

MOUNTAIN OF THE DEAD

By Jeremy Bates

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JEREMY
BATES

**MOUNTAIN
OF THE DEAD**

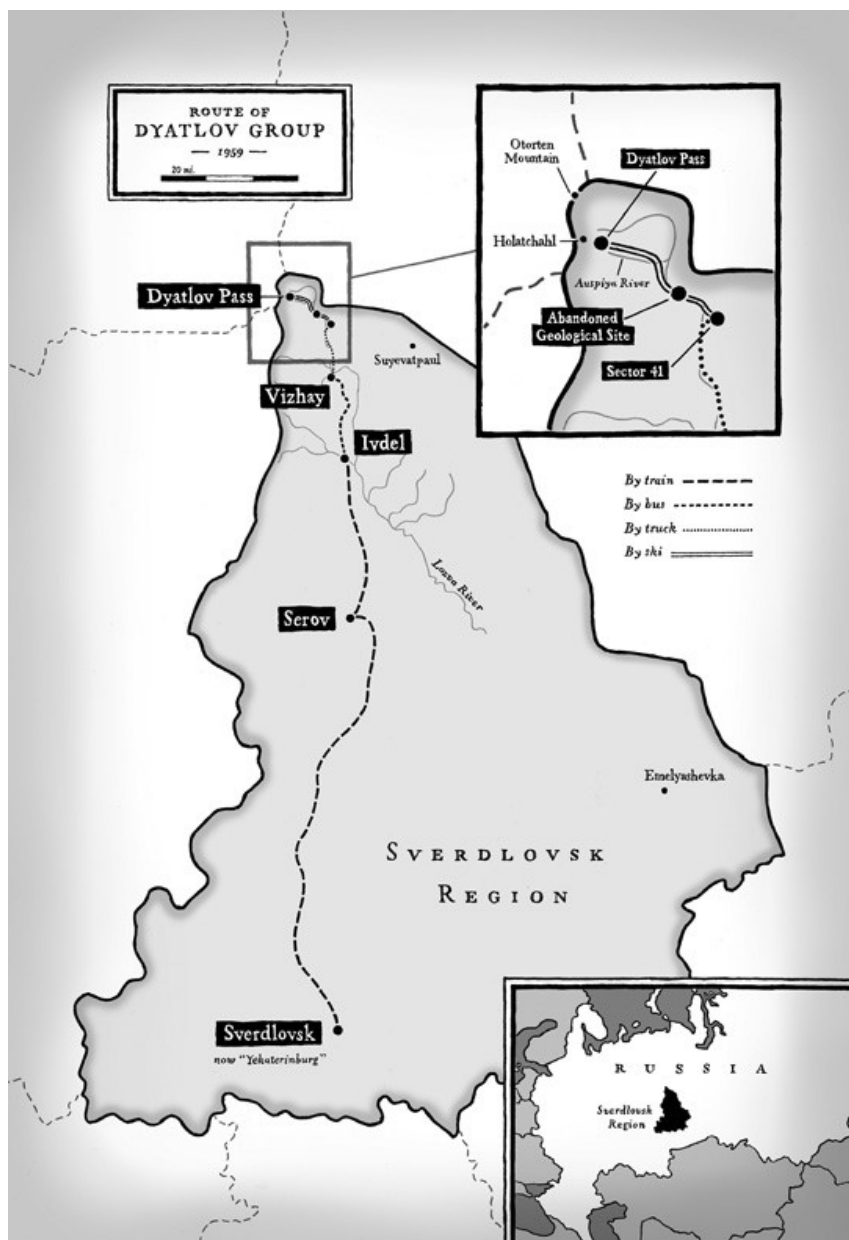


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PROLOGUE

NORTHERN URAL MOUNTAINS, USSR, 1959

LAST DAY TO LIVE

It was the coldest day of the expedition yet. A strong wind blew in from the west, slicing through their layers of clothing and freezing their exposed faces. Heads bowed against the elements, the Dyatlov group skied in single file over virgin snowpack four feet deep, the work so exhausting they were soon sweating despite the subpolar temperatures. Every so often Igor paused to rest, but Igor was rarely one to rest, and it became clear to everyone this was a thinly veiled excuse so he could study the way they had come, to make sure they weren't being followed. Zolotaryov wanted to tell him to cut this out. It wasn't helping the morale of the group. Yet he held his tongue. He was an outsider among these students, a last minute tag-along. He didn't feel it his place to question Igor's actions, especially in front of the others.

When they stopped for lunch, they snapped a few photographs, but the typical smiles and spirited poses had been replaced with determined faces and bleak landscapes, nine young hikers pushing the boundaries of their endurance.

Over the next hour the coniferous Siberian forest opened

around them as the trees struggled to survive in the high elevation and harsh climate until only the occasional stunted birch or emancipated pine poked through the white crust of snow. Many of these leaned at drunken and twisted angles, and depending on your state of mind, they were either pictures of sublime beauty or hellish abominations.

Abruptly Igor brought the group to a halt. Zolotaryov looked up from his ice-crusting skis. He couldn't see much through the milky haze of snowflakes. He slugged off his rucksack and was about to slump down in a drift next to Zina and Lyuda when he noticed Igor and Rustem speaking quietly to each other but using forceful gestures.

He glided over to them. "What's happening?" he asked, stopping himself with his ski poles.

Rustem snorted. "Igor has taken us to the midpoint between Hill 1096 and Hill 805. He wants to climb the ridge."

Zolotaryov frowned. Hill 1096 and Hill 805 shared the same steep slope rising over one hundred meters. It was possible to climb it to enter the pass to Mount Ortoten beyond. However, the plan was to camp at Hill 611 today, where there would be trees to protect them from the wind, and firewood. "The sun sets at five o'clock, Igor," he said. "It will be dark soon. We can't ski in the dark."

"That's what I've been telling him!" Rustem said.

"If we leave now," Igor said, "we can make it to the northeast tip of Hill 1096."

