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STATE OF THE UNION

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State of the Union. . . .

Zvenigorod, Russia

“Winter has come too early this year,” Dmitri Yazov complained as he threw his long overcoat onto a chair near the door. He was the last of the five men to arrive. “I think this will be one of the coldest we have seen in a long time.” Crossing over to the bar, he withdrew a decanter of brandy and filled a delicate crystal snifter. Yazov was a man of above-average height with a solid build. His salt-and-pepper-colored hair was trimmed in a military-style crew cut. His skin was severely pockmarked and his left eye drooped slightly, due to a grenade that had exploded in his face as he was pushing one of his men out of danger’s way. While he was twice as brave as his assembled colleagues, he was easily less than half as refined, and in a demonstration of his lack of finesse, he downed his brandy in one long swallow.

The men around the table smiled at their friend’s behavior. Yazov was as constant as the northern star. In over forty years, nothing had changed him—not money, not power, not even the knowledge that he would go down in history as one of the greatest soldiers Mother Russia had ever produced. In combat, he had saved the life of each man in the room at least once; some more than once, but they had not gathered in this remote wooded area forty miles west of Moscow to relive the past. On the contrary,

the five men seated around the worn oak table were there to shape the future.

Outside, a breath of icy wind blew across the gravel driveway of the centuries-old hunting lodge. From its stone chimney, tendrils of gray smoke could be seen only for an instant before being sucked upward into an ever-darkening sky. As the cold wind pressed itself against the formidable structure, it moaned deeply.

Sergei Stavropol, the group's leader, whom many referred to in private as Rasputin, stood and walked over to the fireplace. He was an enormous man with dark hair and a large nose that bore evidence of having been broken many times. At six feet three inches tall and two hundred seventy-five pounds, he appeared twice the size of any of the other men in the room, but it was his dark, penetrating eyes that drew all of the attention and that had long ago earned him his nickname. Though he hated the Rasputin moniker, he found that it instilled in his enemies and those who would oppose him a certain degree of fear, and therefore he had allowed it to stick.

Stavropol spent several moments prodding the glowing embers with an iron poker as he pretended to search for the appropriate words to say. It was an empty gesture. He knew exactly what he was going to say. Spontaneity was not part of how he worked. It led to mistakes, and mistakes were the harbingers of failure. Stavropol had rehearsed this moment in his mind for years. His raw determination was equaled only by his capacity for cold, detached calculation.

After a sufficient show of introspection, he raised himself to his full height, turned to his colleagues and said, "It pleases me to see you all here. We have waited many long

years for this. Today we embark upon a new and glorious chapter in the history of not only our beloved Russia, but of the world. Fifteen years ago we—”

“Were much younger,” interrupted one of the men.

It was Valentin Primovich, the plodder, the worrier. He had always been the weakest link. Stavropol fixed him with a steady stare. He had anticipated the possibility of dissension in the ranks, but not straight away. Unconsciously, his hand tightened into a fist. He reminded himself to relax. *Wait*, he told himself. *Just wait*.

Stavropol attempted to soften the features of his face before responding. “Valentin, we are still young men. And what we may have lost in years, we have more than gained in experience.”

“We have good lives now,” said Uri Varensky, coming to the defense of Primovich. “The world is a different place. *Russia* is a different place.”

“As we knew it would be,” said Stavropol as his eyes turned on Varensky. He had grown soft and lazy. Had Stavropol been told fifteen years ago that the thick narcosis of complacency would one day overtake such a great man, such a great soldier, Stavropol never would have believed it. “You forget that the change came because of us. It was *our* idea.”

“It was *your* idea,” replied Anatoly Karganov. “Yours and Dmitri’s. We supported you, as we always have, but Uri and Valentin are correct. Times have changed.”

Stavropol couldn’t believe his ears. *Was Karganov, one of the greatest military minds the country had ever seen, siding with Primovich and Varensky? The Anatoly Karganov?*

Despite all of his careful planning, the meeting was not

going the way Stavropol had envisioned. He stopped and took a deep breath, once again trying to calm himself, before responding. “I have seen these changes. Driving here from Moscow I saw them up and down the roadsides—old women sweeping gutters with homemade brooms, or selling potatoes and firewood just to make enough to eat, while the new rich drive by in their BMW and Mercedes SUVs, listening to American rap music.

