

**DICK
HOUNDS THE
AFGHANS**

A DICK AVERY ADVENTURE STORY

CHAPTER 1

SUCKED DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

I was a Dick—truly. My name was Avery M. Dick III and I came from a long line of unremarkable Dicks. My parents were proud of the name and they should have been because they grew up when Dicks were respectable—Dick Tracy, Dick Cheney, and, of course, Dick Nixon. It was a wholly innocent time for Dicks. However, I wasn't so pleased with the name since it caused me torment and teasing since I was a kid. It still smarted now that I was all grown up and sort of mature. It was also life's not-so-little irony that I became a Special Agent with the U.S. Department of State's, Diplomatic Security Service. And I was a bona fide Dick in most other respects too.

Yes, I knew—a Dick was a Dick was a Dick. Excuse

me Gertrude for mangling your famous line, but that was the long and the short of it and I made no apology for the weak pun. That was because it had been the story of my life—one unending pun. It was all the more funny now that I was returning to work after being retired for the past 8 years. I'd been growing old and going crazy, not to put too dull a point on things. I had no money, pride, or regrets; at least until now. I'd been down on my luck and life for a long time. However, I was pleased to tell you that I had just turned the famous corner we'd all heard about. But I should've peeked first.

This was my first day back as a reemployed annuitant. That was government-speak for my new appointment to Diplomatic Security. However, *retread*, *geezer*, and *retard* were the appellations most often used in the biz for those who returned to feed at the organization's generous trough. *Mutant* was also a popular tag among the DS pundits. It wasn't an exact rhyme with *annuitant*, but near enough for government work as the bureaucrats liked to remind.

Keep in mind that horseshoes, inexactitude, and wordplay were serious pastimes in Washington. In the State Department, the ability to use malapropisms, double entendres, rhymes and puns was a prized trait where words—written words in particular—meant everything. Word usage was important because true actions and decisions sometimes had unintended consequences. And those could be career limiting and painful if you weren't careful.

Speaking of limitations, my appointment limited the amount of money I could earn, but that shouldn't be a problem. I didn't plan to spend any more time than absolutely necessary to get the job over with. I only

signed-on for a three month stint and I planned to stay that particular course. In any case, I had just returned to Washington to be briefed on my supposedly important overseas assignment. Yes, that was exactly how they described it—important. Perhaps in some sense that made me important too. Thank god they didn't use the word *plum* in describing my assignment and sketchy role in their little drama. That would have been terribly misleading and totally inaccurate. The pits maybe, but I never would have been that fruity. That image would have been wholly out of character in such a manly-man organization as DS.

I was here because DS was desperate. I was here because I was desperate—a good fit, all things considered. *Here*, by the way, was the Diplomatic Security Service headquarters in Arlington, Virginia and I was waiting in the building's lobby. I had an audience with Senior Special Agent Jersey Briggs, Director, Office of Investigations and Counterintelligence, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State. I'll leave out the *United States of America* part for the sake of brevity. Jersey was making me wait, as usual. It was probably another case of petty payback for past tiffs. He was my junior by a few years and now it was his turn to lord it over me. Okay, yes, I knew. "What goes around....."

The DS headquarters building was an unimposing brick and glass structure surrounded by like buildings in suburban Arlington. *Indistinguishable* was another descriptor. Truthfully, the words *bland*, *plain*, and *dull* also came to mind; much like the people hiding inside. The building's most remarkable feature was its unremarkable location, meaning it was situated well-

away from State's main flagpole. That meant the department's Black Dragons, by conscious design and discontent, made sure that DS would never again be quartered in the Main State building or Mother State for many of us. Please remember, I'd been away from her warm, embracing arms for awhile.

The perceptions of status and power were important commodities in Washington; almost as important as the real things. The Black Dragons were an institution within an institution. What was a Black Dragon? That was an all-powerful careerist in a key position in either the Civil Service or Foreign Service side of the house. They were creatures whose alliances and bonds were forged in shared experiences, exchanges of political favors, and fraternal handshakes. The Dragons, not the politicians, ran the department. They held sway over the whole machinery of the budgetary, personnel and foreign affairs processes. Their gnarled clutches embraced the institution's body-politic tightly against their scaly bosoms. And they didn't easily release their prey to others.

