

Synopsis

American journalist Claire Brennan travels to Moscow in the waning days of Communist rule to discover that her colleague and ex-lover Ian Kendall has died in a local hospital. As she pieces together the final weeks of his life in Russia, Claire uncovers business dealings as multi-layered as a set of matrushka dolls -- and cannot escape a growing feeling she is searching for a murderer who may now be stalking her.

MOSCOW NIGHTS

By Ellen Crosby

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'In Russia, everything is a mystery but nothing is a secret'

- Mme de Staël

Chapter One

I stepped off the airplane into a black and white movie of a place I thought only existed before I was born. Through the plane window I had watched immeasurable empty spaces and faraway horizons grow steadily bleaker until finally, on arriving, the colour was bleached from everything around me. I had come nearly five thousand miles on this late-September day to a faded landscape where sour smells choked my first breath and seeped through my clothing into my skin. I reckoned the psychological distance I had travelled needed to be measured in light years.

I walked through a set of double doors where an adolescent boy with acne and a military uniform watched me the way a guard watches prisoners returning to their cells. Then I followed signs down narrow glass-walled corridors feeling like a rat in a maze.

A different alphabet, but I could read the words. I wonder why that surprised me.

I must have stopped walking to stare because suddenly a guard standing sentry along the way caught my eye and jerked his head. I knew what he meant. Every cop in the world does that when you're loitering some place you're not supposed to be. Move along, now.

So I moved.

Why on earth did I think I'd be able to act like this was just another city? Another assignment, just like all the others. Who was I kidding?

This place was my mother's home. But after she died, I had been told to erase that fact and every remembered story from my mind, until the memories were bleached white and clean as old bone.

I walked down a flight of stairs and found the queue for passport control. The room was dimly lit, like a cave, guarded by more military uniforms. In the washed out yellow light their grey-green jackets and trousers blended into the dark walls so they disappeared like chameleons and watched from the shadows. One of them vaporized next to me and indicated that I should present my documents to the passport officer.

Yet another adolescent with acne and a uniform that looked as if it had been borrowed from his father. He sat, carved in stone, behind smoky glass and watched as I slid my papers toward him under the glass window. The lower part of the window was opaque so I couldn't see what he was doing, but obviously he had opened my passport. He looked up and stared. I hate it when they look at you like that. Who looks like their passport photo anyway, or even wants to? My hair was different. And, okay, older. Well, aren't we all? No makeup. And dead tired. But it was still definitely me.

His head kept bobbing up and down as if a hidden puppeteer was pulling strings to make him move. I clasped my hands together and found they were wet. This was crazy. I had absolutely nothing to be nervous about. So what if he was scrutinizing me like I was a fugitive on the run and now he'd caught me?

Finally I had to look away. Above my head was a copper-coloured mirror, tilted at a forty-five degree angle. So I did what any woman does, confronted with a mirror. I started arranging my hair, which looked pretty disastrous after a bad night's sleep in a cramped airline seat. I was pulling my fingers through a twisted strand of auburn hair that had turned the colour of liquid fire in the copper reflection when I knew for sure.

Someone was watching me on the other side of the mirror. I looked away for a second time and, on cue, the telephone in the cubicle rang. The teenager in front of me said something into it and then he stamped my passport and my visa. He kept right on stamping papers, at least another six or eight documents. Things I hadn't given him. I stood on tiptoe but I wasn't tall enough to see past the opaque glass.

What kind of file did they have on me already? I'd never been here before.

He shoved my passport and visa back to me underneath the glass. I heard a loud click as he pressed a button unlocking the gate next to me. I had been processed.

Time to go deeper into the labyrinth and rescue my suit-cases.

It was another hour before a customs officer made important slashes across my customs declaration after sucking my bags into a clunky X-ray machine that looked like it ought to be tested for leaking radiation. That was all. They were finished with me and I was free to leave the nowhere land of the airport, the nebulous in-between place that was neither where I'd come from nor where I was going.

I walked toward the wall in front of me as a set of double doors slid open, spilling me into the main terminal and a mass of humanity waiting on the other side. A sign said 'Welcome to Moscow'. The long trip and the time difference were making me feel numb and lightheaded. With a hiss the doors closed behind me.

My connection to the real world was severed.

David Manning, one of the correspondents from our Moscow bureau, rescued me from an onslaught of people who pushed and gawked like they were looking at an animal in a zoo. A familiar face. It should have been a welcome sight in this sea of shoving strangers, but it wasn't.

