

**Author's Note:** Thanks to *bluemeanybeany* for providing the inspiration for this story.



To me rites of passage through life, that's a wonderful, beautiful thing.

*Lance Henriksen*

## LINKS OF PASSAGE

BY [LAH](#)

**May 1974**  
**New York City, New York**

“Napoleon, if you don’t take a push off,” called Illya Kuryakin from the living-room of his one-time field partner’s apartment through to the master bedroom and bath beyond, “we’ll be more than unfashionably late for Mr. Waverly’s retirement dinner.”

“That’s ‘get a move on’, Illya,” Napoleon Solo called back from his position before the bathroom vanity mirror whence he was meticulously grooming his hair, still ebony dark with only a few intermingled silver threads, into sleek perfection. It always amused him how his one-time field partner could still mangle American idioms, even after so many years of living in the States. “And I’m almost done.”

“You said that a full ten minutes ago,” griped the Russian as he walked into the main of his friend’s master suite to avoid doing so much yelling as they communicated.

“Just give me a few more minutes.”

“Not like there is any other option on my part,” protested Illya as he wandered a bit about Napoleon’s private domain, shaking his head now and again as he encountered what he considered a particular extravagance on the other man’s part.

His eyes wandered to the dresser and traveled across the wide range of cufflinks displayed in a currently open mahogany chest on its surface. There were at least two-dozen pairs in the readily viewable top-tier of the dedicated storage case, and Illya knew from previous experience that a second tier as full as the first was set beneath out of immediate sight.

He had never understood Napoleon’s obsession with these trinkets. Illya himself owned but a half-dozen pairs of cufflinks and considered that a more than serviceable number. Why Napoleon had a desire to possess so many more than that serviceable number was totally beyond logical explanation from his pragmatic viewpoint.

Napoleon stepped out of the open door of the bathroom and into his bedroom, hair arranged to his personal satisfaction, shave close enough to please his own exacting standards, and aftershave applied in what he determined as just the right quantity, neither too much nor too little. The crease in each leg of his tuxedo trousers was crisp, his Italian leather dress shoes were polished to a reflective shine, and his silk bow tie was looped with sure evenness given to both sides. He moved to the dresser and gazed into the eye-catching assortment of cufflinks, reviewing in his mind which pair would provide the best fit for this occasion.

Illya readily caught Solo’s visual assessment of the contents of that mahogany box. “Any pair will do, Napoleon;” he told the other man in some frustration. “Just grab a set, do up your shirt sleeves, put on your jacket, and let’s be on our way. We’ve already kept the security detail waiting a half-hour downstairs in the limo.”

“Patience, tovarisch,” Napoleon counseled with a slow grin. Illya just didn’t know the why of how important it was to him to choose the right cufflinks for an event in his life as significant as this one: Waverly’s retirement as Continental Chief of U.N.C.L.E. North America and his own subsequent promotion into that spot. The personal significance of these useful bits of male-outfitting ornamentation was one of the few aspects of himself that he had never shared with the Russian who had been his steady partner in the field for over eight years and his best friend for a dozen.

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**December 1936**  
**Montreal, Canada**



The little dark-haired boy stood uncomfortably still, trying not altogether successfully to contain his natural youngster’s energy as his grandmother inspected his appearance in his dark blue suit and stark white dress shirt. He had just turned four years old, forever leaving toddlerhood behind. Therefore was he to be allowed to stay up right until midnight at the New Year’s Eve party taking place in a few days’ time at the official headquarters of the U.S. Ministry in Canada located in Ottawa. He was excited by that prospect, but he wasn’t as excited about the necessity of wearing this pint-sized version of formal wear to the upcoming event.

He hunched his shoulders a bit to force the sleeves of his jacket completely down over the cuffs of his shirt. He hated the tightness of buttoned cuffs, and had furtively opened them as soon as

his nanny wasn't looking. Thus he now wanted to hide the undone state of his sleeves from both his fastidious grandmother and his attending nursemaid.

"Stand up straight, Napoleon," his grandmother admonished. "You have to appear as a little gentleman if you want to attend the party."

"Don't wanna be a gen'lman," spoke out Napoleon a bit obstinately. "Wanna be a hoo-lee-gan," he pronounced – in slow syllables and with a somewhat verbally awkward French flair – the new word recently added to his rather impressive vocabulary for one of so few years. "Just like Nounou's frère."

The nanny, who Napoleon always addressed by the French epithet Nounou, blushed from the base of her neck to the roots of her hair. Admittedly she did sometimes forget the boy, despite his rather unrefined spoken accent with the language, understood français québécois equally as well as he did English. Though a United States citizen by both birth and nurture, Napoleon Solo had to date spent far more of his short life in Quebec than in any area of his own country.

"Sacrebleu! I swear, Madame, I never spoke to him of such things," the nanny declared in obvious embarrassment.

Truthfully she was rather inexperienced as a professional nursemaid. Thus it was both surprising to others and a matter of pride to herself that she had but six months before landed this plum situation in the household of an American diplomat. Franklin Milbourne, her charge's maternal grandfather and legal guardian, was U.S. Minister to Canada with all the affluence and privilege that entailed. The young woman thoroughly appreciated what those aspects of her employer's status brought to her own. Hence she had no desire to lose her position because of an unguarded comment regarding the conversely somewhat idolized black sheep in her own family the precocious if endearing child in her care had apparently overheard without her knowing.

"Better not to swear at all, Océane," Annette Milbourne coolly counseled. "I advise you to take to heart a certain American saying: Little pitchers have big ears."

"Oui Madame, I will remember in future."

"See that you do," Annette's terse caution made the tenuousness of Océane's continuance in her current post perfectly clear.

Napoleon fidgeted as the adults talked around him. He was bored. He wanted to play. And most of all he wanted to get out of his currently confining clothing. He reached up to scratch his neck under the itchy collar of the starched linen shirt, fully exposing his open cuffs just as his Aunt Amy entered the room.

"Napoleon!" his grandmother reprimanded upon seeing those sloppily hanging shirt cuffs, "button your sleeves. You look like a street urchin!"

"Tatie!" enthusiastically called out Napoleon, oblivious to his grandmother's censure, as he barreled into the arms of his great-aunt.

"Mon cher neveu," Amy Oppen-Schilden, Danish nobility by marriage, warmly greeted the great-nephew on whom she doted as she bent to encircle him within her ready embrace. "Have you

been making a nuisance of yourself with those urchin-ready unbuttoned sleeves?" she questioned with laughing eyes.

Napoleon adamantly shook his head. "Am not a newsense; am a hoo-lee-gan." To be honest, he had no idea what either was; yet the latter option did somehow sound so much more exciting than the former. Besides, he absolutely adored his Nounou; so, if her beloved brother was a hooligan, he wanted to be one too.

"That you will **not** be," the authoritative voice of Franklin Milbourne sounded from the open doorway of the room. "Do you understand me, Napoleon?"

Napoleon lowered his head, gazing downcast at his shiny new dress shoes, as he questioned quietly, "Why can't I be a hoo-lee-gan?" This nebulous unknown had now taken on the tempting aspect of forbidden fruit.

"A hooligan is a blot on decent society, a young man with no purpose or aim in life other than to engage in mayhem. Thus is it not a state of being that has any redeeming qualities to recommend it."

"Oh for pity's sake, Franklin!" Amy protested her brother-in-law's didactic sermon to a child much too young to comprehend any of it.

"Do you understand, Napoleon?" Franklin ignored his sister-in-law's objection and continued his deadly serious lecture to his four-year-old grandson.

"But I really wanna be a hoo-lee-gan," Napoleon stated quietly, as he rubbed one of those sartorially offensive (to his grandmother anyhow) loose cuffs across his eyes to ensure no tears of disappointment would spill down his cheeks.

"Napoleon, you will go to your room and reflect on all I have said," Franklin rendered his judgment. "And you will button the cuffs of your shirt a dozen times in succession to permanently set in your mind how a young man with good manners should properly wear his best clothes."

Amy exhaled a huff of frustration, but knew enough to keep her peace. Franklin Milbourne wasn't unloving toward the boy he was raising, but his methods of childrearing were definitely more restrictive than she herself thought necessary.

"Now you will apologize to your grandmother for your bout of stubbornness," finalized Franklin.

"I'm sorry, Mémé," Napoleon said with just the slightest hitch in his voice indicating how close to true tears his grandfather's dispassionate chastisement had brought him.

"I know you are, dear," his grandmother accepted his apology with an affectionate smile. "You are a good boy at heart, Napoleon. You just have une strie petit diable<sup>1</sup> that sneaks out now and again."

Amy kept her peace though she all but had to bite her tongue to do so. Whatever "une strie petit diable"<sup>1</sup> Napoleon had in him was kept under uncompromising control by his guardian

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<sup>1</sup> a small streak of the devil

grandparents. She actually found herself wishing that the little guy would get into an unfettered bit of ingenuous mischief now and again.

“Océane, you will take my grandson to his room please and see that he does as I have bidden,” Franklin instructed the nanny in no uncertain terms.

“Certes, Monsieur,” the nursemaid promptly accepted the orders of the master of the house. “Venez, Napoléon,” she then addressed the boy. “After you have done what has been asked of you, you can change out of your special clothes and I will bring you your lunch, oui? Une betterave et fromage de chèvre tartine<sup>2</sup>,” she furthered in a wheedling tone.

