

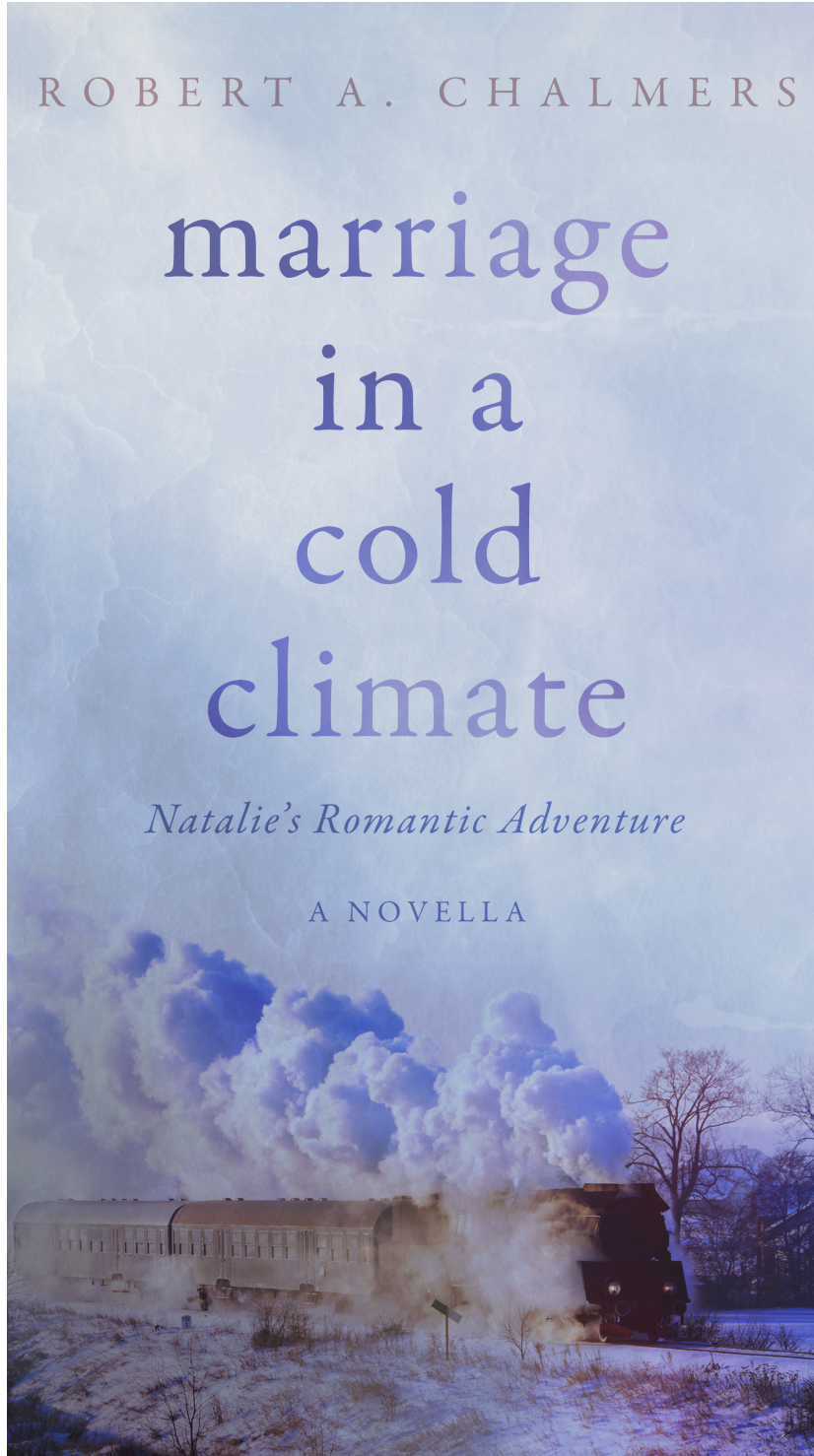
Robert Chalmers

ROBERT A. CHALMERS

marriage
in a
cold
climate

Natalie's Romantic Adventure

A NOVELLA



Marriage In A Cold Climate

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Marriage in a Cold Climate

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DEDICATION

... For Liz, my wonderful muse.

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Introduction

A dramatic story that spans two continents, as a young woman is dragged across the frozen wastes of northern Russia on the Trans-Siberian, from her comfortable home in rural Australia. Two people in love, and soon to be married, who find themselves caught up in the old enmities of a past revolutionary USSR. International intrigue, and personal danger tear the protagonists apart in a seemingly hopeless situation. Neither could have foreseen the outcome.

Chapter 1

William looked across the green lawn to where the group of people from the Manor stood. It was early evening yet, and the garden torches flickered in the light breeze. The staff moved about quietly making sure that everything was just right. Of course William had ensured that everything was in place before any guests had arrived, but they knew how important this night was to William, and fussed about the slightest details, anyway.

The garden setting was beautiful. The property was well up in the mountains, and the natural coolness allowed for a wide variety of beautiful flowering plants to be nurtured. They were at their best at this time of the year which was why William had chosen the setting. It was in this garden of delight that William hoped to win the hand of the girl who had captured his heart. He glanced again at the small group of people across the garden. They had moved into the shelter of light open-sided garden marquees and were sipping Champaign and tasting delicacies offered by William's capable staff.

Just as he was about to glance away, he caught the eye of his love. She had been seeking him out and now blushed a pretty pink as he smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging manner.

Most of the guests had now arrived, and the musicians were taking their place on a raised platform at the lower end of the garden. Light chamber music floated over the lawns, the hum of conversation filled the evening air like bees busy about the garden on a spring day. William mustered the courage to approach the family of the girl he loved.

Natalie. William pondered her name. A derivative of the Russian Natasha. It suited her. She was nearly as tall as he and had a willowy figure that seemed at one with the graceful plantings of the spring garden. Her dark hair fell in a black river down her back, held into a long tail by a sparkling diamond and ivory hair clip that shone like a beacon against her dark tresses.

William had to draw his breath in to steady himself as Natalie turned toward him. The beauty of her countenance would he felt sure, stop an advancing army. Just a hint of slightly almond eyes, dark as midnight and alive with glittering star points. A faint smile tilting the corners of her mouth as the apricot flush of apprehension delicately coloured her cheeks. He had to be bold and brave. His future depended upon it. He was sure he would not be able to go on if Natalie's family rejected his intentions once they were made known.

Indeed, Natalie's father was known as something of a fearsome person. William had heard the stories of suitors being sent packing, a flea in their ear at having the temerity to seek his approval to court his daughter. His very name seemed designed to frighten off suitable young men.

Stanis Stratsvootya was his name although it was rumoured that he preferred—amongst his friends—to be called simply Stan Stratsman. He felt it more suitable in an Australian setting. All this William pondered in the few moments it took him to make his way purposefully over to the family party. He wished the earth would swallow him up as Natalie's mother Lady Nikolina, looked directly at him. She was a mature Natalie. Although he was sure she knew of their intentions, her expression now gave nothing away.

"Good afternoon to you Madam," said William, addressing Natalie's mother, "thank you for your kind consideration in agreeing to join this delightful gathering."

The lady smiled at the formality of this young man whom she knew well to be here for only one purpose, and that being to seek her daughter's hand in marriage.

"We thank you for your kind invitation, although I fear that had we declined we may well have found a sturdy ladder propped against the household at some not too distant time in the future." Lady Nikolina's eyes twinkled with her quick smile, although it still left William blinking and tongue tied.

He was saved by Natalie's father walking up and taking his wife's elbow gently. "My dear," he spoke softly "please be kind to your future Son-in-Law, and don't tease him so." He turned to William and a stern look came into his eyes.

William took a small step back, feeling somewhat like a rabbit caught in the hedge row. Yet here was Natalie's father already referring to him as the future Son-in-Law. It remained only for William to regain his composure and formally ask for Natalie's hand.

"Sir," he began "I wish to ask... I mean... I would like to talk ... ummm, I mean." William felt he had suddenly lost the ability to speak clearly. He took a breath and looked about his garden, at the fine guests, the beautiful spring day, and there was his true love, standing near the hedges, shading her pretty skin with a small parasol against the slanting sun. There was some movement behind the hedges, just to the right of Natalie, momentarily drawing his eye away.

Chapter 2

Natalie's mother Anastasia could not have seen what William now observed with some alarm. Peering through a gap in the folds of the marquee behind the family group was a dishevelled ruffian brandishing a pistol in his hand. The man was obviously bent on evil intention, and before the startled gaze not only of Natalie's mother but the entire family, William rushed past them with a wild cry and hurled himself upon the assassin. The pistol discharged with a roar that sounded like a cannon in the quiet evening air. William's head was ringing from the sound but he had his man. The servants came rushing to his aid.

These were not the soft servants of big houses, but men who had accompanied William on many of his adventures into darkest Africa, and the wilds of the South American rain forests. They were used to quick action and were to a man dedicated to their employer.

William regained his feet and dragged the murderous fiend to an upright stance.

"What is the meaning of this outrage you savage?" cried William.

In reply the man simply looked past William directly at Natalie's father. With such hatred in his eye that William involuntarily took a step back, the man spat on the ground and called at the top of his voice,

"Death to the traitors of the revolution." With this he hurled himself forward, completely breaking free of William's grasp and snatched his grimy arm around Natalie's waist. "Touch me and she dies on the spot. I go safely from this place or you will never hear your daughter's voice again. Quickly man, fetch a vehicle." This last he had directed at one of William's men, even then with a pistol levelled at the Bolshevik's head. The man looked to William for direction.

William took a breath and assessed the situation. The gleaming blade of a dagger shone in the flickering light. Its tip had already drawn a tiny point of blood from the neck of his beloved. He dare not hesitate.

He shook his head with the merest of movements, his man lowering his revolver slightly. His aim was not wavering though, and he would be able to draw a bead on the villain in an instant should an opportunity arise.

All this time, the man had been sidling sideways, the lightweight of Natalie no hindrance to him at all. The man was now on the verge of the driveway, sweeping around past the front of the house away down the slope to the gates of the property some way distant.

William was frantic, but trying to remain calm. The small cut in Natasha's neck was trickling a thin crimson flow that could be plainly seen against her fair skin. 'I must remain calm', he thought 'my Natalie depends on me now.' He could not take his eyes from the scene in front of him.

He shouted to one of his men, without taking his eyes from the tableau in front of him.

"Quickly Barfield, bring around my automobile. Do not tarry, a life depends on your haste."

The would-be assassin laughed aloud, the raucous sound shattering the still air. The slightly mad notes in his voice betraying his fear although his face gave nothing away except the determination of the true fanatic.

The string quartet had long since ceased to play.

William's car came around from the car park. William's driver stepped out, leaving the engine running. "Move away," cried the desperate man, his grip tightening on Natalie.

The car wheeled around and sped down the slope of the driveway toward the front gates. William watched helplessly as his automobile sped down the long driveway, carrying away the woman he loved to who knew what fate.

Suddenly the tableau of frozen figures dissolved. Stanis rushed through the tables, knocking chairs and tables flying. His personal men close on his heels. William himself rushed for his sports car, and soon there was a convoy of fast cars roaring from the property grounds. The only direction the road could take was directly into the city. There were no turnoff roads along the way until the suburbs many miles distant. There were a number of high powered cars in the garage, and the fastest was William's. The car was tuned for racing, and if any car could catch the abductor, this one would.

William's sports car, its huge engine roaring at full supercharged power came hurtling around a hedge row corner and almost ran into the forward car of Stanis, stopped in the middle of the road. William took in the scene at a glance and in a split second had rammed his vehicle through the hedge and was rushing across the field to where he could see Natasha being dragged from the stolen auto and bundled into a single engine plane that seemed to be built for speed.

He would be too late. He could see that already the aircraft was taxiing and gathering speed rapidly. There was no way of stopping it now.

