



Black Sea Affair

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Don, 1960 –

The Black Sea affair / Don Brown.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index [if applicable].

ISBN 978-0-310-27214-4

1. United States, Navy – Fiction. 2. Russia (Federation). Voenno-Morskoi Flot – Fiction.
3. Terrorists – Fiction. 4. Black Sea – Fiction. 5. Submarines (Ships) – Fiction. 6. Submarine
disasters – Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.R6947B57 2008

813'.6 – dc220

2007049128

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Interior design by Michelle Espinoza

Printed in the United States of America

PROLOGUE

*Outside the village of Tolstoy-Yurt
The Russian Republic of Chechnya*

March 2005

The Russian jeep kicked up a hazy cloud of dust in the afternoon sun, bumping its way along the pothole-riddled gravel road. The bunkered compound at the end of the road, fortified by a high wall of brown sandbags, was classified as top secret, for the survival of the bunker's occupant was crucial to the future of the nation.

And yes, Chechnya was a nation. She had lived for generations, but in reality, had yet to be born. Chechnya would some day be free of the brutal Russian soldiers and their pillaging, rape, and murder. Chechnya would deal a lethal blow to the Russians and become an independent Islamic republic.

This was her manifest destiny.

Even so, Salman Dudayev wondered why he had been summoned here.

True, the highest officials in the liberation movement had sanctioned his work. But he had yet to come face-to-face with leaders of that movement, and certainly not with the great man who had requested his presence.

Was this a trap?

Would he step through the fortified bunker and find himself staring down the gun barrels of Russian FSB special agents?

Two armed guards standing at the entrance of the bunker motioned him forward. He ducked his head, stepping through a dark, open hole and down a dimly lit stairway.

A familiar voice boomed through the dark. “The work that you are doing to bring about the liberation of our country may never be appreciated by the masses, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Squinting in the dim light cast by the gas lantern, Salman looked in the direction of the voice, struggling to study the face of the man who would at last bring freedom to his people.

“It is not the ambition of the scientist to revel in glory, Mr. President—”

“Please.” President Maskhadov raised his hand, interrupting him midstream.

In the soft flicker of the candles, the president’s grey hair and trim salt-and-pepper beard accentuated his black, piercing eyes.

“Call me Alsan Aliyevich,” the president said, speaking as though he had known Salman all his life. “We are brothers in a holy cause, a holy cause for freedom for Chechnya. This makes us friends. Please.”

Salman was taken aback. This was a man he revered. This was a man who had served as an officer in the Red Army, and then, after the fall of the old Soviet Union, had become the military leader of his own people.

He inhaled deeply, then exhaled, measuring his words. “Yes, as I was saying”—he took another deep breath and uttered the name—“Alsan Aliyevich. It is not the ambition of the scientist to revel in glory, but to unlock the secrets of the universe to bring about better conditions for all mankind.”

“It appears that you were well trained in America.”

“Yes. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is the world’s finest scientific research and training institution.”

“So tell me, Salman, how is the project coming?”

“My team is gathering the materials we need now, sir. We are still in search of fuel, but—”

President Maskhadov interrupted. “We need this sooner rather than later, you know.”

“Yes, I am aware of the urgency.”

“They strangle us like an anaconda.” He lit a cigarette, inhaled, and blew a puff of smoke. “From all around. Dagestan. Stavropol. North Ossetia-Alania. Ingushetiya.”

Another draw from the cigarette. A reflective look on the president’s face.

“They will strangle us if we do not act. We must not fail.” The president’s black eyes pierced Salman. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“You are our best and our brightest. You were selected to study in America because of your exemplary academic record. We depend upon you now, Salman. Is there any ambiguity in what I am asking you to do?”

“None, Mr. President.”

“You know they are plotting to kill me. Do you not?”

“I have heard rumors.”

“Then move with haste, my friend.”

“You have my word, sir.” Salman sensed that he was being dismissed. He started to turn when the president touched his shoulder.

“Wait, Salman.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I know about your family.”

The two words—*your family*—stung like scorpions. Two years had passed, and still he struggled to erase the memories of the massacre, to put the loss of his wife and two children out of his mind.

President Maskhadov’s eyes were compassionate. “I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I pray the comfort of your soul, and that your work shall be a medium of vengeance to those infidels responsible for these barbaric crimes.”

