribald riposte to that chat up line.

'Er, let's not discuss that now,' he replied, allowing her to bring his head closer, until her lips were brushing his. He tried to adjust his position, but he was now caught in a rather vice-like grip round the neck, her other arm snaking round his waist to complete the stranglehold she now appeared to be exercising over him. With an extraordinary flick of her head, she managed to flip off her spectacles, pulling him against her and forcing her tongue into his mouth with the speed of a python in full flight. After several minutes of this, Illya managed to extricate himself from her grasp and, gasping for air, he held her back slightly from him as he stared at the woman he now hardly recognised from the bookish spinster he had sat across the table from an hour before.

Without the glasses and the scraped back hair she looked completely different. Her eyes were a cold clear blue-grey, diamond bright, and her blonde hair now hung down attractively over her shoulders, accentuating the lupine expression which seemed to have replaced the vacant one Anya had adopted ever since they had met. Illya frowned, momentarily unbalanced by the transformation of this girl, although 'girl' hardly described her now. As her eyes glinted and she moved forward again, he felt a sense of someone else being in the room. From behind her head he could see a small hand reaching up to remove the bag from the chair. Illya calculated that if he pushed her back, she would become aware of Pascale as she sat up. Sliding backwards with a sigh, he allowed her to push him flat onto the sofa and, lying over him, to slowly loosen his tie.

He held out for as long as he could, acutely aware of Pascale's presence the other side of the sofa, let alone Anya's mother in the adjoining room, until the inevitable, and to Illya's mind, totally planned event happened. As he saw the bag return to its place, he heard a door bang and, opening his eyes, took in the wholly welcome sight of Madam Markova as she leaned over him, hands folded over her chest.

'What are you doing with my daughter, young man?' she began, yanking him up with an equally fierce grip until he was facing her, his face reddening despite himself.

'I'm sure that papa has something to announce, Madam,' Pascale intervened, beaming at them all and
nodding at Illya as he fixed her with a glare only usually reserved for Napoleon.

'Er, well, um, Anya and I,' he began, suddenly noticing that Anya had managed to re-materialise as the myopic featureless girl he had thought she was until now.

'Well what, Mikhail Ivanovitch?' Madam Markova said loudly, fixing him with a glare to equal one of his best. He looked towards Anya, feeling her hand squeezing his and a soppy smile now playing across her lips which was as far from the wolfish expression he had seen a few minutes ago, as milk was from best Russian Vodka.

'Er, Anya and I . . . . . are engaged,' he finally blurted out, much to Madam Markova's delight, instantly finding himself enveloped in a large amount of rough black material covering the Markova heaving bosom. As he came up for air, he noticed that far from being astonished by this news, Anya was acting as if they had sat on the sofa and arranged it there and then.

'May is a beautiful month to marry in,' he heard Madam Markova sigh. Illya's brow furrowed. Three months. Three months to complete a program which he had to ensure wouldn't work but would look as if it had; to find the control box endangering Pascale's life, and, of course, to work out a way to escape. And as well as this, to figure out exactly what Nikitin was up to and why. He closed his eyes at the thought, before realising that a glass of what he imagined was vodka was being thrust into his hand.

'End of May, then?' he smiled.

xxxxxxx

From the inside, rays of weak early spring sunlight pierced the expressionless walls from the circular skylight, giving the sombre building a fraction more joy than it deserved. Nikitin gazed through the columns at the scene outside. *Memorial to the victims of fascism and militarism*. An interesting title, bearing in mind the preponderance of military personnel in the Russian Sector of Berlin, he thought. He had been part of the Red Army brigades fighting their way through the streets of Berlin in '45, and afterwards, when he had shown loyalty to the party after reporting anti-Soviet activity by a group of soldiers in his brigade, he had been transferred to the NKGB, and then in '54, to the KGB 3rd Directorate. An exemplary career of loyalty and service, marred only by one person, and because of him, years of work to regain what he had lost.

He stamped his boots on the ground, the noise slightly echoing round the walls, causing the soldier on duty to glance round, only to jerk back his head in response to Nikitin's hard stare. He reached into his pocket and drew out two Black Sobranies, passing the second to the person he knew was now standing behind him.

'Do you like to court danger, Mr Mitchell, or are you just naturally trusting, like so many of your compatriots?' Mitchell, his head covered by a grey astrakhan hat of very good quality, took the cigarette and, leaning against the back wall of the building, lit the two cigarettes from his silver lighter.

'I never quite learned to trust,' he said, inhaling deeply and keeping the back of the guard's head in view as they spoke. 'I find it keeps you alive longer that way.'

'Then, my dear Ivan, why are you here?' Nikitin replied, continuing to stare through two of the perfectly proportioned pillars on the portico of the building at the usual combination of military personnel and ordinary pedestrians plodding along the Unter den Linden.

'I think we need to be clear about our intentions regarding a certain organisation, and, more
importantly, a certain person within that organisation,' Mitchell said calmly. 'We have both been, let's say, 'helpful' to UNCLE's enemies, but I wouldn't want to see the *status quo* too upset by our mutual need to remove your compatriot from the international scene, comrade, would we?' Nikitin finished his cigarette and dropped the butt to the floor, stubbing it with his boot.

'People like you and me, my friend, we all have an interest in maintaining the *status quo*, do we not? Without it, where would we be? The USA versus the Soviet Union; UNCLE versus THRUSH, and so on. What we find disconcerting to our comfortable cold war world, however, is when organisations, and the people within them, start to believe that we can work together. The United Nations has its place, but the delegations know their roles and keep to their own sides in any little dispute. However, when people like Alexander Waverly think that putting a Russian together with an American is a good idea, and when the said partnership begins to work rather too well, then this is where something must be done to, what shall I say, *restore equilibrium*, don't you think?'

Mitchell began to smile, stubbing his cigarette out on the wall with machine like precision.

'Absolutely, my dear Sergei,' he replied, 'but I get the feeling that THRUSH are hoping that their little plant will not only enable them to compromise the UNCLE boys' security system, but the organisation will be fatally damaged itself when Mr Kuryakin is found to be the Soviet spy everybody thought he was all along.' Nikitin frowned deeply and muttered some guttural oath in Russian, before returning to the English they had been conversing in until that point.

'That would be highly undesirable,' he murmured. 'A great deal of publicity would ensue from his arrest and subsequent trial that would not be altogether useful to either you or me. If it were ever to come out that he is a *replica*, then naturally people would begin to ask where the *original* has got to. No, my friend, this would not be in either of our interests. THRUSH will be upset with Dr Rondeau if Shevchenko fails, not us. After all, they have the consolation prize of knowing that Kuryakin has returned to his native land to face the retribution he so richly deserves, and that Mr Solo is being slowly drugged to death by one of their own operatives. Hardly a complete failure, don't you think?'

Nikitin began to move slowly towards the pillars framing the front of the building. As they reached them, he put one hand on the cold stone and turned.

'Please deal with Shevchenko yourself, preferably before THRUSH do. I would have thought it would have been a fairly simple exercise for a man of your resources. Let me have the deep pleasure of disposing of our Russian friend, and I think we can then leave Mr Solo in THRUSH's capable hands. Perhaps Waverly will realise the folly of his attempts to make us all love each other, and thus, the *status quo* is regained.'

Mitchell watched the Russian walking swiftly in the direction of the Embassy and shook his head. Glancing at the still motionless guard, he turned up the collar of his coat and walked slowly back towards the American sector.
He was sitting alone in the commissary, a rather moderate looking meal in front of him, Jo thought, as he talked rather animatedly with Brian Pearson. Jo smirked at the elegant grey suit and immaculate haircut. *If Napoleon could see you now,* she thought, a frown creasing her brow at the thought of him and how long it had been since any news had been forthcoming. She pushed past a couple of men from Section Two who were leaning over a table where April and Sabi were sitting, no doubt exchanging gossip about something. Sabi had been back at work for a couple of weeks, and Jo understood that she was waiting for Vaz Fernandes to return from Brazil, doing a number of easier, courier jobs in the meantime. Jo slid into the seat beside Sabi, plonking her tray with its delicate offering of salad and fruit onto the table, and inducing a scattering effect among the Section Two men.

Sabi looked up and smiled as Jo sat down, then glanced across at April before giving Jo her full attention again.

'Don't worry. I'm not going to interrogate you about Napoleon, which is why I presume those lads rushed off as if the plague had come near them,' Jo said, picking up her knife and fork and stabbing her lettuce as if it were a mortal enemy.

'No, darling, I'm sure that wasn't it. But there really isn't anything to tell you, is there April?' Sabi retorted, her blue eyes wide and anxious looking. Jo looked at April, keeping the Russian firmly in her sights behind April's chair. Pearson was leaning forward whispering something in Kuryakin's ear at which they both laughed, before Brian got up and sauntered out of the room. Something about the laugh disturbed Jo. She'd observed him with Napoleon on frequent occasions, and although they seemed to be joined at the hip, it felt different to the display of friendship between these two. She shook her head and tutted to herself, but not before Illya had noticed her staring. A look of slight nervousness flitted over him, and he got to his feet.

'Ilyusha, sit down for a minute, darling, and tell us how things are going in Section 17,' Sabi gushed, as he approached them. April slid over to accommodate him as he sat down, laying his stick on the floor.

'How's your leg?' Jo said rather sharply, taking in the details of his appearance as he sat opposite her. He was wearing a rather beautiful silk tie with a geometric pattern of purple and mustard which looked like something which you wouldn't find on the bargain shelves at Macy's. His hair was shorter than usual, a style more likely to come from Sassoon's on Fifth Avenue than Frank's, she thought.

'Um, Brian, er, I mean Dr Pearson, thinks I may be able to do without the stick soon,' he started, blushing slightly to Jo's amazement. 'And the work, oh, that's going well.'

'Jo was wondering whether there was any news about Napoleon,' April interrupted. Illya frowned, fiddling with the three interconnected rings of his Wedding band, which looked a little loose on his long, slim fingers.

'Well, I don't work in Section Two now, so I don't really hear much,' he said, pursing his lips. Look, I'm sorry, I have to go now. I have to report to Waverly at five and I still haven't finished the calculations I was working on before lunch,' he muttered, grabbing his stick and hauling himself to his feet. 'I'll come round tonight to see Katya, Sabi.'

The three women looked at each other.
'Excuse me for asking, Jo, but what magic wand has your sister been waving since he came back?' April said, leaning back and grinning at the other two.

'Ja, I heard he even bought the nurses flowers when he left medical,' Sabi joined in. 'Illya Kuryakin, that is, being nice to medical staff.' The two agents laughed, not noticing Jo's frown. *Being very nice to a particular member of the medical staff,* she thought.

'As far as I know, the change in attitude came from him, as did the fashion makeover,' Jo said. 'Well, that's what I think, not that my sister tells me anything these days,' she muttered, but they were too busy recounting what everybody else in Section Two and beyond was saying to notice or hear. A girl from legal department appeared by the side of the table, an envelope in her hand.

'Mrs Solo, urgent message for you, not sure from whom. It was left on your desk, so I thought I'd bring it down.' Jo looked up and smiled.

'Thanks, Lorraine. I'll be up in a minute. Tell them to pull their fingers out and get back to work.' The girl called Lorraine smiled and turned away.

'Jesus, and I thought Waverly was a hard task master,' April said, gathering up the cups. Jo curled her lips a little, and opened the envelope.

'It pays to have eyes in the back of your head here,' she said, looking at the note, and immediately standing up. 'I'm sorry, girls,' she said, smiling briefly, 'something's come up. Catch you later.' Without worrying about what they were thinking or saying, Jo got up and headed for the door.

Back in her department, she signalled to Connie to follow her into her room and shut the door. She had persuaded Waverly to lend her to legal, after Illya had moved to Section Three and at least during the period of Napoleon's absence. She was wondering whether she would ever want to return her, but that battle could be fought later.

'Thanks for the note. I presume you got this information from someone in Section Two?' Jo asked, flicking through her diary. Connie smiled conspiratorially.

'Yes, but don't ask who, otherwise we'll both be looking for new jobs,' Connie replied. Jo took out a pen and started crossing through some appointments in the diary.

'Listen carefully. I want you to book me a flight to Los Angeles for tomorrow. Conveniently, there are some UNCLE contracts I need to sort out at the LA office, and then, as far as anyone here is concerned, I'm taking a few days holiday, OK? Just tell anyone who asks that I'm feeling stressed due to Napoleon etc etc and I'm taking a break. I'll be in touch. Oh, and tell your friend in Section Two thank you, but keep your gob shut, OK?' Connie grinned. Jo took her gun out of the desk and dropped it into her briefcase with a box of clips, before grabbing her coat.

'Oh, Connie, by the way, what you said about Illya. I think you're right,' she said.

Xxxxxxx

Thérèse heard the door slam from the kitchen, followed by the familiar tapping sound of the stick along the corridor and down the stairs. She sighed, not for the first time comparing it to the usual silent entry her husband made, the first intimation of him being there usually being his arms round her waist. She turned as he came through the door and sat down tiredly at the table.

'Bad day?' she said, pushing a cup of tea towards him.

'Mm. Good as far as the program is concerned, but . . . I'm sure your sister is on to me.' Thérèse
pulled out a chair and sat down, noticing that Anastasiya's face had assumed its usual expression when he was around.

'Don't growl, Tasiya,' she said, turning back to him. It was true; the little girl was making low sounds in her throat resembling a threatened cat.

'They look alike and they both have me worked out, I think,' Misha replied, sighing. 'Josefina caught me in the Commissary today, and interrogated me for a few minutes until I was able to get away,' he complained, sipping his tea.

'I still think we should tell her, but Waverly won't hear of it, so you just have to carry on,' Thérèse replied. 'I told you she'd notice how you've changed, didn't I? She's been trying to get Illya to look like you do for a long time, believe me.'

Ever since he had come home from Medical, she had worked tirelessly to make him as near Illya as possible, but there were some things he had had his way about, and his appearance was one of them. Thérèse knew from friends at UNCLE that people had noticed, but it was generally being put down to retiring from Section Two and Thérèse's influence over him. She had laughed when she'd heard.

'You know him,' she'd said to Misha as he looked with horror at Illya's side of the wardrobe; 'he's . . . well, he's just not aware of that sort of thing.'

'Yes, I do know him, but you have to remember we were in uniform for most of that time, and the USSR is not really the place to achieve sartorial elegance,' he'd said, pulling out Illya's black suits and white shirts with a barely concealed sigh.

'Besides, clothes cost money, and I think he's been trying to save some for the children's education,' she had added, knowing this was true after she'd found a deposit account with a carefully filled-in ledger listing the payments he had made over the past few months.

'You don't have to worry about either of those,' Misha had said, smiling, dragging out a large attaché case from a section of the wardrobe high up usually reserved for cases. She had gasped when he had opened it. The inside resembled something she'd only seen on gangster films, after the bank had been robbed.

'Part of the plan to reveal your husband as a KGB plant is the vast amount of money that will suddenly appear in your bank account,' Misha said, shutting the case. Luckily, Mr Waverly was able to 'launder' the money through UNCLE, but we have to get rid of it, before THRUSH realise what has happened,' he said, looking as pleased as a child who'd just been given a very large birthday present. 'As far as your children's education goes, I have every confidence that the Oriel program will net your husband a very large and very legal payment, which will see your present and future children safely through the education system and out the other side again,' he had added.

'But Misha, it's your work, not Illya's. It doesn't seem fair, somehow.' He had sat her down on the end of the bed and held her hand.

'Don't let anyone tell you that, now or in the future,' he had said. 'Without Illya's work, I couldn't have achieved what I've done. It is an entirely joint undertaking, Thérèse. When I leave, there will be enough for me. Besides, because of all this, I've been given something beyond money.'

'And what's that?'

'A new face, his face; a new life, and possibly, if I don't wreck it, a new love,' he had said quietly.

'Well, you can't spend all that money on clothes; Illya will have a fit when he returns,' Thérèse had
said, grinning despite herself. 'Um, I wonder . . . what about a donation?'

'To what, the 'improve the appearance of Illya Nikovetch' fund?'

'No, it's already been tried, at least in the hair department. No, something even more worthy than my beautiful husband.'

They had channelled the money through Gabriel. Every time Thérèse collected Pablo from school after that, she smiled wryly at the plans for the new library on the school notice board.

Thérèse put her hand across the table and it was grasped, their faces regarding each other calmly in the evening shadows.

'To me, it's obvious you're not him,' she said, 'but to others . . ., well, he hides himself, who he really is, from them. If Napoleon was here, he would know too, but he isn't. And in many ways, Misha, you've enabled me to cope; you . . . you've told me things about him I didn't know, things that for some reason, he can't or won't reveal.'

Misha cocked his head to one side and smiled at her.

'Well, he might not have told you everything, but I know he has given himself to you wholly, something an awful lot of women and men have tried and failed to get him to do, including myself,' Misha replied ruefully. He released Thérèse's hand and got up, searching for something in his pocket.

'Now, this is for you, Madame, before all these babies make you forget that you are a beautiful and sensuous woman who deserves to be pampered occasionally, and I need to change before going round to see Katya.' Thérèse sighed and looked at the card. It was for an appointment at a very well known and very expensive beauty salon. She got up and glanced at herself in the reflection of the large mirror hanging on one wall facing the table.

'I can't go, Mish, look at me!' she said, running her hands through her hair, which sprung out of its loose ponytail into an abundance of brown waves. He turned, as he was going out of the room, and came over to her.

'Oh, yes, you can. Madamoiselle here,' he said, nodding at Anastasiya, who gave him a glare back and another little growl, 'is going with Brenda for the whole day tomorrow, and Marina is collecting Pablo. It is settled.' He stroked her belly, marvelling at the rippling motion of the beings beneath. 'I don't want him coming back thinking I didn't look after you, now, do I?'

The Spyrogyra was busy even though it was only ten o'clock on Sunday morning, far too early, Fernando had imagined, for any self-respecting hippy to be up and about. He ambled up to the bar and plonked his empty coffee cup on the counter, hoping that the guy behind the bar might give him a refill when he could bestir himself from chatting to a girl with bleached hair pinned up into an elaborate beehive, who was leaning over the bar so far that Fernando looked down to avoid staring at the frilly pink panties showing underneath her mini skirt. Eventually, coffee cup duly refilled, he walked slowly back to his seat by the window, and sat down.

He'd spent the last couple of days wandering round the Haight, finding a room in a shared house on Oak Street which was relatively clean and filling in the days hanging out in the Park, or doing as he was doing now, sitting in joints like this and listening. Since the meeting in New York he had attempted to trail the woman called Hermione across Europe, coming up against what seemed like an interminable brick wall. If Solo was with her, it seemed that they had vanished into thin air as surely
as if they were part of some evil magician's conjuring trick. The THRUSH facility at La Retraite had been painstakingly searched by UNCLE personnel, but apart from the usual equipment they expected to find, it was as if Napoleon Solo had never existed, let alone been there. He had read April and Darryl's report line by line, for all the good it did him; it seemed that they saw nothing of either Illya or Napoleon or the little girl Pascale from the moment they were captured until they were eventually freed by French UNCLE operatives. In despair, he took a weekend off and drove to Barcelona, spending two nights with his old friend Juniper catching up with news of what had been happening on the island of Peronella since the events of the previous year. It was only when he was getting into his car the next morning that Juni, typically, let slip something he had heard from another boatman who sailed round the ports of the Mediterranean ferrying any tourists about to anywhere they were prepared to pay him to sail.

'He picked up a couple here about two months back and took them to Tangiers,' Juni began, leaning into the car as Fernando was searching the glove compartment for his passport. 'The man seemed, shall we say, a little borracho, Nando.'

'Drunk? Well, I guess that's not so unusual,' Fernando replied, continuing to root in the car for his papers.

'Perhaps not, but the woman, Nando, Diego said she acted more like the Guardia Civil than his wife.' Fernando sighed, wondering why he was telling him about this couple.

'So what did this dragon look like then?'

'She was young, like you, and her hair, it was like your sister's.'

Fernando stopped and twisted in his seat to face his friend.

'Which sister? I have three, remember,' he said, rather impatiently, putting the key into the ignition. Juni grinned, his incredible white teeth glowing in the shadow of the car.

'La hermana mayor, Nando, Senora Solo of course. She has, how you say, the fiery hair? To suit her nature, no? But this senorita, her hair, Diego said, it was very long, and, how you say, not real, my friend.'

Fernando frowned.

'D'you mean her hair was a wig?'. Juniper began to make a clicking noise with his teeth signalling his impatience.

'No, Fernando, her hair was real, but the colour, this was not real, comprende?'

A combination of fear and excitement immediately entwined themselves in Fernando's gut. He grasped Juni's hand in thanks, and after the Mallorcan had disappeared into the crowd, extricated his communicator from his back pocket.

'Open Channel D, overseas relay. Can you patch me through to Morocco, please, Tangiers office.'

It had proved a long and exceedingly complicated journey, but, because of a purely fortuitous conversation with his old Mallorcan friend, he had managed to track them, ironically, all the way back to the USA. However, the trail had run cold once he had reached San Francisco, and he feared that unless he could warm it up a little, Waverly would soon run out of patience with him.

The juke box began playing at the instigation of the beehive girl, who was now looking in his direction and smiling. She had prodded a few buttons to produce a song Fernando hadn't heard
before. After a few bars of fairly interesting guitar music a girl began to sing. The word 'Russian' made Fernando slightly more attuned to the lyrics, which seemed to be the usual lost love lament stuff which he'd heard a thousand times before. He could tell it was reaching a crescendo where the inevitable chorus would begin and he wasn't disappointed. Afterwards, he was glad he wasn't drinking his coffee at the time, or else he would have choked.

'Tell Illya he's the one,

For him to Russia I would run

Tell Illya I'll never forget

That he's my Soviet boy'

Fernando could see that the girl was singing along, bawling out the chorus with a high-pitched, excruciating voice. Forcing himself not to leap at her, he advanced to the juke box as the chorus faded away.

'That's a cool song,' he drawled, trying to keep the edge out of his voice. She smiled again, looking him up and down as if he had just landed from another planet and she was the welcoming committee.

'Can you say that again?' she asked breathlessly, 'I love your accent, you sound like the Beatles!' Fernando sighed, glancing at the disk list out of the corner of his eye as the girl, who introduced herself as Laverne Cooper, late of, Huntingdon, West Virginia, began to entwine herself around him.

