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Chapter 1

It is noon in northern Siberia, the last day of October under the shadow of the Pole, and the Arctic sun floats low over the horizon, a pale orb in a sparkling halo of dust. Not long from now, the brightest hour of day will be gray; the rest will be darkness. Vodka freezes when the temperature plummets, and even the wind seems to thicken to the consistency of syrup. Air appears to cling to the ground as if liquid, a shimmering mirage of reflecting images.

Frost forms on the inside of my cabin window as bitter cold sets in, and you might ask why anyone would want to live in a frigid wilderness. Well, to my mind this rustic cabin in the far north is a treasure. It has something rare in this 21st Century. Privacy and peace, the atmosphere I need for writing.

I can hear the pot percolating on my coal stove, spreading the aroma of Novosibirsk coffee. Soon I will drink it black and thick, imbibe caffeine to accelerate my typing. I have to move fast. I don't have much time left to tell the story of how a brutal prehistoric rape threatened a modern woman. A brave woman that I hold near and dear.

Fingers poised over the keys, I think of myself forty-one years ago, riding in a sleigh behind a team of reindeer, the foothills of the Byrranga Mountains looming near.

I remember my Dolgan guide breaking into a smile and cracking his whip, urging his team across the snows of the Taimyr, their antlers gleaming in the dazzling sun of June. We rushed to confirm the rumor of a mammoth sighting on a ridge.

The reindeer raced forward, descending into an icy dip. Wind whistled past my ears. Sun and mountains disappeared, and everything around became flat, dull and white. Panting, the reindeer strained at their leather harnesses, climbing back out of the dip. Again, the sun beamed down on me. I could see the

crumbling side of the ridge exposed by a landslide, and the glittering ice veins in it had two dark objects jutting out of their midst. Long, curved tusks, I didn't dare hope.

The sleigh glided to a stop on a freezing layer of slush. We splashed across a rivulet toward the landslide debris, gazing upward, our hearts sinking. The dark objects turned out to be noeuchina, driftwood, deposited thousands of years earlier by a river. I recall sniffing and trying to detect the stench of mammoths, but when I only smelled fresh air, I realized there'd be no excited gathering around a blazing fire when we returned to the Dolgan camp, no glasses raised in salute to a successful foray across the barren Taimyr.

We kicked in the toes of our reindeer boots as we climbed crushed ice and soggy mud, and slithered across a glassy vein several feet wide, a dizzy hundred feet up in the air. A closer look at the noeuchina showed it to be petrified, solid as granite.

My guide grabbed my arm, saying, "Ice wedge, we look." He pointed a gnarled finger at a fissure several paces to our left.

We scrambled across to it and peered down into icy gloom. I have never been able to explain why, but I knew something important lay down there and continued to stare. That's when I focused on the frozen figure of a woman, trapped in the ice wedge.

Lowered on a rope, I chopped for two backbreaking hours with an adz, hewing a block the size of a coffin out of the ice. If my Dolgan friend hadn't been so strong, we could never have hauled the ice casket out of the fissure, but we did. We slid it down to his impatient reindeer then loaded it on the sleigh. Preserved from the ravages of decay in hard ice, the poor woman would be ready for a long journey.

Through the ice, I could see her short stature, her bushy dark hair and coarse Neanderthal features. Ripped but still attached to her waist hung what appeared to be a brown, furry skin. Bearskin skirt, I reasoned.

Overcome by the discovery, I wanted to give her a name. Trembling, I suggested Galine, God has redeemed, and my Dolgan guide, in all his native wisdom, agreed.

With her casket packed in additional ice, Galine survived the journey to Moscow. Two KGB agents stood behind, watching while my colleague Sergei and I examined her. One of the men, a mousy little fellow, scribbled on a notepad while we worked all day in our laboratory and through the following night. The other, a huge bald fellow called Boris, stayed as still as stone, his only sign of movement a slight shifting of eyeballs whenever his gaze followed my hands.

Galine had claw marks on her shoulders and bite marks on both breasts, cruel wounds that human nails and teeth appeared to have inflicted. Shaken by our observations, we examined her more closely and found a copious quantity of human sperm on her thighs, on her skirt and inside her body, more than would come from one man.

Sperm that we believed came from the dominant human species of the Pleistocene, from a close ancestor of modern humans, The Cro-Magnons.

The implications saddened and disturbed us, as in a sense we could have become witnesses to a savage crime of prehistoric times, quite possibly a gang rape. Yet, thirst for science drove us to study her further.

As we thawed and examined sperm taken from the outer fibers of her skirt under a microscope, they moved slightly. Moreover, under the warmth of the microscope's light, they gradually began to wiggle their tails and swim. Live prehistoric sperm, a momentous observation, because it suggested the tantalizing possibility of recreating human life from the Pleistocene.

Excited, I grabbed Sergei, embracing him and whirling us around in a wild dance. Boris spat on the floor and shouted, "Goluboy." His fellow agent wrote so fast that one could imagine his pencil catching fire, no doubt documenting that we were homosexual; an outright lie.

Not the least bit chastened, we returned to the microscope, gazing in wonder at the live sperm. When Galine's tormentors had finished assaulting her, they probably threw her down the fissure onto the ice, freezing her skirt fast.

The sperm in her body must have cooled slower than the skirt, and no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't produce the slightest movement.

I should add to all this that our analyses of the ice showed it to be of unusually high purity, which may well have contributed to preservation of the seeds of life.

A few months ago, a message from the Dolgan grapevine led me to follow the discovery of a frozen mammoth, where blood came running out after recovering the animal from pure ice, pure like the ice that preserved the sperm.

Researchers on a recent Antarctic expedition uncovered sperm cells dating to 50 million years ago, the oldest known well-preserved animal sperm. In our case, rapid cooling of the Pleistocene sperm to subzero temperatures in the sterile environment of pure ice probably created conditions for long-term preservation similar to that produced in modern sperm banks.

Back in the 1970s, Sergei and I stored the live sperm in a vacuum flask, submerged in liquid nitrogen, and I'll never forget the phone ringing in the lab late that night. The awful call that cut short our examination of Galine. Boris snatched up the receiver, listened for a minute to someone barking orders, and then, with his beefy hands shoved us out of the lab. A couple of days later I learned that the authorities had incinerated Galine's remains, out of fear that it would portray Siberians as a subhuman species. Of course, this is bureaucratic nonsense, no better than superstition.