“In crumbling houses beyond the roadways, young Russian children smoke crack cocaine, shoot up with heroin, and spread tuberculosis and the AIDS virus, which are decimating our population. Where once we celebrated the deep pride we held in our country, now our posters and billboards only promote all-inclusive vacations to Greece, new health clubs, or the latest designer fashions from Italy.”

“But Russia has made gains,” insisted Karganov.

“*Gains*, Anatoly? And what sort of *gains* have we made?” asked Stavropol, the contempt unmistakable in his voice. “The Soviet Union was once a great empire covering eleven time zones, but look at us now. Most of our sister republics are gone and we are locked in pitiable struggles to hold on to those few that remain. Our economy, the *free market* economy so widely embraced by our greedy countrymen, teeters daily on the verge of collapse. The rich have raped our country, hidden their money in safe havens outside of Russia, and sent their children to European boarding schools. Our currency has been devalued, our life expectancy is laughable, and our population is shrinking. What’s more, not only does the world not need anything we have to sell, it also does not care to listen to anything

we have to say. Where once we were a great world power—a superpower, now we are nothing. This is not the legacy I plan to leave behind.”

“Sergei,” began Karganov, the ameliorator, “we have all devoted our lives to our country. Our love for Russia is above reproach.”

“Is it?” asked Stavropol as he slowly took in each man seated around the table. His eyes did not need to linger on Dmitri, as he knew where Yazov stood on the matter. “I sense that your love for Russia is not what it once was. This is not a matter for the weak or the fainthearted. There is much work yet to be done and it will not be easy. But in the end, Russia will thank us.”

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the room. After several minutes, it was Varensky who broke it. “So, the day we had all wondered about has finally arrived.” It was not so much a statement of fact as it was a pronouncement of apprehension, tinged with regret.

“You do not sound pleased,” replied Stavropol. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you no longer are young men. Maybe you *have* grown old—old and scared.”

“This is ridiculous,” interjected Primovich, normally the most cautious of the group. “Most of what you predicted would happen to the Soviet Union did happen, but it has not all been for the worse. You choose to see only what you want to see.”

Stavropol was beginning to lose his temper. “*What I see* are three lazy pigs who have fed too long at the trough of capitalism; three senile old men who are ignoring a promise made to their comrades, a promise made to their country.”

“You do yourself no favors by insulting us,” replied Karganov.

“Really?” asked Stavropol with mock surprise. “The moment we have waited for, the moment we have worked so hard for, is finally here. We are finally ready to awaken the giant and on the eve of our greatest accomplishment, after so much sacrifice, so much waiting, so much planning, my most trusted friends are having second thoughts. What would you suggest I do?”

“Why don’t we put it to a vote?” offered Varensky.

“A *vote*?” replied Stavropol, “How very democratic.”

“It was fifteen years ago when we agreed to your plan, Sergei. We are not the same people now that we were then,” said Karganov.

“Obviously,” snapped Stavropol, “as oaths no longer mean anything to you.” He held up his hand to silence Karganov before the man could respond. “I have to admit, I am disappointed, but I am not surprised. Time can dampen the fire in a man’s soul. As some men grow older, it is no longer ideals, but blankets that they rely on to keep them warm at night. I blame myself for this. Let’s put this to a vote, as comrade Varensky has suggested. But first, let’s attend to one other piece of business.”

“Anything,” responded Primovich. “Let’s just get this finished with.”

Stavropol smiled. “I’m glad you agree, Valentin. What I want is a full list of the assets we have in place and how to contact them.”

“Why is that necessary?” demanded Karganov.

“Since I am the one who started this, I will be the one to end it. There must be no loose ends.”

“Surely you don’t intend to do away with them?” queried Varensky. “These are not mere foot soldiers.”

“Of course not, Anatoly,” said Stavropol. “The assets will simply be recalled to Mother Russia. That’s all. That would make all of you happy, wouldn’t it?”

A dead silence blanketed the table.

“And what if they don’t wish to be recalled?” asked Primovich.

“I’m sure they can be persuaded. Come, we are wasting time. I know there are warm beds waiting for all of you at home. Tell me what I need to know so we can move to a vote,” said Stavropol as he stepped away from the fireplace.

The men reluctantly provided the information while Yazov took notes.

A steady cadence emanated from Stavropol’s boots as he slowly trod the wooden floorboards around the table. The rhythm was much like the man himself—meticulous and patient.