Chapter 3

Natalie was no shrinking violet, despite her fragile beauty. She did not take kindly to being summarily bundled into the open cockpit of a biplane and flown off to who knew where. It was unfortunate that she was now some thousands of feet in the air, and a glance over the side confirmed that escape was impossible, at least for the moment. She could not imagine what was in store for her, nor where her abductor might be taking her. Natalie determined that she would attempt her escape at the very first opportunity.

The small aeroplane droned on through the cloudless sky, making only slight turns now and then to adjust course. After what seemed like hours Natalie felt the aircraft losing altitude as it spiralled down toward a small beach in a remote cove somewhere on the coast. There was no habitation in sight. No city, no houses. Nothing but a ketch anchored in the bay. No roads or tracks were visible. Natalie was able to see for many miles as the biplane spiralled down. Escape at this point did not seem like a good idea. She would only become lost in the vastness of the bush if she did manage to escape. The small aircraft bounced along the hard sand at the water's edge and came to rest a few paces from where a man stood beside a rowing boat drawn up on the sand. The propeller shuddered to a stop, the blades swinging back and forth in a last flick from the engine pressure.

The pilot, the man who had dragged Natalie away from her family and home and the presence of her dearest love, swung up onto the wing by Natalie's cockpit.

"You will get out now and proceed to the rowing boat. We are going on a journey. A very long journey. I know your father will follow us. Move. Now. Do not resist me as I would just as soon leave you here in the wilderness." The evil looking man stared at Natalie for long moments. Her natural courage began to quail under his fierce stare. He jumped down on to the sand and indicated for her to follow. The problem now was Natalie's attire. She was dressed for evening cocktails and not for clambering in and out of small aeroplanes and rowing boats. She had been virtually thrown into the cockpit and the plane had become airborne in great haste, but during the long trip she had managed to arrange her cloths with some degree of modesty. This was now to be all undone.

"You will look away please!" she demanded.

"Bah!" Was all she got for reply as the villain strode away toward the row boat. He was so sure of himself. So sure that Natalie would not make an escape. She fumed at his self-assurance because she well knew he was right. She could not escape at this time. She could only wonder at her destination.

William had just missed the aircraft as it sped down the field away from him. It had no markings, and as he watched it disappearing into the distance, he could see that it was turning away from the path that would take it to the city. It was heading out toward the coast and over what William knew to be vast wilderness. Of course he knew the country well, but could not think of where the aeroplane could be heading. It had to be heading for a rendezvous with someone on the far coast. William stood in the empty field, frustration and fear alternating in his thoughts.

Some way back across the field stood Natalie's father. He too stared into the distant sky where the small aircraft had finally faded from sight. He had an interested, calculating look on his face when William approached him.

"William." He said. "Let us not beat about these bushes. I know of your love for my daughter." He hesitated. "Would you agree to come on a long journey with me to rescue her?"

William started forward, his mouth open to speak, when Stanis held up his hand.

"The journey will be very dangerous. At least when we arrive it will be. These people want me, not my daughter. They will have neither!"

"But of course I will accompany you." Williams's voice rose in pitch. "I would go alone if needs be. Just tell me where you think they are going."

Natalie's father just looked at William, but William could see that he was not the object of the gaze. Stanis was looking into the future, and the expression on his face did not bode well for those he was seeing.

Some considerable time passed. Natalie found she had the run of the ketch. She could go where she liked. There was nothing but calm blue sea as far as the eye could encompass. The weather grew hotter and hotter, then became progressively colder. The sun's changing path in the sky going unnoticed by Natalie. She became listless and melancholy as the days dragged into weeks, with only small islands breaking the horizon occasionally, and little conversation.

Then one freezing morning she awoke and looked out of the small porthole. She almost swooned in shock. No, this could not be. It was a dream.

Chapter 4

All Natalie could see nearby was ice and snow. Away in the distance stood the unmistakable onion domes of a Russian Orthodox Church. Where on earth could she be? The floating ice bumped and jostled along the sides of the slowly moving boat as it made its way into the harbour. Natalie quickly pulled on all the warm clothes that had been provided to her on the trip. A heavy coat that swept all the way to the floor, with a thick fur collar, and topped by a hat of the same type of fur completed her preparations. Heavy fur lined boots were already on her feet. She started for the upper deck, a whirl of thoughts running through her mind. Those church domes and spires. The ice and cold. The harbour. This could only be one place on earth. A place she had hoped she would never see again. Vladivostok, the Russian Pacific port, and the terminus of the Trans Siberian Railway.

Natalie stopped and gripped the hand rail as the passageway seemed to swim around her. A low moan escaped her white lips as a shiver of fear coursed through her veins. Time had lost all meaning to her as day followed night on the vast empty ocean. The crew had ignored her and spoken not a word in all the time it had taken to reach this port. Only her abductor had spoken to her. His name was Grushko she had found out, and his only interest in Natalie was to draw her father after him. She had been provided with everything she needed, and other than that was left alone with her thoughts. Thoughts of William and of her father and mother.

Natalie stepped onto the deck and looked about. They had drawn up to a disused wharf that was away from the main port activities. The oily water whooshed and gurgled about the rotting pylons and fallen timbers. Natalie shivered despite her warm clothes.

Grushko stepped up behind her.

"Welcome back to your motherland." He said quietly. "The journey continues even so."

Natalie turned slowly to face him.

"Do not try to escape. Do not try to attract attention. If I abandon you here in this stinking city, you will never make it out alive. Even the police here will not help you. Most likely you will end up in the Gulags as a foreign spy." Grushko stroked her shoulder with his large right hand.

"Remember. You have no papers, and here as you know, that makes you a non-person."

Natalie knew exactly what he was talking about. Many years before she had held tightly to her father's hand, as she and her mother had accompanied her father on his flight across Russia from the clutches of the Communists. As she now knew, from the state police. From a man named Yevgeni Ivanovich Grushko. The man who now so casually held her arm.

Natalie could not speak. Fear had locked her mouth shut and her lips were pressed into a thin white line, and already the trickle of tears was freezing into pearls on her cheeks.

One of the crew hurried up to the pair and pointing across the bay drew Grushko's attention to a motor boat that was heading directly toward them. It was unmistakably a police vessel, and heavily armed. With no further delay, Natalie was hurried up the rope ladder that had been lowered down to the deck. Grushko almost threw her into the back of a waiting car, and they sped off into the frozen wasteland of the disused docks area.

"Where are we going?" Natalie asked in a whisper.

Grushko looked steadily at her for long moments. She thought he was not going to answer. Then he said one word.

"Leningrad."

Natalie felt she was going into a nightmare from which there was no awakening. Leningrad was yet another half a world away. They could only go by train, the Trans Siberian Railway, and that would take a week or more to cross the vastness of Siberia. She had never felt so alone and helpless.

The car sped through the deserted docklands, sliding and bouncing on the frozen streets. The driver was taking wild chances and kept the speed high, even at risk of crashing.

"Chazor," said Grushko to the driver "what is the great hurry now? We have cleared the docks, you will have the local militia after us soon!"

The driver looked over his shoulder and yelled

"The train departs very soon. There is not another for a week. Your papers are in that satchel at your feet. Be prepared to run for the train. We will be there soon."

He turned back to his driving, both hands gripping the wheel as he flung the car along the grimy streets. Even the soft blanket of fresh snow couldn't hide the accumulated rubbish from years of neglect.

Natalie saw a sign in the weak cold light of the early dawn. Nevsky Prospect. The station was very near. Suddenly the Zhiguli slid to a stop, bouncing off the edge of the gutter. Grushko dived out, dragging Natalie with him and they ran for the platform. The engine could be seen in a cloud of steam near the open end of the station, and steam rose from between the cars.

Chapter 5

"William, you have your passport?" It was more of a statement from Natalie's father than a question.

"Yes of course Mr Stratsvootya." Replied William.

By now both men were standing in the drawing room of William's house. The ladies were gathered around, and one or two gentlemen of their mutual acquaintance were standing by puffing on cigars, and muttering dark words, liberally interspersed with "damn Bolshi swine" and "communist plots", and meanwhile making steady inroads into William's father's best whiskey.

Natalie's mother was quietly crying, as she sat on the large sofa by William's mother. That good lady was doing her best to console Nikolina, but it seemed a hopeless cause, so she sat quietly by the other woman and occasionally topped up her little sherry glass.

It was much too early in the afternoon for such liberties, but they had all had such a shock that Dame Edwina, William's mother thought it would not hurt on this one occasion.

Quite suddenly Nikolina sat up and raised an admonishing finger to her husband.

"Andrei." She said with some severity. "You must tell these good people the truth after all about our names, and about us. You can not expect this young man to follow you to the ends of the earth—nor to wed your daughter, if he and his family have not been told the truth. All of it mind, for if you do not; I will."

Nikolina dabbed at her eyes, smudging her makeup a little more. William thought she was beginning to look like someone had actually struck her; so dark were her eyes.

Neither William, nor anyone else in the room though had missed the first word of the good lady wife to this now seemingly less than truthful gentleman. 'Andrei' she had called him. Apart from the quiet sobs of the Lady Nikolina his wife, the room was quiet and still. All eyes were on her husband.

"Very well Nikolina, very well. If I must I must. I can see that." He champed irritably on his now unlit cigar. "Yes, very well. I must tell you that my name is Andrei Vladimirov. Major Andrei Vladimirov, and this is of course my good wife, as you know, Nikolina. The Lady Nikolina Vladimirova. In this country also." Andrei chewed his cigar as though he had a personal grudge against it. "Yes," he said again. "I am Major Andrei Vladimirov, lately of the Russian State Security Bureau." He looked around the room. The words hung in the air as brightly lit as summer lanterns. He poured himself a generous whisky; took a sip and added in an undertone. "Retired."

This was something that obviously galled him immensely. The cigar was almost shredded by now.

"However!" He barked, his long moustache and beard seeming to bristle all the more. "I am not so retired that these people do not still fear me. Fear me I say." He repeated with some relish.

Andrei paced up and down the carpet before the empty fireplace. It was springtime of course, and no need of fires now. Unlike Russia, his homeland where his daughter now raced westward on the rattling swaying Express, the white expanse of the Siberian east stretching away into the distance under a bright glittering full moon.

Natalie's father passed a hand over his face as though wiping away rain at the thought of his daughter in the hands of those murderous villains.

"I am solely responsible for having put most of a band of criminals into the Gulags. A band led by that man. He escaped me, and it seems they have followed me all the way to this country. He and a small group of close individuals at the core of his organisation. Bolsheviks they call themselves. Communists they call themselves. Revolutionaries!" He whirled around to face the other men.

"Bah. I tell you they are nothing but criminals. Georgian criminals of the worst kind. Georgians and Uzbeks. Murderous dogs that use the revolution only to cover their own greedy and filthy activities. Well, now I will have them. I still have many friends in the State Bureau, and together we will hunt them down and slaughter them like the rabid animals they are." Andrei suddenly stopped. He realised that he was shouting.

"Andrei—Mr Vladimirov, errr.. Major?" William stuttered slightly. Natalie's father looked at William. "Andrei." He said.

"Andrei. I hesitate to ask now. How can I be of assistance, seeing how you are, um, who you are?"

Andrei walked over and stood in front of William. He reached out and put his large hands on William's shoulders.

"William." He began. "You have here now our permission to marry our daughter." He looked briefly at his wife who nodded slightly.

"When we rescue her, it is you she will want to see there in the forefront. Not I. She will know her father will come. She will fear it I think. But come to her aid I will. However William, when she sees you there—come to rescue her; then will she be truly yours." The cigar finally fell apart in his fingers.

Chapter 6

"William Greylock. What is your business in Russia?" The woman facing William across the desk was as beautiful a woman as he had ever seen; but the tone in her voice was as cold and impersonal as any he had ever heard, and the question as well as being direct was delivered in a manner that had the underlying message 'and you had better be telling the truth when you answer'.

Vladimirov was standing in the queue directly behind William, calmly watching the interaction between William and the customs and immigration officer.

