

Dick Rousts the Russkie

Dick Avery

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Foreword

The world's oil distribution network was now threatened by a tiny Middle Eastern country supporting jihad and reaping obscene profits from manipulating the international spot markets for crude oil. The already wealthy nation was becoming fabulously rich at the expense of other producer countries while disrupting political stability in the region.

The State Department's Diplomatic Security Service and Russia's Federal Intelligence Service, the SVR, join forces to stop a rogue agent from the old KGB spy agency responsible for orchestrating attacks on oil wells, pumping stations, pipelines, refineries and tanker ships delivering the crude oil to market. The world's entire petroleum infrastructure was at risk of collapsing. And everything was fair game for the sociopath and now free agent offering his nefarious talents to the state of Bhutar on the Arabian Peninsula.

DSS special agent Richard Avery and SVR officer Ludmilla Petrova team up to track down Vlad the Impaler, the infamous ex-KGB officer. Both Russian and American interests were at stake and time was running out to neutralize a madman bent on turning off the spigots of the world's supply of black gold. Operation Scorched Earth was now underway!

Please join me as I travel the world on behalf of the Diplomatic Security Service and uphold truth, justice and the American way!

Very truly yours,

Richard M. Avery III

Special Agent (retired)

Diplomatic Security Service

U.S. Department of State

Nothing Shipshape

Chapter 1

The Liberty Bay was a soft target for the Somali pirates. She was hauling oil from the Persian Gulf to the port of Mombasa. To the captain and crew of eleven, it was just another routine sailing around the Horn of Africa and down the coast to her destination in Kenya. With a crew change in Mombasa, the ship would return to the gulf for another load of crude oil and repeat the journey.

The Liberty Bay flew a Liberian flag of convenience. Like Panama, Liberia was the other country chosen by many ship owners to register their vessels to avoid pesky maritime safety regulations, onerous taxes and other bureaucratic unpleasantness. Otherwise, the Liberty Bay was one hundred percent American. One wholly owned by a U.S. conglomerate listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

The Indian Ocean waters were calm as the two pirate longboats shadowed the Liberty Bay for a short while before attacking it at dusk. Two of the attackers attached grappling hooks to the stern of the big ship and shinnied up the long rope with their AK-47 rifles and rocket propelled grenades strapped to their backs. The modern day brigands easily boarded the ship and quickly overwhelmed the crew. One unfortunate crew member tried to sound the fire alarm, but was shot in the back before he could pull the handle. A few sailors tried to put up a good fight, although they were rewarded with butts of rifles across their faces. The chief engineer lost the sight in one eye for his valiant efforts. They were called assault weapons for good reason. The crew was quickly outmaneuvered, outgunned and out of luck!

The captain barely had time to send out a distress call to the U.S. Navy's 5th fleet based in Bahrain. Regrettably, it would be a futile exercise in too little too late.

The crew was rounded up and forced to stand before their captain on the bridge.

"Captain, set a course for Somalia and be quick about it. We now own you and your ship," the pirates' leader spoke in broken English, but with an authoritative voice.

However, Captain Van Hooten wasn't cowed in the least by the ragtag thugs. He was a crusty, stubborn Dutchman who'd sailed these waters before the pirates were even born. He wasn't about to give up his ship to these brigands or even Davy Jones Locker without a fight.

"You don't know how to sail this vessel and I damn well won't help you hijack my own ship!"

The leader didn't bother to argue the point. He walked behind the first sailor in line, put him in a chokehold and slit his throat. Blood spurted forward to the captain's feet.

He then moved behind the next man and was about to do the same thing.

"Wait, stop!" the captain screamed before the second man was executed. He couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed.

The captain knew the Somalis' reputation for toughness, but never expected they were coldblooded killers. That wasn't supposed to be part of the hijacking game. It was always a brokered transaction and cost of doing business these days. One that rarely involved violence or so the captain thought, until now.

Captain Van Hooten moved to the ship's control panel and punched numbers into the navigation system computer. The destination was not to be of his choosing.