When the necessary details had been collected, Stavropol allowed the men to vote. All, except for Yazov, agreed to abandon the operation. It was just as he had feared. Primovich, Varensky and even Karganov had gone soft. There was only one option available now.

“So, it has been decided,” he relented, standing before the fireplace.

“Trust me, it is for the best,” replied Karganov.

Primovich and Varensky voiced their agreement as they stood up and retrieved their coats.

“You can still do great things for Russia,” continued Karganov. “I am certain the Defense Ministry would be glad to have your talents at their disposal. Maybe even a

military academy position teaching the soldiers of tomorrow what it means to be a fearsome Russian warrior.”

“You should take up a hobby,” offered General Primovich, coming over to shake his old colleague’s hand.

“A hobby?” queried Stavropol, glancing in Yazov’s direction. “That is a very interesting suggestion. Maybe I should take up golf?”

“That is an excellent idea,” said Primovich, a smile forming on his lips as Stavropol picked up the iron poker and pretended to hit a golf ball with it. Stavropol seemed to be taking things better than he expected. “I hear it can be very relaxing.”

Primovich’s smile quickly disappeared as Stavropol swung the poker full force against the side of his head and cracked open his skull.

For a moment, Primovich just stood there, then his lifeless body collapsed to the floor.

“Very relaxing, indeed,” sneered Stavropol as he let the bloody poker fall from his hand.

“What have you done?” screamed Karganov.

“You didn’t actually think this would be as easy as taking a vote and simply walking away, did you? We have been working on this for over fifteen years. I have planned everything, *everything*—right down to the very last detail. I expected some resistance from Primovich and maybe a little from Varensky, but not you, Anatoly. Never you,” said Stavropol.

“You have lost your mind,” Varensky shouted as he made an end-run around the table for Stavropol.

Yazov drew a beautifully engraved, black chrome-plated Tokarev pistol from the small of his back and shot him before he had made it even three feet.

Karganov couldn't believe what he was seeing. Stavropol and Yazov were both insane, he was sure of it.

"So, what will it be, Anatoly?" asked Stavropol. "Will you join us? Or will you go the way of Valentin and Uri?"

The look on Karganov's face was answer enough.

"As you wish," responded Stavropol, who turned away as Yazov fired a single round into Karganov's head.

"We will have much more work now," said Yazov as he helped Stavropol drag the three bodies out the back door.

Stavropol smiled. "You saw for yourself that our list of assets in America is quite long, Dmitri. Over the years, we have lost an Aldrich Ames here, a Robert Hanssen there, but there are many more still in place. Everything will continue as planned, and you, my friend, will have to clear space on your uniform. I am sure Russia will create a brand-new medal for what we are about to accomplish."

The two men then worked in silence, digging shallow graves and burying the bodies behind the secluded lodge. They were not alone. Perched high above, on one of the area's heavily wooded trails, someone was watching.

1

Easton, Maryland

Frank Leighton was scared. In fact, if the truth were told, the man was absolutely terrified.

The call had come in the middle of the night, the voice more machine than human. It sounded tinny—canned, somehow—as if it was coming from far away. But it wasn't the sound of the voice that had shaken him. It was the message.

It took Leighton several moments to clear the cobwebs from his head—his sleep had been that deep. And why not? He was retired, after all. Sleeping with one eye open while guarding against the cold knife blade that could be slipped between his ribs by a supposed ally or listening for the telltale whisper of an anonymous assassin's bullet fired from a silenced weapon were all part of his past. Or so he had thought.

Twenty-five pounds overweight and fifteen years out of the game, Frank Leighton took a quick shower, shaved, and then combed his head of thick gray hair. The years hadn't been kind to him. When he looked in the mirror and said to himself, "I am way too old for this," he was telling the God's honest truth.

The initial spurt of adrenaline that had come with the phone call had long since passed, so Leighton decided to brew a pot of coffee while he considered his options. It was

a short period of reflection, as he had no options. That was exactly the way the protocol had been designed.

When the coffee was ready, Leighton filled his mug to within two-and-a-half inches of the rim, then grabbed a bottle of Wild Turkey from the cabinet above the refrigerator and filled the mug the rest of the way. *The Breakfast of Champions*, he thought to himself as he took the mug and headed past a butler's pantry, into the laundry and storage room that doubled as his home office.