"I." William hesitated. "I have come to find my wife." He immediately went as red as the colour of the band on the officers cap. How lame that sounded.

"I mean, ummm. That is. I believe—ummm. We believe, my wife to be was—ummm—brought to Russia." His voice trailed away as the right eyebrow of the customs officer rose higher and higher. There was no other expression on the woman's face. She simply stared stonily at William, with no more than the raised eyebrow for expression.

Vladimirov sighed loudly. They would be in this cursed queue all day if something was not done now. He knew how such bureaus as the Customs and Immigration worked of course. He had over his career actually worked in the bureau on many occasions. Andrei leaned forward and reached past William with a small leather bound ID booklet in his hand.

"Excuse me Comrade, you will be good enough to read this." There was just the slightest hint of authority in his voice. The woman behind the desk looked at Andrei Vladimirov and then at William. 'Comrade' indeed. No one used that expression any more. She took the small ID wallet and started glancing at it. She had had that hint of authority many times in her job and wasn't to be fooled into rushing her job. A very important job as she saw it. Guarding the very frontiers of the Motherland against those who would try to sneak in to destroy what had been built with such great sacrifice over the years.

Her mouth opened to snap a response at this; what was his name? Andrei Vladimirov? Yes, that was it. As she framed her response her eyes travelled over the rest of the small document. Suddenly her mouth snapped shut, and she went as pale as a ghost. She realised how close she had come to committing the greatest folly of her career. She had been about to insult—as only one Russian can insult another—a Hero of the Soviet Union. She gripped the edge of the desk for a little support as she frantically waved to two guards who by now were closely watching the little play being acted out under their very noses.

In seconds they were behind Vladimirov and William with their Kalashnikov weapons lowered and at the ready.

The customs officer was becoming faint at this sudden turn for the worse.

"No No No you fool." She spat in a voice barely controlled. 'I must not behave in an unseemly manner.' She thought. She composed herself as the confused guards shouldered the weapons. In a tightly controlled voice she continued.

"I did not order you to arrest these people. Put away your weapons before I have you posted to Boranly-Burannyi." This was a railway hamlet on the desert steppe of Sarozek. About as cold and remote as it was possible to get in this vast land and made famous by a story written by the author Chinghiz Aitmatov.

The pale customs office felt she now had control of the situation again. It had all taken only seconds of course, and Andrei stood calmly waiting. He knew from long experience how these things worked.

"Comrade Vladimirov, please forgive these peasants in uniform. They send us boys to guard the borders. Please, follow me." She added. "This is your friend of course?" With this she took Williams elbow. William was still trying to get his mouth closed.

With the desk now left unattended the long queue was simply left to languish. The experienced travellers simply folded their hands and stared at the ceiling. The line would move again when it moved. There was nothing to do but wait. Those for whom this was a first time fumed, grumbled, looked about and finally settled down in an uneasy tension. Somewhere in the line a child started to wail.

Vladimirov decided to help this officer a little by easing the tension. After all, she was not really to blame if the guards behaved like dolts.

"Comrade Customs Office." He emphasised the words to give them a sound of importance.

"May I ask your name?" He noticed that she blushed faintly. Andrei was very well trained to observe behaviour.

"Yes Comrade Vladimirov. My name is Comrade Petrovna." Her chin lifted a little. 'She is proud of her family name. Good.' Thought Andrei.

He said with a twinkle. "You are telling me that your mother named you 'Comrade'!"

"Oh No." She quickly replied, "Daria. I am Daria Petrovna."

Chapter 7

"Daria Nikolaevna Petrovna," replied Vladimirov. "Yes, I know that name. Petrovna. Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna. Directorate of Customs and Immigration." He paused as the young officer leading them through the maze of corridors and offices stopped in her tracks. She looked at Vladimirov with some alarm in her eyes.

"Yes, Comrade. He is my father." The question in her voice was obvious. The name Petrovna was not an altogether common name. It sounded like a patronymic that a woman or girl might have.

"He is still in his post?" Asked Vladimirov.

"Yes Comrade. In this very building, today only. There is some sort of alarm on. That is possibly why the two dolts at the gate were so jumpy. Now it will do them good to stand there and listen to the squalling babies and irate Americans for a little while." It was also obvious from her tone of voice that a very bad day was ahead of those two young guards.

"Excellent. Excellent. Your father and I are old friends, and also we have worked together on many occasions." Comrade Petrovna beamed with pleasure.

"Can I take you to him right now Comrade Vladimirov?" She offered, knowing that her father would not be back in Moscow for weeks once he left this building.

"Please Comrade." He hesitated just a second until he was sure the young girl realised he had more to say.

"May I then call you Daria Nikolaevna?" He added. Daria Nikolaevna Petrovna was surprised and flattered. This important man knew her father so well that he even remembered her full name, and wished to address her respectfully, rather than officially.

"Certainly you may Comrade Vladimirov. I will be honoured." Of course she would never dream of calling him anything other than Comrade Vladimirov.

With a smile on her face and a spring in her step she beckoned the two men to follow her down a long corridor that ended in a solid oak door. She knocked and entered without waiting, waving the two to follow her in to the room.

Three men were bent over a large desk studying a map that was spread out on the surface, held down in the corners by water glasses and ashtrays. They did not look up but continued talking quietly. Daria Nikolaevna cleared her throat politely and said,

"Comrade Petrovna, a visitor."

Her father glanced up, a frown on his forehead. He was very busy. Visitors could wait. Then he saw who it was.

"Andrei Andreiovich!" He shouted with obvious delight. "My good and dear friend Andrei. What brings you back to our beautiful country?" His voice continued in a shout, "and with my lovely daughter too! Don't tell me. She has arrested a genuine Hero of the Soviet Union."

His daughter blushed furiously this time and wrung her hands. She had almost done just that.

Andrei took William by the elbow and made sure he stood beside him, then stepped forward and embraced his old friend in a huge bear hug.

"Nikolai Ivanovich Petrovna. How wonderful to see you standing here." He stood back and looked at William.

"Fate is being kind to us William. Here is the one man in all the Soviet Union who we can trust. Here is my good friend Vanya of many years. Vanya, my future Son-in-Law."

Daria's eyes opened wide. Truly, this man was a close friend of her fathers, to call him by such a familiar name.

William stepped forward with his hand outstretched. Nikolai Ivanovich brushed it aside and threw a bear hug around William's tall frame, surprising him at the familiarity.

"Any friend of my friend—is a friend of mine. Any family of my friend is my family also." He shouted. His delight at seeing his old friend was palpable, but he stepped back and looked into the eyes of Andrei. Then at those of William.

"Ah. So it is trouble that brings you home at last my dear friend. Then I am here to help. What is it that you need?" He stepped back to the table and politely asked his associates to come back later. It was time for a break, anyway.

The old friends moved to some uncomfortable looking lounge chairs over by one wall, and Andrei proceeded to tell his friend the full story. Nikolai Ivanovich had his daughter stay to listen as soon as he understood what was going on. She could then take the information back to her superiors on the immigration gates, and a watch would be set up just in case the abductor and Andrei's daughter came in by legal means.

Comrade Major General Petrovna had himself been after the disgraced state policeman Yevgeni Ivanovich Grushko for some time, but the trail had gone cold until now. Now they could swing the whole mighty apparatus of Immigration and State Security into play.

Chapter 8

The light from the locomotive headlamp cut a glittering tunnel through the crystal winter night as it rushed headlong through the darkness. The light seemed confined to a tight beam that shone for a mile or more along the dead straight track, yet failed to light up the surrounding countryside, and didn't seem able even to penetrate the darkness outside of that narrow focus. So cold was the air that tiny speckles of ice floated in it like mist, glittering in the bright headlamp like a million fairy lights. Every so often the cabin of the locomotive glared with a demon red glow that pulsed and glowed alternate shades of red and orange as the firebox door was opened so that more coal could be shovelled in. The windows were tight shut against the outside cold, and shifting shadows were all that could be discerned of the men inside, that is if anyone had been foolish enough to be out in the snows watching the dragon passing in the darkness. Steam billowing from the giant driving pistons was whipped away down the length of the train along with the smoke, the occasional shower of sparks belched from the funnel, the roar of the wheels and the tortured squeal of carriage wheels on the frozen rails gave the impression of some demonic monster loose on the vast plains.

The vast Siberian plains stretched away into the hazy distance under a sickle moon, the night away from the thunder of the train taking on a deep purple luminosity from the bright starlight reflecting from the snow.

Natalie lay on the top bunk of a crowded compartment, her fur lined garments tightly wrapped around her, and her knees drawn up so her coat covered her ankles. Grushko had occupied the bunk opposite and kept a close eye on her movements. Where she could go on this train in the middle of nowhere Natalie could not think, but he watched her like a hawk none the less. It was worse than the weeks on the boat. At least there had been room to move about there. Here in this cramped compartment, all she endured was made worse by the stares of the other passengers. Each compartment contained eight bunks, four on each side of a narrow space, and open at the end to the passageway that ran the length of the carriage. Tiny metal ladders were affixed to the ends of the bunks in the passageway.

Natalie gritted her teeth as the carriage lurched and swayed in its headlong dash. She had been laying in the bunk for hours now, and nature was calling at last. Well, there was nothing for it. She had to find her way to the cubical at the end of the carriage. In any case, Grushko had better sort something out if they were to be in this grimy carriage for another week. It felt like weeks already since they had dashed from the shadows of the station and clambered into the already moving carriage. It had only been hours yet. Grushko had already had tickets secured for them both, and from that point on it was simply a matter of his terrifyingly cold stare that caused the compartment to empty instantly. He had pushed Natalie unceremoniously up the ladder into the bunk, then clambered up into his on the other side. They had no luggage, only his small briefcase.

Well, she had to go, and she started to move about so that she could gain access to the small ladder without putting on a show for the men who lined the passageway smoking and talking.

Immediately Grushko growled at her.

“Do not move about—you are not to go anywhere.”

“Well Really.” Replied Natalie. “Then what am I supposed to do about nature’s calls?” Her voice held such scorn at Grushko’s obvious stupidity that she almost smiled at his discomfit as the babushkas in the compartment’s lower bunks cackled and pointed at him. Naturally they were now speaking in their own language, Russian, and Natalie had done nothing to mask her words. Everyone understood—or thought they did.

Natalie finally gained the floor and set off along the passageway in the direction indicated to her by an old woman sitting on the bottom bunk. Grushko made to follow her, but hesitated when the old woman made a crude remark about following young girls and allowing them no decent privacy. The other babushkas started whispering among themselves. This could not continue for a week. Grushko decided to change his tactics. He smiled and leaned against the bunks and drew out a cigarette. He asked a nearby man for a light and proceeded to join a conversation about current shortages. After a while he turned to the old woman and said apologetically, “You are right of course Old Mother, I must allow my... niece to be more independent. There are so many bad people about these days, one can’t be too careful.”

The old lady grunted. She was not fooled by this evil looking individual for a second.

Natalie gained the privacy of the small cubical. It was freezing, and solid with ice. There was no window, and the train was slowing.

Chapter 9

Natalie looked around the small cubical. It was almost solid with ice. The window pane was long since broken, and the little compartment had taken the full brunt of the frozen air blasting in as the train sped through the night. The door had only just opened in fact, so thick was the ice on the walls and door.

There was nothing for it but to make her way along to the next carriage and see if the toilet cubicle there was in better repair.

Before she left, Natalie poked her head a little way out of the window to see why the train was slowing down. She knew there was no regular stop yet for many hours. There was simply nowhere to stop. No towns, no villages out here in the frozen wastes. To her great surprise the train was crossing a bridge over a frozen river and approaching some sort of siding. It must be one of the many railway camps strung out along the track. Here a permanent work force managed to survive in their huts, servicing the line, keeping it open all year round. Natalie managed to catch a glimpse of a red light in the distance, as someone stood in the swirling snow, right in the middle of the track wildly swinging a lantern.

