

THE ARDIS COLE SERIES



THE Destruction
OF Neva

VICKIE
BRITTON

LORETTA
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Rowe Publishing

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To five memorable aunts:

*Eda Standley, Hilda Rasmussen,
Anna Tibbets, Ebba Buhr, and Ruth Vollan.*

THE Destruction
OF Neva

Red Square, Moscow, 2001

Chapter 1

Ardis spotted Grant Merlin waiting for her at the gateway to Red Square. Against the background of dark, crenellated walls, he, tall, poised, and alert, stood out from the stream of sight-seers.

Grant had recently been promoted to head the Department of Archaeology at the Chicago Institute, so technically that made him Ardis' boss. For the last few months he had been away assisting on a dig at Novgorod, and Ardis, as reluctant as she was to admit it, had missed him, missed his smiles across crowded rooms, their talks over hurried cups of coffee.

Was working with Grant again the real reason she had flown to Russia? It couldn't be the lure of the job, for in spite of her multitude of questions, he had told her surprisingly little about what she was expected to do.

Ardis brought up a hand to smooth her ash-blond hair, which the warm wind had set in disarray, and cutting around a tour group, continued toward Grant. She responded with a smile to his great burst of joy. As usual, Grant's immense vitality, despite Ardis' draining jet lag, at once lifted her spirits and renewed her physical energy.

As they hurried toward one another, Ardis noted the animated light that filled his eyes and realized that the job Grant had offered her on the phone was not, as he had led her to believe, some unimportant matter suitable to occupy her long-accumulated vacation time.

Grant caught both her hands and drew her backward to the shining brass relief centered on the walkway. "They say everything of any importance in Russia begins right here!"

"Now you're talking important." She gazed up at his face that the smile made less rugged. "On the phone you said this job you want me to take was going to be—how did you put it—a heap of fun?"

"I was only appealing to your vacation spirit." Grant's smile remained. "I assure you this little task won't be run-of-the-mill, and it won't in any way bore you."

Grant gazed at her for a long time in silence. His expression caused an image to flash to mind of Grant as he had looked hidden out on a hill in China—facing disaster, but expecting triumph. The comparison made her feel increasingly uneasy, but she managed lightly, "So maybe now I'll hear just why you sent for me."

Ardis knew Grant had been working on an excavation in Novgorod, in a part of the ancient city that contained the ruins of wealthy boyar palaces dating back to the time of Ivan the Terrible. "Does it concern the dig you are working on in Novgorod?"

"No, it's more a matter of my not being able to be two places at once." Another of his charming smiles almost quelled her apprehension. "A Russian friend of mine, Nikolai Savik, has asked a favor."

"So you immediately thought of me." Her first vacation in several years and what does she do? She hastens to fall under Grant's spell and take on some impossible task.

With one hand locked tightly around hers, Grant led her away from the gate toward a scattering of sun umbrellas in a nearby park.

"You'll be traveling to St. Petersburg," he said, as they seated themselves at the table of an outdoor cafe.

"I thought we would be working together."

"We will be, in a way." As he grinned, he extended his hands, large, brown, and calloused, across the table, palms up. "After all, aren't these hands just an extension of yours?"

Grant spoke the words matter-of-factly, but she thought she could read genuine feeling into them.

He eased back in the chair. His white shirt was open at the throat, his sleeves rolled in protest to the warmth.

"Two people have disappeared: Nikolai's very famous uncle, Treve Savik, a sculptor; and his model, a dawning young actress by the name of Varina Morinsky. But my friend Nikolai has not approached me to locate either his Uncle Treve or the model, but his uncle's missing sculpture, a work entitled 'Neva.'"

"Which, of course, is where I come in."

Grant slanted her a persuasive look. "You have found tombs hidden away for centuries. A statue missing for only seven years will be kindergarten work for you."

Ardis studied him, noting a tension that was not common to him. This wasn't just an ordinary request. "Why do I think there is more to this than you're telling me?"

"Because..." Grant's deep voice trailed off in a strange, abstract way. "...there's more to this than I know." Turning from her, he caught the waiter's attention. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Just coffee."

Grant knew enough Russian words to make himself understood, even though he could not put his thoughts into full sentences. "Kofiye, pajausta."

The waiter responded with rapid sentences that Grant probably didn't understand.

"Dva," he replied. "Chyornee."

Still possessing his faraway manner, Grant faced her again. Sunlight fell across his black hair causing it to glisten and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes to deepen.

Ardis finally broke the silence. "Tell me more about the statue."

"I saw the work in progress and even met the model when I was visiting Nikolai seven years or so ago." Grant's blue eyes became darker. "Even though Treve's sculpture was rough and unfinished then, I will never, ever forget it. It was fashioned of the purest, white marble."

Ardis tried to envision the statue from his description.

"Treve Savik, who I didn't get to meet, was known for his ability to bring stone to life, for his sense of infinite detail. There is no telling what this object is worth! From what I could tell, Treve was a modern-day Michelangelo." Awe crept into Grant's voice. "The likeness of this woman would rival the goddesses of Greece and Rome."

"But finding it will be totally impossible," Ardis concluded.