The authorities didn't destroy the sperm we preserved in liquid nitrogen, perhaps because they thought they could conceal it easily. Carbon dating showed it to be 31,000 years old, but all it would take would be the shake of a head in the Kremlin to deprive the world of knowledge as precious as gold.

Curiosity, and determination to prevent erasure of Galine from the annals of science, led us to convince four Dolgan women to allow us to impregnate them with the sperm. The donation of two year's provisions sealed the deal with these courageous women. Nine months later, four brothers who should have been born during the Pleistocene burst into modern life.

Chapter 2

Corky shoved her hand into her parka for a handkerchief, but came out with a wine cork instead. The funny fellows at the New York Herald had inked 101 on its side. She could use a good laugh after a blizzard diverted the puddle jumper three hundred miles to the Laptev Sea and wall-to-wall polar bears, when she should have landed in mammoth country.

At the Laptev outpost of Tiksi, she'd gotten 'lucky', caught a ride to Khatanga on a Siberian helicopter smelling of kerosene, a real boneshaker. Shivering, lucky, and scantily clothed in a turtleneck, baseball cap and jeans ever since the duffle with her warm clothes went AWOL in Moscow.

She glanced through the porthole at the expanse of white below and saw what looked like a parade of ants. Narrowing her eyes to cut the glare, she focused them on a herd of reindeer. Neat to be near to the North Pole in early spring, but she felt damned cold and hoped no one noticed her teeth clacking.

Corky glanced down at her nose and realized that the tip had turned blue. She pulled off her mittens, unzipped the bag wedged between her hiking boots, rummaged inside and pulled out another turtleneck. Her blood had thinned out after spending the last ten years dodging bullets in the Middle East, adding to her misery. She'd been so hot in the desert that she wore a burka without underwear whenever she could get away with it. As her editor said, she needed a break to cool off, and joy of joys, he'd asked her to take one in Siberia.

Siberia because Billington, the newspaper's owner, had lunch with a crazy Russian paleontologist named Zuyev at a conference in New York. She'd never forget Edwards laughing off her protests and saying, "Come on Corky, Billington's giving me a hard time, and you know how demanding he can be. Do me a solid and visit this Zuyev fella. He's a fan of yours, has read a lot about your work

as a foreign correspondent.” Perhaps she did owe Edwards a solid favor when he’d given her the chance to pursue a successful career, although the visa that Zuyev came up with had listed her as his niece, which didn’t make sense.

The other part of the assignment her editor gave her sounded more interesting, checking up on Marty Watson. “Marty’s making a movie on mammoths and thinks he owns the North Pole,” Edwards had said with a grin.

Peeling off her parka, she removed her baseball cap and pulled on the turtleneck sweater, donning another layer by stretching its blue over the red of the favorite underneath. While struggling, she elbowed the fellow sitting next to her on the helicopter’s bench seat, a short man who’d introduced himself as Stu Uhlig.

Getting a friendly elbow in the ribs didn’t stop him writing notes in his little book. Strange, slender, six inches shorter than her five nine, he had dark hair like hers hanging down to his shoulders. High cheekbones and coffee skin, he could be Native American. Yet, when she said Hi to him as they boarded the chopper, he replied in a Brooklyn accent. Uhlig, a German name, yet dark skinned, and he did have fascinating eyes. He’d be interesting to sketch. She needed to draw something or someone to keep her artistic flair from wasting.

“So where did you get the funny name?” Uhlig asked.

Corky smiled to herself, and then did her best to frown and glare.

“Er, I mean, where’d you get that great name,” he stammered.

“That’s better.” Unable to stop smiling, she recalled the Herald’s gang starting to call her Corky, and all because she’d collected corks over the years, when not dodging bullets. Better to have them call her Corky than shorten her real name Catherine to Cat, as if she were a wild woman.

A large man with bushy hair and a beard sat on the opposite side of the helicopter, no hat or gloves, fur parka wide open. The cold didn’t bother him. As she finished putting on the turtleneck, his sharp eyes gazed at her from across a pile of Polar Expedition baggage, watching her every shiver. The pilot, a man in a red

parka, had spoken to the big Russian when they'd boarded and called him Smerdyakov. Smerd had a huge barrel chest, arms as thick as tree trunks and the biggest pair of hands she'd ever seen.

Corky donned her Mets' cap, huddled back down inside her parka and tried to stop quaking. If her hands weren't so cold inside these mittens, she'd sneak her digital Leica from her pocket and snap a few shots of the frosty wilderness. Yet she couldn't act like a tourist with Smerd watching and risk blowing her cover, her alias. Stefan Zuyev's niece, for chrissakes.

Uhlig continued scribbling. He appeared to be one of those funny people who wrote down everything, she decided, glancing to the side, watching him scrawling in Russian. He must think she couldn't understand a letter of the Cyrillic alphabet, because he'd written at the top of the page - Cute chick next door, interesting, eyes slightly slanted, but blue.

She turned her head away from him for a few seconds and grinned. Chick. He probably thought he had her all figured out. She'd play it cool, hide the fact she had studied languages at Columbia, aced Russian, and stayed fluent ever since. She also spoke German, French and Italian, and had a good handle on Arabic.

The rest of Uhlig's page had disjointed notes about woolly mammoths all over it. He could be a paleontologist or a biologist, might be loaded with information she could use to slap together an article on prehistoric critters.

Uhlig penciled in another Cyrillic sentence: This has to be Alexei Romanov's helicopter. It had to be with that Smilodon painted on the fuselage.

Smilodon. She remembered seeing the tiger with the saber fangs when she'd climbed the steps into the aircraft.

Feeling the cold, she shivered again. Uhlig stopped scribbling, looked up and beamed at her. He slid a hand into the backpack he'd balanced on the floor beside his feet and took out a Russian fur hat, light gray with long earflaps. Wolf skin.

He reached over, whipped off her cap, dropped it in her lap, and pressed the wolf hat onto her head, covering her ears. She wanted to say, no way would she wear the skin of an endangered species, but she'd tasted the warmth and couldn't pluck off the

hat. “Thanks, I needed that.” She shoved the Mets’ onto Stu’s head. “We’ll swap back later.”

