

John J. Maresca

The Russian Operation

John J. Maresca

THE RUSSIAN OPERATION

Edition Noëma

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover image: Malivan_Juliiia/Shutterstock.com

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1362-0

Second edition

Edition Noëma

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Stuttgart 2022

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

*For the sunshine of my life—my lovely wife Sisi and
our wonderful daughter Azadeh*

Foggy Bottom

The padded door closed quietly behind him, and he found himself in an immense office, decorated with elegant eighteenth-century furniture. This was the style affected throughout the seventh floor of the Department of State, intended to remind visitors of the early days of the republic, of the solidity of the institution, of the international power of the American government and its representatives.

Through the windows he could see the columns of the Lincoln Memorial, the sweep of the Potomac River, and the wintry slope of Arlington National Cemetery up to the Lee Mansion high on the hill opposite the city. The winter light was fading in the late-afternoon shadows, and the rush-hour traffic was just starting to thicken as it flowed through Foggy Bottom toward Memorial Bridge and the Virginia suburbs. Comfortable Washingtonians were returning to their spacious houses, their cozy families, their thickly padded winter lifestyles insulating them against the biting cold outside their homes, their city, their world.

The Undersecretary behind his vast desk continued reading papers carefully prioritized for him in a blue leather folder with a State Department seal embossed in gold on the cover. A brass desk lamp cast a yellowish glow across the polished leather surface with its sparse but carefully selected embellishments—a broad marble

pen set, a family photo in a simple silver frame, a small Egyptian statuette acquired during an earlier posting in Cairo. Framed on the wall behind him like a doctor's degrees were the various Presidential commissioning documents from the successive stages of his conventionally brilliant career. The shadows lengthened slowly; Foggy Bottom was living up to its reputation as a low-lying region of the city, where winter mists from the river cast a denser gloom than anywhere else.

"Hello, Joey," said the Undersecretary, without looking up at his visitor, who did not reply. The Undersecretary slowly turned a page and initialed something before carefully closing the folder. Finally, he looked at Joey Torino, who was still leaning against the doorframe. "In trouble again?" he said, in the same even voice.

Joseph E. Torino took a few steps toward the desk and stood opposite the seated man. The Undersecretary did not rise. "No trouble," said Torino, "just divorce, unemployment, and boredom." The two men did not share the same sense of humor.

"Well, Joey," said the Undersecretary, "I can't help with the divorce. Have you read this?" He handed Torino a secret telegram from the embassy in Moscow.

"How could I have read it," growled Torino, taking the brief message. "You cut off my access to telegrams two months ago."

"Need to know, Joey, need to know. We never circulate telegrams to people who don't have a need to know. You know that." Pendleton Highsmith was a neat small man entering distinguished middle age. His silver hair was impeccably cut and combed, his discreet necktie in the latest fashion, his mind clear and orderly. He remained seated, looking Joey Torino steadily in the eye.

Torino read the telegram:

TO: SECSTATE IMMEDIATE
FROM: AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

SECRET EXDIS

URGENT FOR UNDERSECRETARY HIGHSMITH'S EYES ONLY FROM AMBASSADOR RUDOLPHUS
SUBJECT: DISAPPEARANCE OF MALCOLM ROBERTS

1. ROBERTS WAS LAST SEEN ON A MISSION IN THE CAUCASUS TWO WEEKS AGO, WHILE ATTEMPTING TO MAKE A TRIP INTO THE MOUNTAINS TO MEET WITH REBEL LEADERS. DESPITE OUR EFFORTS, WE HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO LOCATE HIM OR LEARN WHAT HAPPENED. RUSSIANS HAVE TRIED TO BE HELPFUL BUT UNABLE TO PROVIDE ANY FURTHER INFO. I FEAR ROBERTS HAS BEEN KILLED OR TAKEN HOSTAGE BY ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER.
2. I RECOMMEND SENDING A WELL-QUALIFIED SEARCH TEAM UNDER INTERNATIONAL AUSPICES ON AN URGENT BASIS TO ATTEMPT TO LOCATE HIM OR ESTABLISH HIS FATE. HIS FAMILY HAS BEEN INFORMED OF THE STATE OF PLAY. PRESS NOT YET INTERESTED BUT WILL BE SHORTLY. AS YOU WILL UNDERSTAND, THIS MISSION IS LIKELY TO BE DANGEROUS.
REGARDS. RUPOLPHUS.

Torino looked up and met the Undersecretary's direct gaze. They had known each other for twenty years. "You want me to do this?" he asked quietly.

"Joey," said the Undersecretary, "You're the best troubleshooter we have."

Joseph E. Torino laughed. He was a stocky middle-aged man going bald. His eyes were weak, he had difficulties with his kidneys and the beginnings of what he was sure was chronic rheumatism. His colleagues considered him belligerent and thought he had a drinking problem. His suit was barely acceptable for a State Department bureaucrat and was worn and baggy in strategic places. Like the man inside it, the suit was deeply used.

"Pen," said Torino, "that's the best line I've heard in a long time. You yank me back from my last overseas assignment, you leave me for I-don't-know-how-long without anything to do, you even cut

me off from incoming reports because of some spurious security investigation, and now you say I'm your best 'troubleshooter?' What the hell does that mean?"

"Now Joey, don't be unfair. You know Security is routinely looking into your problems. Anyone who is assigned as an American diplomat abroad and gets into fights in bars is subject to checking. And normally someone in that situation is brought home. I think it was the right thing to do in your case, and if you would reflect on it a bit, I'm sure you would agree with me." The Undersecretary considered himself a fair man who abided by the rules. He resented any inference that he had behaved unfairly.

