

Lying Together

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My Russian Affair



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FOR MY FAMILY

Author's Note

In the interest of privacy and respect, many names of people and institutions that appear in this book have been changed. In the interest of a smoother narrative, I have slightly shifted some time frames, and some characters are composites. I have also disguised details about other characters to safeguard their privacy. But this is a true story. I know that, because it is my story.



OVER THE ATLANTIC—“Are you afraid of flying?” my seatmate asks me. He is frantically chewing gum, and the scent of synthetic spearmint is hovering, stalled around my head. I try to snuff it out by shoving my nose into the pages of a book, but he will have none of it. He asks again. Reluctantly, I turn toward him, and it occurs to me that I should feel fortunate to be seated next to this chatty, bloated, balding man. “Elder John,” says the enamel name tag pinned to his cardigan. A Mormon missionary, the kind that have been swarming to Russia like drunks to a vodka kiosk at the beginning of the day. Except the missionaries seem to think that they are going to be able to control the chaos, not get lost in it. Their arrogance annoys me, and normally I would sooner sit on the wing of the plane than next to this man. But given the situation, I decide to take it as a possible sign from heaven that my aisle partner is a direct conduit to the divine himself.

“No, why?” I say, offering a painfully large smile.

“I can hear your heart pounding from over here,” he says.

“Oh, God,” I say, quickly regretting my choice of words. But he doesn’t seem to mind. He tilts his head with an encouraging nod.



“My fiancé is meeting me in St. Petersburg,” I say in that slightly maniacal tone one uses when speaking more to vent nerves than thoughts.

“You haven’t seen him for awhile?” says the missionary. It’s a really personal question, to be sure, but his is a comforting tone. The way he asks it blows an air of calm over me and I take no offense. It feels a bit like I’m sitting inside one of those idealized Catholic confessional scenes you see on television, the ones where the priest calls the sinner “my child” in a deep, warm, and encouraging timbre while the checkered pattern of the dividing screen creates a delicate and slightly sexy shadow on the star’s face. It works magic on me, because, whether he knows it or not, part of me is a nasty sinner just dying to repent.

“Six years,” I say.

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six years since I last laid eyes on the man I plan to marry. I have rejected the advice of my friends and family and chosen to go with my gut, Father.

“I haven’t seen him since we studied Russian in college together,” I add. “Just e-mails and phone calls. Just this past month.” I wait to gauge his reaction, but he doesn’t have much of one, aside from another encouraging tilt. So I continue. “Well, we aren’t really engaged, not officially, but we’ve talked about it and everything.” I pause. “You are probably thinking it’s like one of those mail-order bride scenarios but in reverse or something?” My head is bobbing up and down like a chimp’s in a zoo. Nerves.

“No, not at all,” he says, sounding something like God himself.

“Right. I mean, that’s not really what I meant, but it’s odd, I know. I mean, most of my friends think I’m nuts,” I say, thinking I both look and sound completely nuts. My sister-in-law gave me the pink silk scarf that I now have tied around my neck to lend me a bit of a Jackie O. flair when I step off the plane. My family has been tentative at best about this romance, and the scarf seemed a bit of an olive branch. So did the matching sunglasses my mother bought for me, the ones that are now precariously resting on the top of my dark, disheveled hair, ready to fall into place on the bridge of my nose with a simple shake of my head.

The missionary nods gently and offers some gum. It's a substitute for brushing your teeth, he explains. Great for travel. He shows me the packaging with the larger-than-necessary seal of approval from the American Dental Association. I take a piece.

"It is a bit nuts," I continue, accidentally spitting on his sleeve. He doesn't notice. "I've really never felt so simultaneously right about something and terrified at the same time."

And then he starts to get all religious on me, preaching about God's will and fate and whatnot. It's normally stuff that would irritate me to no end. But given that I am flying 600 miles an hour into the arms of a man I have never so much as kissed, I am in no place to judge someone else's leaps of faith. And in a way, all this religiosity validates the feeling I have, this sense that I suppose most people feel when they have fallen in love, this sense that I have been blessed.



We first met at our Boston-area college during the spring of 1992. The place had a painful reputation as a safety school for Ivy League wannabes: people who reached for the top and wound up tangled on a lower rung of the ladder. In the world of Upper Middle Class Urbanites from which I sprung, it was a pretty fair assessment. But a sprinkling of brilliant minds and eccentric thinkers was to be found there, and I was lucky enough to find a fair share of them.