Here were some other descriptors of their scope of power. They were the puppet-masters of the government sideshow called the State Department. The term *old boy* didn't quite fully describe the clout and prestige they wielded within the institution. They were modern day Knights Templar without the pretense of religiosity, the truth told. They swore loyalty and fidelity only to each other and their common vision of what the Department of State was and would forever be. A large part of that vision involved maintaining the status quo and their sinecures. There was simply too much at stake to allow the elected leadership of a given administration to decide

weighty matters of state. Administrations came and went. The Black Dragons didn't. They represented continuity and permanence in a dangerous Washington bureaucracy and an insecure world.

So why did the Dragons care where the Diplomatic Security Service was located? In a short phrase, it was pure bureaucratic animus. The two had a *hate-hate* relationship for many years. The very notion that the State Department, and its Foreign Service appendage, could have an international law enforcement and security apparatus in its midst was largely unthinkable in their view. That was even with the Dragons controlling DS's budget, personnel systems, training regimens and operational programs—the whole shebang.

And yes, DS senior managers went forth every year at budget time, held out their collective cupped hands, and had the audacity to ask for more porridge. The humiliation and shame of the ritual was sometimes too great for DS to bear. However, the Dragons enjoyed the symbolic trappings of power and pomp. The pageantry dramatically reinforced and reminded the lesser department beings as to who was in charge.

For awhile, DS was led by a Judas lamb who slyly fed the organization into the Dragons gaping, hungry maws. DS was fodder for the insatiable appetites of the most reprehensible reptiles imaginable and their feeding frenzy knew no bounds. They gobbled up everyone and everything in their determined way—no one was safe. However, it was also an exercise in self-delusion and self-mutilation by the innocent babes-in-the-woods who believed the Dragons knew best. The DS rank-and-file didn't comprehend the implications, hidden agendas and consequences at the time. They would learn painful

lessons much later.

After all, the Dragons were gentlemen and gentlewomen who were global thinkers who truly believed that world strife and conflict were things that could be negotiated and tamed at the dinner table over drinks. They saw themselves as reasonable people talking to other reasonable people in a reasonable language in a reasonable manner. They resolutely detested change and challenge to their perquisites and authorities. With them, there was little room for open, honest discussions, disagreements or similar unpleasantness. In the end, only a thin veneer of professional rapport existed between the Dragons and their DS underlings. Mistrust was the major element that bound the two of them together.

The Dragons believed that security and law enforcement activities were low-brow endeavors best left to others. Well, if you have a thorn in your side, you should at least be able to pluck it, and that's exactly what the Black Dragons did for many decades. The Diplomatic Security Service was plucked over and over again until it couldn't be plucked any more.

DS's pitiful whimpering failed to dissuade the Dragons' from practicing their perverted sense of humor and expeditious style of management through control and containment. Maintaining their own equilibrium was of paramount importance to their survival. As a result, the security and law enforcement arm of the State Department was tightly bound in an institutional sling largely of its own making.

The Dragons simply looked down their scaly snouts and prescribed their own brand of astigmatic oversight for the organization. For awhile, rose-colored glasses were

the fashion rage in Main State's largely impotent corridors. These bureaucratic blinders were brazenly worn even as spectacular events continued to play-out abroad that argued for tougher security measures to protect people, buildings, and America's honor.

DS's treatment would change for the better over time, but not until embassies had fallen and people killed by terrorist acts caused by bureaucratic inertia and indifference. American prestige and credibility took a nosedive overseas. Adult leadership and vision were absent at the highest levels of the building. *Benign neglect* became the institutional watchwords of the day. We all patiently watched, but could do little to staunch the rise of international terrorism and its effect on American lives and interests abroad. Often overlooked, terrorist acts by Islamic extremists against U.S. interests overseas began in earnest at least two decades before the first such incident on American soil. Our embassies were bombed, our diplomats kidnapped and murdered, and our military attacked long before 9/11. We wondered when that terrible shoe would drop at home since it was all too predictable and inevitable.

But the Black Dragons game was about maintaining the status quo at all costs and ensuring they were safely ensconced in their loathsome lairs. The Dragons looked askance at the problems and hoped that whatever ugliness they saw disappeared of its own volition and good time.