'Um, Laverne, that song, it's got an unusual lyric, don't you think?' She stared at him, her eyes looking more like those of a panda due to the massive amount of eyeliner she had used.

'Do what? Oh, the words of that old song! Yeah, that's Pete's song, pretty cute isn't it? He reckons it's gonna make his group bigger than Jefferson Airplane, but I ain't so sure.' She seemed to be pretty well stuck to him now, so he decided not to resist.

'Is that so? Pete a friend of yours then?' Fernando asked casually, smiling at her as she started to run her hands through his hair.

'Your hair is so pretty, is it natural?' she cooed, then, remembering his question, she continued, 'Oh Pete, yeah, I know him. He lives in that yellow house just off Golden Gate Park. It's kinda like a commune,' she added, making it sound at once both exotic and illegal sounding.

It took him another half an hour to separate himself from the girl, promising to meet her back at the Spirogyra that evening before he was allowed to leave. Trying not to break into a run, Fernando entered the Park and stationed himself against a convenient tree with the yellow house facing him, a clear view of the front door afforded him from his vantage point.

'Open Channel D, Mr Waverly please.' He decided to at least give them some positive news even if it led to nothing in the end.

'Mr McCaffery, report please,' Waverly said, without preamble.

'I'm in Golden Gate Park sir, watching a house where I think Miss Pilkington might be staying, and, hopefully, Mr Solo,' Fernando replied, keeping his eyes on the brightly painted door.

'You think, Mr McCaffery? What is your conjecture based upon?' Fernando swallowed, wishing that Waverly hadn't asked.
'Well sir, I heard a song in a bar near here which I think may connect the writer of the lyrics with Mr Solo in a roundabout way,' he said, bracing himself for the reply.

'Did you say a *song*, Mr McCaffery?'

'Yes sir, it was the title that seemed a bit too unusual not to follow it up, really.' There was a slight hiatus, during which Fernando could almost see the old man's eyebrows being raised to the heavens.

'Um, the song was called *Tell Illya*, sir.'

'I see. Well, you'd better follow it up, I suppose; after all, it's hardly an everyday forename, is it? Contact me immediately if you make progress. Waverly out.'

Fernando shoved his communicator back in the pocket of his jeans and leaned back against the tree. After what seemed like quite a while, the door of the house eventually opened, a girl with long blonde hair sashaying forth down the steps and along the street. She had left the door ajar. Fernando stood upright and looked for a few minutes before slowly making his way out of the park and across the road. If what Laverne had said was true, the occupants of the house would not find it strange for someone to wander in off the street and say hello.

He skipped up the steps and stood by the door, glancing behind him before casually pushing it open a little. The hallway was the usual scene of chaos when an indeterminate number of people shared a house. A couple of bicycles were shoved against one of the walls, underneath a large poster of Che Guevara. A strange odour pervaded the place, a rather unpleasant mixture of cannabis, joss sticks and unwashed bodies. He picked his way round the bikes and headed for what he imagined was the kitchen at the back of the house, where faint noises connected with cooking could be heard. Fernando let his nose find the kitchen, the rather strong, spicy smells issuing forth from its depths making it rather easy to locate. He shoved the door open and drawled a long 'Hi there' to the cook, a tall man with shoulder length black hair, wearing a dirty white t-shirt and cut-offs.

He didn't turn round, just returned the greeting and continued stirring what Fernando presumed was some sort of curry. Fernando picked up the guitar slung down by the table and started to play some chords of the song he'd heard on the juke box, with the desired effect on the cook.

'Hey man, you know my song?' Fernando stopped playing and laid the guitar across his lap.

'You Pete?' he said casually. Pete, as it indeed was, turned off the light under the curry and came across to the table. Showing no surprise whatsoever that a total stranger was sitting opposite him playing his guitar, Pete sat down opposite Fernando, splaying his long legs out in front of him, and ferreting in his back pocket for his roll-ups. After he'd rolled and lit a long thin cigarette and taken a deep draw from it, Pete looked across at Fernando.

'You in a band? You play well, man,' he began, nodding his head as if Fernando were still playing.

'Nah, not at the moment. I played in a group at home, then I came out here to find a girl I met on my travels in Europe,' Fernando replied slowly. Apart from them, he could hear no other sounds in the house, but that didn't necessarily mean that no-one else was in. Pete appeared uninterested, but after a few more puffs of his cigarette, he said, 'You from Liverpool? Hey, d'you know the Beatles?'

'I was at school with George Harrison if that's what you mean,' Fernando lied, picking the youngest of the fab four and hoping it sounded plausible. Pete leaned over, his breath a powerful combination of nicotine and garlic.
'I'm starting to write a lot more now,' he said, stubbing out the cigarette on a saucer marked 'See you in Sausalito' and looking vaguely excited by the idea of sitting opposite a friend of George Harrison's.

'Yeah. I liked the song. Where d'you get that name, man? I've never heard anyone called that before'. Pete smiled knowingly, and for a few seconds, Fernando thought he might just tell him he'd made it up.

'Friend of Boudicca's gave it me, well he sort of mumbled it to me, like he does. I checked it out with another guy down the Library, and yeah, it's a real name – Russian, man, so I kinda wove the lyric round it.'

'So who's Boudicca, when she's at home,' Fernando asked, trying to keep his scouse accent as strong as he could without being incomprehensible to the man opposite. Pete smiled laconically and started to wander back to the stove.

'She's a chick from your side of the pond, man. Being a man of history as well as songs, I call her that, seeing she's got that long red hair, right?'

'Ooh, right,' Fernando replied, trying to keep his excitement under control. He could feel the gun in his back pocket as he sat back, his jacket hiding the evidence that he was not an English student bumming round California.

'You hungry?' Pete said, before Fernando could enquire any further.

They shared the curry companionably, Pete's cooking being superior to his song-writing, Fernando decided. The conversation ambled slowly on, ranging from pop art through music, girls, usual subjects for two young men passing time in a shared house in San Francisco in 1967. After the meal, Pete took off his shoe and took out enough cannabis to roll them both a joint. Fernando looked at the joint and wondered how much of it he could smoke before he considered himself unable to continue the mission, at least for today. He took a draw, trying not to inhale too deeply. Luckily, Pete was well into his joint and didn't notice his companion's reluctance to smoke further.

'Um, this Boudicca, she sounds like my sort of girl,' he began somewhat later, not wanting to wait until Pete had passed the point of no return with the joint.

'You think,' he said, a lazy smile on his lips. 'I wouldn't want to mess with that chick, me. Besides, she's got Tony on a string at the mo, man, and they are joined at the hip,' he added, leaning back in his chair and watching the smoke gather above his head.

'Tony? The guy with the Russian friend?' Fernando said, his eyes lowered.

'The very one.' He leaned forward rather uncertainly, a look on his face which suggested he was about to share something confidential. 'They're supposed to be heading north to evade the army boys anytime soon, but, between you and me man, I don't think he's gonna make it out of this front door, never mind up to Canada.'

Fernando sat up a little, forcing an interested but unworried expression onto his face.

'So he's 'in residence' is he?' he muttered, pulling out a band and tying his hair back into a loose ponytail on his neck. If he had to drag Napoleon out of the house, he didn't want his hair getting in the way.

'Yeah, man, he's out of it upstairs. Shame you can't meet Boud, seeing she's a fellow Brit, but of the posh, up your ass variety, if you take my drift,' he added, flicking the ash from his joint onto the
'Yeah, shame,' Fernando said. He could see Pete's eyes clouding slightly, a good sign. He waited, casually dropping the joint and grinding it into the floor as he waited for the other man to drop into a quiet doze at the table. As a gentle series of snores erupted from Pete, Fernando silently got up and left the room.

At the top of the first flight of steps from the ground floor, Fernando counted five doors along the rather dark corridor, the staircase leading up again to a second floor on a small landing. All the doors appeared firmly shut, and the stillness of the place led him to conclude that the occupants were either sleeping or out. He withdrew his gun from his pocket and loaded a clip of sleeping darts, not wanting to draw any more attention to what he was doing than was absolutely necessary. Both doors on the right revealed empty rooms, with the usual collection of posters, clothes and other things strewn about haphazardly over the floor and on the beds. Fernando glanced up the stairs to the second floor, but decided to complete his search of the first before he ascended to the top of the house. It wasn't until he was outside the last door that he heard something. Garbled sounds, a man's voice he was sure could be heard, as if the person inside was having some sort of strange, nightmarish dream.

There was a slight thump, and then he heard the same, vague, half-crazed voice cry, 'Let me fly, let me fly!'

Fernando opened the door. The curtains were drawn across the window making the room dark and oppressive. Like the other rooms, clothes seemed to be flung everywhere, and Fernando had to pick his way through an assortment of objects on his way to the bed. There was the same, unpleasant, rank smell in the room overlaid by the heady aroma of incense. As his eyes became accustomed to the subdued light, he was able to make out the figure of a man lying on the bed. Shoving his gun back in his pocket Fernando leaned forward towards him.

He was on his side, his hands tied with what looked like torn sheeting, which was then tied to the posts of the bed above his head. He was writhing about, a series of almost incomprehensible sounds and words coming out of his mouth. Whatever he was experiencing, it was causing an intense desire to move about the surreal world which the drug in his body had created. At first sight, Fernando was sure he'd found the wrong man. From behind, he looked thin, his pelvic bones standing out above the dirty hipsters as he lay on his side. His long brown hair hung over his face and down his back in thick, greasy strands, Fernando just being able to glimpse a bedraggled beard on the man's face. He cringed at the series of puncture holes in the arm which was exposed, some of which looked sore and infected. As he leaned forward, the body on the bed began to shake violently, his babbling silenced by the clenching of his jaws as the tremor took hold. Fernando grasped his shoulders and pulled him onto his back.

'Christ, Napoleon, what the hell have they done to you?' Fernando murmured, turning him back on his side to prevent him choking. By the bed, a small unit with drawers in it stood, the top drawer slightly open. Fernando wrenched it fully open and scooped out the contents, a number of phials of unidentified liquid and a little box of sugar cubes, nestling next to a number of syringes and needles. He shoved the drugs in his pocket and grabbed a small pair of scissors that were lying on the top of the bedside unit and began to hack away at the rags round Napoleon's hands. Luckily, he had come to an exhausted rest from the tremors of five minutes before, once more starting up a random conversation with no-one about how the walls were breathing blue. Fernando frowned and started to drag Solo towards the edge of the bed.

It was relatively easy to get him up and moving, in fact the main problem was to prevent him from wandering off or trying to jump off the top stair and 'float like a cloud', as he whispered into Fernando's ear. Fernando shook his head and gripped onto the American agent for dear life as they somehow made it to the ground floor. He could see the front door was still open as they stumbled
towards it. It was only a matter of getting him onto the street and as far as Fernando's car parked round the corner. The door of the front downstairs room was ajar as they passed it, no noise coming out of it, or from the kitchen. Fernando shifted his weight to allow him to open the door but his hand got no further than the knob.

'Oh, I don't think he's quite up to going out on the town yet, do you?'

Hermione stood in the hallway next to the bicycles, a small gun pointed in their direction. Her hair seemed even more unnatural in the light from the window above the door; a lurid copper that made her eyes appear like black slits in her face. She stepped back slightly and signalled Fernando to return Napoleon upstairs.

'I don't mind in the slightest killing you both down here now,' she sneered, 'but upstairs would be so much more convenient.' Fernando knew he could never get his gun out in time to prevent her killing him immediately. His only hope lay in somehow being able to disarm her upstairs, or on the way upstairs. He shrugged and began dragging Napoleon, who was now feeling the walls as if they were the body of a woman, upstairs towards the bedroom. As they started to climb, Hermione stood behind them, with her back to the door. Fernando steadied himself on the stairs, trying to keep hold of the writhing form of his brother in law. He glanced behind to where Hermione was standing and gulped.

'What is it? Can't manage him? I'd have thought he was an easy weight for you, big boy,' she sniggered, looking him up and down and momentarily lowering her gun.

'And you're an easy weight for me, bitch.' Fernando winced as Jo brought the butt of her gun down on Hermione's head. She sunk to the floor with a loud thud, the bicycle somehow crashing down on top of her, her hair now splayed out behind its spinning wheels.

Afterwards, Fernando still wasn't exactly sure how she had known they were there, but there wasn't really time to explore that point, especially with his big sister in the mood she was in now. Hermione groaned and began to push the bike up at the same time as fumbling along the floor for her gun. While Jo immediately yanked off the bike and pinned the other woman on the floor again, Fernando made the mistake of letting go of Napoleon to grab the gun. It wasn't until he got up from the floor that he realised his charge had disappeared.

'Where's Napoleon?' Jo said, finally pinning Hermione's hands behind her back and cuffing them. 'You haven't let him go, have you?!!' Fernando jumped to his feet, ran down the corridor, and out of the door, giving Hermione a shove as he passed. If Solo had wandered off, there would be hell to pay, and it wouldn't be from Waverly or Kuryakin when he got back. He felt about seven years old again, lost in the middle of Liverpool when he had inadvertently let go of his sister's hand in order to look at a particularly exciting train set that was on a display in a toy shop window. He had never forgotten the lecture he had received when she had finally found him crying his eyes out in front of Woolworths.

Fernando ran down the steps in front of the house and frantically glanced down the street, his pony tail swinging round his head as he jerked it left and right. A slight commotion further down the road to his right alerted him, and he started to run towards it. A small group of people seemed to be clustered round a car. Fernando could see a girl with her hair tied up in two bunches and amazing winged spectacles suddenly lean over someone he couldn't see and shout,

'Oh, please, just stop kissing my car!' Grimacing, he pushed his way through the crowd. The car was a convertible, a T-Bird he thought, powder blue with a startling red leather interior. Solo had somehow managed to get into the car and was now locked into an embrace with the steering wheel. Fernando nodded at the girl and opening the door, began to prise Napoleon's fingers off the wheel.
He could hear the girl screaming in his ear about spoiling the leather, Napoleon continuing to mumble equally inane nonsense into the other one. He appeared to believe that the car was alive and coming onto him. At last, Fernando dragged him out and onto the pavement, but not before he gave the door one last kiss, reducing the girl to screeching hysteria as she frantically wiped it with her hankie.

'I'm sorry,' Fernando muttered, 'bad trip,' as he got a better grip on Solo's arm and marched him away round the corner to the safety of his rather less glamorous car. As he opened the back door he saw Jo running towards him. She pushed him away and holding Napoleon firmly, pushed him onto the back seat, jumping in behind him with an impressive athleticism.

'There's a clinic near here, we'll take him there,' Fernando said, starting the car. He looked in the mirror at his sister, Napoleon cradled in her arms. The tremors Fernando had witnessed in the house had now returned, and he could see Solo's jaws clenched tight again, the perspiration beginning to pour off his face and contribute to the appalling smell of sweat and dirt which his body was emitting. Jo appeared to be impervious to it, her face a study of concern for him as she gently cleared away the hair lying across the writhing face. As they drove along she looked up suddenly, as if she had just become aware of Fernando's presence in the car.

'I took care of her, if that's what you're thinking,' she said. 'She won't be moving for a while, so you'd better ring the UNCLE lads and get them round there. No doubt Alex will want to speak to her.' Fernando raised his eyebrows at her use of Waverly's name. Perhaps they had a relationship he didn't know about, and somehow it didn't surprise him.

'Um, what exactly did you do to her, sis?' he enquired tentatively, not sure that he wanted to know. Looking up again, a wry smile came to her lips.

'Long hair; bicycle spokes; not a good combination,' she said simply. Fernando winced.

The clinic was new, and despite Jo's reservations, Fernando knew it was the place to take Solo. He had handed over one of the sugar cubes and a phial of the nameless liquid to the doctor treating Napoleon, at the same time as giving him a fairly simple explanation of who the patient was. He left Jo with him, and stepping into a quiet corner of the waiting room, he pulled out his communicator.

'Any news, Mr McCaffery?' Fernando was slightly taken aback by Waverly's voice. He wondered how he was going to explain without dropping Jo into it.

'Um, yes, Mr Solo is alive. It looks as if Miss Pilkington was trying to kill him, but slowly sir. I don't really understand why they didn't just kill him in France.' Fernando swallowed.

'Oh, I think you will find, Mr McCaffery, that the object was to destroy Mr Solo's reputation, and therefore the reputation of UNCLE in the process. Make sure that the clean up team search the house where he was thoroughly, will you? There may be photographic evidence which Miss Pilkington was making of Mr Solo's descent to addiction. By the way, is Miss Pilkington in UNCLE custody?' Fernando swallowed.

'Er, yes sir. We, I mean, I made sure she was secure before we, I mean I . . .'. Before he could go blundering on, Waverly interrupted him.

'Is Josefina with Mr Solo now?' The fact that Waverly knew she was there, let alone the use of the first name again, silenced Fernando. Sighing inwardly he continued.

'Yes sir, she's with him. They think he should be stabilised in a few hours, and can be brought back to New York for further treatment.'
'Good. Well, good work, Mr McCaffery. Hopefully, Mr Solo will make a complete recovery very soon, and then perhaps we can retrieve Mr Kuryakin and get to the bottom of all this.'

After some time, they let him into the room where Solo and Josefina were. The doctor, a man who looked a little like the patients he was treating, drew him aside and gave Fernando a brief explanation of the treatment they had given.

'Here, give this to your medical staff,' he had said, handing him a large envelope. 'By the look of him, he'd been given pretty regular doses of LSD, perhaps some diazepam and a few other things. The other stuff you gave me, if he'd started on that, well, just take it from me, he's lucky that he didn't. Anyway, with a bit of TLC, he should be on his feet in a few weeks.'

Fernando was relieved to see that they had cleaned Napoleon up since he had last seen him. He still sported the shoulder length hair and long beard, but his body seemed a few shades lighter. His face, now calmer and less tortured, looked gaunt and thin and was echoed by the rather wasted looking arms lying across the white sheets of the bed. Jo got up as Fernando came in and stood leaning on the bed head looking at Solo.

'They say he'll make a full recovery,' she said softly, glancing at the drip feeding in the antibiotics necessary to treat the now bandaged sores on his arm. 'But it was a near thing, Nando.' Fernando nodded and came closer, as Solo's eyes fluttered and slowly half-opened. Jo crouched down as he turned his head slightly. Holding back his hair, she kissed him softly, revelling in the familiar lips and the deep hazel of his eyes.

'Don't worry lover, soon have you back to scratch,' she murmured in his ear. If Fernando hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed that Solo actually forced his head off the pillow for another kiss. He began to mumble something which Jo couldn't for the life of her understand. Fernando smiled and shook his head.

'No, you'll be back first, if that's what you mean,' he said, laughing, and repeating the words to his sister. Jo looked up at Fernando, her lips twisted into a confused knot. 'He wanted to know if that bloody Russian is back yet?' she said. 'Now what is that supposed to mean?' Napoleon lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

'What did he just say?' Fernando said. Jo sat down by the side of the bed and crossed her arms in front of her.

'He said 'I've won the Stoli,' she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

CHAPTER 18

The apartment felt strangely empty despite its diminutive size, as Illya slammed the door shut and trudged into the living room. He smiled at the little collection of pictures which now decorated the room, childish drawings and paintings of people and places which now dominated his life. Dropping his bags on the floor, he wandered into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Fortunately, the communal boiler was surprisingly efficient and the supply of hot water was generous and plentiful, even in the early evening as this was now, when, he imagined, other workers in other apartments would be doing the same as he was. There was no need to shut the door or worry about his daughter seeing him, since Pascale was away for a few days on a Pioneer camp run by the local Comintern.

Dropping his clothes on the bathroom floor, he stepped into the shower. It seemed that it was in the bathroom he did most of his thinking and planning nowadays, the rest of the time being taken up by Pascale, work, and Anya. Since the night of the so-called engagement, she had taken over the running of his life, from the moment they left the apartment in the morning, virtually to the moment
his head hit the pillow at night. Every evening there seemed to be some activity; either a visit to the library, music practice, studying some scientific journal together, or just helping Pascale with her homework, which Anya felt she was entitled to assist with 'since Polina will be our daughter soon.' Then there was the PE regimen she had insisted he follow. Soon after the fated evening, she had shown him an application form, his name already entered in her neat handwriting. 'I think this will be good for you,' she had said, looking him up and down, and it will look good on your form when you apply for a promotion within the Institute.' He had sighed and looked at the form.

It was for a triathlon competition, to be held in the week before their marriage. Illya had participated in such competitions when he was at University, which now seemed like a lifetime ago. 'After swimming in the Volga for 750 metres, you will then complete a cycle ride of 20 kilometres followed by a 5 kilometre run,' she had said, as if it was an order, just a sprint, really'. He had frowned at the idea to begin with, but once the training had begun, and with the surprisingly good diet Madame Markova seemed to be providing him, Illya decided to enjoy it.

As he began to wash his hair, he looked down at his body. He could see the benefits of the training and not for the first time wondered why Anya had been so insistent about it. Ever since that evening, he had never seen her looking as she did, or looking at him as she did, and she had never allowed him to get close enough to make her look like it. The thick-lensed glasses had stayed firmly in place, her hair always ruthlessly pulled back into a style that defied any possibility of him running his fingers through it, even if he'd wanted to. Thinking of hair put him in mind of Thérèse. He mentally ran his hand through the wonderful wavy brown hair with the strands like a live bronzy current running through the dark curls. It would be quite long now, and thinking about it made him grimace and scrub at his own hair in frustration. He turned off the water, got out and stood in the bathroom, combing his hair back with his fingers. It had grown considerably, but, unlike any other woman he had ever met, Anya didn't seem to have an opinion about it. Wrapping the towel round his waist, he sat down on the toilet seat and cupped his face with his hands.

There were just over three weeks left until the end of May. Illya felt within himself that the moment of escape had to be very soon. The long-awaited spring had come to the city; the river, frozen over all winter, was now fully-functional, ferrying those given permission to visit on tourist boats, and transporting goods to and from the city in great wide barges, slowly chugging through the swirling water between its massive banks. He considered the mission he had been given; only one of the three parts had been more or less completed. The computer programme was now interfacing with the existing security software; in fact he had been called into the office of his supervisor, Dr Simeonev, and congratulated on his work. The final tests were to be undertaken between the mainframes at Gorky and at the embassy in New York. The use of the key to encrypt and then decrypt messages would enable the USSR to finally obtain complete security from the capitalist lackeys of the CIA, Dr Simeonev had informed Illya, fixing him with a piercing gaze. Illya glanced down at his feet. The day of the test had been set for the Friday before the wedding; the last day he would work in the department. The day when they would discover that there was a hidden virus in the system that would make an important part of the software unusable.