Natalie hesitated. Nature could wait. The train slowed to a crawl and clickety-clacked over a set of crossing points, and eased towards the row of huts beside the line, the man now running alongside the locomotive.

The running man passed up a long tube. It was an emergency message to be delivered to the engineers in the next town. Standard procedure. Natalie was about to withdraw her head when she noticed a woman framed in the doorway of one of the huts.

Was it possible? It was now or never. With barely a moments hesitation, Natalie swung out of the toilet cubicle and hauled open the carriage door. In an instant she was on the running-step, the door pulled shut behind her. A quick glance along the carriage showed her that no heads were looking out of windows although close by she could see faces pressed up against window panes. The train was moving at walking speed now, but quickly gathering pace again.

Natalie simply dropped off the step into the deep snow beside the track and disappeared into the swirl of steam and vapour pouring off the trains air lines and heating system. The soft snow drifts along the line swallowed her instantly. Only one person had seen her drop into the snow. The woman who was standing in the doorway of the line side hut. She gave no indication that she had seen anything out of the ordinary. She just slowly blinked and turned her gaze along the length of the train, watching as it slowly gathered speed again, finally disappearing away into the night until even the sound of its passing was gone from the track.

The man Yuri, the woman's husband, came back stamping his feet and blowing clouds of vapour into the frozen night air.

"What is it Katya? Why are you not inside with the door shut against this cold?" He asked in a not unkind voice. He hadn't much ever thought about it, but he loved his Ekaterina very much, and he always called her Katya out of that deep affection.

"Yuri, I saw a girl jump, or fall perhaps, from the train as it slowed. She is still in that drift right by the line, near those drums." Katya pointed to some drums stacked near the line, only a few dozen yards away.

"You stay here. I will go and investigate. Perhaps it would be good if you made sure the water is boiling in the kettle." With that he strode into the deeper snow until he was almost up to his waist in the drift by the line.

It was easy to see now where the girl had entered the soft snow. Yuri peered into the spot where the girl should be. Sure enough, there she was. Looking up at Yuri with huge dark eyes was a young girl. Why, she couldn't be much more than a teenager he thought. But then what did he know. He was only fifty eight, but felt he had lived in this frozen wasteland for two lifetimes. There were not many children out here. Just a few families, and most moved away as soon as a wife became pregnant. They never came back. Only Yuri and Katya had been here the longest. No children with them, just a daughter now working in Moscow, but they had each other. And now a young girl had literally dropped from the train into their small world.

Yuri extended his massive hand to her.

"Come little one. You cannot stay here. In a short while it will be snowing again, and you will surely die. My wife is waiting with warm tea, and she has warm cloths for you too I think."

Natalie nodded. Already the freezing cold had as good as clamped her jaw tightly shut. She stumbled and lurched as Yuri pulled her from the drift and helped her to the little hut where his wife now toiled over the stove. Stoking it to life, the flames growing and casting a welcoming warm glow through the cabin.

As Natalie crossed the threshold, she took in the scene of cosy warmth, the smile on Katya's face and simply passed out in Yuri's arms.

Chapter 10

Katya turned to the stove where the kettle was rattling its lid as clouds of steam rose from it. The water was quickly boiling, and with a large pot standing by, a strong brew of tea was quickly made. Yuri had scooped Natasha into his arms and carried her to the centre of the room, near to the fireplace, and placed her in the soft chair with a pillow supporting her head.

The warmth of the room quickly revived Natalie, she was strong and healthy and her fainting spell had been a mixture of tension and relief. She had made this bold move without a moment's thought, other than of escaping from that terrible man Grushko. It seemed that she had succeeded at least in the short term, because she had seen and heard the train disappearing into the night, the clatter of the wheels on the rails fading even as she was carried into the warmth and safety of the hut. Natalie blinked and slowly sat up straight. It took but a moment's glance to satisfy herself that the huge bearded man standing over her meant her no harm. Indeed he was looking decidedly worried. "Katya", he said "do you think we should advise the line manager in the next town?" Katya, his long suffering and loving wife looked at him steadily for a moment. She was very patient with Yuri. He was a good man but sometimes he did say the silliest things. "Yuri. When is the next train due through? Which direction is it going? How long to the next line camp, and even so, will their telegraph be working?"

Yuri looked somewhat abashed and shifted his feet. Natalie sat silently looking on. She feared that this couple, so isolated out on the vast snow bound plains would decide to be rid of what was obviously trouble in the making.

"I am sorry Katya. I forgot for a moment in the excitement." He waved his left hand in the general direction of Natalie. "There is no train now for a week, and that will be going westward toward Vladivostok." Yuri stomped over to the stove and poured three large tin mugs of strong tea from the pot. He handed one to his wife Ekaterina, and one to Natalie.

Meantime, Katya had been thinking about the arrival of this girl in so unexpected a manner. She could see that Yuri was also thinking about the same thing. His gaze was fixed steadily on the girl's face as if trying to read the story of her life there. 'He will be disappointed,' she thought 'as the girl is so young, her life is not caused one single line to appear on her smooth face'. Her intelligent eyes were taking in all that she saw and heard, noted Katya. Let us then fathom this mystery she thought.

Katya drew up the rough wooden stool by the arm of the chair where Natalie rested with her tea. In a kindly voice Katya asked,

"Devochka, let us get to know each other. I am Ekaterina, and my husband Yuri. What is your name if you are able to tell us?"

Natalie whispered "Natalie, my name is Natalie". "Natasha" she added. She was none too sure just how much she should divulge. These people were obviously good people, and simple workers. They would not want trouble, and perhaps it was best if she did not give them too much information that might in fact cause them trouble at some future time.

"Thank you for rescuing me from the snow. It is very kind of you." Natalie placed her scald-

ing hot mug of tea on the small table by her feet and rose slowly. It became immediately obvious that she was not dressed appropriately. Even Natalie gave a start when she realised that she still had on only the old cloths that had been provided by the crew on the boat. Her coat had been left on the train, her boots were gone, buried somewhere deep in the snow by now, and in the light of the cabin, the old couple standing in front of her were speechless at the sight of her.

Katya looked the girl up and down. She looked closely at her face and seemed to like what she saw. Yuri wasn't sure about this new addition to the house. He wondered what to tell the others who lived nearby when at last dawn broke and the crews had to go about their duties. Katya said. "You are dressed like a peasant Natalie, but I can read your face. You are not a peasant and never have been. By my guess you are from high society." The term *high society* felt strange on Katya's lips, but her thoughts were confirmed, she was sure of it, when Natalie's response was only a slight raising of one eyebrow.

"Perhaps you should tell us a little of your story devochka?" said Yuri, "if we are to protect you, for I think that will be necessary, then we should know who you are and why we are doing so."

Natalie lifted her chin slightly, "I am not a young girl, a devochka, indeed, I am engaged to be married to a wonderful man, who even as we speak must be frantic as to my whereabouts." Natalie's cheeks flushed crimson, and she sank into the chair with her head buried in her hands, weeping bitterly, choking only the name Grushko through her tears.

Chapter 11

Yuri was electrified. He couldn't believe his ears. That name, after all these years...

Grushko. The devil in human form. A man who had single handedly terrorised people up and down the length of the great railway line, and who knew how much further afield. Yuri almost dropped his mug of tea when Natalie raised her head and said. "I left him on the train with a cabin full of grandmothers. Babushka who will surely keep an eye on him."

Yuri leapt to his feet, slopping his tea after all over the rim of the mug. "Then he knows you are gone?" He gasped.

Natalie thought a moment. "Perhaps not for a while yet I think. After all, what man will make a fuss of how long a young girl takes at her *toilette*?" Natalie thought ahead a little to the scene on the train she had so recently left.

To try to reassure the couple who's house she found herself in, she said. "The other people on the train do not like him, and we travelled alone. No companions other than myself. So now he is Really alone."

Yuri was not convinced. He knew Grushko well. He had been face to face to with him at the beginning. "Natalie. Natasha. Before the dawn comes, you must confide in us. Katya and myself unless we can be honest with our friends you will not be able to stay here even for a little while. You must know how it is?"

Natalie drew a breath. Looking at the old lady, she thought. "Probably no older than my mother, but out here... in this place. The hardship must be terrible." She said to Yuri's wife. "May I call you Katya? It has been so long since I confided in anyone. Months. It seems years." Natalie began to recount her adventures, starting from the garden party at her parents house in Australia. Yuri and Katya could hardly believe their ears. From a farm in Australia, she had been kidnapped - so far away it seemed impossible to even think of the distance. Now here she was in the deep frozen wastes of Siberia, in a line shack by the great Trans Siberian Railway. For all their roughness, it seems that the abductors had not treated her harshly. Natalie had conducted herself well and had shown great presence of mind by watching for escape opportunities. It had not been possible to escape from either plane or yacht, and over all the time it had taken to get to this point, the train slowing at the siding had been her first real opportunity. There had been only the one man guarding her on the train. It had been a bad mistake on the part of Grushko to try to keep her under close watch on a train that of necessity took a whole week to cross the landscape. There was no escape ordinarily because no one survived being out in the open in those frozen wastes. But Natalie had seen her opportunity. Remote huts, smoke from the chimney of a line hut, and the face of a woman beneath her furs, framed in the doorway of that hut. Natalie had hardly hesitated

before swinging down in to the snow. Now here she was in the warmth of a hut, and no one knew she was here other than these nice people.

They were concerned for her, she could see that. She concluded her tale, but could not begin to even guess at what the kidnappers had wanted with her in the first place. She had little doubt that her abduction was connected with her father's past in some way, but as she knew little of his history really, she could offer no explanation to the couple sitting before her.

"I can only think," she said. "That in some way it is something to do with my father."

With some trepidation Yuri turned to his wife and just looked at her.

Natalie continued. "My father used to be head of the State Security, his name is Major Andrei Vladimirov, and the person, Grushko, who kidnapped me, screamed at him that he had betrayed the revolution. Which I don't understand. The revolution is long over. A thing of the past now. My father even, is now retired."

Natalie sipped her tea for a moment. She was thinking. She looked at Yuri.

Yuri was looking at her, his eyes as wide as saucers, his mouth hanging open. His wife Katya, Ekaterina, was also sitting up straight and listening to Natalia intently.

Natalie was suddenly worried. What had she said?

"Oh please," she gasped. "What have I said?"

"Your father!" Shouted Yuri, jumping to his feet. Natalie shrank back in her chair, now suddenly very frightened.

"I know him. How can this be? Is fate coming around full circle to visit me? Natalie..." He collapsed into his chair. "Your father is my friend. We worked together many years. When he retired, I retired. Katya and I decided to come and live out here, far away from the old life. Somewhere to keep working. Keep helping our Motherland, but away from the new troubles besetting our country. Now I find that your father - my friend - ended up on the other side of the world."

Natalie was speechless. "Katya," said Yuri. "Meet our friends, daughter." Katya was smiling from ear to ear and clasping and unclasping her hands in consternation.

She looked at Natalie and Yuri, her face solemn now. "Yuri, then Grushko is trying to draw Andrei back here for some reason. It won't be a good reason, for Grushko will never change."

Yuri cleared off the rickety table that stood in the middle of the room. The fire was stoked up with fresh fuel, and the room was warm and welcoming. He motioned the others to sit at the table, and he dropped into his chair and began to slice some rough bread into slabs.

"Yuri, stop at once," commanded Katya. "Our guest is not a rough rail worker to sit here gnawing on rough slabs of bread." She took the knife and bread away from Yuri, shaking her head and muttering about the manners of some men.

Natalie was starving now. The tea had warmed her, and a fresh full mug stood before her. Within moments Katya had set the table with small plates, knives, and spoons, and had a pot

of something warming on the stove, and soon quickly bubbling. Katya sliced some sausage very thinly and ladled the bubbling soup into bowls. The bread had disappeared.

“Please eat, it will bring your strength back Natalie.”

The pale light of dawn was starting to filter into the landscape, slowly pushing the bleak haze of the cold night further west. The train was long gone, and others in the camp would soon be about their daily duties.