Napoleon’s face brightened and he broke out in a perfectly adorable grin. “Oui! Merci beaucoup, Nounou!” And with that he happily grasped Océane’s hand and left in the company of his nursemaid.

Yet the whole incident set Amy to thinking, and that thinking resulted in what she considered no less than a truly brilliant idea.

The day before the New Year’s Eve soiree, shortly before the family was to commence on the several hour drive from Montreal to Ottawa, Amy stopped by the home of her sister and that sister’s husband. She informed Océane she had a special gift for her great-nephew and sat with the boy in his room as the nanny finished up the necessary packing for the weeklong stay of the Milbourne household in the Canadian capital city. Eagerly Napoleon ripped off the wrapping from the unexpected present and then looked a bit chest-fallen as the box revealed another of those formal linen shirts that were the bane of his current existence (or at least of the skin at the nape of his neck).

“It’s different from the other, Napoleon,” Amy assured her nephew. “Look closely at the sleeves.”

Napoleon did just that and his brow furrowed in confusion as he gazed upon the cuffs showing ‘buttonholes’ on both sides. “No buttons? Mémé won’t like that.”

“I think she will,” Amy assured him with a smile that verged on a smirk. “Look inside the little case in the box.”

Napoleon took the hinged leather case in his hands and snapped open the lid. His eyes widened as he gazed upon two diminutive “squircles” of navy blue glass, each etched with the silver image of a sailing sloop. He lifted one from the inner bed of dark velvet and puzzled over the vertical shaft with a horizontal end-bar attached behind the round-cornered square.

“These are cufflinks, Napoleon. And men of fashion use them instead of buttons to fasten the cuffs of their shirts.”

“Am I one of the men of fazshon?” he queried in wonder.

“Someday,” responded his aunt with a light laugh. “But I think for now if you wore these on New Year’s Eve, your grandmother would be very pleased.”

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<sup>2</sup> A beet and goat cheese sandwich (note: a “tartine” is an open-face sandwich)

Napoleon grinned. “Better than buttons?”

“Much better. Nounou can help you put them on when you get dressed up for the party.”

Océane, who had been casually observing the scene between aunt and nephew as she methodically folded clothing for her charge into an open suitcase, now enthusiastically acknowledged, “Oui, that I certainly can!”

“That way,” forwarded Amy to Napoleon after passing a quick conspiratorial wink to the nursemaid, “you can surprise your grandparents with your very proper fashion sense.”

“And show them I’m not going to be a hoo-lee-gan after all?”

“Exactly,” his aunt noted with a nod. “You can be a roving sailor instead,” she added with another conspiratorial wink, this time at Napoleon.

Amy could not quite resist the idea of teasing Annette and Franklin with this new possibility. The boy did so love sailing, despite having nearly drowned in a boating accident earlier in the year. Yet he remembered no details of that unfortunate occurrence and his paternal grandfather, Horatio Solo, was an Admiral in the Navy who took the boy out on excursions on the water as often as he could manage with his hectic schedule.

Napoleon literally beamed with happiness at this suggested new version of his future persona.

During the course of the New Year’s Eve celebration, little Napoleon took prideful pleasure in showing off his cufflink-fastened sleeves as often as he could. So often in fact, that one guest jokingly remarked to Franklin Milbourne that he had never before seen anyone who had mastered so young the male preening art of “shooting his cuffs”.

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**August 1941**  
**Rome, Italy**

Napoleon Solo pondered over which of his many model sailboats he should take with him on his journey back to the States. He truly wanted to take them all, but had been told by his grandfather in no uncertain terms that would not be possible and that a boy of his years should understand the necessity of such a restriction. He was eight years old, well “eight and two-thirds” as he was wont to declare proudly, and he was embarking on the long trip without either of his guardian grandparents in attendance. They needed to stay at the embassy here in Rome. Or at least his grandfather as official U.S. Ambassador to Italy – a post he had held since the August of 1938 – needed to stay, and his wife had adamantly stated she would not herself leave without her husband.

Yet times were indeed perilous at the moment for United States citizens in Rome. With the majority of Europe at war and Mussolini siding with the Axis powers against the Allied forces, there was constant turmoil under the surface between the Italian and American governments. The U.S. had as yet made no proclamation of open warfare against any country, but it was well-known its sentiments lay with the Allied cause. The various Axis governments, including Italy,

had just days before invaded the Soviet Union. Thus the current feeling was that the U.S. would not be permitted for much longer to teeter precariously on its policy of non-interventionism.

The North American continent was already unquestionably entrenched in the conflict with Canada's declaration of war against Germany in 1939 just three days after Great Britain's similar declaration. Though Canada's involvement in the worldwide theatre of combat had been at first somewhat reluctant, its official pronouncement of war against Italy in September 1940 had very personally affected the ambassadorial household of the Milbournes in Rome. Napoleon's adored Nounou was of necessity at that juncture repatriated back to her home country tout suite. That left the boy without a fulltime caretaker. However, as he had been attending school on weekdays in the international academy generally utilized for education of the children of foreign diplomats, Franklin Milbourne and his wife had decided against hiring another nanny. Instead they had opted in very European fashion to provide the boy with a "cameriere personale", a young gentleman's valet.

"È il giovane padrone preso la sua decisione?<sup>3</sup>" that valet, named Giacobbe, now asked Napoleon.

"Non come ancora,<sup>4</sup>" responded Napoleon somewhat irritably. He did hate how Giacobbe insisted on addressing him constantly in the third person as 'the young master'.

"The young master must decide soon," tut-tutted the valet now in English. "Il tempo scorre veloce."<sup>5</sup>

"Non c'è abbastanza tempo."<sup>6</sup>

"Che dipende interamente dal tuo punto di vista,<sup>7</sup>" the voice of Napoleon's Aunt Amy interrupted the dialogue between 'the young master' and his 'cameriere personale'.

Amy knew her Italian wasn't the best, but she liked to encourage Napoleon in his own use of the language. For some reason the boy's Italian accent had none of the awkward flavor of his French one, a fact that kept him from starkly standing out as an American in Rome. Admittedly his dark hair and eyes also helped in that arena: a definite boon with things as tense in Italy as they were at present.

"Ma Tante," Napoleon greeted her with a warm smile.

"Mia Zia," she purposefully reminded him. "When in Rome, speak as the Romans speak."

Napoleon nodded sagely and then asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to travel with you to New York."

"But you were just in Copenhagen. I know Grand-Mère spoke with you there by telephone a few days ago."

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<sup>3</sup> Has the young master made his decision?

<sup>4</sup> Not as of yet.

<sup>5</sup> Time grows short.

<sup>6</sup> There is time enough.

<sup>7</sup> That depends entirely on your perspective.

“Yet now I am here.”

Amy didn't think it prudent to explain to a boy of eight how difficult it had been for her to gain entrance into Rome. Her own nationality was Canadian after all. However in the end her long-dead husband's Danish citizenship and noble birth had facilitated her entrée within Italian borders. It was a good thing, seen from such a standpoint, that she had maintained her own residency in Denmark after her darling Gregers' passing nearly 15 years ago. Since Denmark was now a Nazi-occupied country that maintained supposedly “brotherly” relations with Germany, the Italian government had few qualms about letting one of its inhabitants cross into its own territory. And where she had played upon her Danish privileges and marital ties to more easily attain admittance into Italy, Amy intended to play upon her Canadian nationality and birth bond to more easily secure access into the United States with her American-citizen nephew in tow. Amy Oppen-Schilden née LaCoursiere was nothing if not resourceful ...and determined.

You see, she had simply decided that letting the boy make the journey on his own was too fraught with possible risk. Thus Amy had forwarded the possibility of herself escorting Napoleon from Rome to New York. Her sister Annette, Napoleon's grandmother, had jumped eagerly at the suggestion. So much better for the boy not to be alone on such a politically dicey crossing of multiple national boundaries. So much better for his experienced world-traveler great-aunt to be there to shield him from any unexpected glitches in the passage from a country fully at war to a country warily trying to maintain its peace.

Napoleon sensed in his aunt's demeanor a desire to speak with him alone. Therefore he quickly finalized his choice on the one sailboat model he would be permitted take with him from Rome.

“Giacobbe, si può vedere che questo è avvolto in modo che non si rompe in spedizione?”<sup>8</sup> requested Napoleon with one of his most winning smiles as he handed the model off to the valet.

“Come vuole giovane padrone,”<sup>9</sup> Giacobbe assented with a nod. Then the cameriere personale left the room to retrieve necessary packing materials.

“We have privacy now, Tante Amy,” Napoleon noted with a mischievous grin.

“You read people too well sometimes, dear boy,” his aunt acknowledged with a small shake of her head both amazement at and admiration of this innate ability in her nephew. “Nonetheless, I do admit I have a special gift I wanted to give you away from potentially prying eyes... and snooping ears.” With that Amy retrieved a small hinged jewelry box from the pocket of the pale cashmere vest she wore over her dark silk dress.