“Keep the wolf.”

“Okay. How long before we land in Khatanga?”

“It’s pronounced Ha-tin-ga.” He turned away from her and peered through the window. “We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Corky knew enough of the language to figure out the pronunciation, but she had to play the part of Zuyev’s American niece. She pulled her pendant from her turtleneck and flashed a one-eyed black cat in front of him.

“That’s neat.”

“I call him Satan.”

“Got the devil close to your heart, huh?”

“Wiseass.” Amused, Corky glanced through the porthole window. The helicopter had begun to descend. She could feel it in her stomach. Squinting through the porthole, she saw buildings in the distance, one or two story at most. It must be Khatanga, but the chopper had no business landing way out here. Then she noticed a billowing white cloud stretching across the northern horizon, spreading every second, approaching fast.

Uhlig nudged her. “Hold onto the wolf, it’s an arctic twister. A lot of crazy weather up here lately, uncanny warmth, ferocious winds, then temperatures all the way down to 90 below.”

“Global warming, huh?”

“Yep, and sometimes the ice doesn’t know whether to melt or freeze. But overall it’s disappearing too damned fast.”

Smerd, sitting opposite, appeared unconcerned about the landing. He kept staring at her. Not lust, suspicion.

A seething, ferocious cloud raced toward them, two hundred yards, one hundred yards, fifty ... it seemed to extend its claws.

Mayhem enveloped the helicopter as it hit the snow with a brain-jarring thump and bounced. The smell of kerosene became stronger, as if a pipe had sprung a leak. The pilot cut the engine.

Through the porthole window, Corky saw a sheet of corrugated iron flash past.

A blast of air hit the aircraft, making it judder and rock. Its rotor blades seemed to be twisting off. Corky grasped the edge of the bench seat for support. Stu grabbed her arm. She hooked the

fingers of her free hand into his parka as the helicopter tipped, thinking they were going to flip over, but the wind shifted and the machine righted itself, its left skid dropping back to the ice with a thud.

Corky peered through the porthole into a total whiteout. Another gust lifted the helicopter clean off the ground and slammed it down again. It hopped several times on its skids. Bounced by an irresistible force, it rattled, sounding like a garbage can loaded with metal scrap. Snow flew by the porthole, sticking frosty flakes to its circular rim. The wind howled through the rotor blades, shrieking.

Corky sunk her teeth into one of her mittens. Then spat out fuzz. “Good move landing or the twister would have swatted this chopper like a bug.”

Looking shaken too, Uhlig nodded.

Something banged several times. Corky shot a glance at the fuselage door, thinking it had blown open, torn off its hinges. The noise came from outside, though.

As she tried to steel her nerves, the banging stopped. Everything went quiet. Stu pointed at the porthole. The twister had rushed past leaving Khatanga clear. She could see the buildings again. The pilot fired up the engine, sending the helicopter shooting upward. The aircraft’s nose dipped as they zoomed toward Khatanga, and a snow-swept town became clear out the porthole window.

The copter sank to a soft landing. The pilot killed the engine, left his cockpit and bumped open the cabin door. Subzero air rushed in, leaving Corky gasping.

Uhlig stood, pushed past her with his backpack and spoke to the pilot. “This is Alexei Romanov’s aircraft, isn’t it?”

“He took a day off, but I have a message for Dr. Uhlig.”

“That’s me.”

Corky chuckled as the pilot handed Stu a crumpled ball of paper.

“If you do not mind, doctor, I already read it. Alexei would like to meet you for food, I think.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that.” Stu took the message and disappeared down the steps. Corky grabbed her duffle and edged to the door on cramped legs.

Smerd rose, neck bent, his head jammed against the fuselage ceiling, huge, glaring.

As Corky climbed down the steps, the north wind sliced through her jeans like an icy knife. Snow drifted across the icy tarmac and swirled around the rusty metal buildings.

Stu Uhlig waited for her a few yards away, beaming. “How would you like to have lunch with Alexei?”

“You’re on, buddy.”

Chapter 3

Corky studied the Russian soldier that guarded the Hotel Taimyr's snowy front door. Soviet red badge with a gold hammer and sickle on his overcoat's shoulder, AK-47 ready, perhaps nobody had told him that the cold war had finished.

Red brick, solid and old, the walls of the hotel seemed to lean over her, but she grinned when she spotted a large pair of modern ears on its roof. Antenna dishes.

Following Stu into the lobby, she dumped her carry-on bag on the floor. The hotel looked clean inside, shiny wood all around, and a spotless carpet, except for the snow that dropped off her boots.

The receptionist frowned through thick spectacles as she thumbed through Corky's passport. Then the woman stopped flicking pages, peered at the visa and said, "Zuyev?"

First, a scowling border guard at southern Siberia's Novosibirsk airport had combed through Corky's paperwork as though she had no right to come to Russia, and now this schoolmarm thing in Khatanga, this micro examination of her background. "The name is Corky, I mean, Catherine Mason."

"I have a room reserved for Catherine Zuyev," the woman said as she put down the passport and opened a thick book with bony fingers.

"I'm Dr. Zuyev's niece."

Stu Uhlig winked at her, flipped his passport across the counter and said, "I'll vouch for her, Tanya." He signed the register. Corky penned in C. Zuyev Mason, receiving another frown from the receptionist.

The woman tucked both passports into a drawer behind the counter. She closed the drawer, took two keys from a row of hooks on the wall and led them up some creaky stairs. "This one's yours,

Ms. Zuyev.” The receptionist threw open the door of a room the size of a closet.

Corky shuddered. The lobby had been warm, but this little bedroom couldn't be any warmer than an icebox, and she'd be sleeping on a narrow pallet bed with a thin mattress, a rock hard plank. The sound of someone flushing water next door penetrated the thin wall. Like as not, it'd be a hole in a tiled floor, but that wouldn't be a problem for her after squatting so many times in the desert.

Corky watched the receptionist disappear down the corridor with Stu.

He tapped on her open door five shivering minutes later, and handed her a plastic bag. “Looked like you were freezing your ass off outside.”

“Spit could freeze out there.” She pulled a pair of woolen long johns from the bag. “Don't you need them?”

