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How to Catch a Russian Spy: The True Story of an American Civilian Turned Double Agent

By Naveed Jamali, Ellis Henican



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The fascinating story of a young American amateur who helped the FBI bust a Russian spy in New York—named the Funniest Book of the Year by *The Washington Post*, sold in ten countries, and to be a major motion picture for 20th Century Fox.


For three nerve-wracking years, Naveed Jamali spied on America for the Russians, trading thumb drives of sensitive technical data for envelopes of cash, selling out his own beloved country across noisy restaurant tables and in quiet parking lots. Or so the Russians believed. In fact, this young American civilian was a covert double agent working with the FBI. The Cold War wasn't really over. It had just gone high-tech.

How to Catch a Russian Spy is the one-of-a-kind story of how one young man's post-college adventure became a real-life US counter-intelligence coup. He had no previous counter-espionage experience. Everything he knew about undercover work, he'd learned from *Miami Vice* and *Magnum P.I.* reruns and movies like *Ronin*, *Spy Game*, and anything with *Bond* or *Bourne* in the title. And yet, hoping to gain experience to become a Navy intelligence officer, he convinced the FBI and the Russians they could trust him. With charm, cunning, and a big load of naiveté, he matched wits with a veteran Russian military-intelligence officer who was recruiting spies on American soil, out-maneuvering the Russian spy and his secret-hungry superiors. Along the way, Jamali and his FBI handlers cast a rare light on espionage activities at the Russian Mission to the United Nations in New York and earned a solid US win in the escalating hostilities between Moscow and Washington.

Now, Jamali reveals the whole engaging story behind his double-agent adventure—from coded signals on Craigslist to the Russian spy's propensity for Hooters' Buffalo wings. Cinematic, news-breaking, and "hilarious" (*The Washington Post*), *How to Catch a Russian Spy* is an armchair spy fantasy brought to life. Film rights sold to 20th Century Fox for director Marc Webb (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, *500 Days of Summer*).



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Editorial Review

Review

“A Cold War-style thriller, full of Russians, federal agents, code names and, in the lead, a New York techie who preps for his double-agent moments by practicing lines from 'Goodfellas' and 'Scarface.' Jamali makes his tough-guy dreams come true by outwitting a Borat-like Russian intelligence officer who recruits him to commit treason. The finale, like in every Bond film, goes down in a New Jersey Hooters. A hilarious book that is being made into a movie.”

—**The Washington Post, Funniest Book of the Year**

“Apparently goofballs aren't limited to the world of fictional spies – before there was Sterling Archer, there was Naveed and Oleg. I wish I could steal some of these stories for the show!”

—**Adam Reed, creator of “Archer”**

“A classic case of American counterespionage from the inside . . . [a] never-ending game of cat and mouse.”

—**The Wall Street Journal**

“Suspenseful and often uproarious...*How to Catch a Russian Spy* offers a rare opportunity to share in the intensity, fear and adrenaline rush of working as a double agent, trying to take down a cagey and skilled operative for the world's most notorious and ruthless gangster regime. Without any formal training, Jamali soon discovers he has all the essential tools of a good undercover: intuition, curiosity, and a jazz-like ability to improvise on the spot. Indeed, by going 'off-script' – both in the way he veers from his parents' conventional-life expectations and by always keeping his adversary guessing – Jamali has given us one gem of a comic counter-espionage yarn.”

—**Douglas Century, New York Times bestselling coauthor of *Under and Alone* and *Takedown***

“Jamali, a smart, young New York techie, somehow spent three years going toe to toe with a Russian intelligence officer who thought he was developing an asset, even though all the while Jamali was quietly collaborating with U.S. federal agents. . . . Watching Jamali and Oleg try to outsmart each other is the joy of the book. . . . If you've watched too much 'Homeland' or 'The Americans,' then *How to Catch a Russian Spy* is a hilarious corrective showing how prosaic low-level espionage can be....an entertaining and breezy read.”

—**The Washington Post**

“A gripping true tale of high-level espionage in which the author, Naveed Jamali, impressively displays tradecraft belying his amateur status. His stories of teaming with FBI agent handlers to doublecross Russian spies are nothing short of sensational.”

—**Robert K. Wittman, former Senior Investigator of the FBI National Art Crime Team and New York Times bestselling author of *Priceless* and *The Devil's Diary***

“So celebrated in American pop culture are the tactics of espionage that even a motivated amateur – with a talent for improvisation and a taste for Hollywood flair – can take on a real-life Russian intelligence operative, and best him at his own game. What's most charming about this page-turning account is Naveed's honesty about his missteps, and the joy he takes in designing deceptions that actually work. Readers will smile right along with him.”