Napoleon grinned. Since her first gift of a set of cufflinks to him at age four, Aunt Amy had marked many “occasions” in the boy's life with similar gifts. A set of cufflinks when he first entered primary school in Canada at a few months shy of five, a set when he left Montreal for Rome at not quite six, another when he lost his first baby tooth not many months after that, still another when he made his First Holy Communion last year, and yet one more several months ago when his competence in Italian proved sufficient to successfully give directions to the daughter of a government official who had gotten turned around in the American Embassy here

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<sup>8</sup> Giacobbe, can you see that this is wrapped so it doesn't break in shipping?

<sup>9</sup> As the young master wishes.

in Rome. Each pair memorialized noteworthy moments in his young life, and thus he cherished each and every one as much for that emotional celebratory connection as any physical aesthetic quality.

“Should I guess what kind of cufflinks you’ve brought me this time?” he teased her playfully.

Amy shook her head. “These aren’t from me, Napoleon. I am just the messenger as it were.”

Napoleon furrowed his brow. Not from his aunt? But who else would know about the association cufflinks held for him? For surely his traveling back to America, going to live in his grandparents’ upscale New York residence with only trusted servants around him and thus being “man of the house” at least for a little while, was indeed an exceptional event that couldn’t be ignored.

“Perhaps if you actually looked at them, the giver might become apparent,” suggested Amy with a small smile.

Napoleon nodded his agreement and then snapped open the hinged jewelry case. Nestled within burgundy velvet sat twin pale silvery metal links, each formed in the delicate continuous union of an infinity curve. Taking a single cufflink from its soft bed within the box, he saw inscribed on one loop the number sequence 12-21-32, his own birthdate, while the opposing loop was engraved with the sequence 2-10-13.

“Do you know what the numbers represent, Napoleon?” his aunt asked gently as she watched his face with tender concern.

Napoleon nodded once more. “My birthdate,” he said after a further moment of emotionally-charged silence, “and the birthdate of my mother.”

Now it was Amy who nodded. “I’m going to take you to meet her, Napoleon, when we get to New York. She wanted you to have these to wear for her during that introduction. The links are platinum, a metal more precious than silver or gold, as you are most precious to her. And the symbol—”

“I know the symbol,” Napoleon interrupted his aunt. “I learned all about it in math in school. It’s the symbol of infinity and it means unlimited.”

“Unlimited and forever, Napoleon,” Amy added, “as is a mother’s love for her child.”

“Does my mother love me?” he then asked with surprising tentativeness.

Napoleon had never once even caught a glimpse of his mother in the flesh; he had only ever seen her captured image in photographs. He knew she was alive. He knew she had been “disowned” by his grandfather, her own father, after she had a relationship not a marriage but that nonetheless encompassed some of what Grand-Père called the “privileges of the marriage bed”. He knew that relationship had produced what was termed “an illegitimate child”: him. He knew that the truth of his own beginning was not known outside his closest family since his very influential grandfathers – one a highly respected international diplomat and the other a governmentally honored U.S. Navy admiral -- had arranged for the backdated filing of a marriage certificate for his mother and by-then-deceased father shortly after his birth. Napoleon had been raised by his maternal grandparents from that point on, his mother never anything

more than a mention his grandfather made as to the “unvarnished facts” of his past. Yet in his child’s heart he had always longed for her, as what child would not for his mother?

“Yes, she loves you, Napoleon,” Amy assured him, “but circumstances simply don’t let her show you that as she would like.”

That was something of a white lie. Though Amy was indeed certain Napoleon’s mother loved the boy, it was at best a kind of sideways love. The fondness of Ciaran Milbourne for her son was more based upon him as a tangible reminder of her passionate affair with Darius Solo than for the child as an individual unto himself. Darius had been her heart’s obsession and, now years beyond the man’s death, still was. In point of fact Darius had died before Napoleon was even born, but Ciaran’s devotion to him was permanently fixed. Darius was her life’s North Star, and thus there was little in her soul left for consideration of Napoleon beyond his direct connection with that most prominent of luminary bodies.

Yet Amy had never agreed with her brother-in-law’s decision to keep his grandson away from his daughter. Despite the young woman’s past indiscretion that had hurt Franklin’s inner sense of right as much as his pride, despite the young woman’s undeniable flightiness of which Amy herself strongly disapproved, despite the young woman’s problematic willingness to let the situation remain to date unchallenged, Amy had always thought Napoleon needed to at least get to know his mother. While there was no doubt her sister and her husband both loved the boy, they were older than true parents and more than somewhat set in their ways. As well, Franklin was a diplomat who lived in a very socially restrictive environment and Annette was a society hostess who preferred that politely limited world. Napoleon, meanwhile, was a bright, curious, imaginative and audacious child who, to Amy’s mind, was being brought up in somewhat of a gilded cage.

To boot Franklin’s finely-honed sense of responsibility had required him to tell Napoleon to the limit of the child’s understanding just why he was being raised by his grandparents and not his parents. That included the truth about his illegitimate birth and what both grandfathers had done to insure those outside his immediate familial circle never knew of it. This in particular had always irked Amy for she didn’t count it as beneficial for a boy so young to be told something he was continually advised was a secret he could never share with anyone. It seemed to Amy that approach had made Napoleon in essence a very lonely child, isolated in this clandestine truth.

Oh, there was no question Napoleon was a charmer who could make friends easily. Adults generally adored him and children his age vied for his companionship. Yet he still seemed somehow as someone who kept his inner self very much contained, only revealing publicly what he expected others wanted to see.

From this insightful perception into her nephew’s well-hidden core had sprung Amy’s resolve to – during the window of opportunity free of his guardian grandparents’ intervention after she took her great-nephew back to New York – introduce Napoleon to Ciaran at last. She had no idea if it would truly make him less isolated within himself, but she thought it past time that mother and son meet. And thus she had contacted Ciaran and set plans in motion. These cufflinks were part of those plans for, though technically a gift from Ciaran to Napoleon, it was Amy herself who had made the suggestion in a written missive to her niece, even down to the actual design of the cufflinks. Ciaran had merely agreed with the details presented to her, and Amy had commissioned the creation of the cufflinks to suit those passed-along details.

“Now you understand why I wanted to present these to you privately,” Amy forwarded, “as I know you are a sharp-witted boy.”

Napoleon found himself nodding in answer yet again.

“I will inform your grandparents once the meeting between you and your mother is a fait accompli. It is solely my responsibility to do that, however; so for the present you must keep this knowledge just between the two of us.”

“I will, Aunt,” pledged Napoleon seriously. “Cross my heart and hope to die,” he furthered as he made an x across his chest with the finger of one hand.

“I trust you to keep silent as long as is necessary, Napoleon.” Amy gave him a warm smile as she opened her arms wide to him. “I promise though that this time it won’t be for forever.”

Napoleon smiled in response as he happily nestled himself within his beloved aunt’s caring embrace.

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**June 1946**  
**Athens, Greece**

The good-looking adolescent male studied his reflection once more in the full-length mirror. With exaggerated care he brushed a minute bit of lint off one sleeve of his caramel-colored linen suit. Summer was fast making its approach and here in the heart of Greece the decidedly warm temperatures necessitated the lightweight material of the outfit. Still, he needed to look perfectly groomed. The occasion was far too important to be satisfied with anything less. For today Napoleon Solo would personally meet the President of the United States.

This meeting between Harry Truman and his Ambassador to Greece, none other than Franklin Milbourne, was very hush-hush. Certainly members of the U.S. President’s security detail were less than pleased about their nation’s leader sojourning in a country coming to grips with the actuality of civil war. Yet Truman thought it prudent to make personal contact with his government’s representative in Greece as the United States had a stake in the Aegean country’s internal conflict. Communists were exerting power in the region and thwarting the elected administration through guerilla warfare. That was very much a dangerous turn in events to the mind of a Wilsonian politician like Truman.

No publicity surrounded Truman’s short stay in Greece; thus there was no overt public knowledge of the venture. He had arrived earlier that day by special helicopter from a private yacht seemingly on a pleasure cruise in the nearby Aegean Sea. Only after the compound had been secured like a fortress against any aggressive measure did that chopper touch down on the embassy’s private helipad. Currently the top policy administrator of the United States was engaged in a private conference with Napoleon’s diplomat grandfather. But afterwards there was to be a formal luncheon with just the Milbournes, Truman and two of his aides in attendance. Napoleon had been included as part of the Milbourne familial group and he simply couldn’t be prouder. It was an experience the thirteen-year-old knew it was unlikely he would ever repeat in his lifetime.

There was a knock at the boy's bedroom door. "Εισάγετε<sup>10</sup>," responded Napoleon in Greek. He hadn't mastered the written alphabet of the language, nor was he truly competent in its spoken form as yet. He had, after all, only been residing in the country a few short months, since Franklin's appointment as U.S. Ambassador to Greece in March of that year. He could, however, successfully enunciate some common words and phrases.

At the spoken invitation, Annette Milbourne opened the door to her grandson's room and came inside, closing the portal's solid wooden barrier again behind her.

"It's almost time, Napoleon. Let me take a look at you."

Napoleon turned to face his grandmother as she walked up to him to perform her visual inspection. With experienced fingers she adjusted the knot in his brown silk tie, pleased by how the chosen ensemble accented her grandson's natural coloring.

"You look very handsome," she complimented him with a warm smile.

Napoleon chuckled. "I bet you say that to all your grandsons," he teased her.