The captain was ordered to sail the supertanker to the Puntland, the autonomous region of northeastern Somalia. There, the oil would be offloaded and sold to the highest bidder on the black market and the crew and ship held for ransom. It was merely business as usual in the hijacking trade these days. However, there'd been one important change, although not in the pirates' modus operandi. Rather it was the conspirators who were now pulling the levers from behind the wizard's curtain. The Somalis were just pawns unknowingly serving a powerful Middle East country bound-and-determined to influence the world price of oil to its advantage.

Red Sky in Morning

Chapter 2

Vladimir Booskowsky, better known as Vlad the Impaler by his former KGB colleagues, was a shadowy, elusive figure who terrified even the most hardened intelligence officers in the old Soviet spy service. He was a vicious sociopath of the first order and that remarkable fact had served the *rodina*, the motherland, well during his long career as a sanctioned killer for the former Soviet Union at the height of its power and influence.

But now semiretired, he was a hired gun, a freelancer, for the highest bidder for his particular talents. And that made him even more dangerous. Although a creature of its own making, Russia's vaunted Federal Intelligence Service, with its SVR abbreviation, even feared Vlad and what he was capable of doing. And now he was doing incredibly destructive things as a turncoat and master of terror. The SVR had a serious problem on its hands and turned to a most unlikely source for help: the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service. Strange bedfellows it seemed. However, the question remained as to who would ultimately end-up on top in this most puzzling, quirky relationship.

I was sitting in Jersey Briggs' office at the DSS headquarters in Arlington, Virginia listening to a dialogue between him and Boris Venchkoff, the Russian embassy's resident or SVR spy chief in Washington. Jersey was the DSS's Director of Investigations and Counterintelligence and my titular boss who brought me back to the organization's trough every once in awhile for a little sip. I was thirsty so that's why I showed up for the meeting. I was

Jersey's designated fall guy if things went to shit as he might say in his own scatological way. I knew this time was no different when he offhandedly mentioned the case was right up my alley. I thought it more likely a one-way street with me headed in the wrong direction.

I admitted to being intrigued about the meeting since relations had soured between our countries over the past few years. Glasnost may have brought the wall down, but distrust was still the order of the day. Spying on one another hadn't abated in the slightest despite all the rhetoric to the contrary. So this little tete-a-tete with me serving as a fifth-wheel was surprising to say the least. I didn't mean me being a fifth-wheel since that was a fairly common experience for someone in my subordinated position.

"So, he's turned rogue and threatens both of our countries. That's why I ask for your assistance in tracking him down and neutralizing him so he can do no further harm. We know the Diplomatic Security Service is the largest U.S. government law enforcement and security service overseas and very adept at locating and capturing U.S. fugitives who've fled abroad. By pooling and coordinating our resources, we have a much better chance of finding Vladimir," Boris spoke to Jersey while ignoring my presence.

I really laughed to myself when Boris used the word neutralizing when describing what he had in mind for Vlad's fate. The euphonizing certainly was diplomatically correct, but euthanizing with extreme prejudice would have nicely sufficed. Much to my embarrassment, I later learned that euthanasia didn't refer to Peace Corps volunteers working in Cambodia. My ESL tutoring hadn't helped one bit. It seemed my knowledge of U.S. foreign affairs agencies and world geography was a little sketchy too. No worries, I worked in the State Department's Foreign Service so one could easily understand and overlook my little faux pas.

However, it seemed Boris's English comprehension was pretty good, especially for a Slav born and raised in Russia. But his guttural tones were off-putting to my ear. His manner of speech reminded me of the Boris Badenov character on the old Rocky & Bullwinkle show and his manner of dress more so. He was a caricature of the character. I awaited Natasha's arrival, but like Godot she never showed up. Obviously, cartoon characters were unreliable beings and wondered the same about our Boris. The results of the litmus test as to his sincerity and bona fides hadn't come back yet. So we didn't know if his true intentions had turned a reassuring red, white and blue.

"So what's in it for us?" Jersey asked his guest. Luckily, he didn't slip and say me to show his penchant for things of self interest. "Where do U.S. interests come into play?" He finally got the question right for a change and I mentally applauded him.

