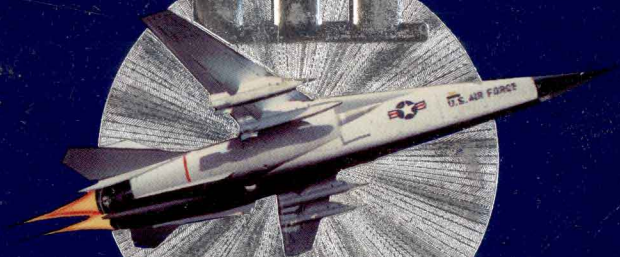


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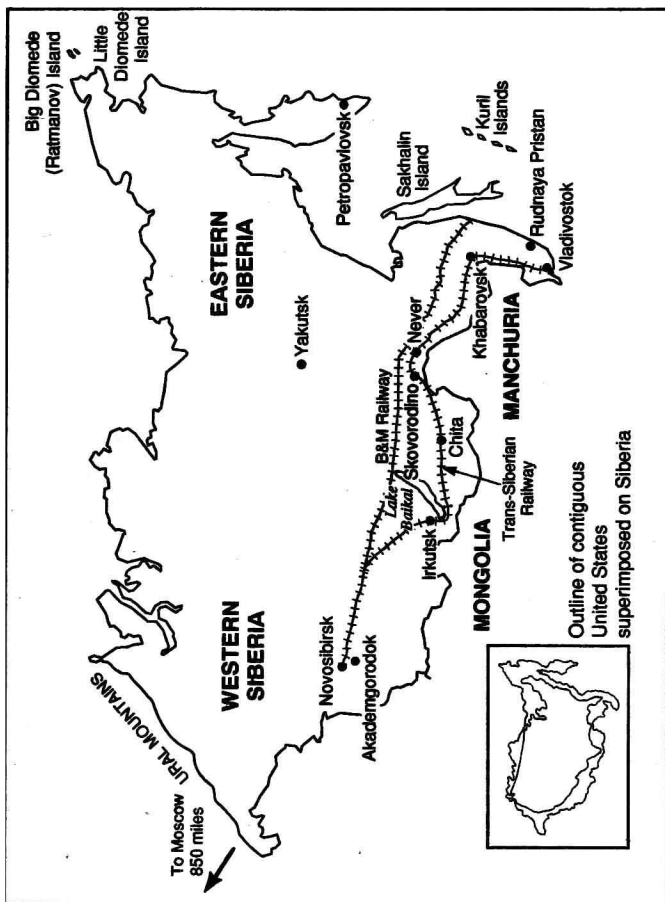
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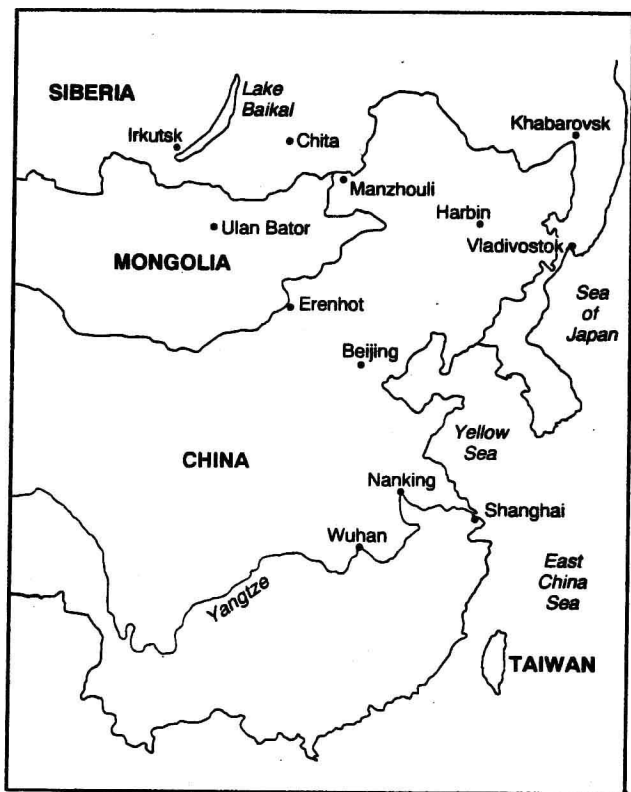
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SIBERIA Scale: 1 inch = approx. 575 miles