"There will be no shelter up there," Zolotaryov said.

"We have the stove. I filled it with firewood this morning. We will be warm."

"But why don't we simply go to Hill 611?" Rustem said, almost whining. He could become petulant when he didn't get his

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way, Zolotaryov had observed. “That is the best spot to make camp. On the other hand, if we get caught up there...”

They turned toward the miasma ahead of them.

“Then we should stop talking and get moving,” Igor said.

“This is about what you saw, isn’t it?” Rustem said, shaking his head. “Come on, Igor! You’re acting like a child.”

Ignoring Rustem, Igor faced the group and announced in a loud voice: “Time to go! Follow me!” He started off, his chin tucked against his chest to protect his face as much as he could from the savage headwind.

The others climbed back to their feet. Some appeared doubtful, but they all obediently followed. They had too much respect for Igor to question his judgment.

Grumbling, Rustem fell into line too, and Zolotaryov took up the rear.

The going proved arduous, and when they reached the bottom of the ridgeline, they were forced to turn their skis and sidestep up the gradient. During the ascent they could see nothing but looming snowdrifts and rocky outcroppings. When they reached the top, the already truculent weather took a drastic turn for the worse. Dark storm clouds corralled the setting sun. The headwinds doubled in force, churning the fresh powder into a wall of uncompromising white that made it impossible to distinguish land from sky.

Yet Igor persisted in a northwest direction, and just before sunset at five o’clock he signaled a halt in what appeared to be a barren wasteland of snow. Zolotaryov could see no landmarks by which to navigate. The damned blizzard had deadened visibility to zero. He had no idea how far they had gone and no real idea where they now found themselves, except somewhere on the western face of the unprotected pass.

Turning in a circle to observe the inhospitable environment, squinting against the barrage of icy spicules pelting his face, Igor announced they would make camp where they stood.

Rustem immediately protested. “This is madness! We need to return to the valley and start over in the morning.”

“We will not!” Igor snapped. “We’ll lose an entire day’s progress! And do you want to repeat that climb tomorrow?”

“He’s right, Igor,” Zolotaryov said. “This storm is bad. We should go back—”

“No!” Igor said. “We will camp here!”

Too exhausted to argue, Doroshenko and Kolevatov and Zina were already shrugging off their packs, and soon everyone was helping to pitch the tent on the western slope of Hill 1096, or in the tongue of the indigenous Mansi tribesmen, Kholat Syakhl—the Mountain of the Dead.

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As the group worked in the glacial conditions, daylight faded to a phantom twilight before surrendering to complete darkness. By the time they realized they had set up the tent with the entrance facing the wind, they couldn’t be bothered to rectify the mistake. In fact, they were so bone-weary they didn’t bother assembling the stove for dinner, settling instead on a meal of cold meat and dried bread. They ate silently in candlelight. No songs were sung. Nobody instigated the usual discussions on love and poetry and science.

All the while gale-force winds pounded the walls of their canvas refuge, an ubiquitous reminder they were imprisoned on a mountainside in the midst of a harrowing blizzard. Some of the members of the group, if not all of them, blamed Igor for their

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dire predicament. They would not speak the accusation aloud, but their smoldering hostility was palpable. Zolotaryov could feel it poisoning the atmosphere in the tent as surely as he could feel the cold in his bones.

This would not have been the case a day earlier. They were all experienced hikers. They knew what they had signed up for, the dangers associated with any expedition into remote wilderness. They knew nature could turn against you without notice. They knew people sometimes made mistakes, and you had to take those mistakes in your stride.

But today was not yesterday. Igor was not the man he had been twenty-four hours before. He remained withdrawn, fidgeting with his ice axe and mumbling to himself. He refused to eat with the rest of them, instead choosing to sit sentry at the threshold of the tent's south-facing entrance, staring into the snow-ravaged night.

When Rustem remarked that Igor was allowing the scant heat generated by their combined bodies to escape outside, Igor glowered at him. Then, without a word, he secured the door flaps and nonchalantly cut slits in the canvas wall, so he could continue his vigil.

This was the point when concern tipped toward enmity, when the seeds of mutiny sprouted within the team. Even so, they were in the middle of nowhere, as effectively isolated as a galleon at sea. They could not banish Igor into the storm, for this would be a death sentence. They could do nothing but put up with his paranoid antics until morning and perhaps try to talk some sense into him then.

After dinner, with everyone preparing for bed, Igor said, "We need to keep watch."

This was met with collective groans.

“Igor—” Zina said.

“We don’t know how far north we are. We need to monitor the weather, hope for a break, so we can get a fix on Hill 611. A reverse compass bearing on the map will show us where we are.”

“Why not wait until morning?” Doroshenko said.

“If the weather hasn’t cleared, then what?”

“We wait—”

“There will be no discussion! One hour each. That should not be too hard, should it? I’ll take first watch.”

He left the tent.

“Who’s turn is it to write in the group journal?” Rustem remarked.

“Mine,” Zolotaryov said. “But I think we should skip writing anything today.” Admitting they had camped on an exposed mountain slope, in blizzard conditions, would surely disqualify them from earning their Category III hiking certification.

In a low voice Rustem said, “He’s acting—”

“Enough,” Zolotaryov said. “We’ll reach the summit tomorrow, then we’ll start back. Forget about this night and get some rest.”

And they did just that. Igor returned inside the tent after completing an hour on watch. Kolya put on his boots and outerwear and braved the cold outside. Zolotaryov couldn’t sleep and decided to sneak a cigarette. He was pulling on his boots when Kolya shouted.

Igor, who was sleeping by the front of the tent, jerked awake. He stuck his head through the door flaps. Zolotaryov scrambled past the others, who were rousing drowsily, and peeked through the flaps also.

What he saw froze him with terror.