Anyway, the look in his eyes said it all. He was suffering. The bosses in New York had sent him a kid to do a grownup's job. And then there was that other thing. The 'I-hope-you're-not-the-same-bimbo-you-were-in-New-York' look of forbearance.

Some day that mountain peak he sat on all by himself was going to crumble beneath him and he'd be like the rest of us mere mortals. If the man ever pricked his finger, I bet motor oil would ooze out instead of blood.

I stared at him longer than I should have, though. He looked terrible, like he'd come straight to the airport after a month-long hike through the Siberian wilderness. His photo in the rogues' gallery of pinups that hung outside the news-room in New York showed a good-looking man, probably late-thirties, with neatly groomed dark hair and features that said 1940s matinee idol, strong and clean. The person in front of me was Grizzly Adams' cousin. He'd pulled his hair, now well streaked with grey, into an untidy ponytail and his eyes were bruised-looking and bloodshot. He hadn't seen a razor in a while which only made him look more haggard.

He'd aged ten years in two.

But he was looking me over as well, and I can't say I came off any better than he did. My hand went instinctively to my hair, which I knew looked like I'd styled it with an electric mixer. Frankly, I didn't look any more like my glamorous newsroom mugshot than he did, but any resemblance between me and the fantasy my photo conjured up was purely accidental. I think I was in the middle of telling the receptionist that yes, please, I'd love a cup of coffee when the photographer snapped it. My mouth was slightly open and my eyes, usually the colour of pale jade, had become exotically, almost glitteringly, emerald-coloured. I guess it's because I'm a hopeless caffeine addict. Talk to me about coffee and I apparently look like I've been discussing something vaguely erotic. My hair was riotous,

but then it always is. I forgot an umbrella and got caught in a downpour on the way to the studio. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking a paper bag over my head would be an improvement.

Surprisingly, the photo made me look like one of those late night television babes on the 'call me, big guy' ads. Stan, my boss in New York and one of those rare men who wouldn't look up if a naked Playboy centrefold wandered past his desk, astonished me by absolutely loving this sex-kitten picture. Don't ask me why but I let him use it as my official press photo instead of choosing one of the staid, more professional poses where I looked like the kind of person you could believe in if you were serious about your news. The real me, normal and ordinary-looking. I have to say, though, that I regret that flirty picture was taken after I'd already gotten my passport - the one I'd just presented to that prepubescent soldier, with the photo that looked like I'd been preserved in formaldehyde.

Manning reached over and grabbed my luggage trolley. 'Keep your hands on your bag. This place is full of pickpockets.' He moved toward the exit and said, 'Yuri's waiting outside with one of the cars. He would have come in to help, but the car would have been stolen.'

I watched his retreating back as he steered my luggage expertly through the maze of people. Still the same friendly guy I remembered from New York. Not one to waste time on trivialities like 'Hi, welcome to Moscow' or 'How was your trip?'

I guess we were going to pick up our relationship where we'd left off in the States.

I had to struggle to follow the swath he had cut through the crowd because it immediately surged around me so I was swept along like a cork bobbing on the tide. I lost sight of him as though he'd disappeared into a black hole.

'Taxi? Taxi?' A stranger with a glittering gold and silver smile and breath that would have stopped a charging elephant in its tracks stood, practically on top of me, so close I thought he was going to kiss me. Unshaven and wearing a red and white striped cap with a pompom on it. One of Santa's elves run amok. I stepped back and stopped breathing.

'Nyet taxi.' Manning rematerialized by my side and grabbed my elbow. He pulled me along with him and said in my ear, 'Whatever you do, don't get into a taxi alone. Especially the ones that cruise around Sheremetyevo Airport. There have been tourists who were robbed and beaten by guys who showed up here, claiming to be taxi drivers. They drive you out to the countryside, strip you, and do it there.'

'I won't.' And no more complaining about the outrageous fares the cabbies at JFK charge, either.

It felt like someone was pulling the scenery past me too quickly and I needed to run to stay in the picture. We walked through an automatic door into a black cloud of exhaust fumes.

'David?'

'What?'

A large, dirty blue and white bus was parked directly in front of us. The driver had backed up so that the bus was overhanging most of the sidewalk in front of the main door, forcing us to manoeuvre single-file through the congealed pedestrian traffic.

'How's Ian?' I had to shout it over his shoulder into his ear so he could hear me above the din of angry voices and hostile car horns. The bus belched more black smoke into my face. I coughed and waved it away. Manning seemed immune to it.