"I bet I do indeed," she countered with a ready wink. She then lifted his left wrist in her fingers and gazed upon one of the Florentine-finished golden spheres he had selected to link his cuffs. "But these won't do."

"No?" questioned Napoleon with a raised eyebrow. He had thought that particular pair of cufflinks understated yet elegant, very apropos for the occasion.

Annette shook her head in negation. "No. But I have just the ones that will."

With that she extracted a small jewelry case from a velvet pouch Napoleon had thought it incongruous for her to have suspended by its drawstring cord from her own left wrist. She extended the box to him as Napoleon's hazel eyes portrayed his surprise far more eloquently than any spoken words.

"What?" prompted Annette. "Did you think your grandmother unaware of all that business with cufflinks to mark special events in your life? Just because your aunt isn't here to commemorate the moment, did you think it would go unheralded?"

"I should have known better than to think the significance of those particular gifts by Aunt Amy would get by your sharp-eyed observation, Mémé," he acknowledged with a grin as he accepted the box from her hand.

"Indeed you should," agreed Annette with a haughty nod. "Now open your gift, mon seul et unique petit-fils<sup>11</sup>," she added with a very loving smile.

Napoleon did as bidden and blinked back unexpected tears as revealed within the case were cufflinks in the form of miniature American bald eagles caught in the glory of full flight. Cast of gold and exquisite in detail, they would serve forever as an ideal reminder of this exceptional episode in his life.

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<sup>10</sup> Enter

<sup>11</sup> my one and only grandson

“Oh Mémé, they are perfect!”

“Of course they are,” bustled his grandmother as she removed one cufflink from the box Napoleon held, slipped the one currently in his cuff into her palm, and pressed its replacement into position with busy fingers. “Have you ever known me to strive for anything less than perfection?” she asked with a mixture of amusement and conceit evident in her voice.

Napoleon laughed lightly. “No Mémé, never,” he confirmed.

Annette replaced the other cufflink, dropped the old ones into the jewelry box, pulled the velvet bag off her wrist, and finally placed both the box and empty pouch on the nearby bureau.

“There. Now we’re both ready to make our grand entrée, n’est-ce pas?” she noted with a final quick look at her own reflection in the full-length mirror.

“Nous sommes en effet<sup>12</sup>,” conceded her grandson. “Grand-Mère,” he then formally offered her his arm.

Annette settled her hand on Napoleon’s arm and beamed proudly as the two of them left the confines of his room and descended the stairs into the official ambassadorial quarters on the main floor.

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**February 1950**  
**Aspen, Colorado**

Hazel Monroe Quenzer VynWinter lazily opened her eyes and then focused them with definite satisfaction upon the athletic naked form of her newly-showered young paramour as he rummaged through various dresser drawers selecting clothes.

“You ever going to rise and shine, Mrs. VynWinter?” he teased her good-naturedly, somehow knowing she was now awake despite the fact that he hadn’t turned to look at her as he continued in his task.

“I’m simply enjoying from a very relaxed position the rather remarkable view,” she teased him back in an equally good mood.

Napoleon chuckled. “I appreciate the compliment, but I’d really like for us to get out and enjoy the sunshine and the skiing this morning.”

“What? You afraid someone is going to come and roll up the mountains before you get a chance to slide down the slopes on twin wooden planks?”

Napoleon chuckled once more. “No, but I know you’ll get me intimately involved again in other pastimes if I don’t make it a point to get us both out on the slopes early.”

“Do those other pastimes present such a daunting prospect then?”

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<sup>12</sup> We are indeed.

Napoleon turned to face the older woman now. “You know they don’t,” he assured her as he sauntered over to the bed. He then leaned down and kissed her ardently, his tongue deftly exploring the warm precincts of her mouth. With regard to kissing, he really hadn’t needed her instruction. From the beginning she had found this one intimate pastime in which he was well practiced.

Hazel sighed contentedly. “I am educating you so well,” she nonetheless forwarded with a mischievous smirk.

Napoleon grinned just as mischievously. “And I remain a most avid pupil, my uninhibited guru of many delights.”

Napoleon Solo was barely past seventeen. And Hazel VynWinter? Well, she was a couple years more than twice his age. She was also unequivocally stunning, a golden-haired beauty with eyes the flashing black of polished ebony and skin glowing with the flawless sheen of porcelain. The two had met some weeks before at a New Year’s Eve party hosted by his social-register grandparents at their rather palatial home in Grand View-on-Hudson in Rockland County, New York.

Napoleon’s maternal grandfather and legal guardian, Franklin Milbourne, had just retired from his long career as a diplomat. During that career he and his wife and his ward grandson had spent but little time in their familial home. Franklin Milbourne had served various stints as a U.S. envoy to several different countries, and thus Napoleon had been brought up with a cosmopolitan aesthetic if in a rather restrictive ambassadorial lifestyle.

And Hazel? Well, she was “old money” who had married other old money not once, but twice, both marriages ending in the scandalous legalities of divorce. Those divorces could have made her persona non grata within the ranks of the privileged in which she mingled. However, she also had a fondness for charitable causes that gave her a certain illustrious public reputation those in her strata appreciated. Thus was the notoriety of her somewhat messy legal splits from her prior husbands “graciously” overlooked, and Hazel remained within the high-nose social circle that included the Milbournes.

Yet that she did so remain in that circle did not engender in her any tendencies to meekly conform. On the contrary, after separation from her second spouse some eight years ago, she decided marriage was a poor method to gain the sexual adventure she unreservedly sought. With war suddenly declared in the United States at that point, she had been in a position to share a few days or weeks with G.I.s brought into the port of New York before their journeys overseas. Thus it turned out that, though this portion of her sexual exploration started when she was but twenty-eight herself, her lovers were usually younger men much less experienced than the twice-married debutante.

She found she liked this particular relationship dynamic. She liked being the one with the surer skill, being the one who could set the tone of the encounters, being the one ultimately in charge of any sex-games. Thus her tendency for taking younger men to bed continued after the war and was a well-known “vice” in her personality by the time she found herself attracted to Napoleon Solo. In truth he was younger than any of her previous paramours, but there was something about him that intrigued her. Out of the bedroom his particular upbringing gave him amazing self-confidence. He was a charmer with an innate sense of just how to approach people to place himself on their good sides. In the bedroom, however, despite his undoubted talent as a kisser, he was on the whole passionate but raw, utterly lacking in the finesse of

secure sexual expertise. Yet was he also especially willing to excite and satisfy her as his partner. Therefore was she able to guide him in those methods that particularly pleased her. He was proving a quick learner and hence was turning into an absolutely delightful lover.

Today was Valentine's Day and the duo was sharing an intimate retreat in the snow country of Aspen, Colorado. Aspen was just taking off as a resort town for wealthy ski enthusiasts. Hazel had proposed this sojourn for the two of them partly for the location's excellent slopes, since she knew Napoleon to be a bit of an adrenaline junkie, always looking for something to actively set his blood pumping. However, part of the equation as to why she had wanted to make this excursion to Aspen was for its upscale privacy. None here questioned her pairing with Napoleon. It was not their business what a wealthy socialite did on holiday, as long as no laws were being blatantly broken. And of course no one here had any way of knowing whether Napoleon was seventeen or twenty-one. He was young surely; but that vagueness was not something they were going to investigate one way or the other.

Hazel drew her arms about Napoleon's neck, drawing him down a bit closer to her. "You sure you want to go skiing?" she purred.

Napoleon laughed lightly. "This morning, yes. This afternoon I'm sure I could be persuaded to participate in more indoor sports."

"That a promise?" she baited him.

"Scout's honor," he gave her the three-fingered Boy Scout salute.

"*So young,*" thought Hazel with a just a bit of private melancholy. "*So eager for everything in life.*"

"All right then," she acquiesced as she pushed a hand against Napoleon's bare and nearly hairless chest, indicating for him to move away from her recumbent form. "Skiing it is this morning." With that she sat up at last in bed, the coverlets descending into her lap and exposing her full breasts. "But first I have something for you."

"I know you do, gorgeous, but later," taunted Napoleon as he swept a lock of her blond hair behind one ear with gentle fingers.

"And people accuse me of a one-track mind," noted Hazel with a chuckle of her own. "But this is something for proper observance of the day."

"Valentine's Day?" questioned Napoleon in some surprise. From the start of their relationship, Hazel had been the one cautioning against romantic involvement. They would enjoy each other to the full, is how she put it, but they weren't going to moon over one another. She wouldn't have that. She didn't want a love affair; she wanted a sexual liaison.

"We aren't valentines, Napoleon," she stated firmly, "but we are affectionate friends, yes?"

"With very pleasant fringe benefits," granted Napoleon with a devilish wink.

"So I did want you to have something... to mark the first Valentine's Day you are spending in the... umh... private province of a woman."

“Oh.” Napoleon flushed hotly. Hazel was indeed the first female with whom he had ‘gone all the way’. There had been in the past incidents of intense kissing and heavy petting and the like with girls of his own age of course. Yet it had been drilled into his head by his grandfather that a man had certain responsibilities within polite society. And possibly getting a naive young girl pregnant, or ‘stealing her virtue’ without a formal pledge of marriage was not something ever done by a responsible man of any age.