“I've got others.”

He had given her the wolf hat, and now these lifesavers. “I ought to give you a hug.”

Stu shot her an infectious grin. “That'll come.”

Corky kept a straight face, and said, “Let me put these on.” She closed the door, undressing and dressing faster than a quick pee in the sand. The arms of Stu's long johns looked a tad short on her, as did the legs, but she could already feel the warmth. Reopening the door, she found him leaning against the doorjamb.

He peered at her. “Are you really Dr. Zuyev's niece?”

“That's top secret.”

“Okay, I get it.” As she struggled into her parka, he asked, “You ready for a quick lunch?”

“Sure.”

“We're heading for the Restaurant Bar, then.”

“Sounds good.” Hungry and wearing this wolf hat, she felt like sinking her teeth into anything.

A battered cab waited outside the hotel, front passenger window down, vapor wafting from the exhaust and whirling away in the wind, engine running to fight freezing. A ZIL, a copy of a forties Packard. The driver looked bigger than the car, huge hands covering the steering wheel. “Siberia's sullen Smerd.”

Stu frowned and said, "Yeah, he's keeping tabs on us." Corky slid across a freezing vinyl seat, making room for Stu.

He leaned forward. "Restaurant Bar, and roll up that window, the lady's dying of cold back here."

"Give this to Smerd." She handed Stu a 100-ruble bill, three bucks worth of Russian cash to avoid walking through town and facing a biting wind.

Fishtailing, the ZIL took off. Snowflakes zipped past the window. Corky scrubbed the ice off the glass with a glove so she could see out, and she had to keep rubbing.

A store bearing the sign #7 flashed past. Several squat men were hanging out on a street corner, Asian faces watching from under the hoods of what appeared to be reindeer parkas.

Stu whispered, "Dolgans from the other side of the tracks, a much maligned minority. Stalin persecuted the nomads. He made them Soviet Citizens so he could draft them into the army."

Shivers running down her spine, Corky stared at icy roads and sidewalks, at vapor streaming from chimneys into crisp air, seeing not even a glimmer of warmth. Everything she saw reminded her that they were only a short hop from the North Pole.

Corky nudged Stu. "Satisfy a woman's curiosity by telling her a little bit about Alexei."

"Everyone in the paleontology business likes him. A treasure trove of info, he's flown supplies and fossils to and from digs for years. Being one of the few Russians that the Dolgan nomads confided in and trusted, he's become indispensable. If you want to know who found what fossil last week, or back in the '90s or '80s, you ask him. I count Alexei as one of my best friends." Stu chuckled. "He and I have trudged through a lot of mud in the summer months, inspecting digs."

"That last piece makes me feel a tad warmer." A large woman muffled in a fur coat and wearing knee high leather boots appeared from around a corner, pushing a baby stroller, a little face peeping out of a mound of fur. Those extra pounds on the woman must help. Frigid weather didn't appear to bother her as much as it bothered this skinny reporter.

The town showed sparks of life, but Corky also sensed an atmosphere of paralyzing loneliness. Specks of coal dust had

turned the snowy sidewalks gray. To her right down a side street, she could see drab houses and concrete apartment blocks. At the street's end, she caught a glimpse of the Khatanga River, a barren white strip.

The cab cruised past a Russian Orthodox Church, a bright contrast. "Impressive, beautiful." Corky gazed at the church spires, one short and blue dotted with white spots and the other tall and gold, both of them shaped like flower bulbs.

Smerd swerved the cab around a corner then screeched to a halt outside a dive. A rusty sign banged in the wind. Restaurant Bar, it said. Snowmobiles, a fat wheeled ATV and a grimy pickup truck sat outside the bar.

"Here we are." Stu rotated the baseball cap so its peak pointed backwards.

"Stu, I'll have their biggest hamburger and fattest fries." Starving, she imagined burgers sizzling on a charcoal grill, grass waving in a summer breeze, a picnic. A vision she'd often conjured up in the desert when eating MREs.

"You can have any burger you want as long as it's reindeer."

Corky wrinkled her nose. "Not sure I like the sound of that when I'm thinking cows."

Stu pressed the rubles into Smerd's large hands.

"Want me to hang around?" he grunted.

"Sure," Corky replied, slamming the rear door.

They found Alexei sitting at a table. He stood, reached out with a warm hand, grabbed hers and shook it, gently. Then Stu got a bear hug from a close friend.

A few minutes later, Corky sank her teeth into a reindeer burger while Stu tackled steak and eggs, wearing the Mets' cap backwards. Wolfing down a reindeer omelet, Alexei beamed at her from the other side of the table. Funny guys both of them. She couldn't help liking Stu, and she could see why he liked Alexei.

Gray hair down to the collar of his parka, kind eyes and a wide smile, she wouldn't mind having Alexei as a father.

"So how's Khatanga treating you, Corky?" Fluent English, first time she'd heard it from a Russian this far north.

"If you guys would turn up the heaters, I'd be doing just fine."

She peered through the cigar smoke at the bar seeing no pump handles, only rows of beer bottles, rough wood shelves loaded with liqueurs and vodka, vodka bottles everywhere. Rough wooden tables with plywood tops, this place would never make it in New York. “Look Stu, the waitress has orange hair.”

Alexei grinned. “Ah, you talk about us, but let me tell you, the town’s had a few problems with your friends from Hollywood.”

Thinking of Marty Watson, Corky said, “They’re not my friends.”

“That is good, and if you don’t mind my saying so, they bought all the AA batteries, silencing our portable radios and dousing the beams of our flashlights. They snapped up the toothpaste, the tape, the ladies shampoo and perfume from Store #7 when it will be months before we Siberians receive replacements.”

She nodded. “That’s too bad.”

“I remember hearing about the ladies in town having to go without tampons. Insignificant, a trivial matter, you may think, but a great discomfort for them. Prices soared in this Restaurant Bar because outsiders splashed their money around, and now the Dolgans often don’t have enough rubles to buy vodka.”

Corky grimaced. She could do without vodka.