He half-turned and shouted back at me, 'Let's get out of here first.' He caught my arm and dragged me past the bus. He scanned the crowd. 'Damn. Yuri was right here. The militia must have made him move when the bus showed up.' He pushed the luggage trolley toward me. 'Stay here. And don't let go of that cart or someone will walk off with it. I'll go find Yuri.'

He left before I could tell him I had no plans to go exploring. I clung to the cart and ignored the stares.

'Claire!'

Manning returned, from somewhere behind the bus. 'Yuri's coming. He'll be here as soon as the bus moves.'

'Right.'

'Look, about Ian...' He was staring intently at a spot near my left shoulder.

There are moments when you know with absolute clarity that something is about to happen that will change your life forever, derail it so there is no going back to the way it was before.

Like now.

I was tired and vulnerable and overwhelmed. I did not want to hear this.

'What is it?'

'He's dead.' It sounded like Manning was apologizing. 'The hospital phoned just before I left to come get you. We've got to go there now. They want me to sign some papers before they'll release the body.'

I heard his voice through the roaring of the bus as it pulled away. Except the roaring didn't stop after the bus left. I said faintly, 'That's not possible.'

Ian, the man I had once lived with and still loved, had never been ill a day in his life. He couldn't be dead. I couldn't have lost him to this drab, threadbare city where time ran back-wards until it got stuck in a place the rest of the world had left behind.

When Stan had told me Ian was in a coma in a Moscow hospital, I didn't believe him at first. Then he said I was going to Moscow to fill in until Ian got better. He figured I would want to be with Ian anyway.

He'd given me barely enough time to throw a few things in a suitcase and, presto, here I was. The company's travel agent nearly had a coronary trying to get me a visa on such short notice. As it was, it didn't arrive until I was practically on my way out the door to Kennedy.

'He died this morning ... I'm sorry.' Manning was watching me and I could see he was worried I might come unglued right here in front of him and then he would have to deal with it. The messiness of a woman bursting into tears and all that.

He worried for nothing. I was too shocked to cry. At least right now. Too stunned to do anything except stand there, glassy-eyed and speechless, waiting for him to take it all back and tell me he hadn't meant it. That it was all a bad joke and he was sorry he made it up.

But no, instead he was tugging at my arm, trying to uproot me from the sidewalk, helping me walk unsteadily to where a midnight blue Volvo station wagon had pulled up to the curb. A dark, slender man whose silver-grey hair did not go with his youthful face waited for us. 'This is Yuri,' Manning 'said, 'one of our drivers.'

Yuri murmured a greeting in Russian. I think I responded. Manning opened the car door and I slid across the back seat. He slid in beside me. Behind us, Yuri was arranging my suit-cases in the boot. He slammed the door and the noise made me jump. Then he got into the car and pulled out into the clogged airport traffic attempting to funnel into narrow exit lanes.

I turned to stare out the window so they could not see my face. I bit my tongue so hard it hurt and concentrated on

looking at the scenery. It became blurry almost immediately. Dammit.

I fished in the pocket of my blazer. Why, I don't know. I never carry tissues or extra change for a pay phone or anything utilitarian like that. But just now, there was no way I was going to ask Manning, who had all the compassion of a Marine drill sergeant, if he had a tissue so I could wipe my eyes.

The silence in the car became even more hauntingly quiet.

He knew. Yuri knew, too.

Mercifully they said nothing.

After a while we got to the edge of the airport and its sea of impatient, congested vehicles. The road opened up and became a multi-lane highway. Yuri deftly shifted the Volvo from one lane to the other, weaving past slower moving Russian cars and trucks. The highway was full of military vehicles and cars that looked old and worn out, with wind-shields cracked like giant spider webs. A filthy dump truck carrying a mountain of pale green cabbages and spewing fumes from its tailpipe bounced and jolted in front of us, occasionally spilling cabbages on to the road. A khaki-covered jeep carrying a group of young soldiers drove past us. I saw their vacant-eyed faces as they stared out the back window. A bunch of scared kids. Across the rear door of the jeep the word 'lyudi' had been painted. 'People.' Like they had to explain it.

Ian, who had been my lover, my mentor, my dearest friend, was lying cold and alone in a hospital somewhere in this godforsaken place where they wrote 'people' across the back of a truck carrying kids playing soldiers.

I cleared my throat. 'What did he die of?' My voice was reasonably steady.

