

PROLOGUE

**PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE
MOSCOW, RUSSIA
1991**

MOSCOW'S WINTER CLUNG dark and dreary. Clouds loomed over the presidential executive office in the heart of the capital city. Russian winters were brutal, but this one was the most severe seen in years.

Harsh wind and snow swept through the center of the seemingly forsaken city, a city of millions who were mostly huddled around fireplaces, cooped up in their homes. It resembled a sign of troublesome times that had fallen on the Russian people. The economy had disintegrated around them.

Restaurants and shops once filled to the max now sat empty, their doors locked. People could no longer afford to be out and about. A decade of total disarray had begun. Many who were happy with the security they enjoyed under the communist regime resisted the idea of capitalism. And, the Russian military was all but broken down.

Behind the curtain of the almost desolate capital city, a secret meeting had been taking place in the Kremlin. The same conference room had held many communist gatherings for many years before. Reminders filled the building, from paintings of now-defunct Soviet State farms to busts of old Soviet leaders that lined the hallway that led to the newly appointed Russian President's office.

The fate and financial security of Russia, as well as freshly independent former Soviet republics, hung precariously with no guarantees. Poverty ran rampant. People who'd been used to being provided with the bare essentials could no longer depend on it. Many turned to criminal behavior just to feed their families. The former communist nation had utterly lost its direction.

A year earlier, the USSR had been bragging to the world about its nuclear capabilities. But, behind the scenes they were in crisis mode, attempting to salvage what was left of the Soviet Empire. However, Soviet power had been decaying for a while. The high price of a losing occupation in Afghanistan, as well as a faulty government system that could no longer sustain itself under the weight of its own corruption, left the country in near financial ruin.

A coup de état had been attempted by certain hard-line supporters of the old communist regime who weren't thrilled with the changing liberal stance the new Russian President had expressed.

Boris Petrov, a former KGB officer, now a senior agent for the post-communist FSB (the government bureau referred to as the Federal Security Service) had

been sitting in the corner with his boss as the meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin and leaders from the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan commenced.

The day's issue was the destination of nuclear warheads that were left behind after the sudden downfall of the Soviet Union. They were the same nuclear weapons that had been employed to threaten the United States and the West for almost the entire duration of the Cold War.

However, with the communist system now broken, it appeared as though a nuclear Russia was no longer a viable option. But these weapons had been spread across the former Soviet states. Left behind, they'd risk them being ravaged by terrorist organizations or anyone who'd wished to sell them to the highest bidder, namely Russia's enemies. Something had to be done with them.

Petrov wasn't willing to accept what he was hearing. The United States had promised the Russian government millions of dollars in exchange for severely dismantling and reducing its nuclear imprint.

"We must comply with America and the international community," Yeltsin told them in his raspy Russian tongue. "This is the way of the new world order. We do not have a choice!"

"We always have a choice!" Minister of Defense, Sergei Lavrov, yelled as he pounded his fist on the table.

Petrov, sitting quietly in his chair, nodded his head in agreement with Lavrov. Though he wasn't a politician, Petrov had dreamt nightly of bringing back the glory days.

He craved it so badly he could taste it. To him, Soviet power had stood for something. It was the only thing he could ever really relate to. As a spy, he'd seen the effects nuclear warnings had on the West, America in particular. The mere threat of nuclear war sent Americans and their politicians into a state of turmoil. It rankled him as he sat in on the meeting that those days had long since passed.

President Yeltsin lit a cigar as he gazed back at Lavrov. He'd wished to keep the meeting calm. Yeltsin didn't see the purpose of making a stressful situation worse.

"Listen, old friend," he said to Lavrov. "I understand your concern. But this is what we have to do. We are not in a position to negotiate!"

With a deteriorating economy, Russia's leftover nuclear weapons had become a bartering tool—a means to regain some of the millions lost during the financial crisis that had plagued them just before the decline of the USSR.

In his corner, Petrov grit his teeth. His blood boiled at this degeneration of his country. He'd always seen Russia as a premiere world power. He and his boss, Mikhail Belsky, just glimpsed at one another without uttering a word. Petrov could tell by a single raised eyebrow they both were thinking the same thing.