CHINA Scale: 1 inch = approx. 350 miles

CHAPTER ONE

Demilitarized Zone, Eastern Siberia

THE THREE FIGURES dropped softly, catlike, from the chopper roaring above them, its rotors a blur against the winter moon. Their progress in the deep snow was unhurried, displaying an economy of movement, yet singular purpose. Their sixty-pound packs and two-meter skis lowered, the women pulled down their night vision goggles, clicked on the long skis, and, using herringbone steps, began to climb the ridge from the depression the chopper had used for cover. The baskets at the end of their poles disappeared six inches into fresh powder before biting into the last snowfall that had crusted under the impact of wind and sun across the vast taiga. At the ridge's summit a black, moonlit wilderness of pine, beech, and fir stretched in every direction, the air no longer polluted by the oily stench of the chopper's exhaust, but pure and smelling of that hard, cold purity that all skiers love.

The three women, in their thirties, were Olympic standard biathletes. In top shape they were as adept at firing the high-velocity .22 rifles dead on target as they were skiing the women's nine-mile or the men's twelve-mile cross-country course, each of them having practiced endlessly on the Les Saisles course at Albertville and on others before the war. Each woman's body was so well-conditioned that she could drop her rapid biathlon heartbeat to 145 per minute while firing on the range in the prone position, and to no more than 190 on the cross-country trails. They skied down

from the ridge in single file, and it wasn't until a minute later that the leader found it necessary to start double poling, her body in the white, skintight, four-way-stretch Lycra-nylon suit moving as if one with the white skis and poles.

As well as having to be beautiful, in top physical condition, and willing to volunteer for the three-day, seventy-mile crossing of the cease-fire's no-man's land, all three had been required to submit to a medical examination to ascertain whether any of them were having, or would have, their period during the crossing. Menstruation would almost certainly be a lure to any tracking dogs that might be accompanying patrols sent out along the enemy's edge of the four-hundred-mile-long, seventy-mile-wide DMZ. The merest whiff of blood, they knew, could be picked up for miles by the animals and would pose a risk to the entire mission. Normally this wouldn't be a problem—you could simply kill a dog with a single shot from the .22 with noise suppressor so as not to attract any further attention. But on this mission, they carried no weapons—at least none like a rifle or pistol, which would be a sure giveaway—only the two-apiece, razor-sharp “ice pick” daggers whose grips were the normal plastic rubberized and finger-contoured handles of the ski poles. These could be extracted quickly with one pull from the pole, screw threads being decided against because even a drop of moisture on a thread could freeze and make extraction harder. Anyway, it would take longer to unscrew rather than pull them. The rubber/nylex pole handles simply slipped out and back into the pole in a firm friction grip, the hairline of the join obscured by the pole's rubberized handle, which extended an inch farther down the pole than the join. Three skiers meant six daggers in all, each tipped with ricin pellets. The castor oil derivative took only seconds to work, as the needle-sharp point, upon being thrust forward, would break the ricin capsule—teardropped at its end like a solidified saffron drop of Canada balsam—

coating the tip with the poison even as it punctured the ricin and the victim's skin simultaneously, the poison causing a total collapse of the victim's central nervous system.

On flat terrain now, the three were moving in unison in leg-kick, pole-push strokes. Then, with an incline up the other side of a frozen stream approaching them, the leader moved from classic stroking to the freer skating slide, poles starting together, then one leg pushing the ski sideways, using the other to glide, then alternating.

Someone back at HQ had argued that while it was obvious they couldn't use a helicopter to cross the DMZ in such clear weather without it being detected and shot down, they should have at least used male commandos—until it was pointed out by the duty officer that even the tradition-bound British had conceded that now half their MI-5 counterespionage agents were women. Better at observation. Saw things men didn't. Besides, with three women there was a greater element of surprise. The enemy wouldn't expect it. Once the three had crossed the DMZ, using darkness as cover, they'd surely fit in much more quickly than three men. After all, what could be more natural than three good-looking foreign correspondents, all equipped with the necessary ID, vying craftily with one another to get a one-on-one interview with the famous American general whose daring if unconventional exploits from Iraq to Siberia had surpassed even those of the legendary Rommel and Schwarzkopf?

And then all it needed was a second, the needle-thin steel out, stab, and back in the pole. Or, if carried in separately—should they have to leave the poles outside—just as easily discarded behind a cabinet, in a wastebasket, anything nearby; the wound so thin, it would in effect be no more than a hat-pin-diameter stab. To make sure of this, having practiced with the optimum size needed to ensure depth without severe hemorrhaging, they had followed the lead of the British, who in the Iraqi War had consulted an eminent

Edinburgh pathologist on the best shape and size of the bayonet required to kill with minimum effort. There would be little if any blood, and the symptoms such that the victim's responses would more likely than not be interpreted as either heart attack or stroke. And giving him mouth-to-mouth would make it look even better if aides rushed in to help.