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By the time the sun rose over the Northern Ural Mountains, all nine members of the ski-team expedition were dead, some having received horribly gruesome injuries. The official investigation into their deaths would last months, though there would be no definite answer as to what happened to Igor Dyatlov and his comrades on that night, only that they had succumbed to an “unknown compelling force.” Soviet authorities would close the area to the public for the next three years and lock the case file away in a classified archive.

To this day, the incident remains one of the most chilling unsolved mysteries of the twentieth century.

PART 1

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains,
however improbable, must be the truth.”
—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

“Passport,” the immigration official said. He had a blond buzz cut and a round face with squinty eyes, like marbles pushed deeply into dough. His nametag read: “Ivan Suslov.”

I placed my passport and migration card on the booth’s high counter. He slid the passport’s identity page through an electronic reader, then glanced at his computer monitor, then at me.

“Tourist,” he said. It was a statement.

“That’s right,” I replied.

“How long will you be in Russia?”

“Ten days.”

“What do you do?”

“In Russia?”

“What is your job?”

“I’m a teacher,” I told him, repeating what I’d written on the migration card. It wasn’t the truth.

“What do you teach?”

“Teach?” I shrugged, the question catching me off guard. “Everything.”

Something shifted in Ivan Suslov’s expression that made me think of a bloodhound picking up a scent.

“I’m a substitute teacher,” I added. “I teach high school, ele-

mentary, different subjects.” I shrugged again, parlaying indifference. “Everything.”

Ivan studied me a beat longer. “Where are you staying?”

“The Hyatt,” I said.

He wrote HYATT on the migration card with a black felt pen in a space I had overlooked.

“You are staying there your entire trip?”

“Yes,” I said, though this wasn’t the truth either.

“You are by yourself?”

“No, with a friend.” I hooked a thumb toward one of the queues to my right. “He’s over there.”

But Ivan Suslov didn’t bother looking. Instead, he leafed through my passport, glossing over the palimpsest of inked impressions, until he came to a blank page. He added his own inked impression with a heavy-handed thump of a rubber stamp, scribbled the date on top of it, and returned the booklet to me.

“Have a good stay in Russia,” he said.

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There was space to walk behind the immigration booths, so I made my way three booths down, to where my buddy, Disco, spoke with a female immigration official sporting a long, glossy ponytail. His legal name was Richard Brady, but when you’re a redneck from a small town in Louisiana named Disco, and you move to a big city like LA to become an actor, chances are you’re going to be called Disco.

I could see Disco’s photograph on the immigration official’s computer monitor. Tight, dark skin, a hairline so straight and perfect it appeared penciled in, lidded but highly expressive chestnut eyes, monumental cheekbones, and a wide mouth prone to smil-

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ing, as if he found humor in all the minutiae of life, which he often did.

Right now, towering before the immigration booth, he was about as out of place as a scream in a monastery. It wasn't that he was black in a land of homogenous white people, or that he stood six-foot-five without shoes on. It was the sharkskin two-button worsted suit he wore. It had been flashy even for LAX, but here, in the hinterlands of Siberia, where the biggest fashion decision for most of the locals appeared to be whether to don track pants with one stripe down the legs or two, the sharkskin suit was turning heads and causing an infection of surreptitious smiles.

Disco conversed with the immigration official for another minute, then flashed his white choppers, hiked the strap of his Roman duffle over his shoulder, and strolled past the booth toward me.

Clapping a big hand on my back, he said, "Did you see her, neg?" His twangy Cajun dialect would best be described as Quebecois meets Deep South. You got a lot of "dis" and "dat" instead of "this" and "that," as well as French and slang tossed in to shake things up.

"Who?" I asked redundantly.

"Hot hot!"

"With the power to send you home on the next plane."

"Maybe I should've asked her for coffee."

"An immigration officer?"

"They people too, Whitey. Just misunderstood."

Like Disco, I didn't choose or approve of my nickname, but "Whitey" had always seemed appropriate enough, given that with my green eyes and Vitamin-D deficient complexion, I was about as Caucasian as you could get.

Unlike Disco, I wasn't dressed to impress. For most of my

life I had been in pretty good shape. I worked out, ate right, checked all those boxes. But over the last seven months I've been in a bit of a downward spiral, smoking too much, drinking too much, checking all those boxes. And you could tell. Bags lurked beneath my eyes, and if you stuck me in a police lineup, I'd probably be called out as the "disheveled-looking guy." Today I was as unkempt as usual in a long-sleeved checkered shirt over a scrappy tee, wrinkled black jeans, and a scuffed pair of Converse. My shoulder-length blond hair felt greasy, and I smelled a little, though my poor hygiene should be forgiven as I'd just endured a thirty-hour flight.

Disco and I followed the crowd of recently disembarked and security-cleared passengers to a large room with pastel-colored pillars. We went to the sole functioning baggage carousel. My black rucksack was one of the first to emerge from the small opening in the wall. It was tough to miss with the American flag patch I'd ironed on the top pocket before I'd left LA. I wasn't overly patriotic, but you're always hearing not to advertise that you're American while overseas—lest a terrorist chops off your head, or a French waiter turns up his nose at you—and I take idiosyncratic pleasure in bucking idiotic advice.

Although Disco and I had checked in together, his rucksack—sixty liters like mine, necessary to hold all our gear during our trek into the mountains—was one of the last to appear.

"Doesn't go with the suit," I told him when he lifted it from the conveyor belt.

"Tell me about it, Whitey. Where's the help when you need it?"

A few minutes later we exited Koltsovo Airport and were greeted with face-numbing temperatures and a blitzkrieg of snow.

Shielding my eyes with my hand, I was scanning the area for

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a taxi rank when a grizzled, middle-aged fellow with a cell phone dangling around his neck approached.

“You need taxi?” he asked.

“No,” I told him bluntly.

“You crazy, neg?” Disco said, hugging himself. To the man, “Which way’s the taxi?”

The guy frowned at him, clearly not understanding his obtuse accent.

“Wid way de tazzi?” I repeated, making the words extra sloppy.