Hazel though was different territory entirely. And, though his grandfather didn’t exactly approve of Napoleon’s ‘association’ with the older woman, he did turn a blind eye to the goings-on. Franklin Milbourne knew without doubt Napoleon wasn’t the instigator here, and accepted that Hazel VynWinter would be for his grandson an essentially easy entry into the world of man/woman intimacies. Her ‘bondings’ were always casual and emotionally undemanding. Thus she wouldn’t stifle his grandson with the suppressive heat of a torrid interdependent relationship.

Hazel playfully placed a finger in the cleft of Napoleon’s chin. “No worries, mon ami. Everyone has a first time and I’m rather proud to have been yours. You are handsome and virile and full of enthusiasm. You have especial regard for the satisfaction of your bedmate. You also have quite a quixotic side to your personality. You will give some lucky young woman the romance of a lifetime, of that I have no doubt. But for me you are simply a stimulating respite in the dullness that is day-to-day life.”

“Day-to-day life doesn’t have to be dull, Hazel,” he suggested. “As long as you find something that really matters to you and make that an integral part of it.”

She only laughed. “*So young indeed.*”

“But you’re forgetting about my gift,” she reminded him. Then she leaned over to the nightstand, opened the drawer and withdrew a small jewelry case.

Napoleon eyed her curiously as he took the box from her extended hand.

“Your Aunt Amy regaled me one evening with tales of the cufflinks you had accumulated through the years.”

“Aunt Amy did?” Napoleon all but gaped.

“I think she had at the time imbibed a champagne cocktail or two too many, to be honest. Still, I found it all very intriguing, and thus considered that perhaps this I-hope-auspicious episode in your life deserved that very personal sort of recognition as well.”

Napoleon grinned. “Interesting idea,” he allowed as he opened the case with a snap.

Within the typical velvet cushion lay a pair of very modernist cufflinks. The design was of a male symbol with its open circle and jutting arrow interconnected with a female symbol with its open circle and short cross. The intersection of the two forms was through the circle of each, with the arrow of the male symbol pointed upward and to the right while the cross of the female symbol pointed straight downward. Smoky quartz with a blue tint formed the male symbol while rose quartz with a milky tint formed the female symbol.

Napoleon erupted in amused laughter. “Not my usual style,” he stated after his mirth quelled somewhat.

“Oh, I know,” agreed Hazel. “Although they are perfect for this unique commemoration, don’t you think?”

Napoleon nodded. “And they will certainly raise some eyebrows.”

“Good!” Hazel announced with an impish smirk. “I do so love to raise eyebrows.”

“Don’t I know it! But right now,” decided Napoleon as he closed the jewelry case and set it on the surface of the nightstand, “I think you’ve raised something else entirely.”

He pressed her back against the pillows as he threw aside the coverlets with his other hand. Then he straddled her nude body with his own.

“I thought you wanted to ski?” Hazel challenged as she assertively wrapped her legs around his hips, capturing him snugly between her thighs and aligning his erection for smooth penetration.

“Hey, nobody is going to roll up the mountains,” countered Napoleon as he thrust himself deep inside her and indulged in a type of exercise not at all akin to sliding down a slope on twin planks of wood yet just as certain to get his blood pumping.

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**December 1954**  
**Anegada, British Virgin Islands**

Napoleon Solo gazed intently through the front window of the quaint little jewelry shop, his eyes held by a pair of cufflinks. Slightly backward-bent “umbrella” disks of gold, their Florentine-style finish exhibited the patina of a long past. In the center of each disk was set a small blue star sapphire with the lines of the textured metal radiating outward from that gem core. At five points the surface changed to a mirror smooth indentation, giving the look of the rays of a star. The cufflinks were undeniably beautiful, but more they seemed to Napoleon like a part of something that was his own legacy, paralleling as they did the design of the gold-and-star sapphire pinky ring he always wore.

Designed after a family heirloom never destined to be his, the ring had been a gift from his guardian grandfather, Franklin Milbourne, just before Napoleon had made his journey to the Survival School run by the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement as a training ground for their enforcement agents. Since Napoleon was technically a bastard by birth, Franklin with his old-fashioned ideals could not see his way clear for the grandson he had raised from infancy – even making legal arrangements to keep forever secret the boy’s illegitimacy – to inherit something that was part of Milbourne familial history. Franklin had nonetheless wanted his grandson to know how much he valued him, how much satisfaction the young man’s decision to take on the responsibilities of ensuring global world order engendered in him, and thus had especially commissioned the exact copy of that family heirloom Napoleon now constantly wore.

Franklin Milbourne had not lived long past the moment of presenting that gift to Napoleon. A fatal heart-attack had claimed his life while his grandson was making his mark in U.N.C.L.E.’s

Survival School. Napoleon wound up graduating top of his class and had received the honor of not only immediate assignment into Section II of the idealistic organization, but also immediate assignment into the North American headquarters in New York City. Thus was Napoleon certain his grandfather would have been pleased with his results in the initial phase of his life calling. The old man wouldn't have said much, Napoleon knew, but he would have been proud as punch, secretly beaming with delight at his grandson's accomplishments.

A tap against the inward side of the window glass called Solo's attention from his personal reverie back to the moment. A middle-aged local with a ring of graying hair surrounding his otherwise bald dark-skinned pate hooked his finger toward Napoleon, signaling for the young man to come inside the shop. With a determined shift of his shoulders, Napoleon decided to do just that.

Anegada wasn't one of the more populated or more traveled-to locales in the Caribbean. Formed of coral and limestone, with a flat and low terrain that had earned it the name meaning "drowned land", the island's barrier reef made maritime navigation to its shores difficult. It was, however, exactly for its lack of populace and popularity, and its complexity as a sailing destination, that U.N.C.L.E. utilized it as a stopover point from-and-to the mainland of the United States to-and-from its own uncharted island that housed the Survival School. Needless to say there wasn't much in the way of city-life in Anegada. Thus there was little to do for the current crop of U.N.C.L.E. graduates who, after arriving by helicopter from the Survival School location, were being held over at the island for some six hours before a chartered plane would take them back to American shores.

Most of the young men had contented themselves with finding a local bar and eatery where they were spending the layover enjoying a good meal and probably a beer or two too many. Yet that hadn't appealed to Napoleon for some reason, and thus he had wandered off into the miniscule shopping district on his own. He really didn't know why; he was in essence a social animal, having purposely cultivated that persona throughout his lifetime. Perhaps it was the realization he would not be able to share his first success in his new vocation with his grandfather that made him somewhat melancholy and desirous of solitude. He wasn't sure about any of that; he was only sure that the sight of those cufflinks in the window of that shop seemed somehow to ease the current ache of loneliness in him.

Inside the shop was incredibly small, but well-kept. There was only one counter and that was made of wood, not glass. Thus but few items were readily on display: those in the window and some necklaces and strings of beads hung on a revolving tabletop carousel. The shopkeeper pulled the weathered leather case holding the cufflinks from its place in the window and onto the polished wooden surface of the counter.

"Your eyes be magic-drawn to these, yes, mister mister?"

"Magic-drawn?" questioned Napoleon with a wry smile.

"Yes. Because they have existed for quite a long time, a sprite of select human history has taken up residence inside."

"That an old Caribbean legend?"

“Oh, be more than legend, mister mister. These cufflinks be over a hundred years old. Things with that much time in the world, as they pass from hand-to-hand, gain an intimate connection to humanity. From that close connection be born an internal sprite.”

“That so?” queried Napoleon with an amused grin.

“Not wise to doubt the reality of the sprites present in the objects around us, mister mister,” cautioned the shopkeeper with a knowledgeable shake of his head. “There be much more to this world than we can see with our eyes.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” agreed Napoleon. “But I’m not Peter Pan; so not about to start believing in—<sup>13</sup> Never mind,” he cut off his own previous intended statement. He realized it might not have been taken in good part and thus might have been construed as vastly impolite. “How much are you asking for the cufflinks?” he then turned the conversation onto a more routine tack.

The shopkeeper looked him up-and-down, Napoleon assumed assessing what he might logically possess in the way of ready cash. But the man surprised him when he said, “You intend to do especial good in the world, yes?”

“I hope to,” forwarded a somewhat stunned Napoleon.

The shopkeeper nodded sagely. “I see this in the aura about you. It shines all turquoise and gold with intermittent flames of purple as of one inspired by personal ideals to fight for others at the possible cost of his own life.”

Napoleon uncharacteristically blushed crimson. This man was in some ways making him very self-conscious. “I can’t be all that self-sacrificing,” he jibbed lightly. “After all, I’m after a pair of antique cufflinks to stylishly outfit myself.”

“You joke with your words, but your soul does not so joke. Inside be a fire that burns with hope and the willingness to stand up for that in which you truly believe. I like what I sense in you, mister mister,” the shopkeeper stated unequivocally. “So I make you a good deal on the cufflinks: one hundred dollars American.”

Napoleon sighed. It was indeed a good deal but it was still more than he had in his pocket. All cadets had been required to bring no more than \$50 (or the equivalent in foreign currency) with them to Survival School. After all, they had no need of money there, and in fact their small caches of pocket cash had been deposited in a common safe during their stay at the school. With graduation that cash had been returned to them for their immediate needs on the journey home, like the meals and beers in which most of the guys from Napoleon’s class were even now indulging on their wait for the U.N.C.L.E.-leased jet.