Salman let the great man’s words sink in. “The memory of this barbarism drives my soul, Mr. President. I shall not let you down, and if necessary, I am prepared to enter martyrdom for Chechnya.”

President Maskhadov smiled. “Go. Do your duty in haste. For your country, and for Allah.”

A guard led him back up the steps, back into the light. He climbed into the jeep. The driver cranked the engine.

They had made it one hundred yards down the road when the explosion rocked the earth from the rear.

The guard hit the brakes. Salman looked over his shoulder. The president’s bunker spewed orange flames and black smoke. Armed men in black uniforms swarmed the area.

“FSB!” the driver shouted. He hit the accelerator, kicking up a cloud of rocks and dust, leaving the smoke and fire in the fading distance.

CHAPTER 1

Several years later
Aircraft carrier
The Pacific Ocean

The admiral took a long draw from his cigarette as he scanned the horizon. The ships under his command consisted of an aircraft carrier, a heavy cruiser, and two destroyers. The small armada plowed through rolling blue-green seas, due east into the rising sun. Already steaming in battle formation, the ships' crews stood ready to launch their aircraft.

Based on intelligence being fed into their combat-information center on board the flagship, they had not been spotted yet.

Good. They were about to execute the most devastating attack by a naval force in all human history. Thousands in San Diego would die in the initial nuclear fireballs. Millions more would suffer and eventually die from radioactive fallout. Coming from the sea, this attack would take them all by surprise. A surprise that would never be forgotten.

The commander dropped his binoculars and considered his situation. At the moment, at least, the target was vulnerable and unsuspecting.

A squadron of attacking aircraft could be easily tracked by an opponent's radar long before approaching a nation's coastline, raising an alert. It was not so with ships coming from the sea. Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, navies were often invisible to an enemy.

The Coast Guard used a radio-based system to follow ships from twelve to twenty miles out. Twelve nautical miles was only about one

hour of traveling time. Thus, the Coast Guard wouldn't be able to track an enemy ship until it was too close to respond to the threat.

For all its military strength, America was unprepared for what was about to happen.

Even if the Coast Guard did have satellite technology, trying to use a satellite to spot any given ship on the world's vast oceans was the equivalent of looking for a particular spec in the sand on a beach. The satellite would have to be in the right place at the right time, and the ship would have to sail directly under its cameras. In other words, a satellite would have to be lucky.

Plus, if there were some sort of satellite system up there somewhere, it was unlikely it would spot them. The admiral's warships had gone silent from the beginning of this top-secret voyage. Celestial navigation using the compass, the stars, the charts, and the sun had brought them to the precipice of history. No radio contact was allowed between ships. Only signal lights between ships were used for communication. And there was no active sonar.

There was nothing to alert the target or anyone else of their presence.

His planes would take off, skim the water to avoid radar, and launch their missiles from far offshore. Then, as hundreds of thousands writhed in agony from the devastating fireballs that their missiles would deliver, the planes would return to the carrier for a safe landing.

The admiral checked his watch.

Two hours to launch.

Two hours to history.

The USS Chicago

The Pacific Ocean

Steady as she goes," the captain said. "Continue to maintain silence."
"Steady as she goes, aye, Captain."

The American sub commander flipped a switch overhead, opening the intercom with his sonar room.

"Sonar. Conn. Anything up there?"

"No, Captain. Still nothing."

"Let me know the first time even a blowfish snorts on that sonar. Is that clear?"

“Aye, Captain.”

The skipper’s lips touched his coffee. The jet-black brew had grown lukewarm and tasted like battery acid.

Fine.

Black, battery-acid coffee. It was the unofficial nonalcoholic brew of the Navy’s submarine force. And the ability to drink it without flinching was part of a submariner’s rite of passage.

It trickled down his esophagus, stinging a bit, igniting another well-needed caffeine jolt. *Good stuff*. He listened for any unusual noises that would signify the presence of the enemy.

Silence.

Dead air.

These were the sounds of a vast ocean whose underwater spaces were far too grand for the human mind ever to grasp.

Silence.

It was a submariner’s best friend.

Hiding under the cover of it, the submariner could attack his prey, and then slip away into the dark waters of the deep before an enemy could drop explosives on him that would crush his skull.

And now, at this moment, the enemy was also silent. One last gulp and his white coffee mug—sporting the inscription “C.O.” just over the official emblem of the USS *Chicago* and just under the name *Miranda*—was now empty.