It was the last semester of my senior year, and I signed up for independent study with Professor Dobrak—Russian 502: *The Works of Angsty Russian Writers Read in the Original*, or something along those lines. He invited another student, Kevin Dillard, to join us. We bonded, the three of us, enamored of our mutual admiration for the mystical misery of Russia. I had spent two of my college summers there and was planning to return in the fall. Kevin had done his junior year in St. Petersburg and was soon setting off to study some more. And Professor Dobrak, well, he had made a life out of it.

Twice a week the three of us sat in his cramped, dusty office in Hull Hall and tried to deconstruct those great literary classics. Kevin

was lanky and rumped. I was mildly bulimic and moderately groomed. Professor Dobrak was a sad-looking fortysomething with thickly framed eyeglasses reminiscent of a Soviet apparatchik's. The seminar always ran late as we lapped up each other's anecdotes and caught up on current events. It was not six months since the Soviet Union had collapsed, and we got a kick out of trying to tie the tomes of the 1800s to the contemporary world. It was a bit like putting together a puzzle with pieces hiding under rugs. But that's the thing of it; in the front of almost every textbook on Russian history or Russian literature appears a quote from Churchill about Russia's being a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. It is used so often that it is almost clichéd, but it does get to the heart of this fascination that most Western-blooded Russophiles feel. In my mind it was about wanting to understand the unimaginable and, by understanding, having some sort of power over or against the unpredictable. It's not that Russia is the only chaotic, endlessly entertaining entity on Earth; it's just that Russians and Russia are enough like us and our society that we can almost relate to them. Looking at them is like looking at your reflection in a fun-house mirror. The image looks like you but distorted, and in small areas sometimes it's a little more interesting. I think Kevin thought that too. From across the desk we shared knowing glances; we nodded in agreement as the other made a point.

The last day of the term, the two of us brought vodka, caviar, and black bread, and with Dobrak we practiced being "Russian." We debated the proper way to do a vodka shot. (Do you sniff the bread or eat it? Do you gulp the vodka down slowly or in one fell swoop?) Dobrak kept pouring. We tossed and tossed and drank "*do dna*"—to the bottom. All that was left at the end of the lesson were three dirty glasses and some bread crumbs scattered about the professor's wooden desk.

The next morning, for the first time in my sober college career, I had a horrible hangover. I felt giddy with my badness.

When the phone rang, I knew who it was.

We met for coffee and eggs in nearby Harvard Square. I brought Kevin an old volume of *Crime and Punishment* that I had picked up

near the Hermitage the summer before. He brought me some Advil. After we ate, we strolled, our legs slow and heavy from lack of sleep and too much food. We walked across the Charles River Bridge. I had a churning feeling inside me, like a propeller winding, preparing for a great release. We talked about the future in that eager way college students tend to do, excited and hopeful. Plotting and scared. Or at least I was. Kevin seemed to be a bit more confident than everyone else. A bit fearless. Just a bit. I admired him for that, but I didn't say so. I was hoping that he thought I was a bit fearless too.

We circled the banks of the river, the Boston side, the Cambridge side, and back again. We walked until the sun was setting over the skyline, and then we stopped.

We were standing on the Harvard Bridge, studiously watching the sailboats, pretending to ignore the tension between us.

"I decided to go to Berkeley for my Ph.D.," he said.

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah, Dobrak told me. He seemed disappointed you wouldn't be staying in town."

"And you?"

"I won't be in town either."

I told him I was thinking of going to Moscow to do an internship with one of the news networks. Maybe I'll see you there someday, he said.

We looked at each other for a moment. Just a moment. Then he looked at his watch.

"I have to go meet Vicki," he said, referring to the woman he was living with.

"I know. My boyfriend will wonder what happened to me," I said, "I should go." And I did.

But that was more than six years ago.