Disco glared at me; the man clued in and led us to a car parked illegally in a pickup/dropoff zone. It definitely wasn’t a regulated taxicab. No yellow livery, no top lamp on the roof. Just a puke-green sedan that had seen better days.

“How much?” I asked him.

“Where you go?”

“The Hyatt hotel. It’s by the—”

“I know, I know. Five hundred.”

I had no idea whether this was a fair price or not. Common sense told me it probably wasn’t. I said, “Two fifty.”

The man shook his head. “Four hundred.”

“Three hundred.”

He snorted. “Four hundred.”

It was too cold to argue, so Disco and I tossed our rucksacks into the trunk and got in the back seat. While we were pulling onto a slushy, traffic-clogged street, Disco nudged me with his elbow and nodded to the front of the vehicle.

“What?” I said.

“No meter.”

“It’s a gypsy cab,” I told him. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, official taxis dwindled in numbers, becoming few and far

between, not to mention expensive. So industrious citizens in the nascent Russian Federation, who possessed a car but not much money, often moonlighted as taxi drivers, picking up anyone on the street who waved them down.

“Feels like hitchhiking,” Disco said.

“Except you gotta pay,” I said. “Uber without the police checks on the drivers.”

I turned my attention to the snowy scenery passing outside my window. Yekaterinburg was a big city in the middle of nowhere, sort of like all of Russia’s metropolises, I suppose. It ranked largest after Moscow and St. Petersburg and perhaps one other. Historically an industrial center, a kind of Russian Manchester, it made the leap in recent years to tourist chic thanks to its abundance of theaters and museums, as well as an edgy experimental music scene.

As I watched the *mélange* of old and new buildings flash past—classical churches and chapels, trendy-looking restaurants and shops, and shabby Soviet apartment blocks—I couldn’t help but think about Igor Dyatlov and his friends, all of whom had set out from here on their ill-fated expedition in 1959, blissfully unaware that they would never reach the summit of Mount Ortoten, that they would die sad, and for some, very gruesome deaths, which would spawn more than a half century of lurid conspiracy theories.

A chill feathered my spine, and not for the first time since I’d decided to come to Russia, I wondered what the hell I was doing. Research, yeah. But I’d already gathered a plethora of information from the internet and other sources, in both English and Russian, on the Dyatlov expedition. This would have been sufficient for my book; it had been for all my others. Was it foolhardy to follow in the footsteps of the doomed hikers? And was I put-

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ting Disco and myself in danger? For good or bad, I believed in Murphy's Law, and we were going to be in a very remote, very cold location for several days. If something unforeseen were to happen, we could find ourselves up shit creek with no paddle.

The driver mumbled to himself in Russian.

I said, "Something wrong, boss?"

"Can you hear?" he said.

"Hear what?"

"Car problem." He swung to the curb and put the transmission in Park. "Wait here. I check." He rounded the car to the trunk. I turned to watch him through the rear window before the raised trunk lid blocked him from view.

"That skinny mullet freaks me out," Disco said.

"The phone around the neck?"

"Everything 'bout him. He's like a little Bond villain."

"Maybe he's getting a tire iron. Gonna come back and bash our heads in?"

"No joke. What's he doing back there? What engine trouble is in the trunk?"

"Shit!" I said, epiphanizing. I threw open my door, jumped out, and went to the rear of the vehicle. The driver's upper body was cantilevered over the open trunk. He stood up quickly.

I said, "What's the problem, boss?"

The man shrugged. "There was noise. Tick, tick, tick."

"From the trunk?"

Nodding, he gripped the trunk lid, to close it. I gripped it as well, keeping it open.

Disco appeared on the other side of the car, frowning. "What's going on?"

I pointed to his suitcase with my free hand, the unzipped front pocket. "The troll was going through our stuff."

“Motherfuck!”

I hiked my rucksack out of the trunk, plunking it down on the slushy road. “Get our carry-ons from the back seat,” I said.

Swearing in French, Disco went to retrieve our stuff.

“Four hundred,” the driver said to me, holding out his hand.

“You gotta be fucking joking,” I said.

“Three hundred.”

“You’re lucky I don’t call the cops.”

He glowered at me, apparently decided he had no right to be the angry one, and stormed back to the front of the car. The driver’s door slammed shut. Disco appeared again, our carry-on bags slung over his shoulders. I reached into the trunk, for his rucksack, when the taxi’s tires squealed, and the car shot off down the street.

“*Arrête!*” Disco shouted.

“Hey!” I said.

The gypsy cab accelerated into the dark, snow-veiled night.

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Once Disco calmed down somewhat—one consolation was that he’d tucked his passport and wallet into his Roman duffle, not his stolen rucksack—we spent the next ten minutes on the street waiting for a legitimate taxi to come our way. When we didn’t spot one, we hailed passing cars. Although hesitant about getting into another gypsy cab, we were still dressed in our LA clothes in subzero temperatures.

Thankfully a silver Lada soon pulled over. We climbed in the backseat of the little Russian-made car—I crammed my rucksack onto my lap this time—and discovered the driver was a female. She wore a fur-lined hood so I only got a quick glimpse of her

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face when she asked us where we were going, but she seemed to be in her mid-forties, handsome rather than pretty.

The ride passed in silence, or near silence, because every now and then Disco would grunt something derogatory about gypsy cabs.

The woman dropped us off at the Hyatt's valet parking and asked for one hundred rubles. I gave her two hundred, but if she appreciated the tip, she didn't show it.

The hotel lobby was modern and quiet, and with the unusual egg lights dangling from the high ceiling, and the sleek reception counters, it almost resembled the interior of a Starfleet spaceship. While we checked in, the receptionist, a pretty blonde sporting a Tasha Yar boy-cut, told us the spa was out of order and gave us each a voucher for a complimentary massage. Not a bad perk since I'd never had any intention of using the spa.

A flat-footed, rolled-shouldered bellhop set my rucksack on a birdcage trolley wagon, telling me in thickly accented English he would bring it to my room.