Yuri finally overtook the dump truck and we sprinted past the jeep.

'They don't know.'

I was stunned. 'What do you mean, they don't know? They have to know. Maybe he's not even dead. Are they sure about that?'

Manning's look would have frozen mercury. 'When you've been here a while you'll understand.'

I know a put down when I hear one and that was a put down. Coming from Mr Congeniality only made it more irritating. 'I have no intention of being here for a while,' I snapped. I wasn't too worried about hurting his feelings since he obviously didn't have any.

Besides, where did he get the idea that I was staying? Maybe he thought I had asked to be exiled here.

Not too likely.

The only reason I came was Ian. I would have walked across hot coals barefoot for him. Even now, even when my life was falling apart in New York and leaving town was only going to make things worse. Make it look like I was running away.

A little problem between me and the bank. If I didn't give them their money - soon - they were going to take my house. The one I'd grown up in. My heart and soul were in that house. I couldn't lose it.

Of course I didn't dare tell Stan any of this when he ordered me to pack my bags and get to Moscow. A personal life must never interfere with our sacred mission to be where the story is. It didn't help, either, that the company was in the middle of yet another budget crisis. The big bosses were once again looking for ways to 'cut the fat'. A nifty little euphemism for getting rid of a few more bodies. So saying I didn't want to go to Moscow would be a dumb thing to do, under the circumstances.

Which left me begging Aaron, my lawyer, to do whatever it took to buy me a little more time with that nice bank. Two weeks, tops. Then I promised I'd be back and we could straighten everything out.

'You obviously don't understand where you are,' Manning was speaking with that grating know-it-all superiority, hauling me back to reality in the rear seat of the Volvo, 'or you'd realize that in this country you can't so much as find a bandage or an aspirin. The pharmacies are empty, a joke. There's nothing. They re-use condoms. Wash 'em out and dry 'em. Did you know that?'

The mental image of a clothesline full of recycled condoms blowing in the wind reduced me to silence. I said, finally, 'Does Susan know?'

'Susan?'

'Ian's sister. She's his next-of-kin. His parents are dead.'

'Ah, no. Not yet. I think New York is trying to find her.' He shifted in his seat so he was turned towards his own window, his back towards me. I took it as a hint our conversation was over. Fine by me.

I never understood why Ian liked Manning, but he did. Ian said they got along just fine, but then Ian got along with every-body, however quirky or weird they were. I always figured it was more professional respect than personal rapport, especially given Manning's sunshiny personality. Ian had told me once he thought Manning wrote like a poet. When Ian said something like that, it was as if God had handed it down on a stone tablet. Ian had a Pulitzer; he knew what he was talking about.

We were approaching the city now and I was no longer exhausted but somewhere in that witless jetlagged state between wakefulness and sleep that felt like swimming under water with my clothes on. We swept down wide boulevards in slow-motion unreality.

Ahead rows of dark grey boxes sat on a flat, lighter grey skyline. The glacial silence in the car continued as the boxes slowly grew larger until they dominated the view like

high-rise sentries on either side of us. They were ugly and graceless, products of an architecture of gigantism, meant to destroy all sense of human scale. Their only distinguishing feature was the absence of any distinguishing feature. No colour, no pretty garden out front, no special details, just a grim, overwhelming sameness. We passed what looked like a large sports stadium, then Yuri turned left and pulled into a parking lot.

In front of us was a box, like the other boxes, except that this building was low and much smaller. It was depressing-looking and dirty.

'Why are we stopping here?' I asked.

'This is the hospital.'

'You're joking?'

'It's a special hospital for high-ranking Communist Party members and foreigners,' Manning said, getting out of the car.

I followed him. 'Good God! Where does everybody else go?'

He looked at me the way you look at merchandise in a store when you're not sure if you want to buy it. 'Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to bring you here. Maybe you should wait in the car,' he said.

No way.

I hadn't really thought about what it would do to me to see Ian, lying dead in a morgue in this dump of a hospital on the dark side of the moon, but there was no chance Manning was going in there alone.

'Don't be ridiculous. I'm coming with you,' I said. I swept past him and started toward the steps of the hospital.

He loped past me and held the door.

I stared straight ahead, ignoring him, but as I walked through the doorway he leaned over and said roughly in my ear, 'I meant it, Claire. I shouldn't have brought you. You don't want to do this.'

I acted like I hadn't heard him.

He was right, though. I didn't want to do this.

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