'After your marriage, comrade, it has been decided that you and your wife should move to the department of Quantum Electrodynamics,' Simeonev said rather dismissively. Illya nodded submissively. They could send him to any department they fancied, he thought, only he wouldn't be around to be sent.

The other two parts of the mission were incomplete, and the more Illya thought about it, the more connected they felt. He had questioned Pascale after the famous evening, and she had written a list of what had been in Anya's bag. While they had been kissing on the sofa, she had also made a thorough search of Dmitri's room, and on several occasions since had searched other rooms and bags in the Markov's apartment. Illya was mildly amazed by the thoroughness of her methods and reports, which
she carried out with a sort of rigorous enthusiasm he could only marvel at. He wondered how well this little girl would settle into a more normal lifestyle, if the lifestyle of his family could ever be called normal. The only conclusion he could draw from all of this was that their original premise was wrong; someone else had the control box, someone who was waiting yet again, to threaten his daughter's life in order to obtain her father's compliance.

And then there was Nikitin. Whatever Simeonev said, Illya had the feeling that when it was known his work on the computer was at an end, he would be moved, but not to Quantum Electrodynamics. Something much more personal was involved in all this; irrational and personal. At least he hoped so, because that usually meant that mistakes were made when personal emotions guided actions. As he got up, he almost found himself wishing for a friendly KGB agent who could sort out exactly what Nikitin was up to for him, or even better, sort out Nikitin, permanently.

Letting go of the towel, Illya gathered up his clothes and headed for the bedroom. Embarrassingly, his future wife had now taken charge of washing his clothes even, laying out neat piles of shirts, underwear and gym clothes on the bed every Friday. No doubt the same rather depressing little pile would be waiting for him now. He smiled to himself at the thought that he was actually missing his old clothes, visualising the black suits and his beloved turtlenecks hanging neatly in his bedroom light years away from the dull little room he was entering now.

Oddly, the curtains were drawn, shutting out even the deep shadows of the evening from the room. He threw the dirty clothes into a basket at the side of the wardrobe by the door and walked towards the bed, to draw them back and let a little light in. Afterwards he was amazed by his lack of awareness that anything was different about the room. As he reached the window behind the bed, he felt a hand grasp his arm and yank him unceremoniously onto the bed. Before he could react he felt the weight of another body on top of his. It was instantly obvious that it was a woman, and that she, like him, was entirely naked.

After several attempts to get up, only to be forced down again by two arms that felt like iron rods, Illya gave up.

'Anya, what are you doing?' he gasped at last, staring up at her. This was obviously to be a time when the scraped back hair and the glasses were dispensed with. She sat up, her legs straddling his body, her arms continuing to hold him fast to the bed.

'Now, are you going to be a good boy, or do I have to keep holding you, Illya Nikovetch?' she said, watching his shocked face with delight ‘I surrender,’ he said wearily, 'but can we draw the curtains back, please, so at least I can see my tormentor more easily.' She laughed, and proceeded to slide up his body until her legs were wrapped round his neck.

'Don't try anything, Illyusha,' she said, now able to reach the curtains and draw them back, a sudden explosion of evening light filling the room. There was a slight hiatus, before Illya murmured, 'Um, would you mind at least resuming your former position? I'm finding it a little hard to breathe.' Anya slid back, giving him a hard kiss as she resumed her former position.

Naked, she was certainly impressive. Illya could see the form of her musculature, which accounted for the immense strength she seemed to have in her arms and legs. He could only imagine what sort of weights she lifted to obtain it. Despite her physical development, she was still a very beautiful woman, her lips wide and full and her grey-blue eyes piercing and bright in the twilight of the room. They regarded each other for a few moments, until, after caressing his hair until it lay smooth on the pillow, she rolled off and lay sideways next to him, her arm supporting her. Illya breathed deeply and pulled himself up the bed a little, attempting, and failing to pull the sheet up over him. Her hand shot
out and pushed it back, stroking his belly as it came back to rest across his chest. Illya knew that if he attempted to move it might be unwise, so he shrugged and relaxed back into the pillow once more.

"Permit me to ask, Anya," he began, "but how long have you known who I am?" She smiled, playing with his hair again, her fingers parting and sifting through it over his head and back towards his neck.

"Oh, I've known who you were from just after you arrived, Illya darling," she whispered, now playing with his ear. "We knew he had someone in mind from his past, but we didn't know he was going to be quite as, let's say ambitious with his vengeance as he was." Illya nodded, trying to keep his body from reacting to what she was doing as she talked.

"And might I ask who 'we' is?" he said, closing his eyes as her hand began to travel downwards.

"Oh come now darling, you know very well," she said, as he jumped at her inevitable grasp of what he thought she'd been focusing on all along.

"KGB. Be careful what you wish for," he murmured to himself. Grimacing, he grasped her hand firmly and pulled it off.

"Then, Anya, you almost certainly know that although you are very beautiful, very intelligent, and very strong, I'm afraid I've already been spoken for."

She allowed him to roll slightly away from her before he felt her push him hard onto his belly and, with lightning speed, sit on top of him, her legs once more flattening him into the bed. Illya sighed loudly, and attempted to turn his head. He could feel her lean down to his ear and start to nibble it.

"Anya, this is not a very constructive position for talking. Could we please at least sit up, if I'm not going to be allowed to get dressed?" he pleaded, feeling her tongue traversing his ear as he spoke.

"Ah, Illyusha, you are a hard man," she moaned, kissing the back of his neck, but then rolling off him until he could finally heave himself into a sitting position and pull the now rumpled sheet over himself. Anya pulled the pillows up and slid under the sheets, ignoring his glare as she ran her toes down his leg. Illya pulled the sheet up higher and crossed his legs.

"Can we have a sensible conversation now, Anya, please?" he said, raising his eyebrows. She glared at him good humouredly and reached out for his hair. This time it was Illya's hand that shot out and returned Anya's arm to her side of the bed.

"Illya, you are, what do the English say, a "prude"?" Anya said, pouting. Illya frowned, trying to reflect on what had just been revealed at the same time as deflecting any unwelcome advances from his bedfellow.

"So, if you are ready to listen, Anya, let me summarise this conversation," he began. "You, Anya Markova – that is your real name, I suppose?" Anya nodded and smiled. "You are a KGB agent, First Directorate? I thought so. First Directorate have discovered that one of their own is, let's say, working on his own, and, in order to achieve his rather personal ambitions, has compromised the Service by allying himself, let's see, not only with a renegade organisation called THRUSH, but also with another loose cannon working for the enemy of our great nation."

"You are not just a pretty face, Illyusha," Anya murmured, her hand beginning to head for his hair again.

"Leave it alone." He glared at her and turned towards her. "So, Captain is it?"

"Major." Illya grinned and gave her a mock salute. "So, Major Markova, what exactly has all this been
about?' he said. 'Why didn't you just arrest Viktor Borisovitch and send me back to my wife and family?' Anya assumed a pained expression at the last part of his sentence.

'I cannot believe that you have a wife and all those children, Illyusha,' she said, pushing herself up closer to him. 'We were thinking of offering you a commission in the First Directorate. You are wasted in that organisation, darling, and you are wasted on that Spanish woman too,' Anya added dismissively. 'If you return to the Soviet Union, I am sure that your citizenship would be reinstated, and then after your divorce, well . . .'

Illya shook his head and sighed.

'I am flattered, Anya, by your offer,' he began quietly, 'but it's not a matter of just my job or my country even. People matter to me now as much as abstract notions of service and loyalty. Thérèse is my life, the children are part of us, and the man I work with, well, he is also very important to me, too. I'm sorry,' he ended, smiling at her. He allowed her to put her hand up and stroke his face as he relaxed against the pillows. She nodded, bringing her knees up and hugging them with her arms.

'I understand,' she said. 'I will miss you, darling.' She leaned back and closed her eyes for a few moments. 'Illya,' she continued again, 'I know that the computer system will not work properly.' Illya went to say something, but she put a finger across his lips. 'Shh. Listen. What you have done, you have given your country a great deal. Even without the key, there has been a great advance because of your work, and it has many applications, no?' He nodded, wondering what this was leading to.

'You were right to identify Commissar Nikitin. There is no doubt that he has an informant in our department, and that he knows already that your work there has been completed. However, comrade, I have been ordered to request your help in the arrest of Commissar Nikitin. If you agree to help, then it may be possible to facilitate your return, and of course, by that I mean you and your delightful daughter's return to, as you so unfortunately put it, your wife and family.' Illya breathed out deeply, involuntarily shivering at the import of her words.

'What did you have in mind?' he replied, trying to focus on the end product rather than what he might have to do first to get it.

'Nikitin has been very careful not to be seen anywhere near you,' she began. We need to bring him out in the open, as it were. We need to prove that this is purely a personal vendetta on his part, but also, we need to know if he has direct contact with someone in the American intelligence service and also with your bird organisation. As you know, the KGB does not take kindly to its operatives being involved with other organisations working against the Soviet state.' Illya frowned and sat up a little, drawing his legs up towards him.

'You will need to make sure that Pascale will be safe,' he began. 'Did you know that they have implanted something into her heart to guarantee my obedience?' Anya's shocked face revealed the answer to his question.

'I am pretty sure now that Nikitin has the device,' Illya continued, and will continue to use it if he needs to. Do you know who his mole is in the Department?' Anya leaned forward and whispered the name of a particularly oily laboratory assistant into his ear. Illya smiled.

'No surprises there, then. Well, let's see. What if I suggested to you, in comrade Glinkov's hearing, that is, that I was thinking of escaping with you to a new life during the Triathlon?' Anya sat up and clapped her hands together.

'How did you guess my plan?' she said rather loudly, leaning forward towards him. Illya held up the sheet round her and shook his head.
'I presume by that comment you mean that all this training is for an ulterior motive, other than to turn me into fit husband material?' he asked, smiling archly. Anya grinned and lunged towards him again.

'Of course, Illyusha!' she gushed, then sat back slightly, thinking. 'Yes, you could suggest that to me. Make sure he thinks that we are going to escape at some point during the event. Believe me, Nikitin will not be able to resist coming after you. Then, when we have Nikitin and the device, you can make your real exit, if you must, darling,' she added sadly.

'You know, you remind me of a colleague, well, a friend of mine in New York,' Illya mused, smiling at her. 'She's a German, but you're very alike.' Anya pouted, and began to wind her fingers through his hair again. 'Is this German a lover of yours?' she said. Illya removed her hand from his hair and looked around for his clothes.

'It's a long story,' he said.

xxxxxxxxx

'Fetch me a mirror, now, and I want a telephone in here, stat'. Napoleon attempted his best CEA glare at the nurse, who instantly turned on her heel and left the room, a look of mingled pity and annoyance on her face. This was the first day he had really felt as if his mind was fully his, he reflected. The last three months had consisted of an almighty black hole with the occasional glimpses of human life vaguely remembered, before he was plunged back into the abyss. He remembered quite distinctly the room at La Retraite; he could see his partner, blood pouring from the cut on his head, as Solo was pulled back from him and pinned to a trolley. And he still remembered the other Kuryakin, and his nightmarish scream as metal hit bone.

He knew as soon as he was first fully awake that something serious had happened to him during the last twelve or so weeks. Even with the bandages round them, his arms looked wasted, and it was immediately apparent from looking down that the rest of his body wasn't much better. As if that wasn't serious enough, he knew, could feel it, that there was something particularly bad about his face and head. The expressions of those who visited his room were enough to alert him without needing a mirror. He could see the end of what felt like a monstrous beard, and, glancing to his right, even worse, could see what looked like . . . a pony tail.

Waverly had visited him several times; on each occasion he was able to tell him a little more of what had happened. Finally, Napoleon summoned up the strength to ask what he needed to know.

'Excuse me, sir, but what about Illya?'

After a short bout of throat clearing, Waverly had begun. After he'd gone, Napoleon was left alone to deal with the range of emotions finding out had left him with. At first he was angry. Angry with Illya, with Waverly, angry with just about anyone he felt like being angry with. For several days, when lucid, he threw the whole thing about in his head, trying to figure out why they hadn't told him, why Illya hadn't told him. Then, after he'd calmed down, or Waverly had judged he had calmed down, he had a visitor.

He was dozing after consuming a combination of some rather unappetising bland liquid supposed to build up strength with a more palatable meal. An image of a guy with long dark hair and a guitar stole across his mind, and then he remembered what Fernando had told him about the song. He smiled, imagining that Kuryakin was sitting there. The familiar blond head seemed to come into his vision, but a little different.

'Tess finally sorted you out, then comrade,' he mumbled. The man in his dream replied, sounding strangely near at hand.
'No, I did it all myself, Napoleon, as a matter of fact.' Napoleon's eyes had snapped open. He was sitting there, a serious look on his face. The same face, but it wasn't the same man. He stood up and put a hand on Napoleon's chest.

'I'm glad you've returned. I presume Mr Waverly has explained.' Napoleon stared up at the blond, his eyes narrowing slightly.

'Where is he? Where is my partner?'

After that, he had returned regularly. As Napoleon regained strength and his mind cleared, he could see it straight away. Apart from Shevchenko's appearance, which Napoleon had to smile at the irony of, considering what he imagined he looked like himself, there were things, small subtle things that gave him away, at least to Napoleon they did. In odd moments, he started to mentally list them; expressions, how polite he was, his fastidiousness with his appearance, his extrovert, relaxed attitude. And his attitude to men. Solo guessed it after being with him a few times.

He noticed that everybody else had seemed to accept him as he was. The fact that he didn't work in Section Two helped; he mixed with an altogether different set of people now, Napoleon thought, people with their heads stuck into microscopes who wouldn't care if the Russian had turned up and done a few cartwheels down the corridor, not that he could with that leg. Waverly had returned a few days later and explained what might happen when Napoleon was fit to return to duty.

'We've had a message from an old friend of mine and Mr Kuryakin's,' he began. 'It appears that there has been some sort of network established between the men on the ship Mr Shevchenko and Mr Kuryakin served on. In the last ten or so years, it seems that Commissar Nikitin has made a systematic purge of any personnel from that ship who he considered were responsible for what happened, from the Admiral in charge downwards. Admiral Gutskov informs me that the network is at our disposal to aid Mr Kuryakin's return.' He passed a small card across the bed to Napoleon. There was no writing of any sort, simply the figure of what looked like an angel printed in gold on the grey background. It was in the style of icons that Napoleon had seen in the Kuryakins' house – the gentle face in profile, hands crossed across his breast, and vast wings lightly unfolded behind. Napoleon passed it to Misha as Waverly said: 'Apparently this is their symbol, an angel I believe; I'm not exactly sure why.'

'No, not just an angel; it's the archangel, Archangelsk,' Misha repeated in Russian. 'That's what we called him, Illyusha, that is'. Misha didn't notice Napoleon's smirk as Waverly said, 'Really, that's most interesting, Mr Shevchenko. Well, Mr Solo, I can only hope that your guardian angel is on call. You're going to need all the help you can get if we are to bring them home safely.'

Not waiting for the mirror or the phone, Napoleon slid his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. He glanced round the room, looking for what he needed. Both the waste bin in his room and the adjoining bathroom were conveniently lined with rather large plastic bin liners, which he removed and wrapped round his arm, after removing his pyjama top. He had been denied the pleasure of a shower for long enough, which presumably explained why he still had to endure the ridiculous hair and beard. Before anyone could get the chance to stop him, he peeled off his pyjama trousers and turned the shower full on. The blast of the water on his head felt as near a spiritual experience as he was ever likely to have, he thought, as, with his good arm, he shovelled on first shampoo and then shower soap on his head and body.

Standing in the shower gave him a chance to review the situation that now presented itself. He looked thin, but he felt more or less OK, perhaps a week or ten days of good food and exercise would be enough to do it. He thought about the Archangel network, mentally storing what Misha had said in his head under the 'teasing Illya' category, while he considered its use to his mission. If
this Admiral had contacted UNCLE, then hopefully, someone at the other end had contacted Kuryakin, and he would know they were coming. Even if he didn't, Napoleon decided, he was still coming. He turned round to see the nurse, an old girlfriend of his who still hadn't seemed to have got the message, heading for him.

'Napoleon Solo, get out of there this instant!' she screeched, yanking the door of the shower back and glaring at him.

'Towel, if you don't mind, Julie,' he said calmly, turning off the jet with reluctance and catching the towel which Julie had hurled in his direction. 'Now, if you wouldn't mind, could you find my clothes? I guess they're in that closet next to my bed, if you'd be so kind,' he smiled.

'You're not going anywhere, Mr Solo,' she ordered, 'until Dr Beacham has seen you, that's for sure.' Napoleon finished towelling himself dry and then wrapped the towel round his head, praying that no-one with a camera within five miles of them had seen him, otherwise there might be some chance of Kuryakin storing that one in the 'tease Napoleon' section of his abundant brain. Picking up his pyjamas, he wandered into his room. Julie, the nurse, had obviously gone for his doctor, so he needed to be at least dressed before they returned. He found what he was looking for in the closet. Luckily, the garments were casual, and so easy to get on. He was glad of the belt on his chinos, but everything else felt OK, in fact it felt really good. Except, that was, the hair and beard. Taking off the plastic bags, he slid his arms into his jacket and put on his watch. It was already nearly four in the afternoon. Napoleon grabbed his wallet and communicator out of the closet and headed for the door.

Ignoring the amazed glances of anyone he happened to meet on the way down, he made it to the reception area and through to Del Floria's in record time. By some miracle a cab drew up as he staggered up the steps. It was only in the next block, but he wasn't relying on making it by foot, especially at the moment. As his head sank back on the seat, his communicator began to blare. As he expected, it was his doctor. After a few grovelling apologies and a promise to be back before six, he managed to gain Beacham's approval and ward off a possible complaint to Waverly. He thrust his communicator in his pocket and pulled out his wallet as they arrived, giving the cabbie a tip as he leapt from the car.

Napoleon sighed deeply and opened the door. The large bulk leaning over the chair nearest him straightened and turned.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' Frank appeared frozen to the spot, his razor slightly dripping onto the person whose chair Napoleon most wanted to occupy in the entire world at this precise moment. After a few seconds, the razor came down and he said, 'is that real?' Napoleon sat down in the next vacant chair.

'Jeez, I never thought I would see the day,' Frank muttered as he finished off the man next to Napoleon, who Solo was relieved to see didn't work for UNCLE. 'Now, if it was your pal, that would be another thing, though, come to think of it, he's turned over a veritable new leaf since Christmas,' Frank said companionably.

'Well, expect to see him turning it back soon,' Napoleon murmured, then smiled, adding, 'Is that so, Frank? He must be getting ready for fatherhood again.' Frank nodded sagely, then came over, tugging at the ponytail.

'So, where shall we start, hair or beard?' he said, giving the long hair a look he only usually reserved for the Russian.

'Anywhere you like, Frank,' Napoleon replied, closing his eyes. 'Just wake me up when it's all over, OK?'
Training for the race had helped Illya to focus on the escape, and he had even been given time off from work for the purpose, the Institute appearing to have accepted that he was their representative in the contest. Anya had become de facto his trainer, Illya deciding after the first day of her ‘final training regimen’ as she called it, that perhaps Ingo was actually quite easy going in comparison.

In the laboratories, he had waited for a convenient moment to talk to her when Glinkov was near enough to hear. The wedding preparations were a convenient reason to meet often, indeed she had assured him that they were ‘fundamental to the plan’. Anya had rushed in one morning, appearing not to notice the laboratory technician fiddling with some printed circuits in a tiny room connected to the main laboratory. He had been sitting at a bench looking through a mass spectrograph at a compound he’d never seen before when he felt her hand on his shoulder.

‘Anya,’ he said, turning round, smiling. He could feel the power in her hold as she moved closer, the laboratory equipment somehow reflected in her awful pebble glasses.

‘Mikhail Ivanovitch,’ she had begun, her voice raised enough for anyone in the vicinity interested to hear, ‘why have you not collected your wedding suit from the tailor’s?’ He had sighed and had turned back briefly to the microscope at the side of the bench. She flicked the hair now hanging down across his eyes back, imperceptibly glancing at the now still figure in the adjacent room.

‘Alright, I’ll go there tonight, and do something about my hair, too,’ he said wearily, giving her a sideways glance and raising his eyebrows. Anya took off his glasses and hers and pulled him towards her.

‘Don’t,’ she said breathlessly, ‘I want you to grow it longer when we are . . . free.’ Illya stood up.

‘Be quiet!’ he said, in what sounded to him like a theatrical whisper, but which he could see Anya had approved. ‘We are so close now, my darling. Only a few days, and we can live our lives according to our own rules. Remember; be ready to go immediately after the race. My friends will provide us with the necessary paperwork to get over the border, and then our new life, together, can begin.’ She had dragged him towards her and kissed him, her hands running through his hair, until he was finally able to firmly push her back.

‘He’s gone,’ Illya had panted slightly. ‘I thought that sounded ridiculous.’

Anya had laughed, stroking his nose with the end of her finger.

‘Oh, no, you were magnificent!’ she replied. ‘It is only a pity that you were telling me such lies, Illyusha.’ Illya’s eyes had widened and he had put a finger across her lips.

‘Not that name, not in here,’ he said quietly. Anya picked up his glasses and pushed them on, retrieving her own and restoring herself at the same time.

‘By the way, dearest,’ she had said finally, ‘I think you should make the effort to go to the tailors.’ Illya frowned, stooping over the microscope again.

‘What would be the point?’ he muttered, ‘I’d prefer to wear something a little less formal after the race, if I’m going to disappear without anyone noticing.’ Anya came up behind him and squeezed him in a tight bear hug.

‘Oh, I’m going to be very sad without you, darling; you are so unconventional,’ she whispered into his neck. ‘No, you must go. I think you might learn something to your advantage, as they say in those stupid spy stories, no?’ By the time he managed to free himself of her iron grip and turn, she was
gone, the address of the tailor's shop written on a sheet of paper on top of his calculations.