Those who protected and served got a lot of practice whistling past graveyards in those days of yore.

Jersey Briggs: it was his name that got me; his first, not last. It wasn't a true Foreign Service handle like

Stape (for Stapleton), Bram (for Brampton) or Muffy (for whatever.) Avery Dick was certainly not a Foreign Service moniker either. I was still surprised that I was hired in the first place. Regardless, none of this stopped Jersey from playing-up the Ivy League, preppie image when it suited him. And suiting him entailed his wearing custom tailored garb of different stripes and colors. That was one of the things that I didn't like about him. That and the fact he was fairly competent in what he did. However, Jersey's faux, blue bloodline didn't jibe with the facts.

He grew up on the far Southside of Chicago. His father was a ward boss under Mayor Daley (senior) when the Democratic Party had a stranglehold on the garbage collection contracts in the city. Jersey grew up in solid, upper-class comfort. His family was not just well-to-do, it was filthy rich. He went to name schools in the Midwest and was a decent athlete. I knew this to be true since I conducted his background investigation. There were no secrets here among friends, or enemies for that matter.

There were other reasons why I disliked him so much. He was a rising star and I was a dwarf by comparison. I knew that, and so did he. He made it all look so easy and I had to work hard just to shine. He didn't want or need a job, even in the family business. He instead opted for public service; first with the Chicago Police Department and then with DS starting at the bottom as a junior agent like most of us. However, Jersey reveled in the life he'd created for himself. He thrived on overseas assignments as an embassy attaché, as a junior diplomat, as a mover in social circles, as a world traveler, and as someone who shared in the accouterments of a life to be lived to the fullest.

Of course, it was a life lived at taxpayer expense for the most part, but the fact never bothered Jersey or his peers in the Foreign Service aristocracy. When other agents would talk around the water cooler about tough times growing up, Jersey would quip that he had it hard too. In fact, the house where he grew up was so large it had two kitchens and he never knew where his next meal was coming from. That old joke pretty well summed up Jersey's life; one of entitlement, privilege, and self-indulgence.

However, Jersey was now serving a hardship tour in Washington, DC and couldn't wait to get back overseas. It could make him particularly prickly to deal with. That and the fact he had to meet with me and might be a wee bit testy. I wasn't suggesting Jersey had balls; only that he might be crotchety as we said. He was also a very savvy operator when he wasn't playing the slavish bozo for his superiors. Yep, that was my good friend Jersey Briggs.

Sometimes those who protected and served were much better at picking their noses than their friends.

I was escorted upstairs by Jersey's assistant, Jim, a fresh-faced kid probably just out of the Special Agent Basic Training Course and doing penance at headquarters for some minor rule infraction during his short tenure. Nowadays, one had to be almost as clean as a Mormon's white shirt just to get by. But DS didn't tolerate the term *butt boy* anymore for subordinates like Jim. Such disparaging tags were much too politically incorrect in this day and age. Regardless, Jim was Jersey's *butt boy*—no mistake about it. Personally, I thought *stud bitch* had more cachet, but that was just me.

And I wasn't being sexist in the slightest.

I didn't get Jim's last name, but I was friendly enough knowing at some future time and place I might have to deal with him since the *old boy* club, (and now girl), was still very much alive and well, thank you. Don't confuse the old boys with the Black Dragons. They were two very distinct organizational creatures. The old boys were simply trying to survive the vast, or perhaps half-vast, bureaucracy known as the State Department. It was the old "one hand washing the other" sort of thing. On the other hand, the Black Dragons were the State Department.

Jersey greeted me cordially with a big, bullshit smile. I knew then things were not going to be pleasant. I couldn't think of a wise-ass remark, so we shook hands ever-so-briefly. After which, I instinctively counted my fingers and wiped my hand on the seat of my pants for good measure and hygiene. You could never be certain what might be going around the building these days. We backed into our respective corners and awaited the bell—his opening gambit. It might not be worth much in Washington, but I didn't kneel, kiss his ring, or buss his cheeks. There was already too much ass kissing in the outfit as far as I was concerned. But I also sheepishly admitted to myself that I'd forgotten to bring my kneepads.