The commander refilled his cup. He gazed up at the steel-grate ceiling of the control room. It was as if he could see through all the steel, through the hundreds of feet of dark water, and spot what may be approaching on the surface.

His sixth sense had taken over beyond the limitations of his eyesight.

They were up there.

Somewhere.

The enemy.

The commander knew it. He knew it from the gut feeling in the stomach. The same feeling he got when he’d hunted whitetail deer back on a friend’s ranch in Texas all those years ago. The pit of his stomach twisted whenever a buck moved within firing range. His gut was twisting again.

The intercom in the control room crackled static, followed by the excited voice of the ship’s sonar officer booming through it to every corner of the submarine.

“Conn! Sonar! We’ve got multiple contacts! Multiple ships! Bearing course zero-nine-zero degrees! Sir! Range . . . Five thousand yards! Designate contact one Vikrant class carrier with four support ships! Looks like an enemy task force! They’re headed this way!”

“I knew it!” the commander said. “Diving officer! Take us to periscope depth.”

“Aye, Captain! Making my depth zero-six-zero feet now, sir!”

The bulb nose of the *Los Angeles*-class submarine tilted upward. She began rising through the ocean depths to a targeted depth of sixty feet below the surface. There, her captain would deploy his periscope for a better look at whatever — or whomever — was out there.

Aircraft carrier The Pacific Ocean

This admiral would not make the mistake that Japanese Admiral Yamamoto made nearly a century ago in Hawaii. Yamamoto set out to smash the American aircraft carriers at Pearl Harbor. He destroyed America’s battleships that fateful Sunday morning, but all three American aircraft carriers were out to sea, well beyond the range of the shallow-draft torpedoes of his Japanese Zeros.

A major intelligence snafu had cost Japan the war.

This time, real-time intelligence was better. Three of America’s mightiest carriers, USS *Ronald Reagan*, USS *Nimitz*, and USS *John C. Stennis*—half the Pacific carrier fleet—were moored at this very moment like sitting ducks at San Diego’s Coronado Naval Air Station, just a quarter mile across the sparkling waters of San Diego Bay and the bustling population of America’s seventh largest city.

This powerful armada would strike with nuclear-tipped missiles launched from its planes over a hundred miles offshore.

They would fly in low over the water, the missiles, under radar, barely skimming the tops of the waves on their approach. Reaching the airspace just off Point Loma, their internal guidance system would turn them on a course directly into the heart of San Diego Bay. Seconds later, they would detonate, two hundred yards before reaching the Coronado Bay Bridge.

A nuclear fireball would vaporize the American carriers, then engulf the glistening high rises on Harbor Drive and Broadway. Forty thousand

souls attending the Padres-Giants game at nearby PETCO Park would vanish in the air, as the atomic blast wave crumbled fragile buildings in nearby Tijuana, Mexico. Nuclear flashes brighter than the sun would blind onlookers in Los Angeles and points north.

Within hours, northbound Interstate 5 would be jammed with millions of cars driven by panic-stricken Southern Californians, seeking refuge from the nuclear fallout in San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle, escaping the giant mushroom cloud rising in their rearview mirrors over what was left of San Diego.

In the mad scramble, his nation's intelligence operatives would telephone American media outlets, claiming credit for the attack in the name of Islamic fundamentalism. They would claim that nuclear bombs had exploded inside an eighteen-wheeler tractor-trailer truck parked down by the Broadway pier on San Diego's waterfront.

In fact, such a truck had been leased and at this moment parked just for the occasion. Photographs had been taken of it, as recently as yesterday, with the clipper-ship-turned-museum *Star of India* in the background. These photos would be leaked to the international media in conjunction with the cover story. The tractor-trailer, of course, was a ruse. But soon, its image would become the most widely disseminated photograph in the history of the twenty-first century.

Neither the admiral nor his nation were Islamic. But in the horri-fied chaos of it all, America would fall for it. She would blame the attack on Islamic suicide bombers.

America would never know what hit her.

Nor by whom.

The USS Chicago

The Pacific Ocean

We have periscope depth, Captain," the chief of the boat said.
"Up scope! Now!" the skipper ordered.

Humming and clicking echoed down the stainless steel cylinder hanging in the middle of the control room. The American sub commander grabbed the training handles of the periscope and brought his eyes up to the viewfinder. His jaw tightened at the sight.