"The fight was necessary in the circumstances," said Torino in his quiet, somehow menacing voice. "I didn't start it, and I wasn't drunk. If you want someone to get information on terrorists, you have to reckon on him getting into a fight now and then."

"Joey, you have always been in trouble, from the day you walked into this place. You can't get along with your superiors, you are tough on your colleagues, you refuse service discipline, you have even refused some quite normal assignments. These are the facts, I'm afraid. I know you were carrying out a difficult assignment. Everyone here recognizes that. But we could not leave you in that country after the fight. You would be dead by now, as you are undoubtedly aware.

"But that is not why I asked you to come up today. You may not have the qualities of a conventional diplomat, but you have the qualities we need for this job." The Undersecretary rose from his chair for the first time during their meeting, and slowly moved to the other side of his desk.

"You are the best qualified person we have for this mission. You don't have to do it, of course. But you yourself said you were bored. You need to be doing something constructive; you need to be doing

something! And this won't be boring, Joey."

"No, Pen, I don't suppose it will be boring."

"How's your Russian these days?"

"Old."

"No problem. We'll send an interpreter with you. When were you last in the Caucasus?"

"Ten years ago, on a tour of the Georgian side. I've never been to the northern side of the mountains, which is where this guy's mission must have been. Circled all around it, but never set foot in it."

"Well, you know more about the region than ninety percent of our people, and we'll have someone with you who's been to the area recently. You will also have a communications technician so you can be in direct contact."

"With who?"

"Me." The Undersecretary moved away from Torino, his hands in a praying position.

"You? Why you? What's so special about this case? It's not the first of our people who has disappeared on a mission." Torino looked with fleeting envy at the back of the Undersecretary's carefully tailored suit.

"It's just sensitive, Joey, sensitive. The Russians are sensitive that we were trying to send a man to meet with the leaders of this rebellion. Ever since the war in Chechnya, the Russians have been resentful of any foreign activity in the northern Caucasus, in the mountains there. Now that there is a new rebellion, they watch everything even more carefully. So, it's extra sensitive. I'm going to be supervising your mission personally, and directly."

Joey Torino thought. He was a deeply cynical man, wounded many times by life, by his career, by those around him. He knew there were limits on the abilities of officials to be honest with each

other. He knew Pen Highsmith well, a conventional career official, careful but not dishonest, and understood that as Undersecretary he might not be completely open on this subject. His instincts told him there was more to this than he was being told, but also that he would not be told any more, at least not now. He thought it likely that he would be badly used if he went on this mission, either as a scapegoat or as a sacrifice, or both. It was true that the Russians were edgy about the rebellion spreading from Chechnya across the Caucasus Mountains. They would not appreciate a visit there by an American diplomat from Washington. There would be unforeseen dangers. On the other hand, he knew Malcolm Roberts slightly by reputation; an honest, devoted young man with high ideals, untainted by the pervasive careerism of State Department officials, at least so far.

Torino reflected quickly on his own situation as well. He was tired of coming each day to the State Department with nothing significant to do; in fact, he corrected himself, with nothing at all to do. He was tired of meeting with his lawyer about the details of the court procedures concerning his divorce. He was tired of Washington, of his colleagues, of people like the Undersecretary with their impeccable hair and suits and minds. He was tired of diplomatic work, with its endless round of meetings and meaningless reports. He was, in fact, ready to undertake an unusual mission, even a dangerous one.

"When do you want me to go?" he asked finally.

The Undersecretary turned toward him and stood silhouetted against the window with its grey evening light. "We have you booked on tonight's flight to Moscow. The Embassy will brief you fully, and you can continue on from there to Chechnya with a couple of assistants from the embassy staff. That's where Roberts was last seen. You don't need to spend more than a few weeks in the

Caucasus. We want to be able to say that we have tried our best to locate Roberts."

"So, you just want to claim you've made an effort," said Torino. "You don't really think you can find him? It's really just for show."

The Undersecretary sighed wearily. "I am not saying that, Joey" he replied. "That is what you are going to find out." Then, after a pause, "You and I have always understood one another."

It had grown dark in the large office. The Undersecretary crossed the room to a sofa, turned on a light, and looked at his visitor. Joey Torino nodded and shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said, "but not for longer than a few weeks. I have to go to court at the end of March."

The Undersecretary laughed stiffly and clapped Torino on the shoulder. After a few parting words he asked Torino to work out further details with his assistant.

As soon as he was alone, Highsmith picked up his direct phone to the Secretary of State. "He's going," he said. "I know him well; he'll try his best. I don't know whether he will learn anything, but at least we can say we did everything possible to find Roberts. The family will not be able to complain, and the Russians won't be too upset. We don't want to rock the boat with the Russians over this; they're already suspicious that we are sympathetic to the rebels. We have too many important issues pending with Moscow, and that must be our primary concern."

He paused, sighed inaudibly, and allowed time for the Secretary to express his views. He knew the Secretary would not; he never did. At times Highsmith thought the Secretary had no views. "I believe this is the best solution, Mr. Secretary. Action, without trop de zele."

As soon as he had said it, he realized that he did not know whether the Secretary would understand the well-worn French expression. That was not wise; he did not want to appear more sophisticated than the Secretary. He quickly covered his tracks: "I'm sure it will look decisive—sending an experienced trouble shooter to find a missing man."

The Secretary of State thanked him and hung up.

The Undersecretary rose from his desk and stood by the window. Darkness had set in and floodlights lit the Lincoln Memorial. He had a brief misgiving about Torino—he was a bit too cynical, perhaps too independent—then put it aside. He had trained himself over many years to move decisively from one matter to another, and not to rethink decisions once they were made. Torino was the right choice, a natural troubleshooter. The Undersecretary buzzed his assistant and said he was ready for his next appointment.