Truthfully Napoleon did have a good bit more than \$50 on him because all the I.O.U. winnings of the penny-ante poker games the cadets had played amongst themselves while on U.N.C.L.E.’s private island had been dutifully paid off with the return of pocket money. And Napoleon was rather a lucky fellow. But he didn’t currently have \$100, nor really close.

“You doubt be a good deal, mister mister? They be worth a lot more.”

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<sup>13</sup> Reference to the “Do you believe in fairies?” line in **PETER PAN** by J.M. Barrie.

"I don't doubt that at all," Napoleon acknowledged straightforwardly. "It's just my funds are rather limited right now." Mentally he added, "*And God knows how soon if ever I'll be back here again.*" He gazed longingly at the cufflinks once more as he forlornly conceded, "I guess they just weren't meant to be mine."

He couldn't resist, however, placing his ringed left pinky finger near the boxed cufflinks to admire for a final time how the designs complimented one another. A ray of sunshine angled through the glass window just at that moment and caught all three star sapphires mounted in the jewelry pieces: one in each cufflink and one in the ring. The central star of each stone glowed and sent off intense if brief cobalt beams of matched illumination. The shopkeeper gawked.

"Sprite already be bound to you. I tell you what, mister mister, you give me whatever cash you have in your billfold and we have a deal."

Napoleon took out his wallet and counted out the bills, placing them on the counter before the shopkeeper. The final total was \$77.

"I'm sorry it isn't closer to \$100," Napoleon apologized sincerely.

"Mister mister, when the inner sprite reveals that an item belongs to someone, it not be wise to interfere," the man declared firmly as he picked up the money and placed it in a drawer behind the counter. Then he closed the case containing the cufflinks and handed it to Napoleon. "The sprite believes in you... even if you not be Peter Pan," he added with a little mischievous grin, letting Napoleon in on the fact he had understood the previous reference.

Napoleon laughed heartily and then thanked the shopkeeper for his kindness. He left the jeweler's with the boxed cufflinks in his pocket and a happy whistle on his lips. He had his doubts about the existence of any sprite within his new acquisition, but he had no doubt whatsoever that it was the spirit of his grandfather he at that moment felt deep inside his own soul.

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### **October 1957** **Old Lyme, Connecticut**

The drive from Manhattan to historic New London County in Connecticut was proving pleasant, Napoleon had to admit. The fall foliage was its peak and the rich colors gave an almost oil-canvas lushness to the surroundings. Still, he also had to admit that he would be enjoying the journey far more if he wasn't so uneasy about what might await him at its end.

He was meeting his fiancée, Clara Richards, at a picturesque bed-and-breakfast in Old Lyme. A couple of months ago, he had made the perhaps foolhardy decision to ask Clara to be his future wife. Foolhardy in that it would be years before he would give real consideration to legalizing their union. As an enforcement agent in Section II of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, he didn't really have the option to wed at the moment; not if he wanted to stay in Section II and in the field. And he did. U.N.C.L.E. was more a vocation than a career for him. Though a married agent could remain in the organization in Section III or transfer to some other non-enforcement section, that alternative wasn't for Napoleon Solo. Not

yet anyway. The adrenaline surge he got doing field work, from taking an active part in “saving the world”, was still too intensely satisfying to give up.

He wasn't sure how well Clara understood or accepted this, however. It was very likely that she imagined them as a married couple within a few years' time at most. That wasn't going to happen: not this year, not next year, and likely not for at least a good half-dozen years (or perhaps more). Though Section II enforcement agents had a mandatory retirement age of 40 and at not yet 25 Napoleon was a long way off from that, he didn't envision making Clara wait 15 years to wed. But six years or eight... Yes, he knew himself well enough to recognize he wouldn't be able to surrender his field status before that. And even then he knew it would be exceedingly difficult for him to transfer from Section II into some other division of U.N.C.L.E., leaving behind forever the ultimate high of personal derring-do.

Yet he did love Clara. He had no doubt of that either. Sometimes just looking at her filled his heart with such overwhelming intermingled feelings of erotic desire, caring protectiveness and unbridled affection he was amazed that organ didn't just burst the confines of his chest. He didn't want to pass on that heady cocktail of blended emotions, didn't want to lose her. So he had proposed and trusted she was fine with the prospect of that promise not being fulfilled in what was generally deemed customary time. He hoped he had made that clear, but he couldn't be positive because Clara was herself a determined young woman, one who perhaps contemplated swaying him away from his addiction to enforcement field work.

Perhaps he should have waited through those years before forwarding the expectation of marriage to Clara, praying that in the meanwhile catch-as-catch-can romantic trysts would keep her heart bound to his. Yet a selfish streak in him had refused to take that risk. The simple truth was he had proposed to Clara because he wanted something that belonged to him. Oh, not in some obsessively possessive way. Just in a way that made him feel... needed... significant... essential.

It was a difficult reality to explain even to himself but, with his particular past as the illegitimate child of a father who had died before he was born and who really didn't want him anyhow and a mother who had been perfectly willing to let her parents take legal guardianship of her infant son solely upon themselves, Napoleon had always felt somewhat emotionally adrift. The grandparents who had raised him had unquestionably loved him; yet the somewhat stiff restrictiveness of their love had always left him feeling more like he belonged to them than they belonged to him. Thus the subconscious desire for an emotional bond that was uniquely his own had stayed with him throughout his life.

With a sigh to purge his currently apprehensive thoughts from his immediate state of mind, Napoleon pulled into the winding driveway of the quaint little inn in which Clara had booked them for a long three-day weekend. He hadn't seen her since the night of his proposal, the circumstances and results of various missions all over the world having kept him from physically connecting with her. When she had managed to get in contact with him by phone about two weeks ago to propose this little getaway, he had needed to make it contingent on him not being off on another mission for U.N.C.L.E. That such iffyness hadn't pleased her had been apparent in her voice. Still, Napoleon had no choice about emphasizing that caveat: affairs for U.N.C.L.E. always came before affairs of the heart.

As his car reached the apex of the driveway, Clara was there waving to him from the doorway of the b-and-b. In slender tan slacks and a rolled-sleeve orange blouse, with her auburn hair blowing freely about her shoulders, she looked energetically lovely, like another scenic wonder

of nature. Almost upon the instant she was there by his convertible as he opened the driver's side door and slowly slid out from the vehicle. He had taken a bullet to the back of his right calf on the last mission. A fortunate angle and shallow depth of trajectory had resulted in no shattering of bone, but the through-and-through wound had nonetheless required stitches. The pull of those stitches now made movement of the leg a bit awkward for him. Once standing outside the car, he reached into the back seat for the cane Medical had advised him to use to keep pressure to a minimum on the sutured muscle and flesh.

Clara frowned. "You're hurt again."

"I don't get hurt that often, Clara," he protested, somehow the phrasing of her remark making him unaccountably irritable.

"Often enough," Clara confronted him. "I swear, Napoleon, I never know in what kind of physical condition I'm going to encounter you next, or whether my preferred role will wind up being that of passionate innamorata or compassionate nurse."

"Well, at least I'm alive," he responded with perhaps more sarcasm than he intended. Two agents hadn't survived the last mission, and that fact was currently branded white-hot upon his brain.

Taken somewhat aback by both the statement and the bluntness of it, Clara kept quiet for a moment. "Look Napoleon, I don't want to argue," she then broached by way of amends. "What I want to do is enjoy a nice, quiet, romantic weekend with the man I love."

Napoleon smiled his warmest smile. "I heartily second that sentiment, only revising the last of it to 'with the woman I love' of course. And appending 'mutually sexually satisfying' onto that 'nice, quiet, romantic' part as well," he ended with a mischievous wink.

Clara laughed happily. "Oh, how I do so adore you, my naughty charmer," she cooed as she wrapped her arms about Napoleon's neck.

Napoleon wrapped his own arms about her body as they kissed: ardently and yet sweetly, with all the intensity and longing of the dewy-eyed young.

Each with an arm about the other's waist, they turned and walked toward and then into the inn.

Clara asked for a light lunch to be sent to their room. There was an autumnal chill in the air, so Napoleon immediately set about lighting a fire in the hearth. Clara then settled him in a cozy chair before the fireplace, carefully raising his injured leg on a tufted hammock, covering his lower half with a warm quilt, and fussing over him in a way that made Napoleon's spirit feel as snugly tucked-in as his body. They dined from folding tray-tables on comforting fare: homemade vegetable soup, fresh-baked bread, wedges of sharp cheddar cheese, and locally-harvested apples.

Napoleon found himself afterwards slipping into a light doze. Though he would never have admitted it to anyone, the stresses of the mission both physical and mental, his body's unaccustomed weariness because of his injury, and the emotional anxiety that had plagued his thoughts on the long drive from Manhattan, were all combining to take a natural toll on him. Then he felt something pressed into the palm of his hand and his fingers instinctively closed over the object. He came fully awake with a disquieted start. Only the fact his immediate

waking gaze centered on Clara's tenderness-filled brown eyes, as she now knelt beside his chair, kept him from automatically reaching for the U.N.C.L.E. Special he had previously stashed behind a throw pillow in his chair.

"You're safe here, Napoleon," she reminded him.