"Oil is the answer. The unfettered flow of oil for both of our countries is at stake. Our intelligence sources and analyses strongly point to Bhutar, the oil rich country in the Persian Gulf, as the locus of the problem. Bhutar is behind the disruptions of oil supplies to its advantage while furthering the advance of Islamic terrorism."

"Look at what's happened around the world in the past few months. Two of your oil tankers were hijacked in the Gulf of Aden, just off the Horn of Africa. Al Shabaab in Somalia, an affiliate of the ISIS, was clearly responsible for those acts. The largest crude oil pipeline in Nigeria at the Port Harcourt terminus was bombed causing a massive oil spill and two weeks of repair to bring it back on line. All thanks to Boko Haram that has sworn allegiance to the ISIS. Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb is making remarkable progress in seizing oil wells in Libya and Tunisia. Lastly, the recent cyber attack on our computer system controlling oil distribution

throughout the Caucasus shut down our flow of oil for nearly a week. We still don't know who was responsible, but suspect Vlad was somehow involved."

"It's all about controlling oil for the greater good of a single country and a coordinated effort by these terrorist organizations to assist it in that common goal. Connect all the dots and you'll come to the same conclusion."

I silently acknowledged the events having read about them in the premier source for real, fake news: *The Washington Post*. At least Boris's veracity in this instance wasn't questionable, despite his impolite reference to the multitude of Indian foreheads.

"So where do Bhutar and Vlad come into play?" Jersey logically asked his guest. I was busy taking notes so I wouldn't later forget any important items.

Let's see, pick up the laundry this afternoon. Since I'd be working for the department again I needed to make sure my shirts were heavily starched to fit in with all the stuffed ones in the building. Okay, stop by Piggly Wiggly and get a box of white Zin for the weekend and then take the dog to the vet for worming. My supply of Marlboros was sufficient for the time being so I didn't add them to my list of necessities. My vices were pretty well covered for the moment, but my virtues less so.

The "to do" lists never ended it seemed to me, even in retirement. I was pleased since my reminders were punctiliously prepared; just like my investigative reports, only more transparent and truthful.

"I'll start with Bhutar because of its key role and duplicity in this conspiracy. The country is playing both ends against the middle as you Americans say. Out of one side of its mouth, it

condemns terrorism, specifically Al-Qaeda and the ISIS activities around the world. It talks the talk, but doesn't walk the walk, so to speak.”

I was impressed with Boris's use of American colloquialisms. I jotted them down in my notepad so I could use them sometime. They were clever, catchy sayings, although I wasn't sure exactly what they meant. Maybe it was his strong Slavic accent that was throwing me off.

“The Bhutari government is secretly funding these terrorist groups, waging a campaign to disrupt and manipulate the world's oil supply to its advantage. What it's doing is timing the international spot markets for crude oil by taking huge positions in the future price movements of the commodity. Knowing when a disruption will occur, it games the market by taking long positions on the price knowing it will spike following one of these events. So it carefully places its bet and sells when the price rises.”

“The short term profits they earn on these brief transactions are enormous. We estimate these market movers have garnered several billion U.S. dollars for the country in the past six month alone. The income is beginning to come close to what it earns through legitimate sales. By the way, no cargo ship carrying Bhutari crude has ever been hijacked. Perhaps it's just a coincidence. However, we don't think so.”

“But don't the other oil producing countries benefit from a price hike as well?” I spoke for the first time. Jersey shot me a dirty look for interrupting. In return, I stuck out my tongue while he wasn't looking my way. His behavior sometimes caused me to bad mouth him in these situations. And I often couldn't stay tongue in cheek around him.

Without turning to me, Boris confirmed the fact that other nations profited as well, but much less so, adding that Bhutar was reaping the lion's share of the riches. It was also fulfilling its goal of promoting terrorism for its own political and ideological ends.

“If you don't believe me about Bhutar's connection to terrorism, simply look at what's happened in the region. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Bhutar. The countries claimed Bhutar was supporting terrorism and destabilizing the region. This is what I meant about speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Air flights were suspended and Bhutar's diplomats in the countries were ordered to pack their bags and leave within 48 hours. The Maldives and Yemen later followed suit by breaking diplomatic ties as well. Only Kuwait and Oman remain with Bhutar in the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization that is now largely impotent and passé.”