Alexei smiled, as if in tune with her thinking, then he continued. “A Hollywood photographer made no secret of her intention to adopt a Dolgan child and give it a better life. I like to think the woman meant well and didn’t make the arrogant assumption that life in America is better than living with a tribe that communes with nature. Then our local gossip club started the rumor that foreigners were going to steal children, and it spread through the Dolgan camp faster than a bolt of lightning. Let me tell you, life can be hard when civilization in the Arctic is a delicate balance.”

Stu winked at her, glanced at his friend and asked, “How are Sonia and Vladimir doing?”

“Ah yes, I bought a shipment of candy, including some of your Snickers bars, and delivered them to our Chief of Police. Popov is going to distribute the candy to Khatanga’s kids, and Sonia’s going to help him. She is in fine health as is Vladimir, who

runs a newspaper route through the city. As you know, Stu, Vladimir also runs a snowmobile taxi service.”

“Yes, we’ll be using it.”

Corky shivered as Stu said it, but she liked the idea of meeting Sonia and Vladimir.

Alexei turned to Stu. “You may recall Popov suggesting that we should have one of those portable American CPR units for the town. Well I’m pleased to tell you that I’ve managed to buy one at a good price and we installed it in this restaurant. The bar is always open and central, you know, and it’s the most likely ...”

“Place to have a heart attack,” Corky cut in, having just swallowed the last of her reindeer burger. From what she’d heard, the residents of Khatanga had struck it lucky having a big-hearted helicopter pilot and police chief to back them up.

Stu scraped his chair on the floor, standing. Alexei rose from the table and helped her as she stood. Not used to that kind of chivalry, she didn’t know what to say and smiled.

“Next stop for us is the Kosov Mammoth,” said Stu.

Corky nodded. They hadn’t talked it over, but seeing a mammoth sounded good.

“Look, I must leave you now; I have work to do in my airport shop. I think you would call it a deadline.” Alexei took her hand in his and peered into her eyes. “Be careful when you are with Zuyev.”

Surprised, she watched him walk out of the restaurant. Careful when with Zuyev? What did he mean by that?

Chapter 4

The gate with heavy iron bars guarding the entrance to Khatanga's ice caves screeched when Stu swung it aside, rubbing Corky's nerves raw.

She frowned as he opened a noisy inner steel door. "You would have thought they'd lock that."

"They don't usually lock the caves. The bars and door are there to keep the bears out. They store the town's meat and fish in here, as well as mammoth carcasses."

Corky followed him into the mouth of a broad tunnel, darkness closing in around her. She retreated into her bulky parka, glad to be wearing it and Stu's wolf skin hat, and thankful to have him in front.

She heard Smerd lumbering several yards behind and had a hard time understanding why he'd left the cab. Although he definitely could be some kind of local watchdog, an FSB spy, more than a cab driver.

Corky would never admit it to anyone other than herself, but wide and cavernous spaces like this made her uneasy. You couldn't see whom or what came at you in the dark, had no idea what lurked near and had nothing tangible to grasp. She scurried along, focusing on the faint outline of Stu's figure in the icy tunnel ahead. When she turned a corner, she saw a lamp on the wall.

Stu slowed and waved a hand. "The bulbs are burned out in the entryway, they need replacing. Good thing they have this light here."

She gazed at the wavy ribs in the tunnel's walls and ceiling. "Solid ice."

"Nothing melts in here without a lot of help."

"Can I hear a vacuum cleaner?"

"Hairdryers, someone's at work thawing out the Kosov mammoth."

“Kosov, I meant to ask you about that.”

“Kosov is the name of the Dolgan nomad who spotted the tusks sticking out of the permafrost.”

Corky stopped at a dim cave to the left, to peer at frozen bloody legs and body pieces piled six feet high.

“All the reindeer you can eat,” Stu said, shooting ahead again.

“Rudolf burgers.” Corky smiled into the dark, relieving her tension. She ran after Stu, skidding around a corner, catching up to him.

When they turned another corner, she found herself staring past him at a blaze of light. Squinting, she saw two men standing on scaffolding beside a monstrous cube of frozen mud, over ten feet wide. They directed hairdryers at the top of the block, while a photographer crouched low shooting pictures of them.

Jutting from the block, pointing at her, were two curved tusks, longer ivories than she’d ever seen before. When Corky stopped downwind from the hairdryers, the choking stench of a thousand wet dogs enveloped her.

Mammoth scent, she guessed. Mammoths stunk as much as Manhattan would if the city dug all the sewers up at once. Oh no, the fat man snapping photos looked like Marty Watson. Yes, she had him pegged right.

Corky expected to run into Watson, but not this soon. She tugged the fur of the wolf skin hat down to her eyebrows, hoping he wouldn’t recognize her. She should never have gone along with pretending to be Zuyev’s niece on that visa.

Smerd lumbered up behind her, a looming presence.

The short, white haired man on the scaffolding switched off his hairdryer. “Come with me, Dmitri.” He shouted it to the tall fellow with him who still gunned the top of the block.

“Zuyev’s the short guy,” Stu whispered.

When Zuyev came within reach, Corky grabbed his padded jacket and gave him a hug, knocking his glasses askew.

Zuyev didn’t hug her back; he stared into her eyes.

His glasses clattered to the floor. Corky let go of him, scooping them up, but then the wolf hat fell off. Her dark hair loose around her shoulders, she handed him the glasses, flashed her best smile and said, “It’s great to meet you at last.”

Stu shoved the hat back on her head, just before Zuyev jammed his specs on his nose and peered at her again.

Zuyev didn't study her out of curiosity. He scrutinized her as if he were examining a scientific specimen. Disturbed, Corky took another step backward.

Dmitri joined them. He looked taller than he had on the scaffolding, a couple of inches taller than Smerd.

Zuyev introduced them. "Dmitri, my son, I would like you to meet your American cousin."

Dmitri's lean, muscular hand engulfed Corky's. He had unusual eyes like her, and his high forehead and prominent cheekbones gave him a somewhat aristocratic appearance. Straight black hair hung down to his shoulders.

Corky blinked, startled by the similarity of her features and Dmitri's. Zuyev had said, cousin, as if he really believed it.

Zuyev beamed. "Dmitri joined us recently from Moscow University. He has a doctorate in zoology like myself."

Yes, there was some resemblance between her and Dmitri, but Zuyev acting as if they were all part of the same family was bullshit. Neither of them looked anything like the diminutive scientist.