The cease-fire might last, but if it didn't—get Freeman, and the battle'd be half won. Freeman was like Patton—unpredictable and brilliant. Indeed, it had been someone at Marshal Yesov's HQ at Irkutsk who, remembering that Patton had represented the United States in the decathlon in the 1928 Olympics, thought of the idea of using the biathletes to get Freeman if the cease-fire between Siberia's sixty divisions and America's twelve broke.

One of the best friends the Americans had had before the cease-fire was a Siberian, Aleksandra Malof, from the JAO—Jewish Autonomous Oblast, or region—around Khabarovsk—whose underground movement had unearthed the secret of Baikal. In this four-hundred-mile-long, twenty-mile-wide lake—the deepest in the world, and holding a fifth of all the freshwater on earth—the Siberians had hidden a flotilla of small diesel subs beneath the winter ice. Nosing up through the thinner patches of ice, the toroidal, “Goodyear Man”—shaped minisubs had been able to launch a deadly missile offensive hundreds of miles eastward against the U.N.-sanctioned and outnumbered American force of ten divisions. The American force, under the command of General Douglas Freeman, was charged with preventing any further annexation of territory in what had been the Soviet Far East.

Now, after escaping from the Siberian jail in Port Baikal during the Allied commando raid that had destroyed the sub base, Aleksandra Malof was still on the run. Having headed south across the Siberian-Chinese border, then east to Harbin, the largest city in Manchuria, she was intent on getting back to the autonomous region in American-held Khabarovsk.

CHAPTER TWO

Harbin, Manchuria

"NOW!" SAID LATOV, sitting on the edge of the bed. It was half command, half plea. As head of the new Siberian Republic's consulate in Harbin, he was used to getting his own way, particularly with refugees like this one, desperately wanting the necessary travel documents so she could return to her home near Khabarovsk.

"No!" Aleksandra told him, taking his hand, moving it sulkily away from the thigh-revealing slit of her *qi pao*, the green dress clinging sensuously to her. "You kept me waiting," she said, sensing that if she gave in too easily, she'd have nothing left to bargain with.

For a moment Ilya Latov didn't answer her. He couldn't. He was too excited—she was still new to him. Three weeks ago he had seen her walking through Zhaolin Park by the river. Dressed in rags, she was shivering, her clothes lice-ridden, her Siberian fur boots tattered. Now the musky smell of her perfume which he'd brought her enveloped him, her lithe, silk-sheathed body exciting him in a reverie of expectation. Despite the darkness of the room here in the consulate annex, he could still see the outline of her breasts silhouetted clearly against the rime-covered window. Beneath all her outward sophistication, the finery he had provided for her, Latov couldn't think of her as any more than a Siberian peasant, a Jewish peasant at that, and he was determined to get every kopek's worth out of her. He tried again to slide his hand beneath the *qi pao*, feeling the

warmth of her thigh. It made him feel young again. "I've been . . . busy," he said lamely, his arousal making his voice dry and cracked.

She pushed his hand away again. It was the only power she had. But soon she knew she would have to yield if she was to get the papers she so desperately needed to get out of Harbin, to head north, back to the JAO near Khabarovsk. It was now, thank God, in control of the Americans, following their push of the Siberians back as far as Baikal before the cease-fire following the first U.N.-declared war since Iraq in 1991.

Latov moved closer to her. He wanted her on top of him, sitting on him, rocking slowly back and forth side to side—to watch her breasts sway above him until he couldn't stand it anymore. He thought her by far the most beautiful woman he'd seen in months, or had he been away from Siberia too long—among the *kosoglazy*—the slant-eyed Chinese who, as far as he could remember, had been Siberia's most hated enemy?

"Who were you busy with?" Aleksandra asked moodily, sitting up stiffly against the wall, pulling her wrap tightly about her, drawing her feet up like a petulant school-girl. Her black hair caught the glow of colored lights outside. The Siberian consulate overlooked Zhaolin Park, where the Chinese were having the annual ice lantern festival. The consulate had been asked to douse its lights to heighten the effect, the kaleidoscopic hues they could see through the frosted windows produced by the battery-fed light bulbs frozen inside the ice sculptures and from swinging lanterns at the edges of the park. "I saw you with her," Aleksandra challenged Latov. "Walking in the park this afternoon."