Yuri and Ekaterina were smiling at each other. Now they could tell the other workers that the daughter of an old friend was here to visit.

Chapter 12

Grushko sat on the edge of the seat, nearest the passageway. The others on the seat were as far away from him as they could get. The old ladies opposite simply glared at him without blinking. It was unnerving. How he hated them. Such relics of the past, it defied logic that they hadn't been swept away in the tides that had crashed across his country in previous years. They seemed indestructible. Where was that girl? No one took this long. Something had to be wrong. Braving the stares and mutters of the Babushka opposite, he struggled to his feet, muscles aching from long hours sitting in uncomfortable conditions.

The train was hurtling along at high speed. The men in the engine must be working like devils to keep the boiler fired at such a rate. Their wind proof cabin would be the hottest place on the whole train. Grushko envied them their warmth. The carriage heating was working, but no one in their right mind could say it was working well, and there seemed to be a howling gale sweeping along the passageway now that he was out of the cabin. Even the casual smokers were gone to their seats.

He could hear the wheels squealing on the frozen rails, and flurries of snow were being swept along the passageway. Something was not right. Grushko struggled against the wind and turned the corner at the end of the passageway. The toilet door was now jammed open by snow and ice, and the main carriage door was also swinging open, with gusts of wind and snow being driven into the carriage. There was no sign of Natalie. Grushko struggled to get the door shut properly. There was ice and snow building up all around the frame, but not enough yet to stop him slamming the door a few times to clear it. The door slammed shut finally with a bang and most of the wind stopped. He didn't see the ladies scarf welded by ice to the outside door rail. There was nothing he could do about the toilet door. That whole room was almost solid ice.

Natalie? Where was she? Grushko rushed along the passageway, trying to peer into cabins in the gloom. There was no sign of her. He couldn't think how long it had been since she had left to go to the toilet. He had not thought to check his watch. It had to have been at least fifteen minutes, maybe even half an hour. It was obvious that she couldn't be here in the frozen toilet room of their own carriage, so perhaps she had gone to another. Grushko rushed along the carriages, banging open the doors. He was drawing a lot of attention to himself by now, but he didn't care. He had to find her. He had spent half an hour by the time he had searched the whole train. Fifteen or twenty carriages - he had lost count. She was not on the train. Grushko was beside himself.

Had she fallen from the train? The door nearest their compartment had been open. Surely not. But who knew, the train was travelling at high speed across the vastness of the region, and no one could get off at this speed and survive. The girl had not been particularly downcast he remembered. Simply watching him always and waiting. Waiting? Waiting for what. The answer was obvious. She was waiting for an opportunity, any opportunity, to escape from him. It seems that she had done so. But how? Grushko flung himself into his seat and glared back at the old babushka opposite. "Old crone." He thought. "They look like a line of crows on a telegraph wire." Grushko jumped to his feet with a cry. Everybody looked at him silently. He could see the looks in their eyes. "Crazy."

But he knew beyond all doubt. The girl, "Natalie", he spat the name out aloud. She had left the train at the telegraph station. The telegraph station now so far behind them that it was impossible to even contemplate how he could get back there to find out. These days were the new days. No one would stop the train for him now. In fact, if he was lucky they wouldn't actually throw him off the train as it sped along, should they find out who he was.

He slumped back in his seat and glowered at those around him. The babushka opposite smiled a knowing smile. She knew. The old hag knew.

Grushko watched in fascination as she leaned forward and carefully placed her finger on the bell push by the door. Her eyes never left his face.

Within minutes the carriage supervisor arrived and opened the door. The old babushka looked up at her and said in a calm voice. "I think this man has murdered his companion. A very young and beautiful girl who I think is not related to him in any way." She sat back in satisfaction. The attendant could be seen trying to digest what had just been said.

She looked at Grushko, unsmiling and rigid.

"What do you say sir?" She asked. "Where is your companion? I have seen you myself rushing back and forth looking for her. Your papers please." Her hand outstretched.

"I don't know where she is. I had nothing to do with her disappearance. Indeed, I want her found more than anyone."

"What is your relationship with this girl?" Said the attendant.

Grushko eyed the woman. "I don't have to answer any of your questions. It's nothing to do with you. In any case, she is my niece, and I am escorting her to meet her father in Moscow."

The old ladies sitting opposite gave a collective snort of disbelief. The attendant looked at the three ladies. She said nothing, and after a minute turned on her heel and walked off down the carriage. Taking his papers with her. Grushko sat back with a grim smile on his face. He was determined to keep quiet, even though he was seething with anger over the babushka having called the attendant. He hoped he had heard the last of this interference for a while.

What hadn't changed of course was that Natalie was still missing. She couldn't be on the train. He had searched its entire length. He couldn't enter any of the compartments of course, especially the private ones, but everything else was sufficiently open enough to show him that no one other than the proper occupants were inside.

It was evident that she had left the train. Had she jumped out into that icy wasteland, or had she fallen? Or had she jumped down when the train had slowed at that telegraph line camp some hours back? It had now been at least two hours since they had passed that little gathering of huts in the wilderness.

The more Grushko thought about it, the more he became convinced that it was the place where Natalie had left the train. In which case she would probably be safe. So long as someone there took her in, she would not be going anywhere now for at least a week. Perhaps this was a good thing. It absolved him of the necessity of trying to look after her. He would make contact with friends when he reached his destination, and they could either go and get her, or simply wait for the train to arrive with her on it. Little did he know that things were only going to get worse for him, and very soon.

Chapter 13

Natalie got to her feet and wiped her eyes. This would not do. She was stronger than this. Weeping like a school girl. What would her mother think? She had to gather her strength and help these kind people to help her. Getting to Moscow and contacting the police were a priority. Maybe not in that order, but her safety was now in her own hands.

"Katya, may I ask for some warm water in a basin so that I might refresh myself? I have not had a chance to clean myself up for so long now, I am sure that I must look like a street urchin." Natalie looked down at herself, alarmed that her cloths appeared to be even worse than she had thought. Her scarf was gone too. It had been around her neck, and she had used it to grasp the outside handrail on the carriage, to avoid being ice-burnt by the cold brass of the rail.

Her abductors had cared little for her clothing needs, leaving her to travel the entire journey in the so very inappropriate gown that she had been abducted in. Old work cloths had been available on the boat, but they were so dirty and ill fitting that she had soon discarded the idea of wearing them. Only putting them on as a last resort. She thought it a blessing that there appeared to be no mirror in the little hut.

Katya had not replied, but simply busied herself about the hut, gathering a huge tin tub from the back store room, and a wooden bucket. She placed a large copper pot on the stove and handed the bucket to Yuri. He knew what to do. They had been together a very long time, he and Katya, and could read each other now, almost without words. Katya wrestled a large folding screen over to a corner of the room that Natalie now saw was obviously used as the bathroom as well. Towels hung on the wall, and there were little shelves with toiletries on them, and a huge shaving mug and brush that Yuri used every day.

Already steam was issuing from the spout of the large copper kettle. Yuri struggled back in the door with the large wooden bucket, sloshing over with sparkling water. The water came from a large tank nearby to the hut, kept warm by slow fires so that train engines that stopped here could refill with water that wasn't frozen solid. Naturally the workers took advantage of this and used it in their huts as well.

Katya was thinking to herself that Natalie looked like anything but a street urchin. Even in those clothes that were now little but rags. Suddenly Katya had a thought.

Looking at Natalie while she spoke, she said,

"Yuri, do you remember the trunk we have that I kept some of my clothes in? The clothes that I could not dream of wearing in our life out here. Would you fetch in that trunk for me please?"

Yuri scratched his chin. He seemed to remember that the trunk his Katya was referring to was buried under a large store of firewood in the outside shed.

"I will see if I can retrieve it Katya. It will take me a little while though." He replied.

"That's good husband." Said Katya. "Make sure you shout and knock before you come back in please."

Yuri nodded and pulled on his large coat and gloves. He would be in the cold shed for some time, having to move the firewood first so he could then drag out the trunk. He left the hut and latched the door behind him. The dawn was now lighting up the sky, and he could see that his neighbours were stirring. Lights were on and smoke was coming from the chimneys. He went into the hut and started working his way toward the trunk. Neither of them had thought that they would ever need to dig this trunk out again, with all its memories as well as all the old clothes. Katya had never moved in high society, but she had come from a good family, of some standing. Her clothes had reflected this, and she had been about the same build as Natalie in those days. How time had rounded them all, like a pebble in a stream, the sharp corners smoothed off as the pebble became rounder and rounder with the passing water. Yuri realised with a start that he had stopped working, and had been gazing into the far past, the vision of his beloved Katya before him, dancing across the floor of the hall where he had first met her. He shook his head with a smile and resumed moving the log pile.

Katya meantime had helped Natalie undress behind the screen and left her to her bath. Her old clothes were to be washed, and perhaps salvaged, and meantime the clothes that Yuri should soon retrieve would be perfect. Katya placed fresh linen undergarments on a stool behind the screen for Natalie. Not the height of fashion, but all she had out here in the wastes. Natalie was so grateful that tears started to her eyes, Katya patting her hand like a mother with her daughter.

"Thank you Katya, you are so kind to me. I am sorry to cause so much trouble. I will leave as soon as the next train comes through I promise." She dried herself with the large towel and began to dress. The garments fitted her well, and she started to feel like a decent person again. Of course, she couldn't yet come from behind the screen, so sat on the stool and waited for the return of Yuri and the trunk.

Katya took a stool nearby and looked to be deep in thought. She said.

"Natalie, I do not think it a good idea if you leave so soon. In any case the next train is going entirely in the opposite direction." Katya looked into Natalie's eyes.

"But even so, I would advise you to stay with us until at least two more trains have gone through to Moscow. If anyone is even thinking that you might have left the train as it slowed, they will be totally confused when you do not show up on the next train, or even the next. And of course you are very welcome here, we would not dream, neither Yuri nor I, of turning out the daughter of our old friend into the snow."

Natalie was spell bound. That was at least another three weeks before she could think of boarding a train, and even then she had no idea how she would make contact with the authorities, nor if they would even believe her. She had no papers, no passport. Nothing but the borrowed clothes she now stood up in. She was speechless, and very close to breaking down. It was all too much for her. Just altogether too much.

Katya could see this and wrapped a soft blanket around the girl and led her to the edge of the bed.

"Natalie, perhaps you should rest awhile now. Yuri may be some time yet. There is no need of decisions yet. Just rest. We will work it all out together."

Natalie's eyes were already closed as Katya drew the covers over her. She missed her own daughter so much sometimes it was like a fresh wound in her flesh. That Grushko had also been involved in that event so long ago now, only made her all the more determined that the same fate would not await this child of her friends. Grushko had not succeeded then, he would not now.

Chapter 14

Meanwhile, the train carrying Grushko was speeding westward, seemingly trying to keep up with the darkness. Grushko ignored the old women in his compartment and leaned his head back against the rest. There was nothing he could do now but wait. After a moment he began to doze. It was very quiet all of a sudden. The constant nattering of the women had stopped, and he was thanking his lucky stars when he was suddenly and unceremoniously hauled to his feet by rough hands. He was about to lash out when he got his eyes opened and found himself staring down the barrel of an automatic pistol. On either side of him two giants held him in a vice like grip. They had Kalashnikov rifles slung over their shoulders. Grushko almost giggled as he thought it likely that these two giants could frighten people to death, with no need for weapons. The man in front of him though was another matter.

The man had the military cap of a captain. He also had the bearing, and his face, with thin bloodless lips was as close to a living skull as Grushko had ever seen. Grushko blanched. He knew without a doubt he was in trouble. He himself had confronted countless men in just such circumstances.

"It has been reported to us that you are travelling with a young girl?" The captain said in a soft voice. His glittering eyes belying the softness. "Where is she?" The captain snapped. All signs of softness gone in a flash. Grushko opened his mouth to reply.