He didn't think it prudent to tell her that an U.N.C.L.E. agent was safe nowhere. That was probably too much of a brutal truth with which to burden her. So instead he only nodded slowly. Then he opened his clenched fingers and set his eyes upon what Clara had placed within his right hand: a pair of cufflinks.

They were knots of white-and-yellow gold, what were termed lovers' knots. Individual "tied" loops anchored both ends of each cufflink: one side larger and the other smaller. A curved rod of yellow gold tethered together the two anchor points.

"What's this?" he asked warily.

"A commemorative, Napoleon," Clara answered simply. "I know you collect cufflinks for that purpose."

"And of what are these intended to provide remembrance, Clara?"

"I accepted your marriage proposal, Napoleon, even though I wasn't sure then and still am not sure now if I will always play second fiddle in your life to your work. But I love you so much that I am willing to take that chance. So much that I am even willing to wait for that chance. Yet in the meanwhile I want you never to forget that, if I am bound to you, you are no less bound to me. Like the double-sided knots of these cufflinks, we are an anchored pair. Thus have you no less a responsibility to me than you have to U.N.C.L.E."

Napoleon swallowed somewhat uneasily. "I won't forget that, Clara. Truly I won't."

Now it was Clara who slowly nodded. "And I'll try not to push too hard, not to tighten the knot into a stranglehold. It isn't easy for me, Napoleon, to accept U.N.C.L.E.'s very prominent and highly prized position in your life, but I am trying. I really am trying."

Napoleon answered nothing for in truth what was there to say? They understood each other and accepted the limitations the personality of each imposed on the other. He would concentrate on that positive fact, and not stress on the negative possibility that his heart's devotion to Clara and his soul's dedication to U.N.C.L.E. might never result in any sort of comfortable lovers' knot.

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**July 1963**  
**Antwerp, Belgium**

Wandering the Meir was a rather invigorating experience. So much to see at every turn. Napoleon was definitely energized by the surroundings and was thoroughly enjoying his stroll.

He was on the prowl for a new set of cufflinks, something to celebrate his recent promotion to Chief of Enforcement, Number 1 in Section II of the North American division of U.N.C.L.E.

His superior, Alexander Waverly, had informed him of that promotion ten days ago in New York. The Old Man, as Waverly was respectfully if mischievously called by his subordinates behind his back, had congratulated his new CEA with a handshake and a “Well deserved, Mr. Solo” and then promptly sent him off to Brussels on a mission. So Napoleon hadn’t even gotten the chance to make merry with a triumphant dinner in a tony restaurant or a festive bottle of vintage champagne.

His mission had concluded successfully this morning and, since his flight back to New York was not until tomorrow afternoon, Napoleon had decided to take the short train ride from Brussels to Antwerp with its bustling diamond market. He wanted the cufflinks that would serve as a reminder of this moment in his career with the Command to be spectacular. Though he owned many a pair of the male-oriented shirt ornaments, he owned absolutely none that boasted diamonds in their design. So what better way to emphasize this personal turning point than with cufflinks bought from the world’s largest diamond center?

Napoleon had received cufflinks as gifts from various people close to him, from his Aunt Amy to his one-time fiancée Clara Richards, throughout his lifetime. Yet, with regard to any such items meant to commemorate a particular moment in connection with U.N.C.L.E., Napoleon always purchased them for himself. He probably couldn’t have explained the why of that if asked; it just somehow seemed most right to him. His relationship with U.N.C.L.E. was far too internal to intimately share with others. He had tried that years ago with Clara and in the end she had walked away from him because U.N.C.L.E. was so integral to his soul.

He didn’t know why or when this kinesis of being had happened, but he was wise enough not to any longer deny it. Oh, there was also no denying Napoleon Solo adored women, found them exhilarating and as necessary to his everyday happiness as breathing was to his physical survival. Since Clara he’d had many affectionate sexual liaisons, yet absolutely no passionate romantic affairs. He recognized now there really wasn’t any compromise that could be reached between the continuously competing responsibilities of the heart and of the soul.

Today though Napoleon wasn’t dwelling on any of that. He was thoroughly at peace with the world and with himself. He hummed tunelessly as he “window-shopped” the displays at various swanky retail jewelry stores. He sauntered in and out of the establishments, nonchalantly browsing their wares, his senses on the alert for that one set of cufflinks that would draw his eye and tickle his fancy. And then he spotted them.

They were bold yet elegant: designed as shooting stars, each with a five-pronged focal point accented by a curved ribbon that split into three separate tails. They literally glittered with diamonds as the brilliantly faceted stones covered every element of the motif, even leaving Napoleon unsure if the underlying metal was white gold or platinum. One could say perhaps they were a bit ostentatious, but they definitely made a statement that to Napoleon suited his current state of mind. He was himself glowing inside with the practical recognition received within his chosen field of idealistic endeavor. So why not let that glow show a bit on the outside with the radiance of diamonds when he shot his cuffs?

Intent on claiming his prize, Napoleon thrust his hands casually into his trouser pockets as he cleared his throat to gain the attention of the salesman behind the glitzy counter. He had no

doubt the cufflinks would be sybaritically costly in terms of legal tender, but hey, he had already more than paid his humanitarian dues in far more precious coin.

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**November 1969**  
**London, England**

“You’re late,” Illya Kuryakin commented a bit tartly to his partner.

“Oh? The plane hasn’t taken off yet, right? So technically I’m not late,” responded Napoleon Solo in a teasing tone and with a mischievous grin.

The two men had been in England for the past two weeks overseeing the security operation for the most recent U.N.C.L.E. Summit Five conference that had concluded the day before. It had been a relatively quiet affair for the organization’s top enforcement team. No murders or jealousy-motivated vendettas or grandiose Thrush takeover plots like those that had made Summit Five in Berlin two years ago such an unpleasant memory, especially for Napoleon.

“You said you would meet me at the airport twenty minutes ago,” Illya further challenged, perhaps a bit petulantly.

Illya’s own most poignant memory of the Berlin Summit Five was of his partner being “psychologically” tortured by U.N.C.L.E. itself. That had left a sour taste in his mouth, even though he now knew Napoleon had used that situation in an attempt to expose a mole within the organization. In the end that mole had been one of the five Continental Chiefs themselves, Harry Beldon, and he had been brought down before he could do any irreparable damage to U.N.C.L.E. Yet Beldon had also been the man Illya had worked for in the initial stage of his enforcement-agent career. Thus that Beldon had turned out to be a Thrush in U.N.C.L.E.’s clothing had disquieted Kuryakin more than he would ever openly admit, even to his partner. So perhaps he was a bit more irritable today than was warranted by Solo’s minor tardiness. It was just he wanted to mentally catalogue the latest Summit Five as completely over and done, and he could only do that with the finality of their current departure from London. Therefore the prospect of he and Napoleon possibly missing their scheduled commercial flight home had been particularly unsettling.

“And I have met you at the airport, just a bit behind schedule. So all’s good,” countered Napoleon wryly.

Illya gave no verbal reply, but he did quite expressively roll his eyes, a sign of mild exasperation that Napoleon purposely ignored. Instead Solo gave the girl behind one of the airline desks a truly charismatic smile as he requested a customs declaration form.

“Whatever do you have to declare?” Illya asked with some curiosity. Napoleon reached inside his jacket and pulled a small flat jewelry case from the inner pocket, laying it on the counter in front of Illya. The Russian opened the leather-bound container and gazed upon its contents. “Another set of cufflinks, Napoleon? You own pairs enough already for a dozen men.”

Napoleon only shrugged.

“Don’t tell me: you saw them in a shop window and couldn’t pass them by.”

Again Napoleon only shrugged. He wasn’t about to let his partner in on the truth that these particular shirt trinkets had been custom designed to his specifications. Though he did indeed own many pairs of cufflinks, he had never before himself commissioned any. He had come across all previous sets he had personally bought much as Illya had mentioned: he would see a set that fit some condition in his mind and purchase them “off the shelf”, as it were. These cufflinks though were different.

He had wanted something to memorialize the fifth anniversary of his permanent partnership with Illya, a milestone that had been reached that October. That particular landmark was not one the two men verbally discussed, yet was it ever-present in Napoleon’s mind. He and Kuryakin were U.N.C.L.E.’s top enforcement team, the cream of the crop, but it was more than that. With the Russian agent Solo had forged a bond of friendship unlike any he had ever formed with another human being. Oh, he had friends by the score, but those ties were always casual, close to the surface, fostered by commonalities of past upbringing, current character traits or future expectations. Napoleon shared none of those usual companionship roots with Illya.

Where Napoleon had been nurtured within the open framework of democratic principles, Illya had been reared within the closed structure of communist tenets. Where Napoleon’s nature was optimistic and idealistic, Illya’s was pragmatic and realistic. Where Napoleon focused on fundamentally affirming opportunities, Illya concentrated on effectively negating threats. The two men could not seem more different. Yet was there an inner core where they melded together, each a separate half of the same whole and neither truly complete without the other.

So, during this assignment in London that wound up fortunately not consuming his every waking hour, Napoleon had spared some time for a trip to Hatton Garden. At the shop of one of the area’s renowned jewelers, he had batted back-and-forth with a master goldsmith ideas on the creation of a truly one-of-a-kind set of cufflinks. Something that represented himself and Illya and their unique synergy. The final result of that creative process had finally been ready today for his pickup, and now rested in the small leather case open on the surface of the airline courtesy desk. That artistic outcome had turned out exactly how Napoleon had wished: a bit of him, a bit of Illya, and a bit of what was shared between them imaginatively interpreted in the skillful twisting of fine metals.