She had slipped an old photo of her Russian father and mother into her carry-on bag when she left New York, hoping to find time to chase down her roots. Zuyev and her father couldn't be brothers. Her father had been a lot bigger and he came from the Dyakonov family. They were no more alike than mole and mammoth.

It didn't make sense to continue this charade of being Zuyev's niece much longer, and Dmitri having similar eyes to hers had to be a wild coincidence. She shook her head, but the doubt that came with meeting Dmitri hung in there.

Smerd grunted and she turned to find him staring harder at her than ever.

Then Corky noticed some movement in the shadows between the mammoth block and the tunnel wall. Someone else watched her. She'd become the focus of too much attention. She ought to crawl under this woolly mammoth and hide. A gray-haired man in a heavy overcoat appeared, bent forward, pushing a broom. She

cursed. Her likeness to Dmitri had made her so jumpy that even the cleanup crew set her on edge.

Edwards, her smart assed editor, could well have landed her in a helluva mess.

Marty Watson appeared from around a corner of the mammoth block, waving his camera, looking as large and heavy as ever. "I thought I spotted you, Mason! What the hell are you doing in Khatanga?"

"I came here to meet my uncle. I'm on vacation." Basking in the sun and sipping martinis, yeah right. Best she'd get in Siberia would be a shot of vodka to cure frost nipped toes and fingers. If she had any sense, she'd have given Edwards a flat no for an answer and instead of coming to Siberia mellowed out on St. John, her favorite Caribbean island.

Zuyev took hold of her arm. "Come up on the scaffolding. I'd like to show you what we're doing."

Watson frowned. Ignoring him, Corky climbed the steps of the scaffolding, following Stefan Zuyev. Stu came, too. Scowling Smerd stayed on the ground.

Corky gazed down on the huge block of frozen mud. They had divided the top into rows, with strings on sticks, as if they tended a vegetable plot. Paintbrushes, dustpans and hairdryers hung from the scaffold's handrail.

Zuyev smiled at her. "We sweep away the dust that forms when we thaw out the mud. It is important not to disturb the mammoth."

Holding her breath to keep out the stench, Corky took a close look at it. The crown of a huge skull stood out from the mud. Curved tusks jutted way out in front of it down the icy tunnel, throwing long shadows.

Stu gasped, probably overwhelmed by it and the stink like her.

"Have you carbon dated the mammoth?" Stu asked Zuyev.

Zuyev nodded. "Dating shows him to be at least 29,000 years old."

The skull had a grayish brown, leathery appearance. Several patches of woolly hair stuck out of the scalp. Thirty thousand years old, Corky reminded herself. It all looked so alive, and she

found it hard to believe that the beast beneath her died so long ago.

She shut her eyes, recalling riding in the howdah of a swaying elephant while on assignment covering the Maoist uprising in Nepal, and now, the scaffolding on which she stood and the mammoth seemed to sway as well. The jumbo she rode back in the Nepalese jungle had tusks jutting forward, but a much smaller head, and that elephant's tusks were toothpicks compared to the mammoth's massive ivories.

They left the scaffolding, descending to the tunnel floor, rejoining Dmitri and Hollywood wonder boy, Marty Watson.

Dmitri had unusual blue eyes like her, she reminded herself, sneaking another glance at him. She didn't like it, but there could be a genetic link, more to it than chance.

Stu heard a cell phone ring and then realized it came from his pocket.

"Popov here. That you, Dr. Uhlig?"

"Yes, thanks for calling back." Earlier, while Corky had changed into the long johns back in the hotel, he'd made a quick call to Popov's office, leaving the message that he'd be having lunch with Alexei and asking Popov to join in. The three of them often enjoyed lunch together last year and it would have been a good chance to introduce Corky to Khatanga's chief of police.

The phone stayed quiet for a few more moments. Then Popov said, "You'd better come to Alexei's shack at the Airport. Now." Popov didn't sound angry. He seemed shocked and worried sick.

"We're coming right away." Stu grabbed Corky's hand and rushed out of the ice caves. Smerd, hard on their heels, caught up as they reached the iron gate. "Alexei's shack. Hit the gas," Stu shouted. Pushing past them, the big man whipped open the doors of the cab and jumped in.

The cab backed up the instant Stu and Corky landed in the back. Roaring down the road, snowdrifts and concrete buildings a blur, the cab wheeled around corners racing through Khatanga. Stu clutched Corky as hard as she gripped his parka when the cab pulled to a squealing stop in front of Alexei's shack.

“Corky, see that silver Mercedes over there. It’s Kira Chapaev’s car. Russian security police, FSB, 21st Century KGB.”

“I’m more interested in that army lorry we passed, Stu. The vehicle going away from here on the approach road, headlights blazing and moving as slow as a hearse. I caught a glimpse of the driver and he didn’t look like a soldier. He wore black.”

“Oh Christ, I didn’t pick up on that.” Stu hopped out of the cab with Corky, and turned, this time swearing under his breath.

Kira Chapaev appeared as if from nowhere and grasped his hand. “So you came back to see us, Dr. Uhlig. And who might this be?”

“Corky Mason, she’s, er, Dr. Zuyev’s niece.”

Kira frowned. The ferret meets the beautiful, he thought, watching Corky shake the FSB agent’s hand.

With her eyes gleaming, Kira made him feel more than uncomfortable. Now he knew why he hadn’t had any trouble getting a visa to return to northern Siberia. Kira intended to finish what she’d started.

Then to his surprise, she turned and walked into the shack, leaving him and Corky standing.

The year before, he’d caught Kira Chapaev searching his room at the Taimyr hotel, and he’d hoped he would never see her again. If a herd of mammoths had stampeded through his belongings, they wouldn’t have been more of a shambles. She had ripped open his backpack and shredded his clothes, strewn pieces of them on the bed. In the middle of the mess, he had found the spearhead he’d discovered at a mammoth dig, hard evidence supporting the Kill Theory.

We’re a perfect pair, the ferrety agent had said. Then she’d pressed her long nose to his and breathed onions on him, saying, I’ll forget about you trying to smuggle the spear out of Siberia, and we shall have sex.