Jersey threw the first punch and I knew he couldn't resist. "Avery, it's been awhile, hasn't it? You retired from DS in your late fifties, about right?"

"No," I countered. "As you damn well know, I took the short exit route; out at fifty with twenty years service."

Those were the magic numbers for an immediate pension under both the Foreign Service and Federal Law

Enforcement retirement systems. DS special agents actually fell into both categories. Jersey always looked for an edge, always a barb to deflate me. Did I mention I didn't like the guy? Did I mention he was my friend?

"Still drinking and feeling sorry for your miserable self?" Jersey asked. I winced, but countered.

"Does Beth still enjoy my little gifts?" Two could play the pimping game of one-upmanship.

I would occasionally mail Jersey packages to his home. These contained women's panties and scented notes of endearment. They were gifts from fictitious lovers with fictitious return addresses. I knew his wife Beth opened all the mail and would be furious with him. Jersey sometimes had no sense of humor whatsoever.

He shot me the finger and I responded in kind. This was how close friends bonded in DS; but so much for the social pleasantries. We then moved on to the main event.

Jersey continued without blushing. I couldn't really tell if he was blushing given his deep tan. More image preening, I was sure.

"Avery, the director personally recommended you for the assignment," but then added his own nasty licks to put me in my place.

"But I'm not sure this assignment is a good fit for you or the Service," he continued. "You've been retired awhile and might have gotten a bit rusty so to speak."

"I'm really not sure you're up for the gig. One's skills go stale, the focus wanes, and the drive slows. And I'm not referring to your sex drive. It's just the normal aging thing, but without a large dose of Viagra in your case."

"Well, in my less than humble opinion, I believe I'm a good candidate for the job. Also, who else in their right mind would take the assignment? I believe your choices

are limited.”

“Well, you’ve never been right in the mind. But remember this Avery, opinions are like assholes, everyone has one.” Jersey shot back.

I thought about that remark and wondered if those who wore colostomy bags were, in fact, really without opinions. Or might a working asshole like Jersey be an exception to the rule? I decided not to argue the point.

Jersey then asked if I understood what he was saying. He must have thought I was hard of hearing too. I did understand the word *gig* and its varied definitions. I’d better be careful. Okay Jersey, my friend, back to the future. Yes, I certainly knew what he meant and resented the inference. With the Foreign Service, you didn’t realize you’d been stabbed in the back and were bleeding until you fell over dead. I kept calm, but I was pissed. It wasn’t a good start to a bad reunion.

I blasted back. “Jersey I still have most of my own teeth, get up in the morning breathing, and can remember the names of the kids I went to grade school with. I’ve already had my calling and career. I’m just looking to pick-up some pocket change. You’ve been directed to assign me to the case so let’s cut the crap and tell me what this is all about.” He really had no choice and he knew it. You’ve just been checkmated, my iffy friend. Game over.

As he thought about his retort, I glanced at the wall behind his desk; the *Wall of Shame*, as we called such things back in my day. Displayed for all to behold were the framed certificates of training, the awards, the plaques; all meaningless detritus of government service and ego. They were all very impressive and extremely

vain.

The walls had become an embarrassment to most and a persistent joke for others in the organization. I saw a photo of Jersey with Colin Powell, a photo of Jersey with a embassy Marine Security Guard Detachment somewhere overseas, his Award for Valor and, of course, the ubiquitous copper and enamel plaques with the State Department and Diplomatic Security Service crests handmade in Chile. These plaques had become commonplace in Washington over the years. The embassy in Santiago was kept very busy with orders from Washington. Some things never changed.

I couldn't pass up the shot. "Jersey, I see your wall has grown fat in the past few years, shame on you for being such an unabashed egotist, my vainglorious friend. Business and self-promotion must be good these days."

Jersey accurately responded to the effect that he at least had awards to hang on the wall. I ignored his snotty reply while continuing to scan his office.

But some things did change. Not me necessarily, but certainly the quality of government digs these days. Yeah, I said digs. It rhymes with gigs. Two could verbally fence using lame, outdated words. Oh, oh, my advanced age was showing again.