I believed he was essentially correct on his points, but failed to mention that the countries also criticized Bhutar's close relationship with Iran, an ally of Russia. No matter, he'd made his case and it was an accurate portrayal of the situation.

He also politely didn't mention the fact that the largest contingent of U.S. military in the Middle East was located at Bhutar's Al Udeid Air Base. Besides being a senior spy for Russia, he was a seasoned, savvy diplomat too. That made him less than credible in my opinion. Of course, my opinion didn't count for much around here these days. Anyhow, Jersey would likely quip that opinions were like assholes because everybody had one. That was one of his favorite off-color allusions and often I was the butt of his tasteless joke. However, he seemed to always think in redundant shades of brown for some reason that eluded me.

“So where does Vladimir Booskowsky come into the picture you’ve painted for us?” Jersey artfully inquired.

“Ah yes, Vladimir,” Boris mentioned while handing me the guy’s dossier.

He must have thought I was merely Jersey’s administrative assistant rather than butt-boy or stud-bitch as he usually referred to me depending on his mood, but mostly out of earshot. I actually believed stud-bitch had some cachet.

I idly flipped through the pages while Boris droned on. Unfortunately, the file was all in Russian and my comprehension of the Cyrillic alphabet was a little rusty. English was sometimes a chore as well. Thank goodness the State Department employed linguists who could translate both languages. I couldn’t wait for Esperanto to become the world’s official language.

“Booskowsky was recruited by Bhutar and now owned by the government to do its bidding. He’s the one coordinating the operations to disrupt the oil distribution. He’s also the paymaster for those dispirit terrorist groups and a ruthless character in his own right. The Bhutar government provides the funding through Vlad and he doles the money out to the others, a fairly simple and straightforward proposition. I suspect Vlad is the designated cutout to maintain a safe distance for the Bhutaris if the conspiracy is discovered. He’ll be the guy taking the fall for them, a scapegoat, and a means of plausible denial for the Bhutaris so they can keep their hands clean in the affair. I think he’s being well-compensated for the role and understands the risks. However, it’s difficult to judge what a sociopath might be thinking. But the doing part is clear to us.”

I had the temerity to ask another question before Jersey could object.

“How did Vlad convince these various terrorist groups to cooperate in the first place? While they all champion the cause of Islamic fundamentalism, they are often at odds with one another and sometimes vie with each other for prominence.”

“It wasn’t Vlad who arranged for the coordination and cooperation, but the Bhutar government itself through secret negotiations with each major organization. That much we learned through our intelligence sources. We suspect the promise of money, and lots of it, to fund their activities was the sweetener to convince them. And the Bhutaris have plenty to spare.”

Boris pulled out a pack of Gauloises and lit the French, unfiltered cigarette while innocently looking around for an ashtray. He knew about the no smoking rule in U.S. government buildings, but decided to ignore it. Jersey was perplexed as to how to handle the situation, although he eventually shoved his empty coffee cup across his desk. I was tempted to light up one too, but thought better, knowing Jersey would ream me out later for my thoughtlessness. And it wouldn’t be a pleasant experience.

Boris had made a pretty good prima fascia case for Bhutar’s involvement in terrorism, but I thought less so about its manipulating the oil markets. Some research by others more knowledgeable of the situation was needed to pin down the matter one way or another. As to Vlad’s complicity in the affair, I didn’t have a clue as government detectives often said. That assertion remained to be seen or proven as the case may be.

I then asked another question. I figured one more wouldn’t damage my current standing with Jersey anymore than it was already.

“Eliminating Vladimir won’t stop the Islamic zealots from pursuing their goal of jihad and the spread of the extremist version of Mohammed’s teachings throughout the world. Is that essentially right?”

Boris turned to me for the first time and asked my name. I told him it was Richard, but my friends called me Dick.