She pulled up her skirt, showing a pair of hefty thighs that could crush a man, and he’d run out of there. When Kira caught up with him at the Restaurant Bar an hour later, she lost her temper and called him a black assed bastard, a vile insult and wide of the mark. His tan skin came from his Native American grandfather.

Stu blinked a couple of times as Corky nudged him with an elbow and snapped him back to the present.

Popov appeared from the shack and stepped forward, hand extended, greeting him and Corky.

He'd helped the police chief sort out the forensic evidence on a case involving the suffocation of a Russian trapper last summer, and they'd become good friends. The trapper had downed a bottle of vodka, staggered out of his hut and collapsed headfirst into the mud. The bruise on the man's temple came from hitting a rock, not a blow from a fist or blunt instrument. It wasn't difficult for him to figure out, since paleontology and forensics were similar disciplines.

Popov's face looked grim as he said, "You'd better come in."

Stomach churning, Stu walked into the workshop with his head down. Corky had gone as quiet as a gravestone, too.

"An airport worker found Alexei dead, Dr. Uhlig." Popov shook his head. "Such a mess, to preserve his dignity we sent his remains straight to the morgue."

The weak sunshine of Arctic spring filtered through the window, casting light onto the floor, illuminating the chalked outline of a body. It also showed a splintered hole in the floorboards, a four-inch wide gap with long cracks shooting into the boards on either side. All of the wood stained with blood, large stains made by pints of blood.

Stu couldn't stop a vision of Alexei lying there from forming in his mind. His friend would have a hole in his stomach four inches wide. "How could somebody do that?" Impossible to imagine how much force it had taken to smash through a man's innards and penetrate thick floorboards.

"Let me demonstrate how a normal man couldn't." Popov lifted an ice pick off the workbench, a tool shaped like a thick spear, with a five-foot shaft and a long steel point.

Hurting after losing a good friend, Stu bit his lip. Corky took a step forward. "Is that the murder weapon?"

"No," Kira cut in.

Popov shifted to a clear area of floor. He lifted the pick above his head and rammed its point into the boards with a thud that rattled the workshop. The chief stood over six feet tall and strong,

yet the pick hadn't even penetrated the floorboards. "I don't know who, or what, could have killed him, Dr. Uhlig."

"Come to the rear door." Popov led the way, and threw the door open. "Look only please, we have to make casts of the footprints."

Stu peered out, but drew back as Kira thrust her head beside his. He'd seen enough. A line of prints in the snow led to the rear door, rounded prints, longer and wider than the box that would come with size 20 sneakers.

"The footprint casts are not to leave police headquarters," Kira Chapaev snapped.

Corky glanced outside and Stu joined her. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

Giving her a mental hug, Stu examined the shop floor near the door.

"Don't touch anything," Kira warned.

Stu ignored her, kept searching. He could feel Kira Chapaev's eyes boring into him, glanced up and confirmed it. At the same instant, Corky smiled in his direction. She could smile at him anywhere, anytime.

Sad times right now and he could only manage a weak smile. Yet Stu couldn't help thinking that Corky gave him the same flush he'd experienced twenty years ago in fifth grade when his teacher took his hand in hers and led him down the corridor to the school nurse. He'd turned hot back then and his ears caught fire. No fire now, but Corky's smile did offer a glimmer of hope. He had to move on and with her help, he would, but he'd never forget Alexei.

"Did Alexei Romanov put up a fight?" Corky said it softly, almost as if she didn't want anyone to hear.

Popov caught up on it and answered. "Romanov doesn't appear to have had much chance. We didn't see any blood under the fingernails, although he did have a broken forearm and wrist. We'll know more when our physician examines him."

Stu ground his teeth. Pinned to the floor with a gaping hole punched through his stomach, Alexei must have been in agony until he died from loss of blood. His smashed body would soon be in a remote branch of Khatanga's ice caves. "I don't think I could stand seeing his body."

Popov nodded. "I understand."

He'd pay his respects to Alexei by helping Popov find out who or what had murdered him. He owed the Russian helicopter pilot who'd befriended him at least that. Alexei also took a big risk with the FSB, speaking out and warning him to stay clear of Kira Chapaev.

Still searching for clues, Stu spotted a tuft of coarse brown hair, stuck at ankle level to the edge of a buckled rotor blade that lay against the wall. He took three strides, bent and peered at it. "What's this?" It could have come from the murderer's boots.

Popov appeared beside him, kneeling. The Chief took a penknife from his pocket, lifted the hair off the rotor blade and dropped it into a handkerchief. He sniffed. "It smells like a wet dog."

"Give me that," Kira snapped. "It must go to Moscow for analysis."

Popov ignored her. Corky looked at Kira as if she wanted to kick the legs out from under her.

Stu sniffed the handkerchief. He'd know that disgusting smell anywhere.

Popov folded the handkerchief and slid it into his pocket. "I will get this analyzed."

Stu felt a glimmer of excitement. Finding hair from a woolly mammoth might be a small step forward, yet it could lead to more. He had recently read a scientific paper that mentioned the making of boots from mammoth hide by Cro-Magnon man. Yet, that couldn't be the case when the Cro-Magnons no longer existed. No, it didn't add up.

Zuyev or Dmitri could be involved, and the Dolgans were another source of mammoth hide and hair. Yet it was hard to see what motive scientists or the nomads could have for murdering a helicopter pilot who had done a lot to help.

The killer might have attacked Alexei for personal reasons, though, and could be any one of them.

Chapter 5

When Corky entered the Restaurant Bar with Stu, hoping to have a relaxing dinner with him, she saw Zuyev sitting at a table watching them. Not difficult for Zuyev to figure out where they'd eat, when nowhere else stayed open for dinner. Stu didn't look too enthusiastic as Zuyev beckoned to her with a finger. Funny fellow Stu, she couldn't help liking him, but Zuyev had a long way to go to gain her respect. Nevertheless, it wouldn't do to snub the old fart and sit elsewhere.

Zuyev ordered a bottle of vodka from the waiter, whether she and Stu wanted any or not, then pointed to reindeer steak and chips on the menu, for himself. Chips as in Europe, not French fries. She'd better be careful here when choosing food, and keep thinking reindeer. Yep, she'd better stick with chopped deer in a bun.