It was conveniently on his route home from the Institute, and startlingly like Del Floria's, only larger, with a room devoted to making suits up from the fairly limited selection of bolts of cloth evident on the shelves at the back of the room, behind a large cutting table which filled at least half of the space Illya found himself in. Since he had not been told anything about the suit or the tailor's shop before that day, he had no idea what his suit might look like, how they knew his measurements, or even why Anya had been so insistent he come.

As he closed the jangling door behind him, a man emerged from what looked like the alterations room. Illya smiled at his appearance, wondering if all tailors were alike; the essential tape measure hung from his small frame, as he gazed critically at his customer through small round glasses.

'Good evening comrade, may I be of assistance?' he said, giving Illya a look which he was used to from Del Floria and Frank; a mixture of despair and resignation, and usually, if Napoleon was with him, an expression of wonder that someone like him could be the partner of someone quite as elegant as the American.

'Um, I've, um, come to collect my suit, for my wedding.' Something about the little tailor seemed familiar to Illya, and he frowned in thought as he stood staring back at him. The tailor smiled, and turned away, coming back a few moments later with a dark grey garment draped over his arm. He motioned Illya towards the changing room, the usual box with curtain affair, Illya noted, and hung up the suit on the coat peg inside, drawing the curtain to behind him with a flourish.

Illya stared at the coat peg, momentarily thinking he might pull it and see what happened. Putting down his canvas shoulder bag, he began to take off his clothes, wondering why on earth he was going through this charade when he had no more intention of getting married in the next few days than he was of travelling to the moon. He untied the laces of his shoes and kicked them off, then took the trousers off the hanger. They were a surprisingly good fit, but they felt rather old-fashioned, as if he'd put on something he'd found of his father's. The jacket had a similar feel, the cloth rather thick and coarse. He could imagine Napoleon's comments as he turned and looked at himself in the mirror. He thought of his real wedding suit; the endless fittings Napoleon had insisted upon; the care his partner had taken to choose the right shirt, tie, shoes. Looking at himself now in the mirror he knew that this suit would not come up to the Solo standards of gentleman's dress. He put his shoes back on and combed his hair into some sort of order with his fingers, absent-mindedly putting his hand in his trouser pocket.

He drew out a small card. On one side, there was a drawing immediately familiar to him from his weekly visits to church with Pascale. She had insisted they had attended the great Cathedral in Gorky with its beautiful green roofs which she liked so much.

'The Cathedral is dedicated to the Archangel, Papa,' she had said very seriously. 'So we must venerate the icon and pray for success in our mission.' He had sighed, but visiting the place became something he started to look forward to. He had told himself it was the music to begin with, but, beautiful and moving as it was, he knew that it was only a part of the powerful appeal of the place. He looked at the angel again. Archangelsk. Other memories stirred, from long ago, memories not connected to an icon or even a great Cathedral. He turned the card over and stared. In writing he remembered so well there was written:

Remember Austerlitz comrade.

Napoleon's writing. Napoleon's words. He was still staring at the note when the curtains were pulled back, and the tailor was standing next to him.
'Ah yes, Austerlitz. If my history is correct, comrade, the armies of the Third Coalition, including our great country, were fooled by the French into thinking that the French army was weak when it retreated before them. But, this was immediately followed by a swift counter-attack using the reinforcements who had arrived to support them. Ah yes, Napoleon was a master of tactics, was he not?'

'And this card just happened to be in this suit, did it not?' Illya replied, pursing his lips. The tailor took a step back and looked him up and down.

'The suit is not bad, but I am sure you will have better ones to wear when you return to New York, Illya Nikovetch. Like the French, your friend with the most appropriate name is coming to, shall we say, "reinforce" the army that is assembled here all ready to help you, as you once helped us.' Illya could feel his mouth open slightly, but before he could put together any sort of sensible question the door opened. A man entered, dressed in a white overall Illya knew well. Poking out of the top pocket were a comb and a pair of scissors. Illya gazed first at the barber and then at the tailor.

'Madiyar and... Askar! I am so sorry, I didn't...' The two men enveloped him in a sort of combined bear hug that, considering their small stature, threatened to squeeze the breath out of him until Madiyar, the tailor, shouted, 'Enough, brother, give him room, give him room!' Illya stood between them, continuing to look first at one, then at the other. They were brothers who served on the Moskva, Madiyar in the engine room, and Askar in the ship's galley. They were from Kazakhstan, forever endeared to the young Russian by his largely successful attempts to learn their language. Madiyar disappeared into a back room and returned with three glasses and a bottle without a label on, from which he proceeded to pour generous amounts. After an initial toast during which the back of Illya's throat felt as if it had been peeled off, Madiyar locked the door of the shop and they sat down.

They explained to Illya the extent of Nikitin's plot, as they called it, against the crew of the Moskva.

'He had many long years in which to plan his revenge,' Askar said, slamming down his glass on the table. 'Some of the officers were beyond his reach, but he made sure that as many of the men as possible were made to suffer. Madiyar and I were sent here five years ago, but we were lucky; we had our old trades, and we have done well here, have we not, brother?' Madiyar nodded, smiling at the Russian sitting between them. Illya in return gave them some idea of his life since he had left the Moskva, including a description of his home, his wife and his family.

'You don't look old enough to have a wife and all those children,' Askar said, slapping Illya across the back.

'That's what they all say,' Illya replied glumly. Madiyar put down the bottle and leaned back in his chair.

'Major Markova has told us that your friend Mr Solo will be at the Triathlon competition on Friday,' he said seriously. 'She is sure that Commissar Nikitin will attempt to remove you from the race, but he has sent something which will enable him to track you when that unfortunate event occurs.' He went to a drawer at the side of the room and removed an envelope which he handed to Illya. Inside lay a small flesh-coloured disk with imperceptible wires squashed between the two layers.

'She said that your friend had informed her you would know where to put this on your body,' he said. Illya held the disk between his fingers and smiled.

'Oh yes, I know just where,' he said wryly.

'We are working with Mr Solo to ensure your safe passage from here. We have a network, you
'I am very grateful for your help, all of you,' Illya replied. 'You know that I have a little girl with me?'

The two brothers looked at each other and smiled.

'Yes, we know Polina very well, comrade,' Askar said. 'We have seen her on her way to the school with you, and she had visited Madiyar's shop with Major Markova to give the measurements for your suit. She is a very clever little girl, like her father, no?' Illya nodded, getting up.

The brothers rose to their feet in unison, looking at each other and smiling.

'Comrade, Major Markova has a message for you, concerning your daughter. She says that Polina will be spending the night at the Markov's apartment and that you are allowed to spend the evening with us, reliving the glorious days of your youth. But before that, Askar, he would like to attend to this.' He leant forward and pulled Illya's hair. 'We are shocked, comrade, that you could have allowed yourself to adopt such a capitalist appearance.' Illya groaned and looked in the full-length mirror at the end of room.

'If I say yes, will you promise me that you will remember I am not in the Russian Navy now?' Askar laughed, slapping him across the back, and then pointed towards the door.

'We won't be long, brother, and then the night can begin!' he roared, pushing Illya ahead of him and out of the door.

Illya woke up suddenly, his head feeling as if his brains had been emptied out and replaced with a mass of sharp jangling objects. He rubbed his head, wondering why it felt strangely different. The room was incredibly dark, a shaft of sunshine attempting to force its way through a crack in the curtains. There was a sudden explosion of light and noise as the door opened and the curtains were flung apart.

'Good morning, comrade! It is a beautiful morning, and you must get up to greet it!' The light felt like someone had exploded something in his already hideously painful brain. He attempted to make his mouth say something even mildly comprehensible, but found that it appeared disconnected from his brain. After a slight pause, he felt arms lifting him to a sitting position, and a cup of warm liquid pressed to his lips.

'Thank you,' he finally managed to croak, looking between squinted eyes at Askar's face, which now appeared to have assumed gigantic proportions.

'Illya Nikovetch, you have obviously had a great evening!' he boomed, his voice echoing round Illya's skull. He was thankful that his stomach had managed to cope with whatever he had poured down his throat during the evening, and after a few false starts, he managed to stand upright and walk unsteadily towards the bathroom, guided by Askar, who managed to turn on the shower and hold Illya up at the same time.

The hot water had a restorative effect, clearing his head and enabling Illya to unscramble his thoughts enough to think where he was and remember what had happened. He put his hand on his head and felt his hair, holding up the short strands and then running his hand down the back of his head to his neck.

'I'm sure I said to you that I wasn't in the Navy now,' he complained, looking through the water at the irrepressibly cheerful Askar.
'Exactly, comrade. That would be considered long by Navy standards, as you know.' Askar lent into the shower and turned off the water, dragging Illya out and wrapping him in a towel.

'Now, shave and dress quickly, my friend, and then you will be ready to eat breakfast and receive your guests.' Askar beamed, backing out of the room towards the inviting smell which had begun to emanate from further down the tiny corridor.

Illya stared at himself in the mirror of the little room, rubbing the glass to clear the steam and reveal his somewhat haggard face in its frame. The blueness of his irises seemed to have merged with the redness of the rest to give him a purple eyed expression, set off by largish dark circles edging the long lashes. He shook his head and slapped water on his face, noting the cropped hairstyle he now seemed to have and which he had no recollection of receiving, presumably at Askar's hands, the previous night. Later, as he thrust his legs into his now beautifully pressed trousers in the bedroom, he heard voices coming from the end of the corridor. He vaguely remembered Askar talking in terms of guests, and presumed it could only be at the most, Anya and Pascale, calling in on their way to the school. Only, that couldn't be entirely right, as he was sure he could hear a male voice, and a very familiar one at that. Yanking on his jacket and hastily tying his shoes, he rushed unsteadily from the room.

'Gee, that must have been a very interesting experience for him,' Napoleon was saying as he blundered through the door. Thinking about it afterwards, Illya reflected that it was extremely difficult to describe how he had felt at that precise moment. He was certainly shocked at his partner's appearance. Solo's whole frame looked diminished, as if he'd been on an extreme diet and had not known when to stop. It showed painfully in his face, making his chin look even more chiselled than normal, the cheekbones laid bare by the absence of normal body fat and muscle. It didn't help that he was wearing a suit of soviet origin, reasonably well tailored but of poorer fabric than the usual Italian clothes that Solo preferred. His hair was cut shorter even than normal, in a rather military style which Illya found rather ironic, considering his own appearance. But after the initial shock of just seeing him there and with how he looked, it was hard not to stop himself from wanting to grab him and in some way express the relief and joy that seeing him alive gave his partner.

Instead, of course, he leaned back on the door frame and nonchalantly said 'Oh, you've arrived early, then. The race isn't until Friday.' There was a slight pause before Solo retorted, 'Well, I thought I'd better help you get out of the usual scrape you appear to gotten yourself into.' Illya could see the brothers glancing at each other as he approached the table and sat down next to Napoleon. Then he couldn't help himself. Leaning slightly towards him, he put his hand over the outstretched arm of his partner.

'It's good to see you,' he murmured, his eyes taking in the marks on his partner's wrist as Napoleon twisted his hand and grasped Illya's own. Before anything else could be said, there was a cataclysmic rattling of cutlery and plates, as Askar slammed down two huge plates of what he referred to as 'the Moskva breakfast'.

'Your friend looks as if he needs building up, Illya Nikovetch,' Madjar whispered, as Napoleon immediately began shovelling down the assortment of meat, cheese and bread which filled the plate.

'Yes, I think, on reflection, he's had a rather harder time of it than I have since we last met,' Illya replied.

He heard the tinkling bell of the shop as they lifted their second cup of coffee to their lips. Madiyar had already disappeared to open up, leaving his brother to clear the breakfast things. Napoleon leaned back on the chair, looking slightly healthier than he had before breakfast. Illya prayed that the same could be said of himself, considering who he was sure would be coming up the stairs any
'You look the perfect Soviet citizen, Napoleon,' Illya began, smiling. Napoleon looked him up and down, and drank the last of his coffee.

'Hmm. I hope you realise that you will owe me big time when we return for this so called 'disguise', comrade. And when we get back and bury these suits in the nearest ten foot hole, then I hope you'll be continuing the new standard of sartorial elegance your alter-ego has set in your absence.'

Illya frowned, putting down his cup. 'Well, before our friendly KGB assistant arrives, perhaps you might fill me in on just what devastation Misha has been wreaking in my life, Napoleon, but before that,' he said softly, drawing his chair nearer, 'just tell me about Tess.'

'Tess is fine, OK? Fine, very large, and missing you.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. 'Here, this is just to keep you going until the great reunion.' Inside the envelope there were two photographs. They were both taken recently, from the look of the blossom on the apple trees in the garden. Illya squeezed his eyes together momentarily to avoid the dizzy feeling which threatened to overcome him just at the thought of his home. He opened his eyes again and looked at the first image. There were three children sat on the long wooden bench underneath the first of the apple trees. A longer-legged Pablo sat at the right, grinning at the camera and holding the baby Katya, her blonde hair forming a halo round her head, and her legs poking out of the pretty pink dress she was wearing. Illya gave a slight gasp as he looked at the other member of the trio. Anastasiya was standing on the bench, her red hair cut in a short bob, glinting in the sun; she was wearing some shorts of a wild pattern and a bright blue t-shirt with a big red heart in the middle of it. She looked as if she was impatient to jump off and run away, her face set in a penetrating stare.

'She's walking, or rather running now,' Napoleon said, nodding at the photograph. Illya put his finger on her little body, as if he could hold her on the bench and prevent her from falling off. 'She's so big,' he murmured, 'I've missed a lot.'

'Yes, well, she's taken a strong dislike to your double,' Napoleon added. 'Tess says she growls at him if he comes too near.' Illya shook his head and sighed. Putting down the first photo, he looked at the second. He felt something catch at the back of his throat, making him want to cough. It was a single portrait. She was also sitting on the bench, the lower branches of the tree framing her with their lovely pink and white blossom. Her hair was loose, just touching her shoulders in soft, loose waves that made him feel queasy when he looked at them.

'She told me to say that she was willing you to come home soon in her head when this was taken,' Napoleon said quietly behind him. He was wearing a Bermudian dress he had bought her on that fateful few days last October, he recalled. The colours of the sea; blues and turquoises, with a fish pattern running through the dress in a wave. He could see the size of her belly, much bigger than he remembered she had been during her last pregnancy. Her hand was held loosely round it, as if she was showing him his children. As he gazed at the photograph, he felt Napoleon's hand on his shoulder and looked up.

'Not long now,' he said simply, smiling. 'You could call them Askar and Madiyar to remember your glorious youth, that I've been hearing all about.'

'Or to remember the glorious suits and haircuts that we've been lumbered with in this benighted nation,' Illya muttered, running his hand through his hair, which Napoleon thought, looking at him, resembled a newly mown corn field.

Illya put down the photos as he heard steps on the stairs.
'I presume you have had contact with Anya,' he said, Napoleon looking momentarily confused, then coming to.

'Ah yes, Major Markova, or, should I say, your fiancée?' Napoleon continued, giving Illya a sharp look. Illya glared a little and looked down.

'Yes, well, I had to go along with her little plan, aided and abetted by Pascale, of course,' he said, sighing. 'I suppose she's discussed our little deal with you, then?' Napoleon nodded.

'Waverly has sanctioned it, in the hope that it will settle some of the outstanding problems related to your position in your homeland, and also give the boys at Langley a clear message about you.'

'If we can deal with Mr Mitchell, that is.' Illya added.

'Indeed. When you're restored to the bosom of your family, as it were,' Napoleon continued, giving his partner a sideways glance, 'then we still have the little matter of the computer program and Mr Rondeau to deal with. Apparently, they know Misha has finished the work and have contacted him. It may be that Rondeau himself will be coming to personally collect the goods.'

Illya fished into his pocket and pulled out a little pad and pencil. Napoleon smiled. The pad and pencil seemed to appear wherever they went, Illya's way of working out things before screwing them up and disposing of them, the facts committed to memory. He saw Kuryakin looking at him quizzically.

'Yes, well, I need this, as you know,' he said, opening the pad and beginning to write. 'By the way, I imagine that THRUSH doesn't know you have been liberated?' He turned towards Napoleon, who had sat down to watch the notebook, waiting for an explanation, the 'butter wouldn't melt in his mouth' look planted firmly on his face. Napoleon grimaced, hoping that whoever had come up the stairs would make an entrance soon.

'Um, that is quite a long story which I won't bore you with now, Illya,' he said. 'However, if you remember that English girl who was such an admirer of yours . . .' Illya began to nod and smile, in fact he looked as if he was ready to make notes, Napoleon thought. 'Well, I ended up spending quite a time with her, but sadly, I don't actually remember much of it. Anyway, she's currently in UNCLE custody, but as far as Phillipe Rondeau is concerned, she is still slowly drugging me to death in a squat in San Francisco.'

The smile on Illya's face suddenly vanished and he put down his pencil.

'I'm sorry. Is everything going to be . . . alright?' Napoleon nodded and smiled, picking up the pencil again and handing it to the Russian.

'Yeah, I just need to put on a bit of weight. They weren't too keen on me coming here, but by the look of you, I should've come sooner,' he added, looking Illya up and down.

'You will see for yourself in a minute, but all I can say,' Illya said, 'is that when the Major has hold of you, there is little point in putting up any resistance.' He saw Napoleon raise his eyebrows and smirk, a little of his former self rising to the surface and breaking on the thin face.

As if on cue, the door opened. Napoleon was momentarily disappointed by the drab looking woman coming through the doorway. Another voice distracted him, as Pascale ran through the door and into her father's arms, kissing him both sides in the European fashion, before standing shyly between them.

'Papa, you look fine,' she began. 'That is a very sensible haircut for the race and,' she said in a very
loud stage whisper, 'for our escape.' Illya sighed and held her round the waist, noticing his partner's suppressed laughter.

'Thank you, Pascale,' he said. 'You remember Uncle Napoleon? He is here to help us, but you will have to remember . . . .' 

'Not to say anything. I know, Papa. I have been trained for such moments,' she said very seriously, looking Napoleon up and down. Napoleon couldn't help but shake his head at the remarkable similarity between father and daughter, so much so, that he jumped when another voice spoke.

'And I suppose this is Mr Solo, is it not?' It was hard not to stare, Napoleon thought at the transformation which had occurred seemingly without him noticing. Just by removing the ghastly spectacles and the headscarf the invisible woman had become very visible. Startling, grey-blue eyes bored into his, her lips curling as she walked round behind him and stood behind Kuryakin, beginning to run her hand through the newly mown cornfield.

'I told you not to do this,' she whispered in his ear, managing to keep Napoleon in her sight at the same time. Illya took her hand away from his head and stood up.

'Napoleon, may I introduce Major Anya Markova. Anya, Napoleon. Anya has been working undercover at the same laboratory as me, in order to discover what Commissar Nikitin is up to.'

'Delighted to meet another of Illya's fiancées,' Napoleon replied, ignoring the furious glare from his partner. Anya curled her arms round Illya's neck and pushed him down onto the chair again with a thump. Napoleon had to work hard not to laugh, and so sat down, signalling to Pascale to sit on his lap.

'Pascale,' Illya began, managing to turn slightly, 'Comrade Askar has something for you if you go next door to his shop. Then I'll take you to school when you get back.' Pascale started to slide off Napoleon's knees, but not before she had seen the photographs. Anya released him from her grasp as he leaned forward and picked them up, holding the little girl round her shoulders as she leaned into him.

'Uncle Napoleon brought these for you, lapin,' he said quietly, pointing out the different children, and then showing her Thérèse. She took them carefully, bringing them up close to her, and putting her finger onto each of the children, and then Thérèse, in the same way her father had done a few minutes before. The room became quiet as Pascale looked carefully from one image to the other, and then back again. Eventually, she glanced back at Illya.

'Perhaps when we go home, we can sit on the seat too, papa, with maman and the new babies,' she whispered. Illya put the photographs back in the envelope and put them inside his jacket.

'I'm sure we can have a photograph of the whole family,' he murmured into her hair, suddenly realising that she had used the term 'maman'. 'I'll look after the pictures and you can put them into your little box when we get home.' She nodded and slipped away out of the room, almost as quietly as her own father.

A few moments passed before anyone spoke again. Anya came round and sat opposite the two agents, allowing Illya to write as she talked of their plan for the days ahead. Napoleon outlined what UNCLE knew of the relationship between Nikitin, THRUSH and Mitchell, and they discussed the whole question of East-West relations at length until suddenly Illya looked at his watch and jumped up.

'Look at the time!' he shouted and ran out of the room, and down the stairs. Anya seemed totally
unperturbed until minutes later he returned and sat down, glancing across the table at her.

'You could have told me you had arranged for her to walk to school on her own this morning,' he said, glaring mildly at her.

'Illyusha, it is only round the corner, and besides, it is good exercise for you to run up and down those steps a few times,' she replied. 'This afternoon, we will be going to the river for training followed by an hour in the gymnasium. Mr Solo, you can meet your colleagues here, and also pick up the uniforms, OK? Madiyar will represent the Archangelsk group at the meeting, and then you can brief Illya after I have finished with him.' She got up and put her hand on Napoleon's chest as he got to his feet. 'You know, you are just the man who could benefit from my training programme,' she said, her tongue poking out of her mouth slightly and licking her lips as she held him in her gaze. 'I don't suppose you can unentangle yourself from whatever women you have?' Illya smirked at the thought of a confrontation between this woman and Josefina. Napoleon seemed to come alive at this point, his gauntness receding at her attentions. He sighed, his head to one side as he surveyed her.

'I'm afraid not, Major. I have a little woman and a baby just waiting for me at home.' Illya winced at the description, and wished he could tape it for possible amusement at Napoleon's expense. She ran her finger round his chin, and then glancing over her shoulder at Illya, said, 'One o'clock, comrade, in your swimming costume, you know, the blue one,' before walking out of the room.

'Little woman?' Illya smirked, putting away his pad, and picking up the canvas bag he had slung on the chair behind him.

'I wasn't going to go down that road,' Napoleon replied. 'The thought of those two meeting, well, you didn't see what she did to Hermione.' Illya jerked his head up, and stared at his partner.

'Oh, do tell me, Napoleon, just what did your wife do to Hermione, and, more to the point, *when and where* did she do it?'
Chapter 7

The crowd along the roads leading to the river was surprisingly thick, though well marshalled, police at regular intervals preventing any sudden outbursts of fervour by those waiting to see the competitors come hurtling by. The start line was at the top of a short, wide street, with the Volga River easily in evidence close by, and the Kanavinsky Most Bridge across the Okra River, on the left. Illya could see the buoys out on the river marking the area where they were to swim, keeping them away from the heavy traffic of river boats and barges chugging their way along in the middle of the wide expanse of water. Then, further along on the same bank, the bicycles stacked ready for them to cycle up round the edge of town leading to the last section, the run back towards the bridge and the great walls of the Kremlin dominating the town.