One American warship, and only one, had by happenchance discovered the approaching presence of an enemy armada. One U.S. naval

vessel stood between the enemy task force and the west coast of the United States of America. She was the nuclear-powered submarine, the USS *Chicago*. Her commander was Pete Miranda, United States Navy, considered to be one of the more aggressive sub captains in the Navy.

Miranda considered his predicament.

He could float a communications buoy and report the armada's presence to the rest of the fleet. But that could alert the enemy that *Chicago* was lurking in the area. Plus, even if he got the signal off, no other ships or planes were close enough to intercept the armada before it was in effective striking distance of the coastline.

Pete was under standing orders to take action against this enemy if its ships and warplanes were observed "engaging in maneuvers that appeared hostile to the West Coast of the United States of America"—General Order 009-001. He was now faced with the sole responsibility of deciding whether to apply it. If he attacked this armada, he would be the first American commander to execute 009-001.

But what if he was wrong?

His predicament shot through his mind like lightning flashing from east to west.



Down scope! Emergency deep! Six-zero-zero feet! Take her down! Now!"

At Pete's command, the *Chicago* dropped through the water like a roller coaster car on Space Mountain. Clipboards, pencils, anything not bolted down was slung across the control room like the steel orb in a pinball machine.

Pete grabbed the handles on the periscope tube as his men hung on to keep their balances. The diving officer called out depth changes.

"Five hundred feet, Captain . . . Passing five-five-zero feet . . . Approaching six hundred feet . . . Five-seventy-five, five-nine-zero, six hundred feet, Captain."

"Very well," Pete said. "All stop!"

The freefall drop ended. The *Chicago* disengaged her propellers. She was now hovering in the water at six hundred feet below the surface. By diving deep, and by temporarily disengaging his propellers, Pete hoped to make his boat "disappear" into a black hole in the ocean, avoiding

the passive sonar on board the aircraft carrier and her support ships, all of which could crush *Chicago's* hull with powerful torpedo depth charges.

"Nobody flinch."

Sweat beaded on the foreheads of the men in the control room.

"Sonar. Conn. I want to know the moment that carrier passes over us."

"Aye, Captain."

He looked around at his men on the bridge. Their eyes were locked on him, hanging upon his every physical movement, as if his next words would be divinely inspired.

Quickly and silently, he prayed for divine inspiration.

"All right, here's what we're going to do. As soon as that carrier passes over us, we're going to turn the boat around. We're going to raise our depth to one-five-zero feet and get right into her wake. Then we're going to put two MK-48 ADCAP torpedoes right up her can."

Their eyes widened even more.

"I don't have to tell you how dangerous this maneuver will be. We're going to pop up inside her escort screen. We'll depend on the noise from her screws churning water to buffer our presence from their passive sonar. But I can't guarantee we won't be detected by one or more of her escort ships. But by then, hopefully it will be too late. As soon as we release our torps, we'll execute another emergency dive, and get the heck out of Dodge."

"Conn. Sonar. She's passing right over us now, sir."

"Very well. Right full rudder. Set course zero-nine-zero degrees. All ahead one-third."

The *Chicago* swung around, pointing her nose due east, now following the direction of the enemy carrier.

"Prep torps one and four. Make your depth one-five-zero feet."

Chicago's nose pointed upward again, and she began climbing through the water.

"Torps one and four are fully armed and ready, Captain."

"Very well," Pete said. "Depth?"

"Approaching two hundred feet, Captain."

"Good. Continue to climb. Continue to report."

"Approaching one-seven-five feet, sir. Approaching one-six-zero. Depth now one-five-zero, sir. Ship stabilized."

"On my mark, be prepared to fire torp one! Range to target?"

“Range to target, five hundred yards.”

“That’s too close to detonate,” Pete said. “Decrease speed to fifteen knots.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Range now?”

“Seven-hundred-fifty yards to target, Skipper.”

“Very well, continue to report.”

Another minute passed. “Range now one thousand yards to target and expanding, sir.”

“Very well—fire torp one!”

“Firing torp one!”

Swoosh.

“Torp one in the water, Captain.”

“Fire torp four!”

“Firing torp four!”

Swoosh.

“Torp four is in the water, Captain.”

“Dive! Dive! Emergency deep! Take us to eight hundred feet! Let’s get out of here! Now!”