Jersey's office had pleasant, color-coordinated furnishings with carpeting and drapes, rather than standard, government issued Venetian blinds on the windows. Gone too were the gunboat gray furniture and the dingy, fly-specked fluorescent lighting.

There were no more floor ashtrays standing as solitary sentries. They'd been put into storage sometime ago, just like me. Regardless, the interior of the office was a welcome improvement over the exterior facade. Some

changes were good, aside from the building-wide smoking ban. Yes, I was a smoker. Disclosure was important in my business; not too much though, just enough to get by and conceal the important things.

Jersey slowly disclosed. He said that I'd need to get the details from the IG, but he reluctantly sketched the case outline for me.

“Avery, about two months ago, the Office of the Inspector General opened a broad fraud case against certain security contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its investigation was prompted by several anonymous allegations that seemed to have legs. The potential loss to the department through bribes, kickbacks, bill-padding, and other schemes is thought to be in the many millions of dollars. It's not the usual chump-change crimes the IG typically deals with.” He then reminded me of one obvious cause of the problems.

“The department noncompetitively contracted with a number of international security firms to provide security services to State Department facilities, operations, and personnel during the Middle East ramp-up. The contractors were also tasked to train host country law enforcement and security personnel.” He casually cited the President Karzai protective training program in Afghanistan as an example. Jersey continued his monologue since it was his show. And showmanship was always one of his strong traits.

“As always, the department is especially paranoid when it comes to adverse publicity. It doesn't want to be caught short and embarrassed. As you're aware, it doesn't have many supporters on the Hill and this disclosure, if true, could undercut what little support it

has.”

“The Hill could move programs and funds to other agencies and the department would once again lose credibility, support, and confidence within the administration. Most importantly, it might lose funding. It badly doesn’t want that to happen.”

Jersey pointed out it was all about face or dirty laundry in this instance. If there was any dirty laundry, the department wanted to be the first in town to air it. It wanted to tell everyone about the great and effective corrective actions it was now taking to prevent further instances of abuse. Internal controls would be tightened and the guilty would be punished, and the rhetoric would never end. The department needed to accentuate the positive. It needed to be proactive. In short, it needed a damn miracle to disengage from this messy tar baby of its own making.

“It’s all about spin and who gets the message out to the public first. Remember Avery, the sin is never the act itself, but not disclosing it quickly enough and making amends—*mea culpa, maxima mea culpa*. It’s the way Washington does business.”

“You know as well as I, the IG has the lead role in the department for waste, fraud, and mismanagement allegations. DS was asked to detail a special agent to the IG team given our law enforcement powers and experience in the overseas arena. It’s as simple and straightforward as that.”

He finished his spiel by telling me I was the agent being seconded to the IG. What’s the translation for me? DS, and the IG, needed someone to take the heat for them if anything went wrong during the investigation. I suspected that’s why I was being offered the big bucks

and I wasn't surprised in the slightest. Fortunately, Jersey telegraphed his punches well and he landed one last blow.

"And Avery, don't screw-up this time. You're representing DS and we have our own face to worry about. Best wishes pal and all that collegial crap." He then ordered me to snap back into the system before I met with the IG.

I was pleased to see that cynicism and real-politick were still very much alive and well in the department. Yes, I understood the dynamics; actually much too well for my own good. Moreover, these things were never as simple or straightforward as Jersey had just asserted.

I left after the customary and banal exchanges of unpleasantness. I didn't let the door hit me on the way out. Sometimes even I had some pride left. I also didn't bother smoking and joking with my former buds hanging out at the DS-designated smoking chamber by the building's front entrance because I was too depressed. I was also having serious third and fourth doubts about reenlisting in the cause.

I now fully understood why I was being offered this prune assignment. Nobody else in their right mind wanted to go to a hot war-zone to investigate massive contract fraud. Iraq or Afghanistan, it was all the same in terms of risk to one's backside. If the bad guys didn't kill you, the other bad guys would. My guess was that other agents had turned down the offer cold.

But I had swallowed the bait, hook, line, and sinker; actually, the whole trawler. I was both vulnerable and conveniently expendable to the starched collars in the tailored suits. I was needy and it must've shown: shame on me for being so obvious and oblivious. I'd be playing

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