"*Gospodi!*" he said exasperatedly. "She's my wife. What do you expect? That I should—"

Aleksandra swung her legs over the edge of the bed, reaching down for the heavy peasant fur boots she'd worn all the way on her escape from Lake Baikal, south then east, across the Mongolian-Chinese frontier and here to Harbin.

Latov reached out, took her shoulders, steadying her. "Look, if I refuse to go out with her, it would look suspicious. What do you expect?"

"Will *little* Ilya have to be home by eleven again?"

He ignored her baiting tone. In a way he liked it—he would enjoy hurting her even more. "The Chinese are giving one of their lunar new year parties," he explained lamely, his hands slipping about her, pulling her around so that her back was to him. He kissed her neck, her hair. "She's gone out with friends."

Alexsandra could smell his breath: wine and stale cigar smoke. "Won't you be missed?"

He felt his erection getting harder. "What do you want? First you're mad that I'm with her—then, if it wasn't for me, you'd still be wandering around in the park."

"I want you to tell me the truth, Ilya. I don't want anyone coming back—catching us here. You're a bigwig—the new Siberian consul. Who am I?" She turned suddenly to him. "A Jewess, a refugee forced south by the war. What would happen to me?"

She remembered all too vividly what had happened to her in the Port Baikal jail after she had been arrested in Khabarovsk as being a member of the *yevreyskie podpolie*—the Jewish underground—and shipped west on the Trans-Siberian. Had it not been for the Allied commando attack on Lake Baikal's southern township, during which a shell had blown open a wall of the jail, she and the other prisoners would never have escaped. She would still be there, having to endure more of the torture of the kind meted out by the OMONs—the Siberian Ministry of Interior's Black Berets—some of them women who, in true OMON style, had gleefully crippled several American POWs by driving needle-thin wire through their genitals. It hadn't taken her long to realize that the OMON thugs were no different from the KGB thugs who had raped her in the Baikal jail, that the *new* Siberian secret police were no better than the *old* Siberian KGB. Only the names had changed.

"She won't come back early," said Latov reassuringly, taking off his greatcoat, the sag of his belly revealed as the white bulge of his tuxedo. "They'll all be too busy stuffing themselves with grilled bear paws and stewed moose nose. The Chinese are barbarians. They'll eat anything—cow tendons, intestines—"

She laughed. "They think you're the ones that are barbarians."

He'd had enough of her teasing and suddenly released her, walked away from the bed and sat in a chair he dragged over from the corner of the room.

"Come here!" he ordered. Pulling her close to him, he felt her breasts pushing against him in the dark, her nipples hard in the cold of this caretaker's annex that he used for what he grandly called their "rendezvous." It was near freezing in the room. The Chinese didn't believe in heat, and had it not been for the small Japanese kerosene radiator in the room, they would have frozen. He knew that outside, enjoying the lantern festival, the Chinese would be wandering contentedly up and down the park in the subzero temperatures, licking ice cream; the big revolution in dreary Harbin, one of the worst-polluted cities in Manchuria, being the advent of a new flavor—strawberry—an ideological victory over the traditional and trusted vanilla.

"Are you telling me the truth?" she asked softly, yielding a little more to him. "There's no one—besides your wife?" She almost said, Another man perhaps? but that would be pushing him too far.

Even so, he uttered an oath under his breath, none of which she heard clearly, but nevertheless understood. It meant, what more do you want from me?

"I told you," he said sharply. "I've been busy. The Chinks are calling up more troops from the southern provinces, sending them up over the Nanking Bridge—to our border. You must have seen them passing through. I tell you, it's a logjam down there in Nanking. We've been trying to help them sort it out. All their other crossings over

the Yangtze are flooded. Chinese have no idea of building approach roads or—”

“I don’t care about Chinese roads,” she said. “Just so long as you’re telling me the truth—that there’s no one else.” She pushed her thigh between his legs. “You promise!”

“I swear,” he said, at once impatient and gratified that she was so jealous. “I’ve been busy with Chink officials all day. Novosibirsk and Beijing don’t want any misunderstanding.”