"Don't lie!" The captain screamed in his face. "No matter what you say, it will be a lie." Spittle cooled on Grushko's face. "She is not on the train. We have searched. While you slept here like a baby with your grandmother," he looked at the old ladies "we have searched high and low - and even outside." He smiled with satisfaction. Grushko didn't feel good about this.

Suddenly he whipped his other hand up to where Grushko could see it. Clutched in his black gloved hand was the scarf Natalie had been wearing during the entire journey. Grushko would know it anywhere.

"Do you know what this is?" The captain looked at the scarf. He asked as if he didn't care whether Grushko answered him or not. "We found it caught on the hand rail on the outside of the door of this carriage. The door that you..." The captain paused to gather his control in. He appeared to be struggling. "The door that you forced her out of, casting her to her death. A young girl, struggling to the last, only her scarf getting caught as she fell. Left to point the way to her killer." He took a deep breath. "You were seen." He said finally and brushed passed Grushko as he left the compartment. The two guards still had a firm grip on Grushko.

"Bring him." Shouted the captain as he moved up the passageway toward the guards van at the rear of the train.

Grushko looked at the Babushka sitting opposite. A grim smile of satisfaction creased her ancient face. As he was forced from the cabin, he thought he heard the old woman say under her breath. "We know you. Murderer." Then he was unceremoniously dragged down the corridor. Grushko was very worried now. It seemed that he may have been recognised. It was unlikely, but it could be. That babushka was certainly old enough to have been around some years back when he had been at the peak of his power. Well, nothing could be done for

the moment. Best to see what was in store for him. If he could get out of this he would. But still, the missing girl was something he had no answer for, and try as he might he couldn't think of a reason why she would have left the train willingly. Perhaps she had dropped from the train way back at that railway camp. But for what reason? The girl was not mad. In fact she had seemed to Grushko to be highly intelligent and thus had necessitated his keeping a close eye on her. The railway camp was not an escape. It was a trap. Possibly a death trap for her. She couldn't possibly get away from it, except by train. And she had no papers at all, and no friends. Especially in a forgotten railway camp in the middle of the frozen wastes. Had she indeed accidentally fallen from the train? What ever had happened to her, Grushko knew he was almost never going to talk his way out of this one.

Obviously the old ladies had implicated him, and no doubt planted the seeds in the mind of the captain. But he faced the same problem as the girl. There was no escape from this train. This capsule of life roaring through the frozen wastes of the most remote and desolate regions on the planet.

Grushko was all but dragged along the passageways until they reached the guards van at the end of the train. People looked at him in passing and quickly looked away. None wanted to be seen to be interested.

Finally he was flung into a chair and handcuffed to the arm rests. Everyone left the cabin, including the captain, without a backward glance. He couldn't believe it. What were they doing? They couldn't just leave him here. He needn't have worried. It wasn't long before the guards and the captain were back. The guards sat in a corner with a desk between them. This was obviously their normal place of work. The captain sat in the chair opposite Grushko. A small desk between them.

"So tell me who you are, and what you are doing. Who is - or was - the girl that you travelled with?"

Grushko looked steadily at the man. He was weighing up the options. Reveal who he actually was, and hope that he found a sympathetic person in the man, or try to bluff his way out of the situation, and say virtually nothing. The problem was, and he knew it, he had no papers on him. None that would help in any case. The ones that he had given the woman some time back were fake. He was supposed to meet his assistant on the platform of a station on the outskirts of Moscow where he would be given what he needed. It had been a stupid mistake to leave from Vladivostok without proper papers, but he couldn't have waited for another train in that wretched city.

The captain was watching him intently, and could almost see the thoughts chasing themselves across Grushko's features. He was very experienced and knew without doubt that Grushko was hiding something.

Suddenly he tired of the game. He knew who this person in front of him was, knew all about him. The captain even knew what he was up to. What he hadn't expected himself, was the disappearance of the girl. He slid his chair back and stood, leaning over the desk and placing his face right in Grushko's face.

"We know who you are wretch. The 'Great Grushko'. Bah! You are nothing. Your plot is foiled. It was foiled before it began. We were warned to watch out for you just after the train left Vladivostok. We know you travelled with the girl, and you will now be lucky to escape

with your life. Her father - and his best friend in Security, are in Moscow awaiting your arrival. Enjoy your trip." He signalled the guards, who took but a moment to unchain Grushko, and fling him into a small cell at the end of the carriage.

Chapter 15

Natalie awoke refreshed. She saw that she was alone in the hut, and the sun was shining in a bright sky and the day was well under way. She had no idea of the time, but by the angle of the sun she could see that it was probably mid morning some time. In these regions and at this time of the year, the sun was never very high in the sky but east was still east, and west was still west and the sun was still in the eastern quadrant of the sky. Natalie dressed herself in warm coats and ventured outside to see if anyone was about. The place appeared to be deserted.

The camp consisted of a line of small huts, eight that she could see. They were strung out along a bumpy track that ran parallel to the railway line and were about maybe two hundred feet from the line. There were power poles along the track. It couldn't be called a road, and the poles marched away into the distance in either direction along with the railway track. The road track left the camp and continued along the trackside as well, only now very close to the track.

Natalie could only assume that the entire population of the huts worked on the line and were now somewhere out there doing what ever it was they had to do.

There were no children, no dogs, no birds, indeed, no trees even for the birds to sit in and sing, had they been there and of a mind to sing. The place was quiet and still as only a place can be that is mostly buried in a layer of thick snow. Grey and white, with streaks of weathered black appeared to be the only colours.

Natalie stood just outside the door letting the silence sink into her. What was she going to do for the next few weeks she couldn't imagine? She couldn't go to work with the line workers that was for sure. She wouldn't know where to start, and in any case she had never done any sort of physical work in her life! There was no doubt though that she wouldn't be going anywhere. There was no way out of this place except by the trains that ran through in either direction on a regular schedule. Well, when Yuri and his wife Katya came home this evening she would talk to them. Meantime she would busy herself by looking about the small settlement, and then clean and tidy the house - although it didn't need much of that because it was obvious that Katya was very proud of her little house by the line, and it was already spotless.

An investigation of the settlement didn't reveal much. The few other houses, a line of work sheds, piles of spare railway line and sleepers and the huge water tower with a banked fire in the boiler shed.

Natalie stood on the line and looked in both directions. Nothing to see but the line disappearing into the far distance. She wondered when the next train was due through. Probably the one that would be heading back the way she had come, back to Vladivostok.

It was lonely out here in the vastness. Still and quiet, and oh so cold. Natalie was used to quiet loneliness though. The vast empty spaces of her home in Australia had seeped into her soul as she grew up, and she felt no qualms at being in this strange lonely place. Only that she really had no idea how she would get back in touch with her father, and her William. She had no idea of course that both were now in the country, and indeed in Moscow even now desperately seeking a way to locate her.

Yuri and his wife Katya had not yet returned, and Natalie slowly returned to the little house that they occupied. She had no doubt that the entire little village of people would return at the end of the working day and perhaps then she could make plans. Mean time she would occupy her time cleaning the little hut that she now called home. it was already as neat as a pin, so really all Natalie could do was tidy her bed, and clean the few dishes that she had used this morning. She had found suitable cloths in the trunk that Yuri had retrieved from the woodshed earlier that morning. Clothes that Katya had brought with them when they had first moved out to this lonely place. They were not peasant cloths, but rather very good quality and told Natalie that in her past life, Katya had been a person of some social standing. No need for such clothes out here in the wilderness though, so they had been packed away like old memories.

Natalie pondered her future. Three weeks Katya had suggested, but this was far too long. Natalie determined that she would leave on the next train bound for Moscow and be very careful at the other end. She had no idea how the people in the line camp communicated with their peers in other camps, or with the authorities who ran the line. Perhaps they had a radio? Or at least a telephone. Of course. A telephone. There were no radio masts, so it had to be telephone. Perhaps she could contact the authorities herself and seek their help. As soon as Yuri and Katya returned, she would tell them of her plans, and ask about the telephone.

She walked along the line of huts now with some determination. Her spirits restored. The lethargy that had been creeping into her bones with the cold was gone.

With a small fire lit in the grate, Natalie drank tea and planned. The quiet hours slipped by, and it was late afternoon when she heard a stuttering engine slowly increasing in volume, and the rattle and squeal of metal wheels on the railroad track drawing closer.

Eventually Yuri and Katya stamped their way into the cabin, welcoming Natalie still with wide but tired smiles. It was almost dark and the others, whom Natalie had not yet met had all returned to their homes. Yuri closed the door to keep the warmth in.

Natalie could wait no longer. She jumped to her feet and in a rush told a surprised Yuri and Katya of her plans.

"I am going on to Moscow on the next train. I can not wait here. Grushko will be long gone now, and really, can't have any idea where I might be. I must let my loved ones know where I am that I am safe."

Yuri looked steadily at Natalie for long moments. Then glanced at Katya.

"Did I not say?" He said to Katya with a smile. "The girl will not stay."

"Natalie child," said Katya "do you realise what you are saying. This is a vast country and you have no money, no papers, and no way of making contact with anyone."

Natalie looked at the floor, her head bowed. These people had been good to her.

Chapter 16

Natalie didn't know when the next train was due through, but she hoped it was soon.

"Yuri, when is the next train due?" Natalie asked.

"In two days now Natalie. Again, in the middle of the night. We can stop it with our signals and put you onboard as a railway worker." He paused, "That way there will be no questions and no cost."

Katya suddenly raised her hands. Surprise on her face.

"Yuri, she will need money in Moscow!" She turned and went to rummage in a chest of draws that stood in the corner. She came back clutching a thick roll of bank notes.

"You must take this," she said. "You will need to get a good hotel as soon as you get off the train. Only then can you begin to locate help and find your way home." Katya held out the roll of notes. It was all Natalie needed. She let out a sigh of relief

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"Thank you Katya. Thank you Yuri. I will not forget your kindness."

The decision was made and planning begun. The next train through would be signalled to stop, and Natalie would be safely onboard. Only then would Yuri risk contacting Moscow, and the head of railway security there. Yuri knew him well, and could safely pass on the message about the girl. Yuri did not of course know that Grushko had already been apprehended. He knew Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna well from the old days and knew that he could be trusted. He also did not know that at this very moment Natalie's father was enjoying the company of his old friend. How could he know, he was living in the middle of a vast wilderness of ice and snow, far removed from the busy cities? Far removed from his old life.

A number of trains came thorough over the next few days, in both directions and Natalie fretted at the delay. She helped about the small cabin where she could, and spent much time out wandering about the small settlement, the snow fall blowing about her long coat on the steady wind that seemed never to stop. The place was truly isolated. The few trains that came by in both directions mostly didn't stop, just thundering through the place like leviathans, the steel wheels squealing on the tracks that curved gently away in a right-hand direction if she stood facing West. The engines were mostly huge steam trains, belching steam and

smoke, their huge driving rods clanking as they drove the huge engines that hauled the freight cars East and West. There was an occasional diesel engine, but Yuri said they were not really successful out here, although Natalie could not really grasp why, even though he tried to explain about fuel and oil and the cost of maintenance. Perhaps one day, Yuri said, things would improve. Meantime the steam engines ran on, their driving cabins with the windows pulled tight shut against the bitter cold, only the red glow of the open firebox flaring against the glass to give any sign of human life inside. Natalie thought they looked rather sinister as they sped by. There were no passenger trains, only the one she waited for, due in a day or so Yuri said.

Both Yuri and Katya still went out with the others from the settlement, track maintenance was never ending in this terrain, and when they all came back of a night time, there was often a gathering in one of the cabins to drink a few glasses of spirit or tea, tell stories, and generally discuss the days activities. Everybody now knew who Natalie was of course, and although she was treated with kindness and respect, she was not generally included in the local gossip. Everyone knew of course that she would soon be gone, never to be seen again. Only Yuri and Katya enjoyed her company, as they knew her father and mother, and she reminded them of their own daughter, whom they had not seen for many years now. In fact, as the time for the train that would take Natalie on to Moscow drew near, Yuri became increasingly introspective. He missed his daughter, and he missed his old friends. All of them now together in Moscow.