“Richard, that is correct,” Boris replied, “but that’s not what this is about in our view. The hydra of Islamic terrorism has many heads and cutting one off will not resolve the problem. We’re not naïve enough to believe in that scenario. But eliminating Vlad will serve as a strong signal to Bhutar that its nefarious activities have been found out and the world will not tolerate state sponsored terrorism or the manipulation of the international oil markets by one nation.”

“At a minimum, we believe Vlad’s death will disrupt the coordinated attacks on the oil distribution system and cut off the funding by Bhutar to the ISIS affiliates and Al-Qaeda. Vlad’s the key player in this conspiracy and that’s why he must die. That’s our goal and it should be yours as well. It’s in both our countries interests to take action now before the situation worsens.”

“We share the common objective of defeating Al-Qaida and the ISIS franchisees. Your enemy is our enemy in this instance and our interests are fully aligned. We may differ in other foreign policy matters around the world, but we are united in this one. As you’re aware, Russia has been attacked by these extremists on many occasions in the past few years. The Moscow theatre hostage taking, the bombing of Red Square, the bombing of a Russian passenger jet over the Sinai, the cyber attack I mentioned earlier, along with many lesser terrorist events too numerous to cite.”

“Chechen terrorists were responsible for some of these tragedies. Those terrorists are closely aligned and supported by al-Qaida and the ISIS. So we have our own problem with Muslim zealots living in our country. Moreover, many Chechens have joined the ranks of Al-Qaida and the ISIS and are now fighting against both of our nations in Syria and Iraq.”

“I propose we each assign an officer to work together as equal partners to locate Vlad. Information and resources will be freely shared by each side. I’ve already identified someone. Her name is Major Ludmilla Petrova, an SVR officer presently working in our Moscow headquarters. She has been trying to track Vlad’s whereabouts for the past six months. And she is probably the most knowledgeable person about his activities on behalf of Bhutar as well.”

Jeez, a Ludmilla! It was just my luck. I’d likely be partnered with a frumpy, dumpy Russian woman wearing a babushka and sporting a mouthful of metal teeth. Oh well, a yummy piece of eye candy could be seriously distracting in a dangerous investigation like this one. So a plain Jane or Ludmilla would have to suffice this time around.

Jersey interrupted my sexist, lascivious thoughts of working with a gorgeous spy gal. My overly active libido sometimes one-upped my abilities in such circumstances. In other words, my roving eyes and sexual fantasies were usually much bigger than my stomach to digest, at least during a single seating.

“Whoa, hold on a minute Boris. You’re putting the cart before the horse! We haven’t agreed to your proposal yet. I need to run this up the old flagpole and see who salutes,” Jersey comically asserted, scrambling his metaphors while doing so. At least he didn’t say up the chain of wisdom as he often did to sound cutesy.

Of course, what he meant to say was he had to first write a memo to his masters upstairs to get their buy-in and approval for the plan. As a consummate bureaucrat, he was always looking for someone else to make the decision to cover his butt and career if things went badly.

“Here’s my card. Let me know when you reach a decision,” Boris spoke as he departed the office.

I strongly suspected Boris had recorded the entire conversation on his cell phone. That’s what I would’ve done in his shoes; only that would never happen. He was wearing a pair of handcrafted Allen Edmonds loafers and I bought my wingtips at Payless. That’s all I could afford on my niggardly government pension. However, my choice of footwear nicely accommodated my largish flatfeet and smallish budget. Better yet, gum rarely stuck to the cheapish, composite soles.

But Jersey could’ve cared less about such things. All that counted in his mind was the written word. His government-speak memos were nonpareil, always carefully parsing his words so he would avoid any criticism from his bosses and any blowback to his reputation. Hell, he’d wrap himself in the State Department flag to show his loyalty and servility to his betters if he could get away with it!

As Boris stood, I did as well as a sign of respect, although Jersey remained seated trying to figure out how to handle this sticky, tar baby. He detested making decisions on his own and as a bureaucrat’s bureaucrat he’d quickly pass the buck on this one. I didn’t bother to stick around and was out the door almost before Boris, although it seemed diplomatic protocol and comportment weren’t for the swift-footed among us.

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