She knew what he meant—the Chinese and Russians had fought sporadic but bitter battles for a hundred years over the Amur River, which the Chinese called the “Black Dragon.” The prize was the fertile river border areas around the northeasternmost corner of Manchuria, within the big hump formed by the river as it flowed eastward into the Sea of Okhotsk. Things had gotten so out of hand in the sixties that at one point soldiers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army had dropped their trousers and mooned the Russians watching them across the river. Many on both sides had been killed during the resulting border clashes. But why the sudden rapprochement between ancient enemies?

“I just want you to spend more time with me,” she said, conciliatory, dropping now any suggestion that he might be fooling around with some other woman. She took his hand and placed it beneath her *qi pao*, telling him flippantly that it was nice Novosibirsk had “kissed and made up” with the Chinese.

“We’ve not made up,” Ilya retorted angrily. “It’s convenient for Novosibirsk and Beijing to get on with one another just now.”

“Why?” she asked, giggling, putting his hand inside her panties.

“Because—” he said, gasping like a fish out of water, “if the cease-fire . . . if it doesn’t hold . . . Novosibirsk would want . . . Beijing . . . an ally.” He was babbling now.

"Here—let me do it," she said, unzipping the *qi pao* herself. He was so clumsy. "You mean you've spent all night discussing that?" she said, laughing openly at him. "The Americans won't break the cease-fire."

He was angered by her laughter, but too excited to chastise her.

She reached out in the darkness, her hand unzipping him, squeezing it, tugging it toward her, smelling it. "Enough war talk," she said softly. "I believe you. So long as you weren't with some slut."

He saw her shoulders visibly relax, her whole body, demeanor, softer, warmer now. Reaching frantically for his greatcoat, draped behind him over the chair, he got up, tipping over the chair in his urgency, flinging the coat onto the bed to take away the chill of the sheets. Then he lowered her to it.

"I'm sorry, Ilya," she said plaintively. "I'm so jealous. Sometimes—"

"*Ladno, golubchik*," he said. It's all right, my sweet. "It's all—" She turned full on to him, squeezing him harder, moving its swollen tip in a fast, gentle whipping motion up and down against the damp tightness of her panties. He groaned with pleasure. "Go on—go on," he pleaded. "No—stop, stop. Tease me!"

She kissed the lobe of his ear, bit it. She hated him, his sour breath now reeking with nicotine and sweat.

He smelled like the OMON thugs, and she felt a rush of panic. She knew they wouldn't give up looking for her. Of all the prisoners who had escaped Baikal, she knew she had earned the OMON's special hatred. As well as being instrumental in helping the Americans to uncover the secret of the vast, frozen lake—the midget ship-to-surface-armed missile submarines that had almost turned the tide against the Americans, until the spectacular joint British SAS/American Delta commando raid on Baikal—she and other Jewish saboteurs from the JAO had wrecked part of the Trans-Siberian, in trying to stop the military support trains heading east from Novosibirsk.

The commandos had completely wrecked the sub base at Baikal. If Ilya even suspected who she really was, she knew she'd be shot—and most likely he, too, for having given her shelter from the OMON bloodhounds, albeit unknowingly. She heard him grunting, his body heavy, suffocating, his belly sliding in perspiration on hers, his arms, barely able to support his weight, shaking. She was still a prisoner. In order to get the necessary travel papers she so desperately needed, the very sex she was giving him as the price might well induce him to take his own good time issuing the papers. Why should he hurry? He might even refuse, just to keep her on tap.

He was covering her in wet kisses, the cloying mixture of vodka and stale breath flooding over her, his rutting rough and hard, confident he was exciting her. She sighed and gasped to maintain his illusion, and to take her mind off the sheer horror of it, wondered how she could possibly end the liaison she'd started when she had determined to "accidentally" bump into him in Zhaolin Park. And now she had more reason to get out of Harbin—to get north with the vital information of the massive Chinese buildup that was streaming over the Yangtze across the Nanking Bridge. The American satellites wouldn't pick it up through Harbin's souplike pollution, even if there was a satellite passing over Harbin.

Suddenly she had the answer. "Alexsandra—Alex—" cried Ilya. "I love you—I—"

Seized by inspiration, she pulled harder, slipped her shawl between them to stop the sucking noise of his sweat-slicked paunch slithering reptile-like against her, and pulled him harder into her, kissing him, her nails digging hard into his back, his mouth now moving quickly away from hers, kissing, slobbering over her breasts. "Harder!" she told him, and she could see them raping her in the jail at Baikal, her hatred of them so intense she feared she might never again be capable of genuine sexual love. She was crying, he mistaking it for passion, his thrusting becoming more violent. Through the maelstrom, she turned her head