In the elevator, I could tell Disco remained bummed over his lost possessions, and I said, "At least you don't have to tip Igor."

He raised a hand. "Watch the slap, Whitey."

"Here." I handed him my massage voucher. "Get two hours instead of one."

The elevator pinged, the doors opened, and we ventured down the carpeted hallway to our adjacent rooms. I said, "So I'll knock at, what, nine tomorrow morning?"

"I might be out," he said. "Shopping, you know."

"We can't be late."

"Gypsy cabs," he grunted for the umpteenth time. "Better be no gypsy chamber maids in my room tomorrow."

I opened my door with the provided keycard and stepped in-

side the dark entryway. The lights blinked on automatically, revealing a spacious and clean room featuring an Art Deco vibe. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered views of the Iset River, as well as the Church on the Blood, christened so because it stood on the site of the former residence of the last Emperor of Russia, who was slaughtered there alongside his family and household staff by the Bolsheviks during the 1918 revolution.

Dumping my rucksack on the king bed, I beelined to the minibar. I'd managed to down five beers before falling asleep on the LA-Moscow section of the flight. I'd had another during the jaunt up to Yekaterinburg, but it had made me feel sluggish and I'd stopped after one.

Now I knocked back an overpriced miniature of whiskey in a single gulp. With a satisfying burn in my gut, I carried two bottles of Heineken to the ergonomic work desk, where I set up my laptop so I could look over my notes a final time before the meeting at the Dyatlov Memorial Foundation tomorrow morning.

Clicking away at the laptop's trackpad, I navigated to my research folder, which I'd named "Mexico 2010" to throw off any Russian officials that might not have bought my story at immigration. Maybe not 007 in cunning, but I'd figured a little subterfuge bested none at all.

I opened a PDF file labeled "1." It was the first of twenty-three files that comprised the nearly five-hundred pages of the 1959 Dyatlov criminal case file. The Soviet authorities had ordered the original file be kept in the classified section of the Sverdlovsk regional archive of criminal files until the 1990s, when parts of it were allowed to be photocopied for public consumption. Since then most of the rest had been smuggled out, though many Snowden types believe several key pages remain missing. To my knowledge, I held in my possession the only

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English translation, which I'd commissioned from a professor of Russian studies at UCLA.

As my eyes flicked over the translated passages from the Dyatlov group's journal entries, I could sense their high spirits as they set out on what would be a one-way journey. There existed a vibe of anarchic excitement as they wondered whether they could play the mandolin on the train, or whether anyone had remembered to pack the salt or the measuring scale, or where the communal knife had gone. Their venturesome zeal impressed on my mind any number of road trips I had embarked on in my youth—only heading off into the stark Russian wilderness during winter was not my idea of fun. Nevertheless, the young hikers had lived in a vastly different time. The Cold War had been at its height, and the Communist Party dominated almost every aspect of an individual's life in the Soviet Union. Consequently, many citizens turned to sport, one part of which they termed "tourism," though not in the traditional Western sense of the word. Instead the term covered organized outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, rock climbing, and skiing. It grew in popularity because it meant a party of friends could escape the day to day grind of their lives and let down their hair, so to speak, without worrying about the eyes and ears that might be monitoring them.

Igor Dyatlov was the leader of the ski group. With a receding hairline, wide-spaced eyes, and a gap between his front teeth, he was not leading-man handsome, but he possessed a quick intellect and commanding presence that encouraged people to follow him. Having been on three previous trips to the Northern Ural Mountains, he would have known the area better than anyone else would. He was also a stickler for details, and when in the mountains, it was often his way or the highway.

By some accounts, he harbored a secret crush on one of his

two female companions, Zinaida Kolmogorova, and indeed investigators had discovered a photograph of her tucked into his private diary. Zina, as her friends called her, was a dark-haired and dark-eyed beautiful woman who had previously dated another member of the group, Yuri Doroshenko.

Yuri Krivonischenko, Rustem Slobodin, and Nikolai Thibeaux-Brignolles were all UPI graduates and qualified engineers. The group called Krivonischenko “Georgy” to differentiate him from the other two Yuris they traveled with, while they called Thibeaux-Brignolles “Kolya” due to the difficult pronunciation of his foreign surname, as he was the son of a French Communist executed by Stalin. Kolya had promised his widowed mother this would be his last trip into the mountains, and you could say that was a promise he had kept.

Every group of friends had its nerd, and Alexander Kolevatov filled that role. Before pursuing a degree in nuclear physics at UPI, he had been in Moscow working in a secret laboratory organized within Department 9 of the NKVD, Stalin’s secret police, the forerunner of the KGB. He composed meticulous notes in a private diary on every expedition he embarked on, and so it was unclear why nobody recovered his diary in the abandoned tent.

The second female in the group, Lyudmila Dubinina, was strong-willed and outspoken, known as a stalwart Communist fond of patriotic phrases such as “For Stalin!” and “For the Motherland!” With her straw-colored hair and plain appearance, she reminded me of the woman with the red kerchief standing before the bayonet wall on the infamous 1941 Russian “Motherland is Calling!” propaganda poster.

Semyon Zolotaryov, a last-minute addition to the group, didn’t know any of the others and inexplicably introduced himself under the false name “Sasha.” He was an older army veteran

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who had fought in the Second World War, attaining the rank of sergeant and earning four medals. He served in a military engineer unit—what you might call a suicide unit—as they were the first to clear enemy defenses and suffered horrific death rates to hostile fire. In the battles for Königsberg and Berlin, up to eighty percent of these soldiers perished within the first few days of fighting. I guess you could consider Zolotaryov a lucky guy, though his luck did not extend to the Dyatlov expedition, as his death came early on the morning of his thirty-eighth birthday, and it would be neither quick nor kind.

The final member of the Dyatlov group was twenty-two-year-old Yuri Yudin. However, he returned to Sverdlovsk halfway into the trip due to a painful bout of rheumatoid arthritis. He would be the only survivor.