To tell this story from that point, I would have to drone on about six years of failed relationships, family illnesses, a few deaths, graduate schools, career successes and failures (we both became journalists), ten countries (I wound up in New York, he in Russia), eating

disorders (mine), rehab clinics (his), a broken engagement (mine), a divorce (his), and God knows how many lovers between the two of us. Life. So at risk of reducing myself to a cultural stereotype, I'll just say that by the time I hit my late twenties, I was feeling a bit like the many mildly neurotic, man-obsessed, therapy-dependent single women who were starting to populate prime-time television shows and pulp fiction. But I also had another stereotype to fall back on: I am the child of a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist, and you know what they say. They say that children of psychiatric professionals tend to be nuts. Actually, it's not entirely true. My brother is tremendously normal. Also not entirely true is the myth that the relationships between mental health professionals and their children are dysfunctional and often estranged. In my case it was just the opposite. We were overly functional and we talked about everything. So those mid-to-late twentysomething years involved a fair amount of crying to my folks, who in turn tried desperately to convince me that it would all work out fine: I would get my career in order, I would achieve great things, I would find my Prince Charming, though not necessarily in that order. It took years of therapy to figure out why, if my parents were so optimistic and encouraging, I still felt like I was a failure. The answer was simple. I thought they were lying.

I loved my parents, but I found solace in my like-minded, similarly situated friends.

My friends and I often tried to convince ourselves that we were better off not getting seriously involved with our soul mates until later in life because the longer you wait, the more you know yourself and your wants and your needs. Your emotional requirements are less compromising; you have more control. We were probably lying to ourselves on some level, but if it helped assuage the loneliness, so be it. But I wonder sometimes what destruction and chaos Kevin and I might have caused the world by now if we had tried to merge our lives back then. Or what wonders. And I wonder whether my mid-to-late twenties would have been stronger, more successful, more vibrant if we had solidified our union then and I didn't experience all the broken hearts and failed relationships that I did. Would

I have had the guts to leave my hometown and return to Russia after graduate school like I wanted to, to laugh at my mildly lucrative New York-based job offers and follow my heart? Would I have become the kind of journalist I wanted to be, instead of the one I had become? I don't know. Because we didn't merge back then and all I know is what actually did happen. Or at least I know most of what actually did happen. So I am going to skip forward a few years in the telling, to a point when twenty-eight years of bumps and scratches had made us both mature enough to recognize a risk and scared enough to take one.



I would be dishonest if I said that when I first contacted him, it was only about work. A part of me, a very conscious part (the looking for love part), was curious to check in on his marital status, his emotional status, his potentially latent interest in me. I could have chosen to hire any number of journalists I knew in Russia. I chose Kevin.

After a number of attempts at setting a tone that was somehow flirtatious and professional, I sent him this:

TO: killard@spbpress.ru
FROM: jcohen@breakingstory.com
DATE: January 20, 1998
RE: whoring around the globe

Hey Dillard, remember me? It's Jennifer. You know, the other party responsible for your final college hangover? Sorry I haven't been in touch for a while. But then again, neither have you. I heard you were in New York last summer visiting the latest love interest. Is she the one tattooed into your arm or is that someone else? Yes, Josh does have a big mouth. Well, if you were here, I am sorry we didn't get to see each other. But I won't take it personally. I forgot to call you last time I was in Russia. Anyway, I stumbled across your e-mail address when I was reading your paper's web site. News editor, huh? A far cry from academia, but I am very impressed. Actually, I knew to look for you there. Josh told me

you have been out seeking death threats from the Russian Mafia of late (congrats on winning the Glasnost Award, by the way. Now not only will the Russian Mafia be looking to behead you, but the local Russian journalists will want you dead as well. How embarrassing to be beaten out by a smart-ass American!).

But this is why I write. I am working as an investigative producer for *Breaking Story*, a (yes, tabloid!) television magazine show here in New York and am looking into doing a story I think you might be of great assistance on. In fact, I think we'd like to hire you to help me out from that end (we pay dollars—not rubles). We are talking Russian Mafia, prostitutes, and other juicy things I shouldn't put into this e-mail in the event that the FSB is reading your files. There is information I don't want to detail until I know you are interested in working with me. Interested? Write ASAP. Let me know where and when I can call. I look forward to hearing from you.

Jen

It was hardly an hour before I got a response. Probably sometime around midnight St. Petersburg time. I know this because I had just returned from my afternoon Starbucks run, tall skim cappuccino in tow.