Illya estimated he could at least be in the first ten, even higher during the swim if the training plan he had followed worked out. If he was to be taken out by Nikiitin or his men, he didn't want others to be involved or even worse, to be injured in the melée. He stood at the line with the other competitors, tugging at his costume slightly, and glancing round at the orderly rows of people behind him. He could see Pascale, her blue eyes riveted on him, standing grasping the hand of Madam Markova, the familiar glasses and headscarf of Anya apparent immediately behind them. On the other side of the road, two soldiers were standing, their backs towards him, the shorter of the two stubbing out a cigarette before slightly turning in his direction. Illya could see now how perfectly Napoleon's military hairstyle fitted his present disguise, as his partner's gaze took him in without acknowledging his presence, and he recognised the familiar curly hair of Fernando underneath the cap of the taller officer as he peered towards the river.

The competitors began to shuffle towards the line, watching the official holding the starter gun while at the same time jostling for a good position. After a slight lull, the official glanced across the meandering row of men, and, raising his hand, fired the gun. Illya dashed forward and, after thundering down a short wooden gangway dived headlong into the bluish-brown depths of the river. The shock of the cold water momentarily gripped his heart like a frozen vice, but then, as he brought his arms up to begin swimming, he felt the energy of the water surging past his body, driving him on in a celebration of his fitness and power over it. After the first few frantic metres, he felt himself drawing ahead of the others. He turned his head to one side, taking a deep breath, suddenly aware of something larger beside him making a deep shadow over the water.

He swam on until the next breath, preparing himself before turning his head. The object was a steamship, of the type which ferried visitors along the Volga to Gorky in the summer months. It was not large, and looked quite old, with accommodation for about twenty on one deck, with the wheelhouse set in a small cabin above. A large, single chimney was shooting sooty clouds into the sky, and beyond that, Illya could see, at the next breath, a small dingy strapped to the stern, beyond the chimney. It was not particularly unusual, except for the fact that it was sailing very close indeed to the buoys that separated the competitors from the traffic of the river. The alighting point at the end of the swim was fast approaching, and as Illya turned slightly to head for the shore, he was aware of a grinding noise behind him. He couldn't afford to pay too much attention, but as he clambered up onto the shore and ran for the bicycle racks, he knew that the steamship had dropped anchor midstream.

Astonishingly, he was in the lead. He dragged on his t-shirt and shoes and pulled the bike out of the rack, powering away from the river and upwards towards the town. He could see that two or three
others were now coming out of the water and would be not far behind him. A large park appeared on his left, spectators a blur of faces and waving hands as he sped by, changing gear to accommodate the steep climb towards the top. On his right he glimpsed the exquisite onion domes and large black doors of a church, a number of old women in headscarves standing motionless outside watching as his now aching legs forced the bike on up the hill. As he saw the summit approaching, there again were the two army officers, standing alone and slightly behind the rather thinner line of cheering supporters.

‘He's in the lead, you know.’

‘I had noticed.’ Napoleon stubbed out his third Sobranie of the morning, thinking he needed to break the habit before he got another lecture from the Russian again. He turned and watched the bent blond head start to sail down the hill towards the last section.

‘They'll take him in the running part,’ Napoleon said, turning away and beginning to head towards the car parked behind them. ‘He's a good runner, but he's small and,’ he said, smiling at Fernando, ‘I have a feeling that Comrade Nikitin will not be playing by the rules, kapich?’ Fernando nodded, grinning.

‘So we need to look out for a few additional competitors do we?’ he murmured, tipping his cap back and scratching his head before replacing it.

From the top, it wasn't possible to see the ending line because of a bend in the road, but the Kremlin walls were visible of course, drawing him on, as if they might protect him from what was coming. During the first part of the run, his legs had begun to feel like lead, and he had had to summon reserves of energy to keep going regardless. The crowds at the side of the road were beginning to thicken, but Illya knew from training, that it was the last, straight part of the race which would attract the numbers. He began to regain his energy levels as the road flattened slightly before the bend leading to the last stretch. Risking a glance behind, he could see a small knot of men in the not too far distance, whom he thought were slowly making up ground. The route was now passing through a number of modern apartment blocks similar to the one he had occupied for the past few months with Pascale. Outside the blocks, rather rough-hewn benches had been made, on which sat more old ladies with country clothes and black headscarves, engaged, it seemed, in an endless, silent, contemplation of the world around them.

It was only when he reached the second block that he was aware of two, very tall runners much closer to him. Illya frowned, already knowing that these men were not from the pack that was at least twenty seconds behind him when he last looked. He had discussed at length with Napoleon how to handle what was obviously going to happen in the next few minutes. A number of possible choices flashed through his mind, none of which now seemed particularly attractive. The competitor in him desperately wanted to run down the hill and through the ribbon. The fighter in him wanted to turn and take them on. With teeth gritted he reluctantly chose the option Napoleon had outlined for him, the agent's choice. The road was beginning to bend, running past another smaller block before straightening for the final descent. He slightly lengthened his stride to give them a little run for their money.

As he took the bend they were upon him, running either side, their arms beginning to pin him between them. He didn't see it, but felt the familiar sharp point plunged into his side and then out again, the syringe thrown away as the three of them careered round the bend. As his legs began to buckle they had hold of him and in seconds he was off the road, darkness approaching his mind as quickly as the shadowy apartment block into which he was dragged swallowed him up. Perhaps, equally surprising were the actions of an old woman on the bench outside. Sliding out what looked like a silver pen from the voluminous folds of her shawl, she twiddled the lid and waited.
'открыть канал D'

'Channel D open. Thank you for your position report.'

Replacing the pen in her shawl, the old woman continued to gaze silently at the road, as the rest of the competitors streamed by.

xxxxxxxxx

Napoleon watched the dingy making its way towards the steamship. The lights on the ship lit up the water round it in little pools of thin, sickly light, punctuated by the stronger lights of the lamps round the outside of the cabins and the wheelhouse. They had waited until night to move him, but it had given Solo chance to exchange his military disguise for something more suitable in which to board a vessel uninvited.

The small warehouse was almost directly on the riverside, giving them both cover to change and to watch what was happening on the Lenin, the name displayed clearly in Cyrillic script on the stern of the ship. Fernando had already changed into his scuba diving gear, his body language making it clear that he was relishing the thought of an evening swim across the Volga. He had his back to the others, engaged in a conversation with someone on his communicator. Anya was also ready. Napoleon raised his eyebrows slightly at her astonishing physique, remembering Illya words above the tailor's shop; 'When the Major has hold of you, there is little point in putting up any resistance.' The rubber outfit looked as if it had been sprayed on, the hood pulled back, displaying her abundant golden hair as she attached a large knife to her side.

'Illya would have enjoyed this,' he mused out loud, putting on his watch. 'I don't really go for these watery missions,' he added, smiling. She came up closer, cupping his chin in her hand.

'You have lovely eyes, Mr Solo. I expect your woman tells you that,' she said, giving him a piercing stare, then looking down. 'Yes, Illyusha is beautiful in water, he glides like a dolphin, don't you think?' Napoleon's lips twitched slightly at the image.

'Er, yes, he's very smooth,' he replied, taking a slight step backwards to avoid Anya wedging herself up to him. They were shaken out of their mutual staring by Fernando, swearing quite loudly and turning off his communicator. As he turned round they could both see that something had upset his normally placid temperament.

'Problem?' Napoleon hazarded, glancing sideways at Anya. Fernando pursed his lips, reminding Napoleon fleetingly of Josefina.

'It's Pascale,' he began. 'Apparently they returned to the apartment when some men called for her, claiming they were from the KGB. I'm afraid that your brother handed her over.' Anya slammed her hand down on the table by her side, uttering oaths in Russian which Napoleon didn't even want to think about.

'That feeble minded cretin!' she hissed. 'That is exactly what boys like him who have no mind, no character, would do.' She began to pace up and down the room, then turned, and began to twist her hair up underneath the hood of her diving suit.

'Of course he is not my real brother,' she said, looking at them both. 'Mama adopted me after she was unable to have any more children of her own,' she continued, as if in disclaiming him, she had distanced his act from her. 'You know that Nikitin has a little control which can kill her? I am sure that he will almost certainly be having her brought to him on the Lenin to taunt Illyusha. He will have no hesitation in killing her in front of him.'
Napoleon began to gather his remaining equipment and start checking it.

'As you said, I'm certain that they'll both be on the boat by now. In a sense, that makes it easier for us, as long as the travel arrangements are in place, and . . .' 

'And, Mr Solo, we can remove that control before that Tvar can use it.'

A stinging slap on the face jerked Illya into consciousness. He shivered slightly, aware that he was still wearing the running clothes he had on when his race had been summarily ended by Nikitin's men. He was lying on a bed, his wrists fastened behind his head to two cleats in the wall, his feet shackled together, but free. Although it was impossible to see clearly, Illya sensed that this room, apart from his bed, was completely empty and felt dirty and very stuffy, a rank smell of unwashed things, human and material, emanating from the bed.

Illya presumed that his guard was one of the men who had so efficiently removed him from the race. Before he could accustom his eyes to the gloom, a bucket of freezing water was thrown over him, causing him to gasp with the shock and cold of it. As he shook his head, someone grabbed his hair and wrenched back his head, leaning over him until Illya could smell the unpleasant sweaty stench of the man close by. It was now just a matter of time before the inevitable happened. A punch to his abdomen made him draw his legs up involuntarily, thereby inviting a string of blows to his face and body. Somehow, the absence of words made the beating worse, the only sound coming from Illya himself as he groaned from each attack. It was impossible to know where he would be punched next, or even to work out just where his tormentor was in the room. He could feel one of his eyes beginning to close, while the rest of his body felt bruised and battered as the blows rained down. However hard he tried to twist out of the man's way, or draw up his legs to protect his abdomen, it was not enough to stop the seemingly unending violence being meted out on him.

Desperate to give himself at least a chance of surviving, Illya closed his eyes and drew up his legs again, straining his ears to detect any noise which would alert him to the other man's presence. At last a slight squeak on the floor to his right gave him his chance. Summoning all the strength he had left, he brought his legs up, and twisting his pelvis, gave what he hoped was a savage kick sideways with his feet. It was immediately obvious that he had connected with the man from the loud crash as he fell to the floor. Illya immediately jerked his body up the bed, yanking at the wall until his wrists screamed with the pain of the handcuffs, as he frantically tried to work himself loose. A sickening punch to his lower abdomen immediately told him that his tormentor was up again, and was not happy.

He felt the man's breath again on his face as his whole weight pressed Illya into the bed, forcing his legs down, and beginning to squeeze his neck with huge, strong hands. Illya forced back a black panic, as he struggled against the throttling of his throat and the crushing weight of the other man on his chest, the energy draining out of him second by second. He had been at the point of death many times before, but this time it felt different; a horrible, suffocating lonely death, murdered by an invisible enemy in a dirty dark room stripped of anything any of his senses could cling onto or derive comfort from.

The simultaneous beam of light and the noise of the gun were almost unbearable. If he had been able to speak, Illya knew he would have screamed at this point. Instead, he lay completely silent as the torturer's hands stopped, then slipped away, the unmistakeable sound of a dead body's thump on the hard floor following. The harsh beam of light was replaced by something lower and more diffuse, through which, through barely opened eyes, Illya made out the outline of someone standing over him.
'Bring something to bathe him and some bandages, you fools. If he dies then you will accompany him personally to whatever hell is reserved for traitors and perverts like our former comrade here.'

There was the sound of several feet rushing from the room, and then returning quickly, although afterwards Illya found it difficult to have any clear idea of how much time had elapsed between Nikitin's order, the removal of the body and the subsequent return of the other men. He was fairly certain, in a dazed way, that not too many bones had been broken, and that he had many cuts and bruises, some quite serious and all very painful. He also knew that Nikitin was nearby throughout.

After a while, he heard the sound of a chair being scraped across the floor towards his bed. He could tell that the bathing and bandaging of his wounds was at best a crude and basic attempt to keep him alive, but not much else. Nikitin was obviously making that whatever fate he had in store for him, Illya would live long enough to experience it, at least for a while.

'Now, I'm sure you would like to know what I have planned for your future, Illya Nikovetch,' he began, as if he had just read Illya's mind. Illya managed to open one eye and fix him with as frozen a glare as he had the strength to attempt. Nikitin's face loomed over the bed and bent down towards Illya, his lips pulled back slightly in the self-satisfied sneer of a man finding himself in total control of another.

'Mr Kuryakin, does the word Psikhushka mean anything to you?' Nikitin examined the face on the pillow. Kuryakin's remained motionless, the one open eye continuing to stare calmly in his direction. He could see Kuryakin running his tongue over his lips and leaned over further, willing him to show or express some fear at the word. Kuryakin opened his mouth, and breathing deeply, whispered painfully, 'only lunatics like you need to visit a psychiatric hospital.'

Nikitin jerked upright, instantly slapping Illya hard with his hand, the ugly red mark of the slap apparent on the pale face now turned away from him on the bed. He kicked the chair out of the way and forced Illya's face back towards him.

'You know, Mr Kuryakin, there are a number of illnesses which patients are diagnosed with at a Psikhushka, and there are a number of suitable treatments for those illnesses. It is quite clear to me comrade that you are suffering from a slowly progressing form of schizophrenia that needs urgent treatment. I hear that the use of lumbar puncture combined with large doses of radiation therapy can often provide unexpected results.' Astonishingly, Nikitin saw that Kuryakin was smiling.

'Oh, I think I would expect to feel a whole lot worse after that treatment,' he whispered, sinking back into the pillow to await the inevitable result of his not being able to keep his mouth shut. He could see Napoleon looking at him on a hundred occasions, pursing his lips and shaking his head, and then afterwards, lecturing him in some prison cell on the folly of the smart answer.

Unusually, this time, the retribution didn't come in physical form. Nikitin walked away from the bed and gave some command to the guard just outside the door, but quietly enough for Illya not to hear what had been said. Picking up the chair, he then sat down by the bed and began to pick the dirt out of his fingernails, wiping it onto the bandage across Illya's head. Illya closed his eyes, wondering if the tracking device was working, summoning his partner across the river to him. If he was to be taken to the hospital, it would be unlikely they would move him before morning. If the tracking device was operational, then Napoleon might even decide to wait, gambling on the fact that it might be easier to effect a rescue on land than on the river. He comforted himself with the thought that however perilous his own position was, Pascale at least was safe.

Nikitin stood up as Illya became aware of the sound of footsteps approaching the room. The door was closed, making it difficult to detect who was outside, but he could just make out the sounds of two voices, one deeper than the other. The pain throughout his body made it difficult to concentrate,
but at least the bandaging had prevented any more blood flowing into his working eye and enabled him to turn his head slightly towards the door. He could see Nikitin reaching into the pocket of his jacket as the door slowly opened, the guard appearing, with someone standing behind. Then suddenly Nikitin was leaning over him again, his hand slowly coming into view, with something held in its grasp. He turned his hand and slowly opened it.

'I'm afraid, Mr Kuryakin, that the hospital only admits adults,' he said, holding the box now between his finger and thumb for Illya to see. 'It appears that we will finally see the results of a little of THRUSH Central's technology. Come in and say hello to Papa, Pascale.'

CHAPTER 21

The homing signal echoed its steady beat in the little room until Napoleon twisted his communicator to cut it off.

'He's still alive at least,' Fernando said, looking out of the window at the steamship gently swaying in the night currents of the great river. Anya frowned, looking at Napoleon.

'It stops working if his body cools below a certain temperature,' he said. 'So he's either alive, or they're cooking him for supper.' Anya came round the table and gazed at him, her lips slightly pouted. He noticed how her hair glowed in the dark like his partner's, which he found strangely comforting.

'Let us hope it is the former,' she said, picking up her mask. 'Shall we go?'

They switched off the light, and opened the door, plodding along the wooden walkway as quickly as their flippers would allow. Napoleon slid a diminutive torch onto his wrist and, after adjusting his tanks, slid into the water behind the other two. The river's current drew them out towards the steamship, the water swirling round them darkly as they forced their way towards the bulk of the Lenin's hull. Anya had estimated the distance to the steamship and how long it would take them, glancing at Napoleon with a look which indicated her less than total confidence that he could make it. He knew that the dive would push him to the limits of his endurance, and he had contemplated just sending the other two, but after the news about Pascale, he felt committed to the task, knew that Illya would expect him to ensure Pascale's survival, even if her father were lost. He allowed the other two to swim in front of him, but Fernando had soon appeared at his side, obviously assigned to Napoleon Solo protection duty by Anya.

He could feel his legs beginning to ache, his chest heaving with the effort of ploughing through murky waters with only a vague outline of Anya giving him any guide. The powerful torches on their heads only served to accentuate the feeling Napoleon had of the river's impenetrability, as if it would eventually thicken until it was impossible to swim through it any more. He could see Fernando's concerned gaze directed towards him as he swam effortlessly by his side, and, not for the first time, Napoleon began to wonder if Mr Waverly's chair was not such a bad thing to look forward to. He smiled at the thought, suddenly picturing his partner sitting in the chair one day long ago, when Waverly had been out of town.

'I will never occupy this chair,' he had said, cocking his head to one side, 'but you will.' Napoleon had flicked a pencil in his direction before asking him what exactly he intended to do when he left Section Two.

'I am going to get married, have ten children, and get very fat on my wife's cooking,' Kuryakin had replied. Napoleon reflected that so far, he had achieved half of this, though, as hard as he tried, he somehow couldn't imagine Illya any larger than the lithe figure that he'd seen that day hurtle past him on the road to the centre of Gorky. But there was time, he hoped.
He was startled out of his reverie by Anya, her pale face suddenly close to his, her hand pointing upwards. Napoleon acknowledged the sign and turned off his torch, pushing upwards gratefully to whatever awaited them on the ship. They emerged simultaneously and silently on the starboard side, near the dingy, which Napoleon could see had been returned to its normal place after bringing both Kuryakins to the ship. Anya indicated the presence of a guard and then lightly tossed a rope over the railings, before beginning to climb, cat like, up the side and over the top, using the paraphernalia stored round the dingy as cover. They waited for a few minutes until her face suddenly appeared over the side, signalling for them to follow. Napoleon squeezed his eyes together and took hold of the rope, grateful for the comparatively small climb that boarding the Lenin involved.

The guard lay dead in front of them, a thin red slit across his neck indicating cause of death. Anya signalled Fernando to help her drag him under the tarpaulin which was protecting some large ropes, a lupine expression on her face that fascinated and appalled Napoleon in equal measure. They ditched their excess diving equipment underneath the tarpaulin with the body and crept slowly in single file round the end of the boat towards the door to the cabins.

'Napoleon, darling, please go and find Illyusha and Polina for me. Fernando and I will take care of the other members of the crew, and then we'll follow the little tracker noise until we find you, da?'

Before Napoleon could agree or disagree she had produced a gun, silencer and clip and handed them to him.

'Mm. Makarov PM if I'm not mistaken.' Anya took the gun from him, slammed in the clip and screwed on the silencer, before rolling the barrel round his chin.

'Beautiful eyes and knows about guns. A winning combination, comrade,' she said rather huskily. Napoleon smiled and took the gun out of her hand.

'Use Fernando's communicator to track Illya, and hopefully you'll find me hanging out in the same cabin,' Napoleon said, looking at his watch. 'If you're not with me in fifteen minutes, I'll come looking for you, however feeble you think I am. We need to reckon on using the dingy to get us over to the other bank, and also be aware of the fact,' he said, glancing at Fernando, 'that one or both of them might be injured.' Fernando nodded, his face assuming a rather more serious expression.

Napoleon allowed the other two to go ahead before slipping inside and turning left along the corridor which ran along the port side of the ship. He could hear the noise before he arrived at the door which he presumed led to some sort of recreation room used by the crew. They had estimated that the ship would probably have no more than ten crew members on board, seeing that there were no official passengers making the journey. One was already down, there would probably be two or three in the wheelhouse, and at least one with Illya. That left possibly five or six in the room he was now standing outside. He rubbed the gun across his chin, knowing what he should do. He should walk past and leave the job to the others.

There were four of them, sitting round the table playing what looked like poker, piles of notes and change of varying amounts in front of each man. It proved easy in the end, their astonished expressions the last thing he saw before their heads, one after the other, crashed downwards, scattering the money in bloody confusion over the table and onto the floor. Napoleon noticed a set of keys carelessly left on the table, and grabbing it, shut the door behind him and locked it, before continuing on his way down the corridor. At the end, there was a larger space, containing a number of tables and chairs and a small galley kitchen serving the restaurant. Beyond the tables, he noticed another, shorter corridor, the shadow of a large man unmistakeable in the gloom at the end of the passage.

Napoleon glanced back at the restaurant. Behind the counter of the galley, he could see a number of
metal containers used for preparing meals, piled onto metal shelves, the large rectangular preparation table in the middle of the room left bare and clean. Inching back, he kept the figure at the end of the corridor in sight as he slid under the counter and entered the galley kitchen. Starting with the smallest, he selected a number of pans, which he proceeded to pile up in a precarious tower on the top of the counter. Selecting a medium sized turnip from a box of rather dried up looking vegetables left on the floor, he retreated towards the edge of the restaurant and took aim.

'Chief Bender, eat your heart out,' he murmured as he lobbed the turnip across the room towards the tower of pans. There was a thud as the turnip hit the bottom pan, pushing it backwards, followed by a brief pause before the pans, with a horrendous grinding crash, tipped over onto the floor. Napoleon winced as footsteps hurriedly approached. It was satisfying to note, he thought to himself, how the butt of the Russian gun was as good as its firing mechanism for removing unwanted guards, only a little quieter.

As he approached the still closed door, he heard a voice ask him in Russian what was the problem.

'Ничего,' he managed to say, 'it was nothing, just some pans in the kitchen.' He smiled at the irony of it all. His watch told him that fifteen minutes had nearly passed. He guessed that the voice was that of Nikitin, and that Illya was in the room. Hopefully, if the other two had taken out the men in the wheelhouse, then they would be heading in this direction fairly soon. Grasping the door handle, he flung it open and stepped inside.