I would have given anything to have interviewed him, but he passed away at the age of seventy-five in 2013. He was interred in Michailovskoe Cemetery alongside seven of his old hiking comrades, taking whatever secrets he knew to the grave.



As a radio engineering student, Igor Dyatlov was an expert at designing and assembling his own radios. Even so, he didn't bring one on the expedition to Mount Ortoten. In the 1950s a radio would have weighed a hundred pounds, far too heavy to carry on such a difficult hike. Consequently, the only way to contact Sverdlovsk had been by telegram, and on February 12 he had intended to do exactly this: send a message via telegram from the village of Vizhay to the Ural Polytechnic Institute, confirming he and the others were on their way back.

When no telegram arrived, the families of the hikers called

officials at UPI, who sent an inquiring telegram to Vizhay. The response came the following day: “The Dyatlov group did not return.” A search party comprised of volunteer students from the university hastily set off by train to the Ural Mountains to look for the missing hikers, while the UPI Sports Club director flew by airplane and helicopter. They were soon joined by prison guards from the gulag camps around Ivdel, local Mansi tribesmen, police officers, and specialists from Moscow.

Four days later two students, Boris Slobtsov and Mikhail Sharavin, discovered a tent on the western slope of Kholat Syakhl. Slobtsov immediately recognized it as belonging to Igor Dyatlov, as he had helped Igor construct it years earlier by stitching together two smaller tents.

The support poles and the south-facing entrance remained standing, though snow had covered and collapsed much of the roof. Using an ice axe left in the snow, Sharavin sliced open one of the tent’s canvas walls. The interior recalled the *Mary Celeste*. No hikers, but all their gear undisturbed. Packs and jackets spread over the floor in preparation for sleeping, personal items next to bedrolls, boots lining the entrance. You could almost imagine the hikers had stepped out for a morning stroll and would return at any moment.

The following day several search teams arrived at the tent. Professional investigators they were not, and nobody thought to preserve or record the scene. Most notably they destroyed the original footprints surrounding the tent. Further down the declivity, however, they identified tracks made by eight or nine people wearing no footwear. These continued in two single-file lines toward the Lozva River valley in an orderly fashion. After a half mile they vanished completely.

There were no return tracks.

MOUNTAIN OF THE DEAD

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A mile away, a pair of students were scouting the same valley for a new, flat spot to serve as a central base for the growing number of search parties. Around midday, near a tall cedar, they discovered the bodies of two men partly buried beneath the snow. They lay side by side, stripped almost to their underwear, their feet bare. Close by, the charred remains of a fire and, inexplicably, a stack of dry firewood. The men had clearly frozen to death—burn marks disfigured their hands, indicating they had been so cold they had likely stuck them over the flames in a desperate attempt to warm them up—so why had they left perfectly good firewood untouched?

The students identified the dead as Yuri “Georgy” Krivonischenko and Yuri Doroshenko.

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The next day the search-and-rescue operation shifted from the slopes of Kholat Syakhl to the Lozva River valley. A thousand feet from the cedar a Mansi tribesman uncovered the body of Igor Dyatlov beneath a foot of snow. He lay on his back, his frozen arms folded in front of his face, almost as if he had been defending himself from someone or something when he died. Dressed better than the two Yuris, he wore a sleeveless fur vest, a sweater, and ski pants, though he also lacked a hat, mitts, and boots. His watch had stopped at 5:31, though this meant little. Watches during the 1950s needed to be wound, and his could have stopped before his death, and he hadn’t bothered to wind it.

Given the location and orientation of Igor’s body, it appeared

he had been trying to return to the tent. Believing some of the other hikers may have attempted the same feat, searchers fanned out from the cedar in the direction of the tent. The strategy paid off. Some eleven hundred feet past Igor's body, where the land angled up the mountain slope, a policeman's German shepherd sniffed out the body of Igor's secret crush, Zinaida Kolmogorova, beneath half a foot of snow. She wore a hat, two sweaters, and ski pants. Yet she too lacked mitts and boots.

Some of the searchers wrapped the four dead hikers in a tarpaulin and carried them to a large boot-shaped rock appropriately named "Boot Rock," where the bodies would be out of sight and out of mind. Meanwhile, other searchers continued to scour the area between the cedar and the tent, using steel poles to plumb the depths of the snow for more bodies—for it now seemed clear it was no longer a rescue but a recovery operation.

On March 1 the senior regional prosecutor in Sverdlovsk, Lev Ivanov, whose name would become inextricably linked with the Dyatlov incident, took over as the lead investigator of what had become a criminal case. The next morning some of the volunteer students, frustrated by the last several days of futile searching, returned to Sverdlovsk to continue their studies. The specialists from Moscow left also. Their short report summed up what happened as an open-and-shut case of misadventure in blizzard conditions—though, conspicuously, they wouldn't or couldn't explain why the hikers had abandoned the tent so poorly dressed in said conditions.

On March 3 the corpses of Krivonischenko, Doroshenko, Igor, and Zina arrived at the morgue in Ivdel. The pathologist who conducted their autopsies, Ivan Laptev, concluded Krivonischenko's and Doroshenko's clothing had been removed after they'd died, ruling out paradoxical undressing, which describes the phe-

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nomenon in lethal cases of hypothermia whereby a person removes all of his or her clothing shortly before death. Moreover, a foamy gray discharge from Doroshenko's mouth covered his right cheek, which Laptev likened to an injury sustained by someone pressing hard on another person's chest cavity. Although he didn't state as much in his forensic report, discharges of this kind had been common during forceful interrogation by the NKVD.

Igor's postmortem examination revealed dark red scratches on the lower third of his right forearm and the palms of his hands. Defensive wounds? It also revealed bruises in the area of the metatarsophalangeal joints, or knuckles, of his right hand, a common result of fistfights. Blood pooling in the dependent parts of his body following death caused blotchy discoloration in his face and chest, which meant he had died lying on his front. Unaccountably, he was found on his back.