Chuckling, Stu also went for a repeat of his lunch, probably to make her feel better.

Curious, she watched a noisy group across the dance floor, what looked like Polar Expedition types mingling with the Hollywood crew and Dolgan tribesmen. A man clad in a black leather blazer shuffled past, blocking her view, his arms clasped around a bulky woman with orange hair. They swayed to music piped through speakers; a tune that sounded like it came from a bagpiper on an opium high. Corky grinned, wondering how she'd look with orange hair. Maybe she ought to go check it out at Khatanga's Store #7.

Zuyev raised his glass in salute and gulped the contents, while she and Stu took sips of theirs.

She could see two orange heads in the place, the waitress they saw at lunch and the woman dancing with the leather blazer. "Russian Mafioso and one of the local prostitutes," Stu whispered. "The Mafia controls the flow of goods along the ports of the Laptev

Sea. They've had their claws clipped back now, but they used to have a stranglehold on Siberia."

Corky downed the last of her vodka "I wouldn't have gathered any of that from what I've seen around here." Zuyev raised another shot of vodka in salute as she asked for a glass of water.

She shoved the burger aside, wrinkling her nose, thinking that perhaps a joker had slipped a slice of stinky mammoth in on her. No way did it taste the same as lunch. Jesus, when would the waiter bring that water?

Stu sawed at his steak, rocking the table. Corky placed a hand on the corner, steadying it, and watched while he shoved a hunk of meat into his mouth. Some table, a plywood top supported by three long metal legs and one short.

The rocking table didn't appear to bother Zuyev, the vodka-toasting machine, but maybe the liquor had something to do with that.

"It is good that you meet Dmitri your cousin, Ms. Mason."

"He's not my cousin Dr. Zuyev."

Zuyev's eyes gleamed in the light of the table's candle.

"Why don't you get DNA tested to see if you and Dmitri match up?" Stu mumbled it through a mouthful.

Corky had seen a trailer in town with a red cross daubed on its side, the local hospital, primitive like its surroundings. She wouldn't let them shove a secondhand needle into her, suck out blood and give her an ugly virus. "No way, I'm not going near that rusty trailer."

"I could get a sample from your hairbrush. But mostly broken hairs in them, though, when you need a hair follicle to get DNA," Stu spouted. "A saliva sample is the best."

She kicked his foot. "Shut up meathead." If he didn't stop tipping vodka, she'd have to kick his butt. Damn it, Zuyev had topped up her glass again. Water, that's what she needed. Not vodka.

Zuyev grinned. "Dr. Uhlig has a good idea. Would you get tested, Ms. Mason?"

"My father's name is Sergei Dyakonov. Angie and Bill Mason, the New Yorkers who adopted me, told me that my father and mother brought me to the States from Russia as a baby. My

mother and father died in a plane crash a few months later.” Zuyev and Stu were off base, hinting that she and Dmitri were relatives. Lord, when Stu started banging his gums about science he lost all commonsense.

“Would you do it, Ms. Mason?” Zuyev persisted.

“No. I came to Siberia for a vacation, and I find mammoths interesting. Let’s talk about them.” Oops, vodka talking and distorting the facts. She had no choice, though. She couldn’t tell him she’d come because her editor twisted her arm.

The zoologist filled their vodka glasses again and then raised his. “May it not be long before mammoths roam the tundra.”

Corky tossed and turned on her room’s pallet bed, sweating, cursing because she’d drunk too much. If it weren’t so dark in there, she could have seen her breath steaming into frigid air.

An hour later, the pallet bed stopped swaying, and her pulse rate slowed. She stopped perspiring. Snug under the covers, rest and peace at last. No dreaming please, she mumbled, half asleep.

A palm frond smacked her in the face. She raised her arms to ward off a branch that threatened to knock her off the elephant’s back. If this howdah didn’t stop bucking, she’d barf. Orange howdah, gaudy like a deer hunter’s hat. Ugh, she shouldn’t have let Stu dye it. That’s weird, this jumbo had reindeer antlers, but it had a huge head and brown fuzzy hair, hair as coarse as mattress stuffing. Holy Jehovah, what an awful stench, the stink of a million wet dogs.

Surfacing a little, she heard a rattling sound. Must be the door handle. Nah, she didn’t give a damn about that when she’d locked her room with a key the size of a handgun, a brass key weighing a ton.

Quiet now, ice all around her, as cold as a morgue. Yikes, she’d better get out of here and climb on jumbo’s back again. Screw this jungle. Sand in the howdah, grit in her hair, in her ears and up her nose, between her lips and in her underwear.

Corks started to rain down on her, so many that she had to swim to the surface, spitting them out of her mouth. Then a strong wind blew them all away, as if stripping her of her identity.

Struggling to wake up, foggy, Corky clung to the edge of consciousness as the door creaked. She must be dreaming about the door creaking. Damn the vodka, she rode in the swaying howdah again, this time staring down at mammoth tusks instead of reindeer antlers.

A hard hand gripped her, thumb and fingers on either side of her cheeks, squeezing, hurting and forcing open her mouth. Someone shoved a swab on a stick between her lips. She kicked, shook herself all over and tried to get free but other hands pinned her down. The cotton swab wiped the inside of her mouth, the roof of it and her tongue, and under her tongue. She retched and then choked. The swab pulled out of her mouth. She could smell body odor that didn't come from her or from an elephant.

The stretchy band tightened around her biceps. Hurting, she gritted her teeth. A sharp pain stabbed into the crook of her arm and dense fog closed in. She fell into a black void, arms and legs flying wide from her body, all of her floating free. Peace, she found blessed peace at last.

Someone shook her shoulder. She snapped open her eyelids. Ouch! The insurgents had bombed her head.

“Corky are you all right?” The light shone in her eyes, the glaring, naked bulb hanging from the ceiling of her room. Longhaired Stu bent over her, looking worried. She pushed herself up, propped herself on an elbow and returned his stare.

“Found your door ajar,” she heard him say. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. “It’s eight in the morning. I thought you’d gone to breakfast without me.”

She shook her head, told him about the swab on a stick. “I had a rotten nightmare.”

“What’s that on your arm?”

She sat upright and gaped at the crook of her right arm. On top of the vein, she had a small scab and a streak of dried blood.