

EXCERPT: CHAPTER 1. LAKE BAIKAL

They say the dead can see their bodies from above before moving on to wherever the dead go. If that is true, then mining engineer Leonid Nikulov could see himself trapped against the bottom of a mine shaft, filled with 920 meters of deep frigid water that just moments before had not been there. And jutting to within a few feet of his crushed and drowned body would be the smooth metallic surface of an alien spacecraft.

Nikulov, a recent graduate of the Moscow State Mining University, had been hired by the Irkutsker Oblast Gold Mining Company to work with a new mine in a tectonically unstable region. The multibillion-dollar Russian company normally mined gold in open pit mines northeast of Irkutsk in Siberia, not far from the northern border of Mongolia. The company, owned largely by one of the richest Muscovites, had been contracted to attempt their first deep slope mine, perilously close to the western shore of the southern end of Lake Baikal, 90 kilometers east of the regional capital of Irkutsk.

The gold mining company was used to doing everything on a grand scale, so when the Russian government said they wanted a mine with 8 kilometers of large-diameter tunnel reaching 920 meters deep, the company recruited the best engineers academia had to offer.

Nikulov was one of those, relatively inexperienced in actual field experience but blessed with exceptional intelligence, high academic scores, and unparalleled instincts. However, his mining bosses showed their displeasure with the young upstart right from the beginning. While they welcomed Moscow's interest and money in their new operation, they resented Moscow selecting one of their own graduates to replace one of the company's most experienced engineers.

The mining plan involved digging a spiral tunnel from the surface down to the 920-meter level. As was normal for a slope mine, once the miners reached the target depth they would proceed horizontally along an anticipated seam of high-quality gold-bearing rock.

Initially, Nikulov had been concerned about the proximity of Lake Baikal — but the mining plan clearly showed that the gold-filled rock lay in a north-easterly direction from the drilling site, in a line paralleling the rocky shore of the world's deepest freshwater lake. That was to be expected for a rift valley, which in fact was where Lake Baikal lay, so the overall plan made sense, even to young Nikulov and his pregnant wife, Svetlana.

Twenty-two hours before the flood, Leonid and Svetlana were lying in bed. He lay on his side, running his fingers over her rounding belly.

"Are you proud of your handiwork?" she asked him.

"Our handiwork, and yes is the answer."

He turned closer to face her, inches from her face.

"So my kitten, what parts of our little girl will you be working on today?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do you have any special requests?"

"Of course. I request that you work very hard today. No slacking off. I want extra brains in her little head. You can't have too many. And a big heart, so she'll understand when Mama and Papa have to discipline her. And so she'll have extra love for her family when her time comes."

"Anything else?"

"Pay particular attention to her smile today. I want her to have that same smile as her beautiful Mama."

"Anything else?"

"No, that should be quite enough for today."

“Then I better get started. With all that to do, I don’t think I’ll have time to fix you breakfast. You don’t mind, do you?”

They both laughed, knowing this was not the first time they had played that game before.

She did, in fact, fix his breakfast, and he just had time to eat it before heading to the mine.

After an uneventful shift, Nikulov came home dirty but not overly tired. As usual, Svetlana asked how his day went.

“We’re tunneling horizontally now. I think we’re getting close to the gold-bearing ore.”

Looking at her silver wedding band, she said, “How nice. Any chance you could bring me home a souvenir?”

With a wink, he said, “I brought you something even better my bunny, but let me shower first.”

At 3 in the morning, multiple water sensors sent alarms to the mining control office, and the company began the time-consuming process of evacuating the mine. There was no emergency yet, but the company called Nikulov, the on-call safety engineer. It was his duty to head down the long and gargantuan tunnel by himself in a filthy, diesel-powered two-person man-trip, a low-slung miner transport vehicle.

As he approached the end of the dark tunnel, the dirt-splattered lights of his vehicle were the only source of illumination. Just as the sensors had indicated, water was oozing from the right side of the tunnel where it straightened and headed horizontally for about 100 meters.

Nikulov backed the vehicle a few meters and turned it so its lights played on the water-slickened wall. He thought he heard a shrill sound, so he turned off the engine to listen more carefully. Then he clearly heard the scream of air being forced through minute cracks in the surrounding rocks, followed by a rumble. Before he had time to react, the wall directly in front of him exploded with a devastating force of over 1,300 pounds per square inch.

The lower portion of the mine was flooded instantly, with a jet of water shooting upwards along the spiraling course of the gigantic tunnel, blasting like a geyser out of the mine opening less than a minute after the tunnel wall collapse.

That geyser quickly dissipated, and the water level subsided to a level equal to the water surface in nearby Lake Baikal.

Stunned, the chief mine operator on duty that night was immobile in his chair for several seconds before hitting the general alarm. The wailing sirens could be heard for miles, but Leonid Nikulov could not hear them.

The operator, hands shaking, placed a call on his satellite phone to the mine owner in Moscow, 4300 kilometers away.

The owner had only one thing to say: “ideal’no,” which meant “Perfect.”