Zina suffered bruises and abrasions to her face, hands, and palms, as well as a long liver-red bruise along her lumbar region, almost as if someone had struck her with a baton, or had been hugging her very tightly. One of her sweaters was torn, and her ski pants and trousers appeared to have been loosened. Given her exceptional beauty, I had to wonder whether someone had been trying to take her clothing off her. Yet whether this had been the case or not, they had failed or given up in their attempt. Laptev determined she had died a virgin.

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At the same time the four autopsies were being conducted, two searchers recovered the body of Rustem Slobodin. He was in the same general line between the cedar and the tent, six-hundred

feet ahead of Igor and five-hundred feet behind Zina. He wore a hat, a sweater, ski pants, several pairs of socks, and one valenki, or felt boot.

His postmortem examination would reveal abrasions on his face, a bloody nose, swollen lips, and bruises to the knuckles of both hands. This led to the question: Had he and Igor been fighting? Or had they been fighting someone else? His skull had also been fractured. Like Igor, his corpse had been turned over.

It seemed to me that someone had been checking the bodies.

But who? And why?

Despite the suspect injuries and unanswered questions, hypothermia was ruled to be the official cause of death of all five hikers.

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In mid-March, a respected UPI alumni overseeing the search party operations named Yevgeny Maslennikov testified before the Search Commission in Ivdel. He explained the difficulties the squall winds and myopic visibility posed to the recovery operation and recommended the search be suspended until April to allow some of the snowpack to melt. The commission not only denied the sound advice, they made the unusual decision to replace Maslennikov with a military man, Colonel Georgy Ortyukov.

They then urged the parents of the hikers not to bury their children in Sverdlovsk but in a mass grave in Ivdel. The parents were understandably furious; they wanted to be able to visit their children's graves. Eventually the authorities allowed the hikers to be laid to rest in Sverdlovsk only if the memorial service was not one event but two, held on separate days, and the procession of caskets from the morgue to the cemetery took the least conspicu-

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ous route, namely not past the university.

If they intended to downplay what happened in the mountains, they clearly failed. Not only did a vast number of mourners turn out, they began talking about the strange discoloration of the hikers' bodies, which appeared to be a brownish-brickish color. This, combined with hundreds of eyewitness sightings of strange orange orbs in the sky over Kholat Syakhl and Mount Ortoten throughout much of February, got the rumor mill churning, and soon there were whispers spanning everything from top secret military tests to UFOs.

Lev Ivanov also got caught up in this line of inquiry, and he altered his investigation accordingly. However, after being summoned to Moscow for reasons he would not disclose to anyone in the prosecutor's office, he returned a changed man, and never spoke of orbs in the sky again.

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The search for the remaining four hikers continued throughout March and April, though it wasn't until the spring thaw in May that their corpses were discovered—and what they revealed changed everything.

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Buried beneath fifteen feet of snow in a ravine about two hundred thirty feet from the cedar, the bodies were at various stages of decay and promptly transported to the morgue in Ivdel. This time the pathologist was Ivan Laptev's colleague, Dr. Boris Vozrozhdyonny, who had performed Rustem Slobodin's autopsy. According to his forensic report, three of the four hikers—

Nikolai Thibeaux-Brignolles, Lyudmila Dubinina, and Semyon Zolotaryov—had *not* died of hypothermia.

Nikolai Thibeaux-Brignolles wore a full set of outerwear, as well as boots, which suggested he had likely been prepared to go outside the tent, or was already outside it, when the unexplained event happened, and not just to urinate, but to remain there for some time. He had suffered cuts and bruising on his arms and multiple fractures to his skull.

Lyudmila Dubinina wore Krivonischenko's brown sweater. She also wore a hat, burned ski pants, and socks, but no boots. Her injuries included massive thoracic damage, nine fractured ribs, and internal hemorrhaging, including in the right side of her heart. Most disturbing—her tongue was missing. Coagulated blood in her stomach implied that her heart was beating and blood was flowing when the organ was removed. This ruled out predatory culprits such as birds or mice, or the micro fauna in the melting snow that had covered her.

Army veteran Semyon Zolotaryov wore two hats, a scarf, a short-sleeved shirt, a long-sleeved shirt, a black cotton sweater, a flannel jacket, a sheepskin fur vest, long johns, two pairs of pants, ski pants, woolen socks, and burkas, or warm leather shoes—in other words, the guy didn't die from the cold. He died from massive trauma to his chest, which was crushed so badly several shattered and bloodied ribs pierced the flesh. According to some of the searchers, Zolotaryov's frozen corpse clutched a stenographer's notebook in one hand and a pen in the other, and Colonel Georgy Ortyukov had immediately grabbed the notebook, read it, and cursed Zolotaryov, saying, "He's written nothing!"

Yet was this really the case? Or did he not want to reveal what was on the paper?

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The fourth and final hiker recovered from the ravine was Alexander Kolevatov. He had somehow escaped the violent deaths of his comrades and was presumably the last to die. Oddly he did not strip Zolotaryov or Thibeaux-Brignolles of their warm clothes or footwear after they'd perished. To the contrary, he had unbuttoned his own jacket.

Knowing what had killed the others, had he chosen suicide rather than suffer their same fate?

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Although Dr. Boris Vozrozhdyonny wasn't able to answer who or what had caused the lethal injuries to Zolotaryov, Dubinina, and Thibeaux-Brignolles, he felt comfortable enough to state what did *not* cause them, which included a fall into the ravine or another human being. Neither, he believed, could generate the required force, which he compared to what you might witness in a high-speed automobile accident.

This conclusion didn't sit well with Lev Ivanov, and despite no longer officially entertaining links between the strange orange orbs in the sky and the hikers' deaths, he still privately pursued such a possibility, and four days before the hikers were to be buried he ordered radiological tests on their organs and clothing. This was by no means standard operating procedure, and the instrument needed, a Geiger counter, was not part of any investigator's toolkit then or now. Eleven days later a senior municipal radiologist concluded the hikers' organs contained traces of the radioactive substance potassium-40, while Krivonischenko's brown sweater evinced double the normal number of beta-particle contamination.