But, he could no longer hold his tongue. The agent rose to his feet, scowling at the President from across the room.

"This is an outrage!" Petrov blurted out in anger.

Belsky clinched Petrov by the arm, trying to keep him from provoking the Russian leader.

“What the hell are you doing, Boris?” he asked under his breath. “Sit down now!”

The FSB agents weren't in the meeting to speak on the matter. Nor were they expected to. But, suddenly, all eyes in the room riveted on Petrov.

President Yeltsin looked back at Petrov in confusion.

“You have something to add?” Yeltsin asked with sarcasm. “If so, we would love to hear it.”

Every person in the room stared at Petrov, waiting for him to speak up.

“Russia is my home,” he said. “I have always done my job to the best of my ability, knowing that I was serving the greatest communist power the world has ever seen.”

Their jaws almost dropped to the floor. Nobody in the room could believe the young agent would be so bold and brash in such high company. Now, everyone in the meeting was keen to hear Petrov finish; everyone except President Yeltsin. He wasn't the least bit impressed.

“But now we are bowing down to the international community?” he continued. “America, of all countries? Why must we reduce our nation's pride to please them? They have always been our sworn enemies. Now, we are making deals with them? This will not stand!”

President Yeltsin cleared his throat as he stared Petrov down.

“You finished now?” he asked with a bitter smirk. “Thank you for enlightening us all with your educated

opinion, Agent Petrov. We are all so appreciative. Now, please sit down and allow us to finish this meeting!”

Petrov took his seat, his face twitching in frustration as Belsky looked over at him in disbelief for having the audacity to disrupt a Presidential meeting. However, he wasn't at all surprised. Petrov had a temper. And, he would never shy away from giving his blunt opinion to anyone, even those in power.

Many in the Russian government silently shared the same opinion as Petrov. But they were powerless to do anything about it and wise enough not to voice it. The attempted takeover of the Russian Government, although a failure, had set the tone for the fall of an empire. The only thing any of them could do was sit and watch in horror as it tumbled to the ground, hoping they could somehow gather up the ashes and build anew.

“This matter is now closed,” Yeltsin said to his cabinet members. “All remaining nuclear stockpiles will be sent to our facility in Siberia to be broken down and made into nuclear fuel.”

“But...” Lavrov interjected. “The young agent does make a point!”

“But nothing!” shouted Yeltsin. “This matter is no longer open for discussion! I have made my decision. This conference is now closed!”

As the intense hour-long meeting adjourned, ambivalence punctuated the air—an element of desperation in the minds of all who attended, especially Petrov, coupled with a powerlessness.

Petrov stepped out from the meeting room and headed straight down the long corridor to the door that led to the back of the old drab looking, Soviet-era building. His hood over his head and looking out at a blanket of white amassed on the ground, he lit a cigarette to calm his raging nerves.

Belsky moved in behind him, resting a hand on his shoulder as they both stood, silently staring out into the dreary winter day. Though not as outspoken and brash, he'd shared Petrov's disappointment. Both men were staunch supporters of the old communist regime.

However, it appeared as though those days had died, and neither could comprehend what would become of the motherland. Russia had once been a significant player in the world of nuclear nations. Now, they were reduced to accepting money in exchange for getting rid of the only thing that guaranteed them power.

"I cannot believe that the country I have served for so long has succumbed to this," Petrov said to Belsky as he balled his fists. "I am outraged, boss. Getting back at America was the only thing I ever cared about. Now, we are accepting donations from those God damned dogs? It's disgraceful!"

Belsky looked Petrov right in his eyes with all the weight of a life-long career in espionage.

"Listen, Boris," he said as he went in closer to him. "You are my number one. You have always served your country well, comrade. You will go places, I promise you that. Maybe you will become President one day, huh?"

Then, you can fulfill the ideals of our former Soviet leaders, in all their glory!”

Exhaling a long string of cigarette smoke, Petrov clutched Belsky by his shirt collar.

“Long live mother, Russia!” he spouted.

“Long live, Russia!”