As the airline clerk returned with the form Solo required, Kuryakin took the case in hand and tilted it to-and-fro, examining its contents with a critical eye as the light reflected off the ornaments from various directions. Each cufflink consisted of a toothed leaf wrought in white gold that sported a short curved stem running through one side of a horizontally positioned yellow gold acorn. Another short curved stem ran out from the opposite side of the acorn into the main body of a serrated leaf fashioned of rose gold. The crossbar backed the white-gold leaf on the left cufflink and the rose-gold leaf on the right cufflink, thus placing the toothed leaf on the top of one link and the serrated leaf on the top of the other. The leaves themselves were angled in such a way that the set together formed an open circle, with a leaf of one kind seemingly stretching toward the leaf of the other kind on the opposite cufflink.

“The detailing of the leaves is exquisite,” Illya conceded with honest appreciation for the workmanship, “but I must assume the goldsmith had little familiarity with botany.”

“Oh?” casually questioned Napoleon, seemingly intent on the task of filling out the customs declaration. But in truth he was watching Illya’s reaction askance, pleased with his partner’s

obvious fascination with the design of the cufflinks. He had never shared with Illya the association behind his assorted collection of cuff ornaments. It was one of those rare private emotional places where he didn't unreservedly embrace the prospect of Kuryakin's interconnection. Between the partners there were still a few of those for each man. Still, Napoleon could not help but feel contentment with the fact the concept he had conceived as a representation of the unique harmony between the two of them did indeed intrigue the other man.

"Napoleon, even you must know that, though mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow," Illya paraphrased an old adage, "powerful birches do not. And this rose-gold leaf is that of a birch just as surely as the white-gold one is that of an oak."

"Think about it, Illya," Napoleon's mind forwarded even while his lips merely inquired, "Is it?"

"Of that I have absolutely no doubt, my friend," Illya confirmed. "I am quite familiar with the shape of that particular leaf as the birch is the national tree of Russia."

"You don't say," said Napoleon aloud as his brain silently noted, "*As the oak is the national tree of the United States, tovarisch.*"

Illya ran a finger lightly over first one cufflink where it was nestled in its bed of velvet and then over the other. His brain was reaching toward a correlation with something, but his facial expression let on he wasn't sure just what.

"*The acorn is U.N.C.L.E., my Russian cohort,*" Napoleon's wordless mental prodding continued as he seemingly concentrated on the form he was mechanically filling in as necessary, "*and from that 'tiny acorn' have we both gotten the chance to grow: toward a conviction that has crossed rival political boundaries and into a trust that has bridged opposing personality traits.*"

As if somehow hearing Napoleon's thoughts, Illya opened his eyes remarkably wide for a split second and then squinted hard at his ostensibly mundanely occupied partner.

"Napoleon," he ventured, "is there anything in particular you want to tell me about these cufflinks?"

Again Napoleon shrugged. "Just that I appreciate them as a set... more than I ever expected."

Illya shut the small case with an audible snap, enveloping the separate halves once more within the protection of the same whole. "Then you'd best keep them close," he gravely admonished Solo as he extended the closed box back to the dark-haired man.

Napoleon looked up toward his partner once more and accepted the jewelry case from his hand with a simple, "Indeed." Then he carefully placed the box back within his inside jacket pocket, right over his heart.

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**May 1974**  
**New York City, New York**

In the end Napoleon chose to wear to Waverly's retirement dinner the gold-and-star sapphire umbrella disk cufflinks he had purchased nearly two decades ago in Anegada. It somehow seemed appropriate to him that the ornaments he had selected to rejoice in his own triumphant entry into U.N.C.L.E. should now as well memorialize Mr. Waverly's graceful exit from the organization. Something in Alexander Waverly had always reminded Napoleon Solo of his grandfather, Franklin Milbourne. There was no doubt Mr. Waverly was more open-minded and less bound by old conventions than Napoleon's childhood guardian had ever been, yet were both incredibly righteous men internally compelled by the tenets of their own moral convictions. And in some ways Waverly's mentorship of Solo mirrored his grandfather's guardianship: caring but tough, expectant of a certain degree of adherence to set rules but also tolerant and even pleased by a certain degree of independent thought in his "charge".

The mood of the dinner was nostalgic yet cheerful. The Old Man would be missed. It was he who had built the organization from the ground up, he who had helmed it into steady achievement of the admittedly difficult goal of non-partisan cooperation between nations. Yet the "New Man" held the promise of a bright continuing future for the Command. Napoleon Solo was a superb strategist who also recognized how to use congenial diplomacy to best advantage. His experience as a field agent gave him a ready understanding of the "down in the trenches" aspects of U.N.C.L.E., and his personal commitment to the underlying ideals of the organization was unparalleled. Only a tiny minority of practiced skeptics had any misgivings that he was the best mix of both personality and skill for the position of next "first among equals" Continental Chief.

Napoleon sat to Waverly's left at the head table, the other four Continental Chiefs ensconced to the Old Man's right. Illya sat on Napoleon's left as he had so often at Waverly's round desk during their enforcement agent years, both men listening to the Old Man speak challengingly then of their next assignment in the field as he now spoke contentedly of their next roles in the organization. The food was delectably mouth-watering, the champagne delightfully nerve-relaxing, the toasts either warmly or humorously celebratory, and the atmosphere a perfect blend of fond conclusion and eager anticipation.

As the last of dessert was being happily consumed by the attendees with an additional cup of coffee or tea poured by the servers, Mr. Waverly asked to speak to Napoleon privately for a moment. Concerned that perhaps there was to be one more piece of crucial but heretofore confidential information that needed to be passed on by the exiting Section I Number 1 of North America to his successor, Napoleon's countenance took on a very serious mien as he nodded his assent. The two men walked off toward a small private sitting room in the secured catering hall.

Once there, Mr. Waverly chided with a wry smile, "You needn't look so tense, Mr. Solo. I'm not about to reveal some hush-hush situation that could result in World War III and thus that you must rectify immediately.'

Napoleon's shoulders visibly relaxed. "That's good to hear, Mr. Waverly."

"I simply wanted to personally present you with a little gift."

Napoleon's eyebrows rose upward toward his hairline at that disclosure. Ignoring the younger man's astonishment, Alexander Waverly removed a small jeweler's case from the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket and extended it toward Solo. Napoleon accepted the box from the hand of the older man and silently opened the hinged container.

Inside was a pair of gold cufflinks. The motif was of a framework dove, wings outstretched, with the main of the body formed by a globe. To Napoleon it looked very akin to a religious symbol he remembered from his Catholic-educated childhood: the Holy Ghost protecting the world. But he noted that the globe was the skeletal globe of the insignia of U.N.C.L.E. He glanced back up at Mr. Waverly's face and saw the sly amusement in the Old Man's eyes.

"I know you collect cufflinks, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon slowly nodded. It would seem the cunning old fox knew much more than simply that. That somehow he had found out the particular associations Napoleon attached to those collected cufflinks.

"A long time ago, when the idea of U.N.C.L.E. was first conceived," Mr. Waverly revealed now in a conversational manner, "Winston Churchill said to me that it was akin to 'a pregnant belly in the body of the dove of peace, alive with the fledgling hope for a better world'. I always thought that a particularly poignant sentiment and one worth remembering. So it seemed to me appropriate, with your rite of passage in taking over the reins of the Command, that you have something to forever serve as a reminder of that most apt description of our organization... your organization."

"I will cherish them, Mr. Waverly," Napoleon stammered out.

Now it was Waverly who nodded. "And U.N.C.L.E. as well, Mr. Solo. I have no qualms about leaving the 'belly of the dove' for delivery into your guiding hands. You have the right mindset, the right heart-vibe and the right soul-sense to lead the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement into the future. And, where any excess sentiment triggered by your romanticized idealism or over-expectation instigated by your energized optimism might occasionally interfere with more exacting judgment, you'll have Mr. Kuryakin's steadying hold on unembellished reality and dead-on grasp of a pragmatic viewpoint to keep you on an even keel."

"Yes sir," Napoleon found himself responding automatically, since he just didn't know what else to say.

Mr. Waverly's lips curved into another wry smile. "Go enjoy the remainder of the evening, Mr. Solo. Myself I'm too old a man to unnecessarily keep these late hours. I'm going to find my wife and suggest we take our leave."

"Yes sir," Napoleon answered automatically once more, as more expressive words simply failed him. Then Waverly was gone from the room and he was left standing alone, staring at the boxed cufflinks in his hand, the moisture of startling tears blurring his vision.

"Everything all right?" a very familiar and most reassuring voice suddenly brought him out of his emotional daze.

Napoleon turned to look at Illya standing beside him: the mission partner a master tactician had unerringly matched with him, the other half of the whole, he who could ably assist in the delivery of the promise held in the belly of the dove.

The new Continental Chief of U.N.C.L.E. North America smiled his most brilliant smile. "Everything is just how it was meant to be," Napoleon stated cryptically, thinking of how utterly complete was this particular brief capsule of time in his life and how perfectly it would always be commemorated by Waverly's extraordinary gift.

**—THE END—**