The light in the room was poor, a single fitting in the ceiling with only one, very low wattage bulb rammed into it, the rectangular window the other side of the small room emitting a faint gleam from the distant river bank. Nikitin's squat figure was framed by the window, one hand outstretched before him holding a small metal box, the other wrapped round the terrified looking figure of Pascale Kuryakin. Solo grimaced at the sight of his partner lying on the narrow bed in the corner of the stuffy room. A number of dirty looking bandages seemed to be wrapped round his head, his legs and body covered in a series of bloody cuts and bruises, some very unpleasant looking. Napoleon could see immediately from his neck that there had been a fairly major attempt to strangle him, resulting in a series of grotesque wheals and marks on the pale skin below his chin. The manacles chaining him into the wall were covered in blood where he had obviously fought to be free of his attacker. Looking at Nikitin, Napoleon didn't think that he had the power or the inclination to have done the dirty work himself. Nikitin had obviously been speaking to Kuryakin. Napoleon could see his partner's body absolutely rigid on the bed, frozen in a rictus of physical pain, anguish and helpless frustration.

Nikitin stared momentarily at Napoleon but remained unfazed by his appearance, taking a small step backwards and dragging the little girl with him as he stood against the window.

'I am impressed, Mr Solo, that you have come so far, in your condition, to rescue him.' There was no point in thinking he could use the gun with Pascale standing in front of Nikitin. Napoleon stuck the gun in the back of his wet suit and knelt down by the side of the bed. Illya turned his head slightly, the single unbruised eye regarding him fixedly.

'Save her,' Illya whispered, his lips barely moving.

Napoleon got up, conscious of the utter silence of the other two occupants of the room. Nikitin stood regarding the figure on the bed with a look of utter contempt, his fingers stroking the little box, while Pascale wore an expression on her face that Napoleon had seen many times before. Her lips were set in a straight, thin line, the sapphire eyes narrowed in concentration. Every few seconds, she glanced towards the bed.

'Let the girl go, I'll take her and you two can sort out your differences,' Solo said, trying not to look at
Pascale's appalled face. Nikitin's face set into a superior sneer, his fingers continuing to play with the box. Napoleon could see a tiny switch at the top, with a button just underneath. There was no way he could get across the room and get to the box before Nikitin had flicked the switch and pressed the button. He tried not to glance at his watch, or hint to Nikitin that there were others on the ship. He was sure the Russian would assume Napoleon was not alone, but if he was worried by it, he obviously felt he held the trump card.

'What time is it, Mr Solo?' Nikitin said suddenly. Napoleon blinked slightly, and looked at his watch.

'Um, it's half past midnight,' he said, aware of his partner making some sort of noise behind him. Nikitin smiled an unpleasant smile and glanced out of the window.

'In thirty minutes time, Mr Solo, a small boat will arrive to collect your former colleague and remove him to a secure psychiatric hospital. I am afraid to tell you that while he has been residing here, he has developed a serious form of schizophrenia which will need to be treated to ensure he is not a danger to others and himself. Unfortunately, we have had to restrain him to prevent him hurting others in his psychotic state.'

Napoleon sighed, taking a step back from the bed and leaning against the wall facing Nikitin and Pascale.

'Give it a rest, Nikitin' he began, at the same time wondering whether one of the keys he'd taken from the rec room fitted Illya's manacles. 'I think we know who has the serious psychological disorder, and it's not Mr Kuryakin here. Besides which, he is an American citizen, and you have no right to detain him, or his daughter, in this country.' Nikitin gave a low snort and stepped back further, his back now pressed against the window.

'Yes, the traitor Kuryakin has betrayed his country, but this man will be a patient under the name he has been using since he arrived here to sabotage Soviet security systems. I am afraid that once the UNCLE security system has been compromised and the culprit is found to be the former communist Illya Nikovetch Kuryakin, who unfortunately will be shot dead in New York by your Mr Mitchell of the CIA, then of course people will stop looking for him, will they not? Oh, but of course you won't be around to witness all this, you or the Kuryakin brat here either. It was really very obliging of THRUSH to provide me with the means of getting Mr Kuryakin here, but I did have to promise Dr Rondeau I would take care of this problem of his, too.' His arm jerked at Pascale, causing her to whimper a little, before she set her face again in a mask of endurance.

Napoleon tried not to react to the Russian, preferring to allow Nikitin to hold forth for as long as he wanted.

'So you have a little arrangement with the boys at Langley, then?' Napoleon replied. 'I didn't think US-Soviet relations were that far advanced.'

'Very funny, Mr Solo. In fact, the only arrangement is between Mr Mitchell and I, to our mutual advantage. Mr Mitchell and I have found ourselves, surprisingly, to have several things in common; our wish to maintain the status quo of the cold war, and our dislike of any organisation or individuals in particular who insist upon trying to promote harmony between our nations. Your organisation, you, and in particular your partner here fall into the latter category.' There was a momentary change in the quality of the light entering the room. Napoleon stared beyond Nikitin and Pascale to the figure hanging down behind them, who suddenly vanished again onto what Napoleon imagined, was the flat roof of the cabin accommodation.

'Good story, Nikitin, and I buy it as far as it goes. However, I just have the tiniest feeling inside my gut that Mr Kuryakin here means a little bit more to you than just a Ruskie who's trying too hard to
get the Americans to love him.' Napoleon could just see Illya's face as he talked. Despite the bandages, he had still managed to pull his 'I can't believe what you've just said' look as Napoleon kept talking.

'Oh, he doesn't mean anything to me at all,' Nikitin hissed, staring at the bed. 'He is learning, painfully, something which as a Russian he should know.'

'Which is?'

'That betrayal will result in retribution, and that retribution will be taken, however long one has to wait.' He took one of Pascale's arms and shoved her towards the bed.

'Go to Papa, so that he can see you.' With sudden clarity, Napoleon saw the KGB man's intentions. Standing unencumbered, he was now holding the little control box in one hand, one of his fingers caressing the switch, as he pointed a small pistol at Solo with his other hand. A deep, strangled shout emanated from the bed. With a nasty, low laugh Nikitin flicked the switch as Napoleon brought up his gun. Their eyes locked, Napoleon aware of the two figures on the bed, Pascale sprawled across her father simultaneously protecting him and desiring comfort. Abruptly, before either Nikitin or Solo could move, the window exploded, spraying glass across the room. Napoleon leapt forward, cannoning into Nikitin's legs and hearing what he hoped was the control box skidding across the floor. Forcing himself to spin round, he stretched out towards the box, catching it before it smashed into the wall.

'Beautiful eyes, good with guns, and fast reflexes. You are becoming ever more fascinating, Mr Solo.'

Napoleon rolled over and stood up. Behind him, he could see the body of Nikitin on the floor face down, an enormous shard of glass the shape of a elongated dagger, piercing his back, another smaller one deeply imbedded in his skull. Fernando was crouching down beside the bed, the sobbing figure of Pascale clinging to him. He walked over to the bed and knelt down by Illya's head.

'It's OK. I think the excitement proved a little too explosive for him'. He flicked the switch back on the box and laid it by Illya's head.

'Break it. Now.' Anya came over, took the box and put it on the floor. She lifted up the sub-machine gun she had slung on her shoulder, and smashed the butt onto the box. Without speaking, she gathered up the bits and laid them back by Illya's head.

'Thank you,' Illya whispered hoarsely, wriggling his feet and hands and staring balefully at Napoleon.

'Oh, you want me to unlock you,' Napoleon said, smiling. As he started to rummage through the keys, he murmured to Anya, 'There's a boat due in about fifteen minutes, apparently, to take our friend here to a not so friendly psychiatric hospital. I think it might be good if we're not around when they arrive.' Anya whispered in Fernando's ear, who then immediately carried Pascale out into the corridor.

'She has seen and heard enough,' she said simply. She knelt down beside Illya and began to stroke his face.

'Are you broken in any place, Illyusha?' He shook his head, grunting a little as Napoleon managed to unlock the manacles and remove his now extremely sore and bleeding hands from the wall, lying them gently down by his side, before working on his ankle restraints.
'Illya, we're going to have to leave very shortly,' Napoleon said, managing to open the restraints and freeing Illya's feet. 'Can you sit up?' Anya gave him a hard look and knocked his outstretched arm out of the way.

'Of course he cannot sit up!' she shouted. 'Look at him!' As if to attempt to prove her wrong, Illya began to make an attempt to raise himself from the bed. The pain from his ribs and shoulder was excruciating, made worse by the fact that his arms and legs had been kept in awkward positions for hours. He fell back onto the bed, groaning in frustration.

'Listen, we have a dingy ready, and your very attractive colleague has already taken Polina there. If you would care to lay these in the correct places as we leave, then I will attend to Illyusha here.'

Anya handed Napoleon a bag the contents of which he could guess immediately. However badly injured he was, Solo could see Illya's face begin to light up as Napoleon withdrew the explosives and leads from inside their container. For once, he was going to enjoy laying these charges, with no interference from the Russian.

As he stuck the first charge on the wall of the cabin, he noticed Anya sling the machine gun on her back and get up, standing over the inert body of his partner. With a slight grunt she picked him up and began to carry him out of the room, holding him close to her, his arm round her shoulder. As they went through the door, she paused slightly, enough for Napoleon to hear a hoarse voice whisper 'when the Major has hold of you, there is little point in putting up any resistance.'

The explosion on the ship was spectacular, even Kuryakin had to admit. After a few false starts, the outboard motor of the dingy had burst into frenzied action, nearly tipping the little craft over as Fernando manoeuvred it into the mid-stream and towards the far bank of the great river. After they'd travelled a safe distance, he cut the engine on Solo's signal, as the silent ship was approached by a large cabin cruiser, several men leaping onto the deck of the 'Lenin' and securing the craft by her starboard side. Napoleon looked at his watch, as Anya, who was sitting in the boat behind Illya's head, gently propped up the Russian to observe the goings-on aboard the steamship. With the powerful binoculars Anya had handed him, Napoleon could see what looked like two or three armed guards moving along the side of the ship and then entering the cabin area, while another man and a woman remained on the smaller boat. He frowned at the pair, presuming that they were the so-called medical attendants, preparing themselves to receive their latest patient. He looked down at Illya. His face had begun to look puffy and swollen, and Napoleon wasn't convinced by any head shaking his partner did, that there were no broken bones.

'I think that . . . it should happen . . . just about . . . now.'

There was a deep rumbling sound followed immediately by a tremendous blast as the ship appeared to fragment, great burning shards of wood and metal flung up into the air and then plunging into the river around the stricken vessel. The smaller boat was caught by the explosion, its occupants diving overboard to escape its destruction.

Illya smiled wanly and lay back onto the assortment of pillows and blankets which had formed a makeshift bed in the dingy.

'I never liked those psych assessments,' he murmured. He turned slightly, wincing at the pain in his shoulder and ribs. Pascale had managed to squeeze herself next to him on the bed, and was now lying with her head on his chest, her arms gently holding him, aware of his wounds.

'Don't get too comfortable, lapin, we're going to have to move soon.'
'Oui Papa, I understand. And then, can we go home?' Illya sighed, staring down at her tangled brown hair so close to him.

'Je tellement espere. I hope so.'

Anya lent across his head and touched Pascale.

'Polina, is the little cap still in place? You can take it out now if you want.' Illya frowned, rolling onto his back with a groan.

'What cap?' It was obvious that Napoleon and Fernando were also interested in what she might be referring to. Pascale sat up carefully, opened her mouth and felt inside. After a few seconds she pulled out a tiny silver capsule, which she handed to Anya triumphantly, before lying straight down again next to her father.

'Anya, what is going on?' Illya persisted, unable to turn his neck sufficiently to see what it was. Anya leaned over and held the capsule in front of his eyes, before putting back in her pocket.

'We had to have evidence that Nikitin had contact with the CIA and the nature of that contact,' she began. 'I set up a listening station in the warehouses on the other bank, but, of course, we needed, what do you call it, a 'bug' to transmit what was being said. We couldn't put it on Illyusha here, in case he was searched, or, darling, that it was dislodged during any unpleasantness, if you understand.'

'So you put it on a child; my child,' Illya whispered icily.

'Don't be cross with Anya, Papa; I was pleased to wear the special cap. In any case,' Pascale added, proudly, 'I am trained for these things.'

'Now who does that sound exactly like?' Napoleon whispered to Fernando, smirking at the back of the boat.

'Excuse me for asking,' Napoleon interrupted, but how did you know they would take Pascale?' Anya shrugged.

'I didn't to begin with, but after Illya told me about the device, I knew he would not hesitate to use Polina for his own ends.' She drew her hands across Illya's head, smoothing down the blood encrusted hair. 'I'm sorry, darling,' she whispered. 'You will understand that it is essential that we know the extent of the plot, for all of our sakes. I will have to report back and explain satisfactorily why Commissar Nikitin has met such a tragic end, and why you must be allowed to remain in the United States unmolested.' She ran her hand down the side of his neck onto his shoulder.

'I thought so. You are a very good liar, Illya Nikovetch, but you do not fool me.' She looked over at Napoleon, her lips twitching irresistibly as she returned her hand to Illya's hair.

'He has dislocated this shoulder' she said, 'and I think . . . ' she ran her hand across his collar bone, receiving the expected grunt from its owner, before continuing, 'he has broken this bone and probably other bones which he has not informed us about. You are very naughty, Illyusha. For that you will receive the necessary punishment under Soviet law.' Napoleon saw her reach back for a small bag pushed into a space behind her.

'What are you doing, Anya?' Illya asked, slightly nervously, the pain getting the better of his attempt to turn and see for himself. Anya motioned to Solo to kneel down at the side of the bed.

'Hold his arm.' Not for the first time Napoleon caught himself wondering why they were trusting this
fairly high ranking KGB agent with their lives and their mission. He shrugged. She had been trustworthy so far, and it seemed they had very little choice now but to go on with it. She had drawn up a drug and was identifying a suitable vein in which to inject into.

'Don't worry, it's just a painkiller,' she said quietly. 'He cannot be expected to endure any more. Besides,' she said cheerfully, 'it will keep him quiet and stop all this moaning.'

'Stop, just a minute,' Illya replied hoarsely. 'I... Is it Saturday now?' The others stared down at him. 'Well?' he repeated, a little louder, the effort causing him to cough, before he lay back on the pillow.

'Er, yes, of course it's Saturday,' Napoleon replied, wondering what was coming next. Illya turned slightly towards his daughter, his face ashen in the light of the torch Napoleon was holding over him.

'Bon Anniversaire, mon chou. Je suis désolé, je n'ai pas acheté un cadeau'.

'C'est d'accord, Papa. Tu es mon cadeau.'

'Excuse me,' Napoleon intervened. 'If today is Pascale's birthday, then, you don't mean ...'

'Yes, Napoleon,' Illya croaked, his pale face now slightly illuminated with a faint smile, 'Pablo and Pascale are honorary twins.' Anya glanced at Solo and he reached out once more to immobilise Illya's arm, but not before the Russian, with a slight growl of pain, had clutched at Solo's arm.

'Anya,' he murmured, as she drew near to his face, 'I also know what you are doing.' He gazed at her for a few seconds, his eyes becoming a little less intense as he concentrated on the words. 'Pascale and I... want to say thank you, I mean I want to say ...'

Before Illya could continue, she had slid the needle in and injected the drug. The hard line of his partner's face relaxed into a soft smile, and he drifted into sleep in seconds. Napoleon frowned, wondering why she had cut him off in mid sentence like that. She looked up and he could just make out an expression of intense tenderness slipping away from her face, to be replaced by her usual feline hard-edged appearance.

'The comrades of the Archangelsk group will meet you at the other bank,' she began, as if nothing had happened. 'They will take you to the airport, where a military aircraft will be waiting. I understand that your colleagues from UNCLE will meet you in Berlin.' Anya glanced down at the now unconscious figure on the floor of the dingy. 'Look after him, Napoleon, and... tell him we will see each other again, I am sure.' She touched Illya's hair lightly, before taking a deep breath and turning towards the approaching bank of the river. Napoleon could just detect the figures of three men standing facing towards them, the open doors of a rather ancient looking lorry parked immediately behind them.

As Fernando guided the dingy into the bank, Anya turned to face Solo, her expression serious and intense.

'Have a safe journey back to New York, Napoleon,' she said softly. 'This affair is not yet ended, I think. What do you say, "pieces have to be tied up"?'

'Ends have to be tied up,' Napoleon replied, smiling. 'Yes, a couple of loose ends need tying up, comrade, that's for sure.'

CHAPTER 22

'Look, I've finished, and just in time, too!' Misha slammed down the piece of paper triumphantly onto the kitchen table, a look of benign satisfaction on his face, as Thérèse patiently ticked off the last
three jobs on the list.

'I am impressed, deeply impressed,' she breathed, staring at the paper. She had been waiting for some of these jobs to be done for what felt like a lifetime, Illya always either actually being somewhere else or suddenly finding that he needed to be somewhere else when she had mentioned them. He was more than willing to do anything which involved taking things to bits or messing round with the insides of things like the car, but when she had casually mentioned decorating, he had frowned.

'Um, I think my decorating skills are about at the same level as my cooking skills,' he had said, turning on his helpless little boy expression as if to underline the absolute disaster that attempting such a task would be guaranteed to bring. Thérèse had sighed and put these jobs to the bottom of the increasingly long list she had written and pinned up in the kitchen.

But the onset of her pregnancy and the possibility of Pascale's arrival had brought them back up to the top again. Getting someone in to do the job was such a trial; everything had to go through some sort of vetting procedure in UNCLE, and she grew to resent the all-encompassing hold on every aspect of their lives that her husband's employer seemed to have.

Misha had noticed the list quite soon after he had moved into the house. After ascertaining her desired choice of colours for the rooms, he had set to, using Pablo and Marv as willing slaves in moving furniture and enlisting Brian's help with the trickier bits. When the baby twins' room, as Pablo called it, had been finished, Ingo had come round and hauled the new furniture up the stairs and into the room, the giant German lifting the downsized wardrobes and cots as if they were a few sticks of wood he'd gathered up to put on the fire. Pascale's room, at the top of the house next to Pablo's, proved more difficult, Thérèse agonising about colours and furniture for days, until Josefina came round one evening.

'Here, this is a fab colour!' she said enthusiastically, pointing at a lovely lavender shade on the colour chart, 'and this pattern is pretty in a little girly kind of way, don't you think?' Therese sighed and nodded.

'But I don't know if she is a little girly sort of girl, do I? Her voice trailed off as she put the samples down and lay back on the sofa.

'Do you know . . I mean, have you heard . .?'

'He's only been gone a couple of days, sis. Give him a chance to find Goldilocks and then before you know it, they'll be back and we'll both be longing for them to bugger off somewhere else again, eh?' Thérèse smiled rather wanly at her sister and heaved herself upright again. Jo had been round a great deal after she had confronted Waverly about Illya and been told about Misha. It appeared that she had worked it out at least in part for herself, or so she said. Tess still wondered what had happened to Napoleon and how her sister had been involved in his return. As usual, nobody was telling. At any rate, she knew that he had gone again, and this time she hoped he wouldn't return alone.

Finally, the lavender shades were settled upon, and Misha had set to work, Ingo pressed into service again to lug more furniture up more stairs. And now, it seemed, he had finished, just in time. She felt the babies lurch within her as the telephone suddenly rang, diverting them from the list. Misha got up and answered the call, standing by the side of the phone on the kitchen wall and smiling at Tess staring at the completed list. She noticed the expression on his face change as the call continued. He put down the receiver and leaned against the wall.

'I have to go out for a while,' he said seriously. 'I'll just get changed and check the children if you like.'
'You'll be lucky. They're sleeping with Grandma and Peter tonight, remember?'

He didn't say why, but Thérèse guessed it would be UNCLE business ten to one. She had learned, even in the last two short years of her relationship with Kuryakin that it was better not to ask or even expect to be told. She heard him climbing the stairs, his leg still stiff and causing him to limp slightly, although it was significantly better than it had been in the first few weeks after he had left the medical section. Therese switched out the lights and came upstairs slowly to the bedroom. Her dates gave her three more weeks, three weeks in which to hope that he might return to be with her at the birth. She had admitted to no-one, not even Jo, that this time she was scared. Bernard Shearer had been bluntly honest with her all through the pregnancy, but even he seemed pleased with her progress. Nevertheless, she had fought to remain calm as every day went by and no news came.

Misha had on a long Burberry raincoat over his suit as she came into the room, and was going through some papers in the soft leather briefcase he used for work.

'I'll ring you if there is anything about him I can tell you,' he said immediately, sitting down on the bed beside her. Therese reached out and hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder as if it was as heavy and cumbersome as her body.

'I need him back, Mish,' she said in a tired voice, 'soon.'

xxxxxx

The address was on Upper East Side, a rather grand looking brownstone with a brass plaque proclaiming it to be 'The Spier Clinic'. The weather had turned unseasonably wet, and Shevchenko hesitated only fractionally before running up the wide stairs and walking into the comfort of the reception area. The room gave off the appearance of a rather upmarket hotel rather than somewhere medical, Misha thought, as he walked up to the large polished wooden desk at the back of the room. He could see the lifts waiting at the side of the staircase that disappeared up to what he imagined were the treatment rooms on the floor above.

'Please go up, first floor, Room 112.' He blinked momentarily at the receptionist, a young woman with interesting horn-rimmed glasses that matched her swept up hairstyle in some way he couldn't quite put into words. Seeing that his ankle was aching, Misha decided to take the lift. It was of the comfortable, wood trimmed type that he had thought so American when he had arrived, with an automatic door which then opened automatically moments later, depositing him onto the first floor, to a very different environment to the plush comfort of the ground floor entrance.

The rooms had obviously been converted to provide a mixture of meeting space and medical ward. There was a reception area, this time staffed by more ubiquitous American nurses in their ubiquitous white uniforms. There were several rooms with porthole windows in them, suggesting their use as patients' rooms, then, facing him, a larger room, indicated by the wooden double doors leading to it, and the absence of portholes. As he advanced slowly towards the Nurses' station, one of the double doors opened and Napoleon Solo emerged. He must have been alerted to Misha's presence by the receptionist, he presumed.

'This way,' Napoleon said simply, following him into the room.