Nevertheless, these results would ultimately have no bearing

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on the Dyatlov case. The existing Code of Criminal Procedure allowed for two months for the prosecution to investigate a crime. An additional month could be added by the prosecutor of the Sverdlovsk region. The clock started ticking February 26. By May 27 the deadlines had passed, and on May 28, a day after the radiological experiments were completed, Lev Ivanov closed the criminal investigation as unsolved, as it seemed there would be no perpetrators to prosecute.

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Two hours later, a half-dozen dead soldiers standing watch next to my computer, I glanced one final time over the questions I'd scribbled down for Vasily Popov the next day, then I flopped spread-eagle onto the plush bed and drifted off to sleep, my last remembered thought:

What the hell happened to those people?

CHAPTER 2

NORTHERN URAL MOUNTAINS, USSR, 1959

NINE DAYS TO LIVE

Now we can finally relax, Zina thought with relief as the train trundled out of Sverdlovsk on the way toward the mining town of Serov. They had left the chore of packing their backpacks until this morning and had rushed to make frantic last-minute preparations, all under the watchful eye of the head of provisions distribution, who had kept shouting, “Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!” Then on the way from the university to the train station they’d gotten mired in heavy traffic and had to run to board their car before it left. Zina was still going over in her head everything they’d brought, hoping they hadn’t forgotten anything. Because soon they would be cut off from civilization. A shortage of sugar, or a missing pickaxe, might not be a calamity, but it certainly wouldn’t be ideal.

Even so, she didn’t brood on this for too long. She didn’t want to worry about what could not be changed. She had been on expeditions into the wilderness before. She knew you had to take each day at a time, and everything would work out in the end. Besides, even if they had forgotten something crucial—say, the batteries for the flashlights—she had faith in Igor’s leadership

abilities to muster a solution. There was nobody at the university more capable of surviving off the beaten path than he.

And speaking of Igor, where was he?

They were packed into the *platzkart*, or third-class compartment, which was one step lower than four-person cabins, and one step above sitting on a hard metal seat. Given the cramped conditions, there were four rules you had to abide by. Don't get drunk or rowdy or else the *babushka* will yell at you. Don't eat smelly food or the children will yell at you. Don't try to steal someone else's bunk or the rightful occupant will yell at you. And finally don't fart or everyone will yell at you.

Zina's eyes settled on Yuri Doroshenko. He sat across the aisle from her, looking stoically out his window. That was so like him. He would probably spend the entire train ride watching the snowy scenery pass and not say a word to anyone. It wasn't that he didn't get along with the others. He did. He was simply reserved and comfortable with silence. This quiet strength was one of the qualities she had admired most about him when they had dated.

Zina still didn't understand why he broke off their relationship. She thought things had been going so well between them. She had even invited him to her hometown in Kamensk-Uralsky to meet her parents. He had been so cute! As they'd walked up the street to her house, he had been so nervous, repeating their names over and over again so he didn't forget them, brushing his sweaty palms on his trousers, asking her if he looked okay in his threadbare coat. He had always been self-conscious about his coat. He'd had it for years now, and you could see its age. But his father had died in 1954, the year before Doroshenko graduated high school, and his mother didn't have much money. So she was still saving up to buy him a new coat. He hoped he might have it

by next winter.

Could he have met another girl? Zina wondered. This would break her heart. It was silly, of course. There was no rule that said he could not see somebody else. After all, she was with Igor now. Well, secretly. They didn't want to tell anybody they were spending private time together for fear of hurting Doroshenko's feelings.

Still, she missed Doroshenko tremendously. Tall and handsome, he was also intelligent, thoughtful, kind, and a good listener. And of course a good kisser! Zina could not say who prevailed on this account—Doroshenko or Igor—as she had only kissed Igor a couple of times now, while she and Doroshenko must have kissed...oh, she couldn't even count.

Zina pushed aside the memories. As pleasant as they may be, they hurt too. Because Doroshenko would never kiss her again.

From the far end of the car Igor appeared, accompanied by a man at least ten years his elder. The man had a stiff posture and quick eyes that made Zina think of a soldier. Yet at the same time he carried himself with an easy confidence. He had brown hair and a matching mustache, the tips waxed into upward curls.

Georgy stopped playing his mandolin. Yuri Yudin woke from his light doze and elbowed Kolevatov awake as well. Lyuda set aside the tin of money she was counting for the umpteenth time. Even Doroshenko turned away from his window. Everyone looked at the newcomer.

"This is Semyon Zolotaryov," Igor announced. "He's a local guide. He's going to be joining us on the trip."

The man smiled, revealing a mouthful of gold teeth. "Just call me Sasha," he said.

Zina stifled a yawn. It was very late now, or, more accurately, very early. She had the group journal open to the first page. She'd already penned a few sentences while back in her dorm room, and once she'd gathered her thoughts, she picked up where she'd left off. *Here we are on the train, she wrote. We sang all the songs that we knew, learned new ones, everyone went to sleep at three in the morning. I wonder what awaits us on this trip? What will be new? The boys solemnly swore not to smoke. I wonder how much willpower they will have? Everyone is sleeping and the Ural taiga spreads away in all directions.*

As if to verify these last few words, she glanced out her window at the Russian wilderness.

She could see little apart from her ghostly reflection in the glass, and the grave-blackness beyond, but the emptiness captivated her nonetheless, and she didn't turn away. And then she found herself thinking about her hometown and her parents, missing them, and Doroshenko and Igor, confused by her feelings for them, and the mysterious man with the mustache...*attracted to him?*...and then the journal slipped from her hands to her lap, and her heavy eyelids slid closed, and she sank into a fitful and dreamless sleep.



Ural Polytechnic Institute where the Dyatlov hikers attended university



Zinaida "Zina" Kolmogorova