Finally the day arrived, the morning bright and cold. The sun just lighting the horizon in the South. It would not climb much higher at this time of the year, and Yuri had already made his decision, discussing it with his wife Katya long into the night. He would go with Natalie. Much better he thought. He could protect her against the modern criminals that he knew were as thick as flies in the cities and deliver the girl safely to her father and her future husband in Moscow. At the same time, meeting his old friends, and hopefully, just hopefully, he could arrange to meet his daughter there. Although she would have to come in to Moscow too from a long way off.

During the night, Yuri had gone to the main office, that housed the communications equipment. He had contacted the train controllers further back up the line toward Vladivostok and advised them that the train must stop in his settlement to pick up three passengers. Himself, his wife and a friend, a young girl visiting them - a member of his family. Yuri had decided to take Katya with him. It would save awkward questions on the train. Besides, they should both go and visit their daughter, it had been a long time.

Chapter 17

Events were now moving rapidly. Natalie and her new friends Yuri and Katya were aboard the train and rushing West. Grushko was by now in a Moscow prison cell, a guest of the State Security organ. He was somewhat the worse for wear, but had not given up hope of making good his escape. He still had friends.

Meantime, William and Natalie's father Andrei were engaged in a frantic search for Natalie. They both thought, although never mentioned to each other, that Natalie lay undiscovered in the vast snow drifts that stretched for endless miles across the vast Siberian wasteland. There were no reports of strangers anywhere from one end of the Trans-Siberian line to the other. Very little movement of anyone in fact. The only report recently to come in was of a railway worker and his wife and daughter leaving on a well deserved holiday for Moscow. Their names were familiar to Natalie's father, but he was distracted with worry and did not dwell on it. His old friend Nikolai Ivanovich knew the names well. Old friends of his, but they now lived a quiet life. The girl must be their daughter, as he knew they had a daughter, but he thought... No, they would not be involved. Couldn't be.

He shuffled the papers on his desk looking for the report of the capture of that enemy of the state, Grushko. Where had it been that the men he had set to watch for him had finally caught up with him?

"Ty che..." Nikolai Ivanovich exclaimed loudly. "What the..." He looked up at Andrea, and William. Both of them haggard from lack of sleep. The two visitors could play no real part in the search as they were only visitors. Andrei's wife Nikolina had long since arrived in Moscow and was staying in a good hotel, too worried to move. She was being quietly protected, but didn't notice. The hotel was near the main station and was the central hotel used by visitors and dignitaries in Moscow.

"I have it," cried Nikolai Ivanovich. "I have a starting point. I also have old friends who are even now on their way here with their daughter." He was beaming from ear to ear. He had an idea, but he could not give voice to it yet. He had to check something. Nikolai Ivanovich knew where Yuri and Katya's daughter worked. He had arranged the posting himself. He grabbed up the telephone and was soon shouting down the line, the authority in his voice unmistakable.

"What do you mean, 'she can't come to the phone'?" Nikolai Ivanovich shouted. "Do you know who I am? Do you know? Are you telling me she isn't there? Not in the building? No excuses comrade director. Put her on the line immediately."

Nikolai Ivanovich looked over the handset at his friends, his head lowered so he was looking out from under his eyebrows. 'He looks like a wild bear.' Thought William, somewhat alarmed. Of course William spoke no Russian. What was causing the man such... anger? Suddenly Nikolai smiled, and his voice was as soft as honey.

"This is your Uncle Nikolai Ivanovich speaking my dear." He listened for a moment. "No no, nothing is wrong, I merely wanted to check that all is well with you. And have you heard from your father, my old friend, recently?"

He listened some more, the others in the room agape at his one sided conversation.

"My dear girl, I am happy to tell you that even as we speak your father and mother are on their way to visit here in Moscow. I shall send a car for you when they arrive." He listened. "No no, it is no trouble." He laughed aloud. "They travel with their daughter, You

will be most surprised to meet her!" Again he listened on the telephone, then with a laughing "goodbye," he rang off. He was still chuckling as he came back to sit with the others.

"My old friend Yuri knows me well," Nikolai smiled. "He knows still, how to forewarn me. We must find out when that train arrives." With that he again picked up the telephone. After some time talking to various departments, he had established the train's arrival time, even down to which platform.

William was by now very confused. He couldn't restrain himself.

"Excuse me sir, but what has this to do with my dearest Natalie, my... Natasha?" He wrung his hands in anguish while Natalie's father had stopped his pacing and was staring at his friend Nikolai Ivanovich.

"Nikolai, how can you be talking with Yuri's daughter on the telephone, when you are also saying that Yuri and Katya are travelling here with their daughter on the train?" He stood with his arms extended, smoke trailing up from his cigar in the still air of the room.

"Ha Ha Ha," bellowed Nikolai. "Come my friends. We are away to the station. We have friends arriving within the hour. We are just in time. You will be most surprised unless I am very mistaken." He hesitated and gave another laugh, adding, "I am not often mistaken."

Of this William had no doubt. His future father-in-law nodded, beginning to put the pieces together.

"Vanya," he said to his old friend. "I trust Yuri will remember me, his old friend Andrei. It has been a long time. I do hope his... daughter... is well and, and..." He hesitated to go on. "Let us go then. We have to get across the city yet. Let us hope that it's not too crowded around Gorky Park, the traffic was always terrible in that area."

William was still unsure what was happening, and as the other men alternated between speaking English and Russian, he really only had half a picture of some old friends arriving by train.

Andrea clapped William in the shoulder. "Come young man, there is someone I want you to meet."

Together they all hurried from the building out to the waiting car, idling by the curb-side, a plume of white vapour rising into the freezing air. Darkness was falling again, and it seemed to William that it did so ever early in this place.

Chapter 18

The trio climbed into the spacious car, the driver closing the door behind them. The heaters were going at full blast, in deference to the visitors and the interior was warm and comfortable. As the driver went around to open his own door, a man across the street stepped out of the shadows, a cigarette showing a pinpoint of red in the enveloping darkness. The orange flare of a sodium streetlight momentarily lit his face. He was staring intently at the car and its occupants and continued to watch them as the car sped away down the almost deserted street. Nikolai Ivanovich was FSK, Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna. Directorate of Customs and Immigration, and he didn't miss much. He had seen the man but said nothing. He had people watching the building, and it was probably one of his. If not, he would soon find out that he was not alone in the shadows. They sped on toward the Hotel Mandarin, some half a mile from the Leningradsky Station. There they would meet with Lady Nikolina Vladimirova and together proceed to the station.

William sat back in the corner of the seat staring out of the side window at the glittering ice hanging from the buildings. Weeks had gone by and he felt no closer to rescuing his true love. He was desolate over her loss and frustrated by his inability to make any progress. Here they were again dashing across Moscow in the cold and the dark, the other men silent in the warmth of the car. His almost father-in-law had a determined look on his face, and the Director was... William looked again. The man was smiling. What was there to smile about? William did not understand these men. They seemed to be treating his problems with disdain now. More often than not they spoke in Russian, and he didn't understand that either. He felt very isolated in this strange frozen place. He felt very... foreign. He caught his breath almost in a sob as the full impact of this forbidding place dawned on him, and the effect it must be having on his Natalie. The last he had heard about her, was that she had disappeared from the train. The great Trans-Siberian. She had been boarded many thousands of miles to the East, in Vladivostok in the company of some ruffian called Grushko. As he understood it, the man was a failed revolutionary. A left over from the days when Russia had still been the USSR, and the man apparently still harboured dreams of either restarting the revolution - surely a futile dream - or at the very least of exacting a futile revenge on the men riding in the car with him, for some past wrong that he thought had been done to him.

Well revenge he seemed to have achieved. He was in custody, but there was not a sign of Natalie. William knew Natalie's father was in a towering rage over the effrontery of the man, and had he been able to lay hands on him personally, it would have not gone well for Grushko. Nikolai Ivanovich, her father's personal friend was no less in a rage, but William could see that he was at least able to do something. William too had noticed the man watching them from the shadows of the buildings when they left. Even he knew that it was a watcher. Nobody in their right mind stood around smoking in the sub-zero temperatures of a Moscow night just because they liked the outdoors.

William touched Andrei on the shoulder. "Andrei Vladimirov." He said. His father-in-law to be had asked William to just use his first name, Andrei, but it still felt uncomfortable. He didn't know his Russian derivative that was used by close friends,

and wouldn't have used it anyway he thought. He would use the Russian for father-in-law, Тесть, at some time in the future, but for now, he was Andrei Vladimirov. This in itself was a slightly shortened version of Vladimirovich, but the name had been that of a relative of the old Tzar, and no one now wanted to know about the name. It was better to shorten it.

Andrei was looking at William across the short distance of the car seat. He thought William looked a bit distracted.

"What is it William?" he replied. William continued to stare at his future father-in-law, and seemed to be lost in thought, as indeed he was. He shook himself out of it.

"Who was that man watching us leave?" He asked. Andrei shook his head slightly. He had seen no one. He looked at his friend for assistance.

Nikolai turned to William. "Have no fear my young friend. The man is either one of my people, or he is already in custody. We will soon know either way." The car sped through the dark snow covered streets. There was very little traffic, and what there was gave this important looking car a wide berth. Modern Russian might now have a car for every person, but all Russians knew the symbols of authority well, and kept well clear. Finally the car slid to a stop outside the hotel. Nicolai turned and said.

"Wait here my friends a moment. I will fetch Nikolina and we will all proceed. Keep your eyes well aware. Talk to no one. My driver is armed should it be necessary." With that he leapt from the car and hurried up the hotel stairs and into the inviting foyer, lit with warmly glowing light, and bright decorations. In what seemed only minutes, he was hurrying back down the stairs with Andrei's wife Nikolina in tow. She appeared flustered and not at all happy at being rushed out into the cold night on an errand as yet unexplained to her. She was well rugged up though, with her furs and long boots, she looked the picture of Russian elegance.

Chapter 19

With everyone safely back in the car, the driver accelerated out into the traffic, the little flag on the hood of the car warning everyone that a person of importance was inside. There was not much traffic though and the few vehicles that had to swerve to avoid a collision with the Security Chief's car were ignored by the driver as he sped toward the station.

William had time to look at the others in the car with him. Andrei Vladimirov, whom he'd formerly known as Stanis Stratsvootya. His wife, Lady Nikolina Vladimirova and soon to be - he hoped, his mother-in-law. She was not happy to be bundled into the car, but was intelligent enough to see that something was afoot, so kept her silence, her mouth set in a thin line of displeasure, and of course Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna. Vanya as William's future father-in-law called him. William referred to him simply as General Petrovna as was fitting. He had not been invited to use anything else to address him. It would have been nice if his own parents had been able to come to Moscow with him, but he was a young man now, and could manage his affairs on his own. It would have been nice though he thought. Although best, he thought that they stayed back in case news came to them at that end. They still had no proof after all of Natalie's whereabouts.

Still, Andrei was acting like a father to him, and looked after him every step of the way, as had Lady Nikolina, even though both of them were distraught with worry. There had been no word of the fate of Natalie, and although the General seemed to be unaccountably in an upbeat mood this evening, it could only be because he was going to meet old friends, and their daughter. Although, William didn't quite understand what the phone call had been about. Did the General's friends have one daughter, two daughters, even no daughters? They would find out soon enough as the approaches to the vast railway station complex came into view. This was one of the busiest railway stations in all of Russia, Leningradsky Station and the General had already found out the platform and very carriage where he would find his friends Yuri and Katya, and their daughter, their second daughter. He had already sent a car Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna to fetch Alina, Yuri and Katya's daughter. She would be on the Leningradsky Station platform waiting for them, or arriving soon after. She only had to come a short distance as well as she worked and lived in a secret research complex very nearby.