The room was as Misha expected. It was big enough to accommodate a large rectangular table, as well as a more comfortable seating area at one end, with upholstered settees surrounding a low, wooden coffee table. At one side, a cadaenza stood, upon which was placed a large tray with a selection of food and a coffee percolator and cups. Alexander Waverly sat with a cup of coffee in his hand on one of the settees, while, at right angles to Waverly and directly facing Misha, propped up on the other sofa, lay Illya Kuryakin.
'Ah, come in, Mr Shevchenko. I hope it didn't prove too difficult to find this place?' Waverly said.

Misha found that his heart was beating faster as he gazed at Illya. He was dressed in pyjamas and a dressing gown, which explained at least in part why the meeting was here and not at UNCLE HQ.

Misha cringed at the bruises evident on his fellow Russian's body and face, particularly the fading wheals round his throat, and the sore looking marks on his wrists and ankles. Despite that, he looked well-nourished somehow, Misha guessing that his stay in the Soviet Union hadn't been courtesy of the gulag system at least. Kuryakin turned his face towards him, the features impassive under the cropped golden hair, difficult, as ever, to read. Misha had thought about this meeting from the moment when he had last seen Illya, before Rondeau had smashed up his ankle on that hideous night in France. Illya had looked shocked then, still dealing with the sight of his own face on that of his former friend. Misha had talked with Napoleon about him, trying to reassure himself through the words of his friend's closest American friend and partner, that there would be forgiveness and understanding eventually.

'He'll have had time to work it over in his mind,' Solo had said. 'As long as you've treated Tess properly, he'll forgive you for anything else.' Misha thought of the list again, as if it stood for things other than just odd jobs and decorating. He had tried to care for her in the way he imagined Kuryakin would want him to, and in doing so, had become closer to her than he had to any other woman he'd ever known, except, he thought, to Illya's own mother.

He felt Napoleon tug at his coat slightly, and realised that he had been standing motionless staring at the figure on the settee. Illya didn't speak until Misha had sat down between him and Waverly, Napoleon thrusting a coffee into his hands, his gaze darting between the two men with concern and some amusement combined.

'Misha,' Illya eventually said, keeping him in his gaze.

'Illyusha,' Misha replied, finding it hard to keep his voice level. Napoleon suddenly walked between them, giving Illya a coffee and pushing his feet slightly to sit down at the end of the settee.

'Ow. Please try not to injure me any more than you usually do Napoleon,' Illya complained, sliding his legs down to accommodate his partner.

'I thought the Doc said you were ready to come home in a few days,' Napoleon replied. 'So don't milk it, otherwise I'll have to fetch Nurse Beelzebub in to supervise your bedtime routine.'

'Please don't mention that woman's name again otherwise I will walk out of here now!' Illya hissed, lips tight. Waverly, sitting at the end of the sofa, was allowing the two agents to continue, the atmosphere considerably lightened by their bickering conversation.

'He never was a very good patient, even when he was a boy,' Misha ventured. Illya stopped and looked at him.

'That is not surprising, Misha, since you were inflicting most of the injuries.' He suddenly smiled, inducing a sort of choking feeling in Misha's throat.

'Oh really?' Napoleon said. 'What sort of injuries might they have been?' Illya looked over at Waverly, hoping that he might do what he usually did, and call a halt to the chat, but he seemed to be enjoying it, sipping his coffee and smiling benignly at the three men.

'I think he's referring to the button box incident, and also the time I cut his head open with that piece of wood when we were playing
"reds and whites", Misha continued, glancing at Illya's pained expression.

'Yes, Napoleon, that is the forces of the Revolution against the Tsarist counter-revolutionary white Russians,' Illya added, leaning back and closing his eyes.

'Sounds like a neat game,' Napoleon remarked. 'And the button box?'

'You'll have to ask my mother about that one,' Illya replied, now looking directly at Waverly in beseeching mode.

'Yes, gentlemen,' he replied, a faint smile continuing to illuminate his face. 'I suppose we had better get down to business, as no doubt Mr Kuryakin will be required to return to his room soon.' Illya grimaced at the last sentence, and then leant over slightly towards Misha. It was obvious he was having trouble in moving, his whole left side seemed stiffened by his injuries, and Misha could see some elaborate bandaging beneath the Russian's partly open pyjama top.

'Tess?' Illya whispered, his face taking on a concerned look Misha had never seen before. Misha moved nearer, and put his hand on the pale, bandaged one of his childhood friend.

'She is . . .' He wanted to say 'beautiful' for some reason, but held back. '. . . missing you. She is worried that you won't be there in time for the birth,' he murmured, noticing his friend's face become pensive and the blue eyes fill with a sort of cloudy anxiety.

'I intend to be there,' Illya replied quietly, glancing at Napoleon.

Solo gazed at them both, the first time he'd had the chance since they'd returned from the USSR. The physical likeness was astonishing, their hairstyles being the only really obvious difference he could see. However, now that Misha was not required to play the part, it was obvious just how different they were. Illya, reserved, awkward even, his natural shyness and introversion so often a magnet for women and men, and Misha, emotional, extrovert, self-aware; someone Napoleon imagined who could be the life and soul of the party if he was allowed.

Waverly cleared his throat and passed round copies of a clearly marked map.

'Tonight, gentleman, Mr Shevchenko here will be handing over the codes for the new UNCLE security system to Dr Rondeau here.' They all stared at their maps. The familiar elongated green outline of central park was annotated with a large red arrow. 'I'm sure you're all familiar with the Trefoil Bridge,' Waverly continued. 'Meeting here will ensure that we can control just who goes into the tunnel and who comes out. Mr Shevchenko has managed to reassure Dr Rondeau, it seems, that there will not be a waiting party for him as he leaves the tunnel, and we intend to make sure that he collects his package and exits the park without any interference.'

Napoleon frowned and started doodling on the side of the map.

'Um, what about the safety of Mr Shevchenko in the tunnel, sir? Rondeau might decide to kill him and there's little we could do to prevent it.'

'No, they don't want him dead. As far as they're concerned, this has been an enormous success, and they want to keep him in place for as long as possible, at least until the security of UNCLE has been compromised.'

'So we just allow him to escape?' Illya intervened, still staring at the map.

'Precisely, Mr Kuryakin. We need this program to be loaded into the THRUSH central computer. While our friends at THRUSH are enjoying what they think is highly classified intelligence coming
out of UNCLE, hopefully, we will be given access to their records for as long as it takes them to realise that what they are getting is entirely worthless. Then, no doubt, they will deal with Dr Rondeau in their own, rather unpleasant way. No, the danger to Mr Shevchenko will not come from THRUSH, gentlemen.' He looked towards Napoleon, who was still engaged in mental note-taking of the differences between the two Russians.

'Er, ah yes, sir. I'm sure Mr Kuryakin will be pleased to know that Major Markova has been busy on our behalf since she took her fond farewell of us two weeks ago,' he began, ignoring Illya's pursed lips. 'She has interrogated your lab technician who has confirmed the plan Mr Nikitin outlined for me so kindly before he tried to kill Pascale.'

'Pascale! How is she?' Misha burst in, apparently unaware of Illya's amazed expression.

'Um, she is fine, Misha. The surgeons removed the device from her heart with a little difficulty, and she has made a good recovery. She, like her father, is now anxious to return home.' Illya sighed, closing his eyes momentarily. Misha smiled broadly, thinking of the lavender bedroom and all it contained. Waverly was frowning, lightly patting his pockets for his pipe and tobacco.

'Sorry. You were saying, Napoleon?'

'Right. The good Major has also made contact with your former shipmate, gentlemen.' Illya raised his eyebrows and looked at Misha.

'I presume you mean Sasha?'

'None other. Captain Koronin, as he is now, has been very happy to cooperate with the KGB. She has sent a message through him from Nikitin, telling Mitchell that Illya here is dead, and that if he wants to continue their cosy little friendship, he is to let Shevchenko alone. The idea, I believe, is to expose him as a fake and then let UNCLE deal with him without a fuss, as only we know how.'

'And you think that Mitchell will listen?' Illya said, wincing slightly as he shifted his position on the sofa.

'I think so. His main obsession, as well as ridding the capitalist world of you, comrade, is to use Nikitin to infiltrate the KGB.' Illya sniffed and lay back a little. Napoleon could see a look of fear building on Shevchenko's face, strange to see on a man, whose double had rarely shown even the slightest touch of it.

'Don't worry,' Solo said. 'There will be a back-up team hidden in the bushes. There are only two ways in, and we'll have them both covered. The important thing to remember is to stay put until we come and get you, OK?'

xxxxxxx

''The Spier Clinic.''' Now what is all that about?' Bradley Mitchell said under his breath as he stooped slightly to look through the car's windscreen.

'Apparently, it's like a private rest and rehabilitation centre,' Ellestadt replied, reading from a glossy brochure on his lap with a tiny torch. Mitchell sniffed, aware of several men loitering outside the doors, their subtle glances betraying who they were, at least to him.

'So why, my boy, is Mr Mikhail Shevchenko, aka Mr Illya Kuryakin, making a beeline for the place?'

Mitchell had been following Shevchenko after he'd received the message from Nikitin. At first he
had felt mildly disappointed, but he reasoned to himself that keeping his relationship with Nikitin alive was more important than this excuse for a human being that he had spent the last week watching. He shook his head as the blond rushed into the clinic, shutting the heavy wooden door behind him. Anyone in the world of espionage could see from a hundred paces that this guy was not Illya Kuryakin, whatever he looked like. The real McCoy would not have allowed himself to be tailed so easily for one thing. In one week Mitchell had established that he had obviously pulled the wool over the wife's eyes; he had seen them walking hand in hand in Washington Square, that red-haired brat screaming her head off in the stroller, and then there was his little trips to his boyfriend's house. All in all it would be mildly amusing to see Waverly's and especially Solo's face when they discovered that their little Russian friend was not who they thought he was. It was only a matter of time before Shevchenko dropped the codes, and it was worth continuing to follow him until he did, particularly since he made it so damn easy. Mitchell had even observed that the fool hadn't even set the alarm on the house, he had been so eager to get to this clinic, and whoever was waiting for him there.

'Perhaps he's visiting someone, Brad, you know, one of his 'friends'?' Ellestadt said, raising his eyebrows.

'That's a possibility, Ken, but I find it a little strange that he is visiting someone at 9 o'clock in the evening. I have a feeling in my insides that it's more than that. Someone is in there, someone important, and, for some reason, that person cannot be treated at UNCLE HQ medical. So who could that be?' Mitchell reached into the glove compartment and drew out a packet of cigarettes. His lighter suddenly flared in the darkness of the car, momentarily startling his partner.

'What, Ken, these UNCLE boys make you jumpy?' Mitchell drawled, taking a long draw of his cigarette and inhaling deeply before blowing out a long stream of smoke into the car.

'No, it's not that. I . . . I just wonder if it's worth it, I mean he's dead isn't he, Kuryakin?' Mitchell sat up and stubbed out the cigarette.

'When Shevchenko comes out I want you to follow him Ken. Don't get too near and be aware of the fact that the place will probably be crawling with UNCLE and THRUSH men. I'll meet you back at that late night café on Times Square, say 1.00 am onwards, OK? But first, I just want you to do me a little favour.'

Carlene Donaldson looked up as a young man with soft brown eyes and a hangdog expression came up to the desk. It had been a long shift, and there was only half an hour to go before she could be out of here, in a cab to Grand Central, and meeting her boyfriend for a drink before hopefully going on to his place. The big meeting upstairs was still on, and she hoped they'd all be out of there before the next shift began and she'd have to explain to the next clerk in as much detail as Jenny had explained to her.

'Hi.' She looked up to see that the young man was holding an envelope. He flashed his UNCLE card at her, her tired eyes registering it vaguely before she took off her glasses, wiped them, and returned them to her face.

'Er, I'm sorry, Connie forgot to give this to Mr Kuryakin, it's kinda urgent,' he began.

'OK, I'll give it to him when he comes down,' she said, smiling at him.

'Oh, so he's recovered now?' the young man continued, looking as if he knew all about it. Carlene frowned a little, then her expression cleared.

'Oh, you mean the other one, the other blond?' she asked, beginning to laugh. 'Yes, he sure does look
like him, doesn't he? Apparently they're brothers, but they haven't seen each other for years until tonight,' she whispered. She began to look a little worried, glancing over his shoulder at the man by the lift, who was starting to take an interest in their conversation.

'I think I might have said too much,' she giggled, taking the envelope. Ellestadt watched her writing, her pen slightly smudging the thick paper of the envelope. Room 112.

'Don't worry,' Ellestadt said conspiratorially. 'I won't tell anyone.'

Xxxxxx

The house was uncomfortably silent, none of the usual family noises permeating through to the bedroom from either the floors above or below, only street sounds filling the darkness; traffic crossings, horns and human voices ebbing and flowing like a tide on the pavement outside. Stripping off her dressing gown, Thérèse lay on the top of the bed, her thin silk nightgown rippling imperceptibly with the movements of the babies beneath and the slight breeze from the windows across the room. She gazed at the telephone, willing it to ring. Misha had been gone for some time now, her initial hopes of finding anything out about Illya's whereabouts sinking with the setting of the sun over the school opposite. She felt huge, heavy and very tired, her body reflecting the pain weighing her down at his continued absence. If he was in New York, why had he not contacted her, or was he so badly injured that communication was rendered impossible? And if that was the case, why hadn't Napoleon, or somebody else from the damned organisation he worked for let her know?

She suddenly felt frightened neither for herself nor even for Illya strangely, but for Misha. After months of getting what they wanted out of him in that laboratory, they were now making him do something which her husband was trained for, but for which he was totally unfitted. She got up and reached for her bag. Illya had brought it back from one of his 'trips', as she called them. It was a deep turquoise, with wonderful tiny sparkling beads sewn over the front in a swirling pattern, waterfall like on the velvety cloth. She liked its unorthodox roominess; she was able to shove in a whole host of bits and pieces, secreting the more important ones into its zipped inside pockets and little flaps.

Pulling open the top drawer of her bedside table she pulled out her knife and hid it inside the bag. Afterwards, she never really understood herself why she had done it, but as she zipped up the pocket, she heard the front door of the house open, and then quietly close again.

Thérèse frowned and looked at the bedside clock. He was obviously trying not to wake her up, as she didn't hear him again until the door began to open.

'I . . .' Her sentence was cut off by the choking sensations she felt in her throat as she looked at the man in front of her. He was taller than both Illya and Misha, about Napoleon's height and build, but with brown hair cut like an American Marine's, and small, closely set dark eyes, which were now taking her in as if she was something he owned and could do with as he pleased. The gun in his hand, pointing in her direction, was smaller than Illya's PPK, a dark, menacing instrument, its wide rectangular barrel staring at her as unpleasantly as its owner.

'Sit down, Mrs Kuryakin, please,' he said, his voice cutting through the quietness of the room. Therese fought down the waves of sickness, gripping the end of the bed and breathing heavily to calm herself.

'No,' she heard herself say slowly, 'I'll stand if you don't mind.' There was another silence before he spoke again.

'Sorry to disturb you, but I'll have to insist that you come with me. You have to understand that it's a matter of National Security you see.' He said the words National Security in a rather mocking way, as if he knew that neither of them believed it.
'Where are we going?' Thérèse managed to blurt out, forcing herself to keep looking him in the face steadily. She could feel the babies lurching around inside, as if they were panicking at the intruder standing before her.

'Well, you'll be pleased to know that if my intelligence is correct, we're going to visit your husband. That is, your real husband, and not the imitation one you've been screwing for the last six months,' he replied calmly, his face looking her up and down and dwelling on her belly before returning to stare at her again.

Thérèse gripped the bedpost tightly, pushing her back against its cool rails. For some reason, the reference to National Security and his sheer offensiveness with her made her think of the whole medical fiasco which Illya had undergone at that military place. She tried hard to remember the names they had used in conversations they'd had which she wasn't supposed to overhear.

'And your name is . . . Mitchell, it's Bradley Mitchell, isn't it, from the . . . CIA,' Thérèse murmured, her face now set as hard as the iron posts digging into her back. Mitchell curled his lip into an unpleasant sneer that matched the rest of his behaviour.

'Very clever, Mrs K, almost as good as your little commie husband,' he said, stepping a little closer. 'Sadly, I don't have time to chat now. You can either come with me or I'll kill you and whoever's baby that is in there now.' He stepped a little closer, aware now of her eyes on his face, and her soft, gently waving hair falling onto her shoulders in the twilight of the room.

Thérèse backed away from him slightly and turned on the light at the side of the bed. Mitchell looked round the room. This place and this woman were the absolute antithesis of his experiences with the opposite sex. He had never had sex with a pregnant woman; he sniffed at the thought of the last woman he had done it with, a twittering dyed blonde piece in some dive in the Bronx she had laughingly called home, but which looked more like a roach-infested excuse for a garbage tip. This room, with its beautiful wooden floors and warm coloured walls, its paintings and photographs, and the evidence of children in the randomly placed toys and baby clothes, even the guitar against the wall, spoke to him of another, happier life, lived by people he at once envied and despised. He looked at his watch.

'Get dressed.'

Thérèse stared at him momentarily and then opened the wardrobe door and pulled out some clothes and underwear.

'Hurry up,' Mitchell said, indicating that she was to dress in front of him with the gun. Thérèse laid the clothes on the bed and turned away from him.

'Turn round. Face me when you're getting changed, you commie loving bitch,' Mitchell hissed. He walked forward and grabbed her from behind, stroking her belly with his gun as he held her against him, fondling her breasts roughly with his other hand. Thérèse could smell the cigarettes on his breath and clothes, shuddering at his crude touch and eventually pulling away and facing him.

'Don't touch me,' she said fiercely, 'just don't.'

She felt him staring at her as she took off her slip and dressed as quickly as she could, grabbing her bag as she hurriedly forced on a pair of delicate pumps onto her feet. Mitchell glanced at the bag.

'Do you want to search it?' Thérèse almost shouted, offering him the bag. She could feel her heart beating too fast for her own good, but tried to keep her arm from shaking as she thrust it in front of him. He hesitated for a moment, then, grabbing her arm, pulled her towards the door and down the
Illya lay motionless in the darkened room. Something very lumpy was digging into his head. He suddenly smiled, remembering what it was. The number of sleeping pills he had secreted in the hole he had made in his pillow must now be reaching thirty, making a sizeable collection. He pulled the pillows from behind his head and sat up, glancing at his watch. Misha would be on his way to the Trefoil Bridge by now. He had always found Central Park bordered on the creepy at night, even for someone of his experience. He caught himself feeling concern for his childhood friend. During the meeting, he had looked very scared at times; he had managed to keep the illusion of Illya Kuryakin going for the past few months, apparently with a lot of help from Tess, but this end stage of the mission was a difficult, unpredictable one, filled with dark possibilities. He put his hand down under the mattress and closed his fingers round the familiar shape of his Walther-PPK, flicking off the safety catch.

After lying in the dark for a while, it was easy to see the outline of the door and its familiar handle, after all it was opened regularly through the night by his favourite nurse. Edith Beelsen, or Nurse Beelzebub as Napoleon had re-named her, was turning out to rival anyone he had ever had the misfortune to be manhandled by in UNCLE's medical unit. Her bed baths every morning at some ungodly hour were torturous bordering on sadistic, and she had been ruthless in the first week especially, about the routines of the day and night, conspiring with the day nurses to insist that he had 'adequate rest and no reading', as she put it. She had confiscated his glasses, her daytime colleagues turning him over like a slab of meat, as he complained to Napoleon, while they administered the sedation she had insisted on. At night, he had persuaded her to give him tablets, which he had hidden, after years of practice, in his gums, storing them in amongst the feathers of his pillow when she had left the room after laying him flat. During the night, she would come in regularly, Illya surprised in his feigned sleep by her gentle touch of his forehead and hair.

He shut his eyes, squinting through them as the door began to open, very slowly. His hand returned to the mattress, gripping the gun. He could see another, smaller hand squeeze gently through the space. He tensed, bringing his gun up with his right hand to chest height, his eyes struggling to make sense of who it was. As the arm wound its way round the door, he stared at the long fingers on the hand. The three intertwined bands making up the ring glinted in the moonlight, the long tapering fingers gripping the wood of the frame. He put the safety catch on and slid the gun back under the mattress, lying back and watching the door open, a smile on his face.

CHAPTER 23

Misha turned into the Park off East 79th Street, crossing the now quieter 5th Avenue into East Drive. He glanced behind him, as the Park began to swallow him up, its vastness soaking up the noises of the city like blotting paper. As he walked further along the road, he began to be more aware of his own footsteps and of those of others on the same road, every step becoming more and more like a loud clanging bell inside his head. He had memorised the directions towards the rendezvous, as well as Napoleon's instructions, endlessly repeating them to keep back the waves of panic sweeping his soul. He suddenly stopped, aware that a voice was talking to him from inside his ear.

'Shevchenko? Misha! Where are you?' Napoleon's voice echoed round his skull as he stood against a low wall, dark trees looming overhead.

'OK. It's OK, I'm coming towards the bridge now. I . . . I can't see anyone.'

'That's the idea; we're supposed to be good at that,' Solo said laconically. 'Remember, once you're in the tunnel, do not move until I come in and get you, OK?'
'Yes, I understand. What about Mitchell?' He glanced round again nervously, expecting the man he had built up in his mind as an absolute monster to appear at any moment.

'Don't worry about him. It looks like he's taken the hint from the good Major. Hopefully, once you've handed over the prize package to our friend the Doctor, then we can get back and you can let Tess know that husband No 1 will be joining her very soon, bandages willing.' Misha smiled, thinking of Illyusha. He thought of the two together again, of the little girl Pascale's good fortune in finding them, and of the babies. Suddenly his heart froze.

'Napoleon, oh God, oh God!' 

'What is it?' Misha felt his voice shaking and he stamped his hand on the top of the wall in his misery.

'Napoleon, when I left the house, I . . . I was in such a rush, I wasn't thinking straight.' There was a slight pause. Misha thought he could almost hear Solo's indrawn breath followed by a deep sigh.

'Please don't tell me you didn't set the security system at the house.' 

Illya wondered what was taking her so long to come in, and how she'd found out where he was, never mind how she'd got through reception and the nurses' station. Then suddenly she was standing in front of him, and as he pushed himself sideways to get out of the bed, he realised she was not alone.