While he waited for his computer to boot up, he gazed at a picture of his sister, Barbara, and her two kids. Maybe he should call her. She still had the cabin in Wyoming. They would be safe there. He wouldn't have to tell her why. She would trust him. She would do what he asked. It was important for them to be safe, at least until he could complete his assignment. *How in the world*, he wondered, *had things come to this?* And after all these years.

The opening of his Web browser interrupted Leighton's pondering. He went to the American Airlines website and ran through all of the international flights leaving from Washington that morning. When he found the flight he wanted, he began the process of booking the ticket. He had no idea if the old Capstone Corporation credit card still worked. It was the only way to reserve and pay for the flight, as he no longer kept large stores of cash in the house. That was something he had left behind in his old career, his old life.

If the card still was still active, the little-known bank in Manassas, Virginia, would accept any expiration date he entered into the computer. Leighton had no need to fish the card, or the false passport that matched the name on

the card, from its hiding place within the old lobsterman's buoy stored in a corner of the boathouse behind his home. When one's life has hung by a delicate thread for years upon end, certain things are never forgotten. He entered the credit card number by heart and waited while the American Airlines site processed his request. Moments later, a confirmation number and seat assignment appeared on the screen.

Leighton knew that a same-day ticket purchase was going to raise a lot of red flags, so transporting a weapon was out of the question. He would have to wait until he got there. Once he arrived, he would have access to more than enough firepower, and money—if everything had been left in place.

It had to have been. The fact that the Capstone credit card still worked, hell, the fact that he had even been called after all this time was reason enough to believe that he would find things just as he had left them fifteen years ago.

But what the hell was going on? Could it be a test? If so, why test him? Surely, they had younger, more capable operatives—operatives who were actually *active*. None of this made any sense. If you were going to run the world's most important horserace, why drag in old warhorses from the pasture for it?

Frank Leighton's mind was overflowing with questions, and as it began to get the better of him, he slammed an iron door on his misgivings and second-guessing. He reminded himself of what they all had been taught, the one thing that had been drilled into them over and over again—*The protocol will never be wrong. The protocol is infallible.*

As he pulled himself together and shut down his computer, Leighton thought again about calling his sister. If his mission didn't succeed, at least she and the kids would have a chance. Then he thought again. No, he couldn't call her. Despite how much he wanted to, the protocol was explicit. There had been no indication that this was coming. Nothing. But at the same time, it was one of the eventualities they had been told to be prepared for—something coming out of the clear blue sky.

After Leighton had thought about it some more, he rationalized that there was one person he could call; someone like him—someone who would have been contacted as well. They wouldn't have to discuss details; the tone of their voices would say everything.

He retrieved his cache from the old lobsterman's buoy in the boathouse and brought it back inside to his bedroom, where he quickly packed a small suitcase full of clothes. After throwing in what looked like an oversized PDA, he opened the manila envelope from the boathouse and spread its contents across the top of his dresser.

The passport was going to need some tweaking. He would need to update some of the stamps and, of course, change its expiration date. He'd need to do the same thing for the driver's license. The credit card and false business cards were slid into various pockets of the sport coat he had hung on the knob of the closet door.

Other items, like the pre-European Union currency, which was no longer of any use, were dropped into a metal wastebasket. An old, coded list of names, addresses, and phone numbers were recommitted to memory and then dropped into the wastebasket as well.

Now was the time to place the phone call. Leighton walked back into his kitchen, picked up the phone, and dialed. He felt like he was in one of those nightmares where everything moved in slow motion. The ringing of the telephone on the other end seemed to take forever. Finally, on the fifth ring, there was what sounded like someone picking up. Relief flooded through him. If the man he was calling was still at home, maybe he hadn't been activated. Maybe this was all some sort of mistake. The feeling, though, was short-lived as Leighton realized he had reached the man's voicemail. He didn't bother leaving a message.

Nothing but the assignment mattered now. He could trust no one. Everyone and everything at this point was suspect. He retrieved a bottle of starter fluid from beneath the kitchen sink and doused the contents of the metal wastebasket. There could be no trace left behind. Leighton set the wastebasket down outside on his stone patio, struck a match and watched as the assortment of papers went up in flames. When he was positive they were burned beyond recognition, he used the lid of his kettle grill to choke out the fire.

Two hours later, his false passport and driver's license expertly altered, the house locked up and the suitcase in the trunk of his car, Frank Leighton pulled out of his driveway and headed toward the airport, committed to his assignment and the havoc he was about to let loose upon the world.