Their driver ran the car directly up to the main concourse, stopping directly opposite the vast main doors to the station entrance. The huge glass doors slowly revolving as people moved in and out of the station. A traffic warden had started toward the car, intent on moving them on, until he had seen the flag on the hood fluttering in the light breeze. He suddenly changed direction and found himself busy directing luggage wagons that were trundling along behind a small electric powered tractor. The General jumped from the car, even before his driver could get out and help them. He turned and helped the Lady Nikolina from the car, followed by her husband and William. He spoke to the driver.

"Wait here. We will return, then we go back to the Hotel. Keep your eyes open, I fear we are being watched."

"Yes General." Replied the driver. The man had been the General's driver for a long time and knew he did not say things lightly. If the General thought they were

being watched - then he would make sure he was watching the watchers. The small group hurried inside the station and made for the correct platform. The train was arriving at any moment.

As the General hurried along at the head of his friends, he kept a watchful eye out for anything - anybody, out of place. Grushko was locked up, that he knew, but he had friends in this city. Friends only too willing to take a chance on his behalf. Nikolai Ivanovich kept his hand in his coat pocket, with his revolver gripped firmly in it. He would not be caught unawares. Finally they reached the platform where the Trans Siberian would arrive and the General looked about for his friend Yuri's daughter. Finally he spotted her as at the same moment she had seen the General. They hurried to greet each other, Nikolai Ivanovich clasping the diminutive Alina in a huge bear hug. She almost disappeared inside his vast overcoat and encircling arms. As she stepped back, a little embarrassed at such a display of affection in public, a man stepped forward out of the crowd that was pressing through the gate onto the platform.

"Natasha!" He called out, raising a pistol in his hand, his outstretched arm pointing directly at Alina. Alina looked around as a person does when someone calls out a name, and this seemed to confirm to the attacker that she was indeed Natalie, or Natasha as he had called out. He drew back the hammer on the old pistol preparing to fire, but was suddenly driven to the ground by a flying tackle from the General's driver, who had followed the man onto the platform. The pistol flew from the attacker's hand and discharged with a loud roar that drove the pigeons from the rafters in a flapping swirl of feathers and clattering wings. The bullet from the weapon clanged against the side of a nearby carriage and whined away into the labyrinth track area between platforms.

It had all happened so fast, that Nikolai Ivanovich, the General, had hardly had time to move. Now he walked over to the man laying stunned on the ground and delivered a kick to the man's side that drove what little breath he had left from his body.

Nobody was moving. All the people on the platform were standing stock still, as Nikolai Ivanovich slowly scanned the faces in the crowd, looking for signs of assistance for the fallen attacker. There was no one. His driver now had the fallen assassin handcuffed and was using his mobile to call for assistance. The station security police came bustling in, but stopped when they saw who they were dealing with.

"Get this trash out of my sight!" Roared the General. "I will deal with him later." He turned back to his friends, still standing speechless nearby.

"Come my friends. We go a little way along the platform to meet our arriving guests. My deepest apologies for this horrible display of bad manners by this madman." As he spoke, the trailing cars of the long train were slowly creaking along the track as the train reversed into the station platform bay allotted to it. The carriages were brightly lit, but still encrusted with ice and snow from their long journey through the freezing night.

Chapter 20

William was trailing along behind the others slightly. He was feeling quite dispirited at the seeming lack of progress in finding his beloved Natalie. Mad men jumping out of crowds shouting and waving guns. Now they were all going to meet some old friends of the General's. Was nobody interested? Clouds of steam from the train's braking system drifted over the platform making it difficult to see more than a few feet in any direction now.

The General was in the lead again, striding into the thick fog as though he could clearly see through it. Suddenly he shouted, causing William and the others to hurry forward. There was the General clasping a rather poorly dressed man in a firm embrace alternately kissing his cheeks and shouting welcome words at the top of his voice. Suddenly he turned and found William, again shouting.

"William my boy. Come forward, come forward. I have someone you must meet." He was laughing at some huge joke that only he seemed to know. William stepped to his side, supposing he was to meet this man and his family. He looked at the man then his wife, equally poorly dressed. And their daughter he supposed, bundled in ill fitting coats, furs, and with an outrageous fur hat pulled so far down it almost hid her face entirely.

William was a gentleman however, and as bad as he felt, he would mind his manners. He stepped forward to take the man's hand. He knew very little Russian but did his best with a simple 'Hello' to the man and his wife. The girl he did not how to greet. He didn't know the protocols at all so merely nodded in her direction.

He was about to turn away when she began to fall. He could see her knees beneath the shaggy coat folding. In an instant he stepped close to take her in his arms and support her. In doing so he knocked her fur hat askew and suddenly there she was. The fog and steam swirled about them, their companions seemingly frozen in a tableau in the eerie light. Williams heart was pounding, his voice failed to work as he looked at the pale face of his beloved Natalie, his... Natasha. She was looking up at him with a faint smile on her lips, her eyes deep pools of jet. Her breath misted in the cold air, and time stood still as she finally found herself safe in the arms of her dear beloved William.

She had never in a thousand years expected to find herself rescued into the safe arms of her dear William. Alighting from the train she had been bundled up by her friends Yuri and Katya, both against the cold, and against recognition by any who might still be trying to harm her. She had seen the huge bear of a man being warmly greeted by Yuri and being greeted equally warmly in return. Katya had stood back a little and had indicated to Natalie to wait a little behind her and stay hidden as there were others she didn't know in the company. Natalie was not a frail young woman, but glancing from deep in her protective furs she thought she had seen William. Her William, as the fog and steam swirled about them. It wasn't possible of course but the sudden image of the young man taking Williams shape had wholly shaken her to her core, and she had started to lose her grip on reality, her knees no longer wanting to hold her straight. She felt the young man take her in his arms. So like William. She gasped, her eyes shut a moment. When she opened them she was gazing into his

eyes. Williams eyes, the love shining out of them taking her breath away again. She couldn't speak. Tears sprang to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, freezing in the night air. She felt William wiping them away with his fingers. Her eyes were still locked onto his, the entire world just a blur outside of her vision.

"William?" She whispered. "William, is it really you?" She paused. "How can this be? Am I finally safe at last?"

Finally, Natalie started to regain control of herself. She again stood firmly on the platform, still wrapped in Williams arms, but the world now moving normally around them both. The others had barely moved, and indeed very little time had passed, although for both William and Natalie, time had seemed to have stopped. Reluctant to relax his embrace, William stepped aside a little and said to the General directly.

"General, may I enquire? Did you know that Natalie," he had to stop for a breath. "That Natalie was arriving on this train?" He added softly. "Yet you said nothing?"

The General was not in the least perturbed. He laughed aloud.

"My young friend. I said nothing because I did not know for sure. I only knew that my good friends Yuri and Katya," he smiled at them. "Have only one daughter, and this is she." He waved the girl forward, her parents finally able to greet her properly. Yuri laughing and Katya hugging her daughter with pure happiness written all over her face.

He looked to Natalie. "I am Comrade General Ivan Nikolai Petrovna, I have the pleasure of meeting the daughter of my lifelong friends Andrei and Nikolina, Miss Natalie. I last met you my dear when you were but a babe in arms. How the years have cherished you."

"Come my friends, let us return to the hotel, and quit this uninviting place. We have much to discuss. Much to plan. Much to celebrate."

With that, he took his friends Yuri and Katya in either arm, Katya still holding her daughter's hand and led the party along the platform, scattering other passengers like chickens. The others hurried to catch up. The driver had already hurried ahead to the car, the man captured in the earlier incident by now dispatched to prison to await his fate.

Chapter 21

The party arrived back at the hotel, William and Natalie having hardly spoken. Neither could believe that the other was right there in front of them and were alternately hugging each other and crying with joy and relief. The others kept quiet and left them alone for the moment. They had come back to the hotel in two cars, the second car having been commandeered from the director of the railway station.

Space was made for the entire party in the grand lounge. The General's authority was never questioned. General Andrei Vladimirov. What he asked for he got. He was even now speaking to the maître d'hôtel and ordering their own private dining facilities be made ready as quickly as possible. Soon enough everyone was settled comfortably in the warmth of the private dining room.

While the waiters fussed around the table, the General, Natalie's father, and mother were now asking a thousand questions all at once of Yuri and Katya. They were still leaving William and Natalie alone. Both Yuri and Katya and Natalie for that matter were well rested, even after the long journey. It had been cold but comfortable on the train, and they had had plenty of time to prepare themselves for their arrival. None of the three had any idea of course that they would have such a reception committee. It had been a great surprise. The daughter of Yuri and Katya sat close and watched this Natalie - she smiled at the thought of this girl being passed off as her sister. Alina was a little older than Natalie she thought, and not so... frail. How that girl had survived the experience and was still able to sit here holding her loved one's hand she couldn't imagine. Well, it seemed everyone was happy now and the unexpected arrival of her own parents gave her a great deal of joy.

Presently, William's father Charles tapped his glass to get everyone's attention.

"My dear friends." He began. "My son William. My..." He hesitated a fraction. "Soon to be daughter-in-law, Natalie." Again he paused. Was his lip trembling? He sipped his cold vodka to steady himself. He continued.

"In truth, I had not expected to see Natalie again. I had hoped against hope of course as one must. But this is such a vast and unforgiving country. When I heard that Natalie had actually arrived in far away Vladivostok, a captive of the villain Grushko still, I could not believe my ears. We had heard nothing for months. Only thanks to the work of my dear friend Vanya," here he raised his glass to his friend. "I could never have known her whereabouts. Without further ado we came directly to Moscow. William and I, my dear friends Vanya and Nikolina. William's mother had, unfortunately, to stay in Australia. But she joins us soon. Even now she is on her way, again it seems that I owe so much to my friends." He raised his glass to his friends. "Vanya. I thank you for taking the time, as soon as you suspected who accompanied Yuri, to contact my wife and have her flown at haste to be here."

He looked at his son William, and saw the great joy on his face as he held the hands of his bride to be, Natalie.

It was the turn now of Vanya, the General, to struggle to his feet.

He banged the table with a nearly empty vodka bottle, spreading his arms wide. He was laughing and smiling and encompassed all with his gaze.

"My dearest family, all of you are my family. This is a great day. That we have been successful in bringing to justice those vile kidnappers and murderers who would bring such disrepute to our great country is truly fantastic. What is beyond all belief is that of all the people across this vast land that Natalie should fall into the arms of as she jumped from a train in the middle of nowhere?" He paused. "She falls into the arms of two of my closest friends, people who are as my family. It is unbelievable." He looked directly now at Natalie and William. Now much quieter, he addressed them. "That William loves you Natalie is indisputable. He has dogged my steps the whole time we have been here. Never allowing me to give up the search for a moment. Fortunately my reach is wide across this land. When we heard that the pig Grushko had been seen entering the country with a young girl in tow, we knew immediately that he bore watching. When William and his father turned up at my assistant's immigration desk, I fitted the pieces together immediately. The girl could only have been you. Imagine my surprise and consternation when you disappeared from the train, only minutes ahead of my men apprehending Grushko and rescuing you from his clutches. One of the most worrying moments of my life I can tell you. The Siberian waste lands are not a place that people survive long in, unassisted."

Vanya, the General resumed his seat. William looked about at the people around the huge circular table. "My dearest friends," he began. "I don't know how to thank you all. I don't know where to begin. Yuri and Katya, please forgive me for not weeping over your hands in appreciation of saving my Natalie. For truly I can find no words to express my appreciation. Nor can I find words to express my joy to you all."

William paused and took a sip of wine. He helped Natalie to her feet. Her cheeks glowing in the warmth of the room and the company. The light in her eyes solely for William.

She quietly spoke. "Dearest family and friends. My adventures have been many and sometimes very frightening, but now I am safe with my William. I will tell you all over the next little while, for I must now tell you all. Mother, Father." She drew a breath. "I must tell you that I, we, will be staying here in Russia in this coldest of places for a little while. There is to be a wedding. A marriage. A marriage in a cold climate."