'Mr Kuryakin, what a real pleasure,' Mitchell drawled, his arm coming round Thérèse and his gun pointing directly at her head. 'Now, bring that arm up where I can see it, that's right, nice and slow.' Illya put his unbanded arm on top of the bedclothes and sat back in the bed, his eyes fixed on his wife. Mitchell shut the door behind him and locked it, then moved round to the side of the room, his arm locked round Thérèse.

'Are you alright?' Illya said quietly, ignoring Mitchell. He could see that apart from her terror of having a gun held to her head, she was also taking in the sight of him, his bandages and his now rather fading bruises and cuts. 'I'm OK,' he said, trying to sound positive. 'It looks worse than it is.'

'Oh, how very touching,' Mitchell burst in. 'What I want to know, bitch, is why you seem so very unsurprised by seeing commie boy here, and why, Kuryakin, you are not history, courtesy of your glorious comrades in the Union of Soviet fucking Socialist Republics.'

Illya looked at him, a hard expression on his face that was, for once, totally readable. Mitchell began to laugh, his hand deliberately fondling Thérèse's breasts as he pointed the gun at the figure lying on the bed.

'Don't tell me, you will kill me if I touch her,' he said, suddenly ramming the gun into Therese's belly.

'Nikitin is dead,' Illya said. 'We, that is, UNCLE and the KGB, know about your little plan to turn him. What I am interested to know, Mr Mitchell, is whether your employers at the CIA know about your plan and how happy they are with you taking the lives of American citizens, let alone British ones, to fulfil it.' Mitchell didn't flinch, continuing to move his hand down Thérèse's belly while he pointed the gun at Illya. Thérèse could feel the strength in his arm as he held her, her teeth clenched as he began to pull up her dress.

'How interesting, Kuryakin, UNCLE and your friends in the KGB working together,' he snarled, now yanking Thérèse's dress up and pulling down her panties. She struggled, her bag still managing
to remain on her shoulder.

'I'll put a bullet in him now if you don't quit,' Mitchell murmured in her ear, beginning to grope at the soft pubic hair underneath her belly. Illya's eyes narrowed and he felt his hand clenching the bed. As Mitchell continued to touch Thérèse, he didn't seem aware that she had her hand in her bag, obviously searching for something, although Illya frowned with the thought of what that might be.

A tiny flash of something metal inside the bag alerted him to the possibility that it could be a weapon. He knew that trying to yank out his gun in his condition would be suicidal; he, or Thérèse, could be dead before he could even aim, never mind fire. He knew that Tess wouldn't want to use what was probably her knife, in fact he was amazed she had it in the bag. He looked at her, frustration making him breathe harder and grip the bedclothes tighter as Mitchell pushed her forward.

'I'm sorry to hear about Nikitin,' Mitchell said. 'My little plan as you so beautifully describe it, Kuryakin, might have produced some interesting developments. But there you go, just goes to show you can't trust the Soviets, especially so-called American ones like you, commie boy. Your Ruskie hubby lookalike wasn't so hot in the spy department, was he, bitch?' he said, pushing Thérèse forward and holding her down so that her head and upper body were virtually lying on the bed, her lower body exposed to him behind her. 'Not only did he lead me to you, Kuryakin, but he kindly left the house unprotected for me to just walk in and pick up this fat bitch and bring her on down to see hubby No 1.'

Illya worked hard to ignore Mitchell's attempt to wind him up, focussing his attention on Thérèse.

'Let her go, Mitchell. She's done nothing to hurt you or this country. Besides, she can't stay in that position, it will hurt her and the babies.' Mitchell stopped fractionally, his free hand on Thérèse, her bag now splayed across the bed by her side. A cruel grin spread across his face.

'Well, whatta you know, babies is it? More Kuryakin disease to spread across the free world? Well, if it isn't my lucky day. I get to take out not only you, Mr Commie boy, but two of your kids too. That is, if they are your kids, eh, comrade?'

XXXXXXXX

'Mr Shevchenko, what an absolute delight. I trust you've enjoyed your time with UNCLE, and, of course, with Madame Kuryakin.' Misha shuddered at the man's arrogance as he listened to his lies echoing round the bricked vault surrounding them. He had forced himself to walk into the tunnel, flinching at the eerie dampness of the place, jumping at each minute sound. He had stood there alone for several terrifying minutes which felt more like aeons of time to him, until he saw feet slowly appear at the other end, gradually revealing the unmistakeable figure of Rondeau as he descended the stairs on the west side, the trees black and menacing behind him.

The code books were safely concealed in Misha's inside coat pocket, Rondeau taking a cursory glance through them before secreting them inside his own coat.

'We were sorry about Solo,' he said, striking a match on the wall of the tunnel and lighting a cigarette. 'Hermione will be dealt with soon. I understand that he hasn't realised, anyway, and that you're soon to be a father. Felicitations.' Misha sighed.

'What, for fooling those idiots at UNCLE or for being a father? Actually, she was harder to convince than they were, but I guess you see what you want to in the end, don't you?' He looked down, wishing that Rondeau would just tell him what they wanted, and then go. Rondeau turned up his coat collar and stamped his cigarette butt into the ground.
'Well, Mr Shevchenko, your mission is nearly complete. Kuryakin is dead, now all you have to do is to make sure that the computer system is up and running your end, while of course, we listen in to all that seriously interesting information at our end. Oh, and don't worry, Mr Shevchenko, once THRUSH has engineered the final destruction of UNCLE, we will arrange for you to, how can I say it, publicly "go over" to THRUSH.' He grinned unpleasantly, as he buttoned his coat. 'After all, it's the final cherry on the cake is it not? Illya Kuryakin, golden boy of UNCLE, is discovered to be none other than a loyal employee of THRUSH. Parfait, n'est-ce pas?'

xxxxx

'Vaz?'

'None other, dear boy. I'm afraid it's not good news. I used the override code you gave me. The door had been opened by someone who knew what they were doing, but the security was off anyway. It looked as if she had been in bed, and then strangely decided to get up again and go out. Her nightclothes were strewn all over the floor and the closets were wide open; not like our Tess, that, is it?'

'No, not at all. Right, get a squad over to the clinic asap, and I'll meet you there. I've got a horrible feeling in my gut that Mr Mitchell has somehow put two and two together and got four.'

The cab was cruising up East Drive as Napoleon burst out of the park, the cab driver's astonished face reverting to a fixed smile as Solo waved the notes in front of him.

'Two minutes,' he shouted after the address, falling into the back, and mentally thanking whoever it was above for Ingo's fitness plan that had brought him to the road in double quick time thus far.

Vaz had already organised the squad, most of them sent to all the exits of the building marked on the map he was now staring at as Solo leapt from the cab. Only the Indian and Darryl Moore were stood leaning against the railings of the brownstone. Moore instantly leapt to attention as Napoleon approached them.

'All exits covered, sir,' he said enthusiastically, towering over Solo and Vaz.

'I see you've brought the brawn,' Napoleon murmured to Vaz as they walked up the steps.

'Well, you know, anything where he thinks the Russian might need rescuing.'

'And even better, Mrs Russian,' Napoleon replied, smiling.

The night receptionist looked suitably chastened as Napoleon leaned over and checked the book.

'And who is this with Mrs Kuryakin?'

'Er, he said he was her bodyguard from Section Two. He showed me ID, I guess I didn't look at it too closely. We don't have anything electronic here, sir, it's just a clinic,' she had said beseechingly. Napoleon signalled to the security officer by the lift, who also had been convinced it seemed.

'This is the man we are looking for. Under no circumstances is he to leave the building. And next time, check people's ID, for God's sake,' he muttered as they took the stairs to the first floor.

Unlike the reception area, the ward was in darkness, apart from several faintly winking lights coming from the nurses' station in the main area.

'Feels a little quiet, even for nighttime,' Vaz whispered, glancing round at the row of doors on the
right which he presumed were patients' rooms. Solo nodded, indicating to Moore to go and look at the nurses' area.

'Knowing this place, they'll all be drugged up to the eyeballs and sweetly sleeping, apart from our Russian friend,' Napoleon replied, remembering the steadily growing stash of sleeping pills Illya had shown him last night. He could see Darryl signalling to him rather frantically from the nurses' station.

There were two nurses and an orderly slumped behind the desk, the telltale marks of a bullet designed for execution on each of their foreheads. The closed circuit link to the patients' rooms had been disconnected, the screens dead and unseeing.

'Stay at the door, Darryl. Only come if I shout, OK?' Napoleon murmured, signalling to Vaz. Darryl moved away as Solo and Fernandes moved silently towards the last door in the row. Then inexplicably, the door at the other end began to open slowly, a small figure emerging out of its dark shadows. She froze in the doorway, then, seeing Napoleon, ran lightly forward, seemingly unafraid of his unholstered gun, nor of the other strange man who stood by his side.

Before she could speak, Napoleon bent down and put his fingers to his lips. Holding her hand with his free one, he stood up and faced the astonished Vaz.

'Vaz,' he whispered, 'Je te presente Mademoiselle Pascale Kuryakin. Pascale, ceci mon ami, Monsieur Fernandes.' The all too familiar Kuryakin penetrating look scanned Vaz's face, before she took his hand gently and whispered, 'Enchanté, Monsieur. Vous êtes un ami de Papa aussi?'

'Oui, mademoiselle, bien sur;' Vaz replied, his icy white teeth gleaming in the dark as he smiled at the diminutive Kuryakin. Pascale looked at the closed door, and suddenly they were all aware of the sound of voices from inside, two voices, both male, one softer than the other.

'Is Papa in trouble?' Pascale whispered in a tiny voice to Napoleon.

'Don't worry, go back to your room and wait there,' he replied, noticing a stubborn look which he knew well appearing on her face. She shook her head, her arms crossed over her chest, forcing Vaz to force his lips together to prevent him from laughing.

'I can help you, Oncle Napoleon,' she whispered so quietly he could hardly hear her. 'You cannot go in that room if there is someone there. Papa is, well, he is like a mummy, you understand, he cannot move very well.' Napoleon smiled, wondering what gem was going to issue forth from her lips next. 'I will make a noise. The nasty man will know who I am, and he will come out, and voilà, you will have him.'

'She has a point,' Vaz whispered, looking at Pascale, who had now assumed a superior expression worthy of her father. Napoleon sighed, wondering just how much he was going to have to suffer when Kuryakin found out he had involved his daughter in a highly dangerous situation.

'OK. Pascale, stand right over there. Do not, I repeat, do not come into this room until I fetch you, comprends?'

'Oui, oncle, d'accord,' Pascale replied, sotto voce, creeping over to the other side of the corridor, but luckily not within sight of the bodies behind the desk.

'One thing, old man,' Vaz murmured as they stood either side of the door. 'What about Tess?' Napoleon stared back, screwing the silencer onto his gun.

'Oh, she's in there, you can bet on it,' he muttered almost to himself.
Thérèse put out her hand to steady herself. Her face was pressed so hard into the bed that she could hardly breathe, the babies now wedged between her back and the mattress in an excruciating position which frightened her, the muscles of her legs and back beginning to ache in unison as she tried to shift position. She felt the bag beside her on the bed, its secret weapon now hard beneath her hand. It was impossible for her to know if Mitchell could see what she was doing, and the thought of what might happen to her next was so terrifying that she needed something to distract her from the sensation of his hand now probing her pubic area, his body pushed onto her bare buttocks, the gun, she reasoned, now most definitely pointing at her husband.

She began to shift around more, at the same time gently turning the end of the bag in what she hoped was Illya's direction and edging the knife towards its end. She felt him hit her hard on the back of the head, a blow that made her want to retch, but not before she felt her husband's fingers momentarily touch hers.

'Keep still, you fucking bitch!' Mitchell screamed into her ear, before re-commencing his rough penetration of her with his fingers. She could hear Illya speaking now, low cold tones, trying to support her without provoking the man who had power over them both.

A piercing scream followed by a series of loud cries brought his attentions to an abrupt halt. There was a silence in the room, all three of them frozen, listening to the voice.

'Papa! Help me, Papa! Help me!'

Illya had obviously tried to get out of bed, judging from Mitchell's reactions.

'Stay where you are, you commie faggot. Now, care to tell me just who that is? There was a silence, Thérèse trying to catch her breath as Mitchell transferred his grip from her genitals to her hair. He had obviously had his elbow on her back she thought, using her to aim directly at Illya.

'That is my eldest daughter, Pascale.' There was another silence before Mitchell spoke again.

'Oh, sweet. This gets better and better. Now we have nearly the whole fucking family.' He suddenly pulled Thérèse up by her hair, forcing her to scrabble for the end of the bed to steady herself. She could see Illya again, his good arm just in the place it had been in before, and no sign of the knife.

'Well, I think it's about time we had a little family reunion,' Mitchell said, pushing Thérèse towards the door, and moving nearer to Illya. 'Now, just in case, you decide to run away, Mrs K, I'll count to five, and then I'll put a nice little hole straight through your husband's head, OK?'

Napoleon backed away from the door as the handle began to turn. He signalled to Vaz who instantly melted into the shadows the other side of the opening. It had been fairly easy to hear Mitchell's last words, even easier once the door was open and the number 'One' was shouted out. It was difficult to hold back as Thérèse emerged from the room. Her dress looked torn and dirty, her face drained, filled with the memory of whatever horror Mitchell had inflicted upon her the other side of the closed door. She seemed completely unaware of them, focused instead on walking away from the door towards Pascale. As she walked, Napoleon noticed something wet running down her leg.

'Two,' issued out from inside the room, and then, as she reached Pascale, 'three'. The little girl stepped gingerly forward, her arms raised towards the now shaking woman in front of her.

'Maman?' Napoleon heard her say, before he saw her grasp Thérèse, the child drawing the adult
towards her.

‘Four, Mrs K, four.’ The voice seemed louder and crueller as the numbers increased. He could see Thérèse holding the little girl now, whispering something into her ear, before holding the sobbing child, preventing her from seeing or hearing what was about to happen.

‘I think you'll find it's . . .’

Napoleon had leapt into the room and fired, gun aimed directly at where he knew Mitchell was bound to be standing. Vaz ran in behind him, hearing the sound of at least two bullets being fired, and cannoning into Solo's back as he stood at the end of the bed.

‘Get a doctor quick, and tell Darryl to get Shearer and his team down here, now, Vaz!’

He ran round the side of the bed and pushed Illya down, the Russian groaning as Napoleon touched his shoulder. The bandaging on the shoulder was already blossoming into a deep red, as Illya's colour faded. Napoleon glanced across the bed. Mitchell laid slumped back on the floor, the gun left on the bed, a long, delicate looking knife plunged into his heart. He looked back at his now slightly delirious partner.

‘Guess you didn't wait for five,’ he said smiling.

CHAPTER 24

‘Papa, put these on, they will look nice in the photographs.’ Illya groaned, and grabbed the rather bright blue silk pyjamas from his daughter before limping into the bathroom.

‘Oncle Napoleon, do you think I look suitable for visiting?’ Pascale said. ‘Tante Josefina says that this dress goes with my eyes.’ Napoleon bent down and turned the little girl round and back as if she were a very large doll.

‘Well, I would say that you look just about perfect,’ he said, marvelling at the way Jo had braided her hair. As he had predicted, his wife and Illya's eldest daughter had bonded instantly, both of them turning on the hapless Russian with a whole series of nods of the heads, little asides and knowing looks as he sat on the bed in front of them.

He emerged, pyjamas covering the now thicker bandaging on his shoulder, raising his eyes heavenward as Pascale thrust a striped silk dressing gown and slippers towards him. Illya looked at his daughter, now standing in front of him for inspection.

‘You look absolutely charming, lapin.’ He bent down with a little difficulty, holding both her hands in his. ‘Ready to meet the rest of the family then?’ he murmured, smiling at her serious face in front of him. Napoleon thought her expression a classic.

‘Oui, Papa. Of course, I know maman, very well.’ Something about the phrase 'very well' gripped him in the throat. He had guessed that when his wife walked through the door the previous night, she had not expected to return, or to see him alive again. She had given him what she hoped was the means of saving his life, but she had known that he wanted her to save the other four lives whom Mitchell had threatened. Whatever she had said to Pascale had bound them together, but her face when he had struggled into the delivery room to see the twins born told him that it had been the hardest decision of her life.

In the end, the shoulder wound had been superficial. Momentarily distracted by Napoleon, Mitchell had, for once, shot wide of the target, but Illya had not failed to aim perfectly. The sight of Mitchell with his wife, on the other hand, would take a while to fade from his memory.
There was a commotion in the corridor outside the room. A rather high-pitched scream was followed by slightly lower children's voices and a very familiar adult one.

'Ah, Mr Kuryakin, you appear to have made a rather rapid recovery from the previous evening's activities. Dorothy and I were visiting with your mother, and the children got a little excited, so I've, er, brought them up to see their fathers. Give the women a little time together, if you see what I mean.' Illya groaned inwardly and glanced up at Napoleon, who had scooped Fabian up from Mr Waverly's hand and was now swinging him round the room above his head, much to the little boy's delight.

'Er, Mr Waverly, everybody, this is Pascale,' he said simply.

Pascale, whom Illya felt gripping his hand tightly, looked anxiously round the assembled group. Suddenly, there was a loud, high-pitched shout.

'Papapapapapa!' The group parted, allowing Anastasiya to toddle through.

'Oh Tasiya, you can walk!' Illya exclaimed, ignoring his shoulder and lifting her onto his knee as he crouched down in front of her. She instantly locked on, her chubby hands in his hair and her face pressed close to his own.

'That's the first peace we've had for six months,' he heard another voice say. Pablo stepped out, and quietly came over to his father's side. Illya looked up and saw the relief in the boy's eyes.

'Pablo, this is Pascale, your sister.' The two children stared at each other, Pablo looking down nervously at his more diminutive sister. There was a slightly uneasy silence before Pascale said 'Do you like music?' Pablo's face warmed up with a gentle glow.

'I play the cello.'

'Oh, I play violin,' Pascale replied, clapping her hands together in excitement. Napoleon sighed.

'Get the others trained up, comrade, and you can have your very own orchestra,' he said.

The special care baby room had been created rather quickly at the end of the Intensive care unit in the clinic, the two incubators in a little area of their own, the medical equipment softened by the numerous cards and, to Illya's horror, sea of soft toys stacked on a unit across the back of the room. A nurse held open the door for him as he pushed Thérèse through, followed by their other children, Napoleon, Jo and Fabian.

The three children gathered in front of the two incubators, Tasiya between the two older children. Illya knelt behind them, lifting Tasiya onto his knee.

'This is Mikhail, and this is Valentin. Misha and Valya.' Thérèse had stood up and gone round the other side of the incubators, putting her hand into each to touch the tiny bodies within.

'They are very small, Papa,' said Pascale, eyes wide.

'Not really, lapin, they just need to grow a little before they can come home,' Illya replied, smiling, thinking he'd made them sound more like cabbages than babies. He looked across at Thérèse, whose gaze was directed at their tiny boys. She looked up and smiled, more like the girl he had pictured through the long months of their separation. He sighed, looking up and noticing a huge bunch of beautiful flowers on the window sill behind her.

'They're from Misha, that is 'Uncle Misha,' Tess said, noting Illya's slightly dark look. 'There is also a
letter which you need to read, Illyusha, and act upon.'

Misha had visited the babies that morning, with the flowers.

'Are you sure, I mean, is it alright with him?' he had said, when she had told him the names.

'Quite alright. He will forgive you, of course he will. And we will come and visit, with baby Misha, I promise,' she had said. He had handed her the letter then, before holding her for several long minutes.

'I will never forget you, Tess,' he had mumbled, his eyes full of tears. She had wiped his face and smiled.

'Me neither. You made the difference, Mish, between coping and not, and . . .' she had added, grinning, 'you got rid of that terrible wine coloured jacket!' Illyusha will be able to find me, if he wants to,' he had said quietly. She could see Brian Pearson outside the door, watched him put his arm round the blond's shoulders and walk away with him down the corridor.

Napoleon swung round on his chair and gently threw the file down on his desk.

'Ah,' he sighed loudly, 'another mission filed under "qualified success".' He looked at his watch and then picked up his coffee cup, counting to twenty under his breath until the door swished back to reveal his partner.

'You've got that limp perfectly now,' he remarked as the Russian plonked himself down in the chair opposite, taking the cup of coffee passed over his head by the ever efficient Connie.

'Actually, I'm not acting,' Illya replied acidly. 'If you remember, that very large madman on the good ship Lenin laid into me not that long ago, including a few choice thumps on my leg.' Napoleon leapt up and refilled his coffee, giving Connie a look signalling mischief as he sat down again.

'You're a little tetchy today, comrade. Anything I should know about?' Illya glared back at him under his now respectably grown back thatch of blond.

'Two things, Napoleon. One, did you know that I would have to keep playing the part of Misha playing the part of me until THRUSH finally realises that we have broken into their security system, rather than the other way round?'

'Er, ye-es, Waverly did kinda let me in on that one, but I didn't want to spoil your paternity leave,' Napoleon said, suppressing a grin. Illya looked backwards at Connie and then glared again at his partner.

'Two things, Napoleon. One, did you know that I would have to keep playing the part of Misha playing the part of me until THRUSH finally realises that we have broken into their security system, rather than the other way round?'

'And, darling,' Sabi chipped in from the door, 'you will have to maintain your extremely smart wardrobe . . .'

'And dear boy, regular haircuts to maintain the effect . . .' Vaz added, coming round and dipping under Sabi's outstretched arm.

'Anyone else out there like to add anything?' Illya almost shouted, jumping to his feet. Connie came
up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder.

'Now now, boys and girls, stop teasing my favourite Russian. After all, you don't get to No 4 in the charts for nothing, now do you?' Illya turned round and fixed Napoleon with an evil glare.

'Ah yes, Napoleon, the other thing I was most interested to know. Why is it, I wonder, that a song with the worst lyrics in the world after My baby does the Hanky Panky, and which seems to have originated in San Francisco in the last few months, just happens to have my name in it?'

Napoleon leapt up rather quickly, managing to get to the door without feeling Kuryakin's hands round his throat.

'You should be flattered!' he shouted back at the indignant blond standing in the doorway. 'Just you wait and see. In a few weeks, they'll be naming their kids for you. Illya Smith, Illya McKenzie, Illya Doyle, Illya Turner, Illya Waverly . . . . . .

Chapter End Notes

song referenced "My baby does the hanky panky" by Tommy James and the Shondells

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!