"All I'm asking is that you give it a try. Nikolai is offering a generous wage." He leaned across the table on folded arms. "Besides, regardless of success or failure, you will get to see St. Peterburg." His eagerness not waning in the least, he relaxed in the chair again. "It is a magic city! Do you remember Pushkin's poem? 'I love you, Peter's great creation, Your stately aspect, perfect ranks, The Neva River's undulation, The granite vestments of its banks.' Ardis, I want you to see St. Petersburg with me!"

Grant was now using other means to convince her to accept the job. Not to be swayed by his poetry, Ardis stated, "Treve probably took the statue with him when he left."

Grant raised his eyebrows. "Not likely. Didn't I mention the fact that the sculpture is life-sized?"

This time it was Ardis who showed surprise. The small statue she had envisioned enlarged before her eyes and made Grant's request even more incredible. "Life-sized works are not easily misplaced."

"I'm not asking you to look the world over for it," Grant said, the smile returning to his lips. "Only around the Savik estate, which is made up of a square of four or five miles. Nikolai is convinced that his uncle has hidden the statue in or around the manor." As Grant spoke, he drew some folded sheets of paper from his vest pocket. "I owe it to you to tell you the truth, though. Most people think Treve destroyed the statue before he left. Even his brother, Mikhail believes this."

"But why would he? If his work is so priceless, why wouldn't he want to benefit from its sale?"

"The story goes that he fell madly in love with his model. This girl, Varina, less than half his age, jilted him. Treve was a man of passion, both to create and to destroy. A demon of spite, that's the way his brother, Mikhail, refers to him."

"If that's the case, my job seems doomed to failure."

Grant's deep blue eyes held to hers. "Would a man who has devoted his life to preserving art destroy his masterpiece? I don't think so. And neither does Nikolai."

"I'm an archaeologist, not a detective. I wouldn't even know where to begin forming theories on where some mad-man hid his statue."

"You won't be going into this blind." Grant in a helpful, convincing way slid the papers he still held in his hand across the table to her. "Nikolai has given me sketches and blueprints of the Savik mansion as it was before the war and as it now stands. I have been toying with the idea that Treve may have hidden the sculpture in a false wall created during the restoration. Or in some tunnel. Most castles of that date had them,

you know, escape tunnels to be used in case of enemy attacks, tunnels leading to a river or to the sea.”

As Ardis studied the sketches, the feeling of apprehension she had been attempting to brush aside became more pronounced. She looked beyond Grant, who was sipping his coffee in pleasant silence and allowed her gaze to skim the faces of the people that passed by.

Mostly tourists, she decided, wandering in small groups or alone, many of them lingering in the shade of the tall trees. Everything looked ordinary, like any lazy summer afternoon. Then why was she so thoroughly convinced that someone, from somewhere, was intent on watching them?

She had seen far too many Russian spy movies, she thought with self-reproach. Still, she turned, carefully checking along the doorways that housed the row of shops and restaurants.

“Is something wrong?” Grant asked.

“No,” she said at last, “nothing.”

Grant had finished his coffee and set down the cup, rising as he did. “Let’s walk,” he said.

The brilliant green lawns, embedded with bright pink flowers, were adorned with gigantic fountains. They stopped beside one of them, then crossed through the park back toward Resurrection Gate where they had first met.

Instead of turning toward the busy street, Grant guided her under the arched entranceway into Red Square.

The vast area was floored with small blocks of stone, some rising in uneven patterns. At the far end the symbol of Russia, St. Basil’s Cathedral, rose in fairyland grace. Lenin’s low, flat mausoleum dominated the center area and looked very modern against the background of the ancient, dark wall that separated it from the Kremlin proper. Behind this wall loomed towers and domes of gold and silver.

Red Square encroached into her mind whenever she thought of Russia; even today it seemed filled with plots and secrets. Phrases and impressions from her childhood, ominous ones, ran through her mind: cold war, Iron Curtain, KGB. Surely only these images had caused her to believe that Grant and she had their own follower, their own personal spy.

She attempted to lighten her mood as they continued across vast space toward St. Basil's with its eight, looming domes, each of them varied in shape, design, and color.

Grant stopped momentarily to look around. "Red to the Russians means beautiful. And it is, isn't it?"

Despite the splendor the scene seemed harsh and grim—a place where Ivan the Terrible ruled with his reign of terror, where mass executions had once taken place.

She followed his gaze to the star, which would light red at night, and to insignias with double-headed eagles that topped nearby towers. "A number of great artists have worked here," she said and followed her observation by a request, "I would like to hear more about the sculptor of the Neva statue, about Treve Savik and his work."

"Let me give you a little background on the Savik family. Treve and his brother Mikhail grew up in England. Their parents were killed during World War II and a sister took in my friend Nikolai's mother the two orphans. Mikhail went into retail sales, importing and exporting rare porcelain and crystal. His nephew, Nikolai, followed his lead and joined him as a partner."

"Was Treve a partner in the business, too?"

Grant shook his head. "Treve was always the artist. As soon as he was old enough, he returned to Russia and reclaimed his citizenship. That would have been in the mid-sixties. He entered the Iron Curtain at a time when most artists were clamoring to get out."