I sat down in my ugly but ergonomically correct tweed chair and took the plastic lid off the paper cup. A moment of serene calm in the sea of a frenzied newsroom.

I gently tickle the top layer of foam. A deep breath. I close my eyes. I open them slowly as I raise the cup to my lips. And then—

The mail flag on my computer screen pops up. Normally, I would have continued with the sip, but I was compelled to put the cup down and click on the mouse.

TO: jcohen@breakingstory.com

FROM: kdillard@spbpress.ru

DATE: January 20, 1998

RE: Re: whoring around the globe

Hey back! So good to hear from you. Wasn't sure you had made it

back alive from Croatia (yes, Josh has a big mouth. He told me about the orange smuggling). Surprised you didn't wind up in some Serbian prison. Or did you? Still, I'm more surprised you returned from covering that war-torn hellhole. Actually, I'm surprised you aren't based here, covering this hellhole. And speaking of hellholes, I'm in the office if you want to call. 011-7-812-XXX-XXXX. Will be here for another hour. The guard answers the phone at night, and he is probably smashed on vodka, so be patient when he tries to transfer you. Or call me at home. 011-7-812-XXX-XXXX.

K

PS Different chick is written on my arm. I still have to either find another woman named Vicki or find a way to morph those letters into something else. You still dating the DC Republican Josh told me about? Or did you finally find the nice Jewish doctor you are fated to marry, the lucky bastard?

K

The latent interest was definitely not just potential. It was most definitely there. And not even that latent.

I responded immediately.

TO: killard@spbpress.ru

FROM: jcohen@breakingstory.com

DATE: January 20, 1998

RE: Re: Re: whoring around the globe

Actually, it was a Bosnian prison. But the guards were cute in that dark, Mediterranean, malnourished sort of way, so it wasn't all bad. Just kidding. Funny story though. Last time I take a package from a shriveled granny without knowing what is inside—even if it was for her dying relative in Sarajevo! But it was a precious moment when the border guard handed my co-conspirator a butcher's knife to cut open the package. Trembling, she cut into the orange rind and the juice started to seep out. Oh, the adventures of the foreign correspondent. I wish. I was actually there on vacation, not corresponding about anything at all, just tagging along with a friend who was. I've been working in New York

since graduate school, covering fluffy stuff I'd just as soon not discuss. It's not as exciting as it was back in the USSR, babe, but I stay. It might be the golden handcuffs, but more likely it's because we have better coffee over here. Oh, the dangerous draw of complacency. Anyway, this story is my big chance to refresh my taste for the Moscow mix.

As far as the DC man—I still love him but can't be with him. He'll only convert if I convert and that won't really get us anywhere, now will it? It's a terribly long story, but the short of it is that, yes, I am still busily trying to find that nice Jewish doctor (or at least someone who can play one from time to time). Hopefully I'll find him soon, because the hunt is exhausting me (and probably my parents as well). Anyway, I will call you at home if that is all right, as I have a few things to attend to here. Some crazy rumor is circulating that Clinton had an affair with a White House intern and I need to make myself scarce so I don't get assigned to that tawdry tale.

Later, Jen

My timing was perfect. Just as I hit "send," Bill—the senior producer of the investigative unit—came out hunting for producers to send to D.C. Time to stalk the hairdressers and high school classmates. I jumped under my desk, cappuccino in hand, and sat there sipping until the story was safely assigned elsewhere.

When I emerged from the cover of my cubicle trench, I found the mail flag had sprung up again. I smiled and grabbed the mouse.

TO: jcohen@breakingstory.com

FROM: kdillard@spbpress.ru

DATE: January 20, 1998

RE: Re: re: re: whoring around the globe

Now it's a white house intern? And people ask me why I'm in Russia. Not that you can entirely escape that shit. Get this—last year, when Clinton et al were in town for the summit, a whore at the Grand Hotel National gave me a copy of Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's credit card receipt—\$1,000 for room service! More specifically it was for her room service. And she claimed it wasn't just Talbott in the room.

Apparently, our tax dollars have been donated to insure those arrogant geeks get laid. Although, I haven't paid taxes in years, so I really don't care.

OK. Call me later. I need to finish throwing pencils at my staff.

K

Some girls are turned on by muscle, others by money. For me, journalistic prowess is a potent aphrodisiac. I grinned knowingly at my computer screen and wrote back again.

TO: killard@spbpress.ru

FROM: jcohen@breakingstory.com

DATE: January 20, 1998

RE: Re: Re: Re: Re: whoring around the globe

Dear Sir,

I am simply going to postpone judgment about the fact that you are romping around Russia cavorting with prostitutes. Glad to know you have some ins with that community as it will come in handy should you agree to help me out with this story. And you will agree to help me out with this story.

Will call in about two hours.

J

PS that you throw pencils at your staff I will judge immediately.

It's not like I decided then and there that I would actually pursue a romance with Kevin, but it was then and there, as I sent the e-mail off into the ether, that I felt that same pit-of-the-stomach swirl I had felt on the Charles River Bridge.

I reached for my cappuccino, thinking that it would focus me a bit, but I was down to that part when all that remains are the white crusty crystals of dried milk on the sides of the cup and a small, almost inaccessible ring of light brown liquid at the bottom. I made one last attempt to suck it all out before I stood up and marched toward Bill's office.

He was in rare form when I got there.

“I don’t care what Krantz says. Find a fucking hotel room yourself. We are not going to miss this fucking story because you couldn’t find a goddamn place to sleep in all of D.C.!” Bill was pacing in front of his phone—clearly on speaker—and waving a faxed copy of the tomorrow’s *New York Post* cover: BILL SNARED IN SEX, LIES AND AUDIOTAPE.

He looked over the piles of papers on his desk and saw me lurking in the threshold.

“Where the hell were you?” he said, motioning for me to enter the lair.

“I’m here, Bill,” said the voice on the other end of the phone.

“No, not you. Just get your ass down there and call me when you hit the ground.” Bill jammed his pointer finger into the disconnect button and directed his cross eyebrows in my direction.

“I was here, Bill. Working up a source for the trafficking story.”

“I need you on this intern thing,” he said, and visions of my professional life passed ominously before me. I could feel the coffee riding up in my throat. Covering the president’s intoxication with an intern while working at a tabloid would be the end of any journalistic credibility I might have. All the years of graduate school and dues paying would be wasted. I would never emerge from the sensationalized trenches of tabloid TV. I had to save myself. I had to sell him the sex slaves. “This is a really hot story, Bill. The Russian story, I mean. Total sweeps story. I really think we should jump on it.”

“We aren’t *Dateline*, Jennifer. I don’t have a staff of three hundred. I need you on this intern story. We can return to the sex-trafficking thing later.”

“I hear *Primetime Live* is hot on it already,” I lied. Well, it wasn’t a complete lie. They were doing a story on sex-slave trafficking into Israel. Ours was better. I had been looking into a story about sex-slave trafficking into the United States, into Brooklyn. Word was, thousands of young women from the former Soviet Union were being lured here with promises of work as nannies and house cleaners, only to have their passports confiscated by the Mafioso thugs who organized their transport. The women are told that without

their passports, they don't exist. Then, terrified, they are forced to pay back their transportation costs and re-earn their identities by turning tricks in makeshift brothels or behind the stages of seedy strip joints. Any other time, this would have been the ultimate story for our syndicated television newsmagazine: tits and ass with a dash of respectable reporting. Toss in the international angle, and we could pretend for a few moments that we were the broadcast equivalents of Seymour Hersh.

"It's now or never, Bill. We need to jump on it," I said, walking up to his desk and pressing my hands flat on it.

He shook his head. "If Clinton was sleeping with these sex slaves, sure. But right now, that's the only way you are going to sell it to the EP." The EP is the executive producer of the show, the big boss.

"What if I could give you both sex slaves trafficked into Brooklyn and proof of Clinton administration officials using taxpayer dollars to party with Russian whores?"

Bill's ears perked up.

"Is there a connection here?"

"Just that both stories require my going to St. Petersburg."

"Can you prove those allegations about the Clinton officials?"

"My friend says if I go over there, he can show me a copy of the deputy secretary of state's credit card receipt for overindulgent room service."

"We don't have the budget." He started typing an e-mail message into his computer. Attention deficit disorder is practically a job requirement for anyone in television management.

"Plane fare in January is less than flying to L.A.," I said.

He hit send and sat down at his desk. "Go on."