"Why would he have wanted to return to a place where he knew his work would be censored and oppressed?"

"Love for his home country, I guess. From what I've heard of Treve Savik, he was one of those die-hard idealists. He wanted to do what he could to preserve Russian art. He entered Russia knowing he could never leave again without defecting."

"It was easier to get into Russia those days, than to get out," Ardis agreed.

"Although Treve and his brother Mikhail kept in contact, it was not until after the curtain lifted that Mikhail was allowed to enter Russia again. Their nephew, Nikolai, had been establishing their business line in Warsaw. He decided to join his uncles here and see what he could do about opening a door to Russian markets. Then this disaster with the Neva statue happened. Treve has been missing for the past seven years."

They moved over into the shade and stood against the Kremlin wall.

"I need to know more about the artist."

"According to Nikolai, when they came to Russia, they found Treve a changed man. During the Communist reign the elegant family mansion had been turned into a cultural center. Treve had spent many years leading a double life, laboring for the center on the surface, working with the underground to preserve censored art. He was never far from danger from the KGB, imprisonment or Siberia. But, because he had influential friends in high places, he managed to survive."

"In the nineties things got better. His sculptures were beginning to gain popularity, and with the onslaught of free enterprise, he found himself in great demand. His career hit a boom, so to speak. Overnight he became one of the wealthiest men in Russia, rich enough to purchase back and begin to restore the family home, which had been severely damaged by the war and only haphazardly repaired."

"During that time he asked Mikhail and Nikolai to return home," Ardis prompted.

"Yes, Treve wanted them to take up a permanent residence in the old Savik manor." Grant's expression grew dark. "But the years of oppression had made Treve a different man... furtive, brooding, given to mood swings. Just before his... disappearance...he and Mikhail had a bitter argument. Before he left, Treve wrote a will that in the event of his death leaves all of his earthly possessions to his nephew, Nikolai. Then he vanished and hasn't been heard of since."

"What could have happened to him?"

"Rumors abound. Some say Treve was seen in Prague, that he was glimpsed in Florence. But Nikolai believes his uncle is dead."

Ardis felt a chill go through her. Her gaze strayed again to the scattering of people around them. Surely it was only Grant's unusual story that increased her sense of foreboding, that made her so certain that even at this very moment, they were being watched.

Ardis' gaze lingered on passing faces as she asked, "Why would Treve simply drop everything and disappear at the height of his career, just when things were going so well for him?"

"Nikolai tells me that it was solely because of his love for this young actress, his model for the Neva statue. He was a man given to strong feeling, and he became obsessed with her. Evidently he wasn't able to handle her rejection."

"Then it's likely he did destroy the statue."

"Mikhail is convinced that he did. He says given his brother's monstrous egotism, there can be no other answer. Treve destroyed his Neva, threw all to the wind, and left the country in a bitter rage."

"But Nikolai disagrees."

"Only with the part about Treve destroying the statue. He is certain Treve left Russia, and because Treve was a man of dark moods, Nikolai thinks he might eventually have committed suicide."

"Do you believe that's what happened?"

The tension she had recognized earlier returned to Grant's features. "To be truthful," he said, "I think someone has been murdered."

"Someone?" Ardis asked, her voice becoming cautious. "Which one do you have in mind, artist or model?"

He shook his head. "They are both missing."

"And probably ran off together," Ardis replied, finding relief from his graveness in her own words. She went on quickly, "Or one of the lovers might have killed the other one and fled."

"Or someone may have killed them both."

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES!

Ardis Cole is summoned to Russia to help Grant Merlin's friend, Nikolai Savik, locate a priceless marble statue called Neva. The life-sized sculpture vanished along with the artist, Nikolai's uncle Treve Savik, seven years ago. Most people believe Treve destroyed his masterpiece then committed suicide after being jilted by the statue's beautiful model, Varina Morinsky. On the way to the Savik mansion Ardis is nearly pushed to her death in the Moscow subway. Once in St. Petersburg instead of finding the sculpture, Ardis discovers the grave of a murder victim, buried for seven years. The search for the missing sculpture becomes a hunt for a dangerous killer—one who will not hesitate to strike again.

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Each book in *The Ardis Cole Series* takes place in locations around the world. The authors have travelled to such places as Peru, Russia, Egypt, China, and Australia in preparation for this series.

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"Nice thrills and chills! The authors have obviously done their archeological homework." *Mystery Scene Magazine*

"Loretta Jackson and Vickie Britton have effectively collaborated to present a series of superbly crafted and entertaining mystery adventures featuring Ardis Cole, an intelligent, fearless, and persevering young lady who finds herself in the midst of exciting and suspenseful mysteries set in a variety of different locales." *Midwest Book Review*



Vickie Britton and **Loretta Jackson**, sisters, have co-authored over forty novels, and numerous short stories, most of them mystery, suspense, and westerns. They are recipients of the Edna Osborne Whitcomb Writing Award, the Seaton Award, and are finalists for the 2013 Readers' Favorite Book Award.



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