—**Lindsay Moran, bestselling author of *Blowing My Cover: My Life as a CIA Spy***

“One early lesson I learned leading SEAL units is that it’s not enough to begin with a good plan – an effective operator must adapt to fast-changing conditions and adjust the plan accordingly. Despite his lack of training, Naveed Jamali intuitively grasped that lesson, repeatedly calling on the main weapon in his amateur’s arsenal – ingenuity – to deceive his opponent. In a time when our nation’s enemies vigorously troll for information that will give them an edge, it’s comforting to know that American resourcefulness can triumph even out of uniform.”

—**Rorke Denver**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Damn Few*

"The end of the Cold War didn't stop Russia's intelligence operations in America, as Naveed Jamali's amusing tale of his life as an amateur spy deftly illustrates. Corvettes, military secrets swapped in suburban Uno Pizzerias, and a clandestine operation to snare a Russian operative at Hooter's—this is a real-life *Get Smart* for the twenty-first century."

—**Guy Lawson**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Octopus* and *Arms and the Dudes*

“Every now and then, the safety and security of our country depends on an everyday young American doing the right thing. What sets Naveed apart is that he obviously had such a blast doing it. As amusing as it is to read this book and watch an admitted amateur get over on a Russian operative here in the U.S. to steal secrets, it's also sobering to contemplate how many bad actors there are waiting to take advantage of the fact that we live in an open society.”

—**Frances Fragos Townsend**, former Homeland Security Adviser to President George W. Bush

“*How to Catch a Russian Spy* simply blew me away. Imagine John Le Carre assigning a spy mission to Walter Mitty and you have Naveed Jamali. His fascinating account strips away the glamour of fictional espionage, replacing it with even more provocative reality. Here, spies communicate by Craigslist, thumb drives are as dangerous as a Walther PPK, and agents and handlers meet at Hooters. Viewers of ‘The Americans’ will love this story’s take on the *real* world of espionage. There are no George Smileys here, but there *is* a hero whose patriotism is quite stirring.”

—**Gary Weiss**, former Senior Writer for *Business Week* and bestselling author of *Born to Steal*

“[A] page-turner of a memoir....This highly entertaining read is enhanced by the author's self-deprecating sense of humor.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

About the Author

After his successful run as a civilian double agent, Naveed Jamali accepted a reserve commission in the US Navy. He has spent more than a decade in technology management at a senior level. He continues to advise and speak on matters of security, counter-intelligence, and understanding the motivation to spy. A life-long New Yorker, Naveed lives in New York City with his wife and two sons. He has no intention of travelling to Russia any time soon.

Ellis Henican is a newspaper columnist, a television commentator, and the coauthor of five *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Damn Few*.

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How to Catch a Russian Spy

INTRODUCTION

I gripped the wheel tightly and steered the Jeep toward the warehouse. My heart was thumping so hard I thought Oleg might be able to hear it in the passenger seat.

“You okay?” he asked in that flat, stiff English of his.

“Totally,” I lied.

The air was chilly for early April, but the morning was unusually bright. The year was 2008, nearly two decades after the Berlin Wall tumbled and the Cold War was consigned to the history books. The Jeep was a black-on-black SRT8 6.1-liter Hemi V8 with 425 horsepower and all the subtlety of a cinder block through a giant plate of glass.

I’d been waiting for this day for almost two years. Ted and Terry, my FBI handlers, had been gaming it out with me for nearly six months. What would I say when Oleg asked how much money I wanted? What would I do if he pulled out a gun? Lately, things between us had grown unusually tense. The agents had done what they could to prepare me. But all along they kept telling me, “You have to be ready to think on your feet.”

What the hell did that mean? Think about what?

As I eased the Jeep to a stop in front of the old brick building, Oleg was staring straight at me. I knew this was a big day for him as well. The documents I’d promised, cockpit manuals for two of the U.S. Navy’s most important combat aircraft, weren’t classified TOP SECRET. But you couldn’t just buy them on Amazon or eBay. These were the technical operating procedures that American pilots relied on in Iraq and Afghanistan. These two fat, blue three-ring binders told you everything you needed to know in the pilot’s seat.

A handoff like this one, I knew, would inspire Oleg’s Russian imagination. But it would do more than that. It would help convince his bureaucratic superiors in Moscow that he had recruited a potentially valuable mole in New York, a well-placed American civilian capable of delivering U.S. military data. I was the kind of American asset the secret-hungry Russians searched for, someone with the motivation and the technical expertise to deliver the goods.

“We make an excellent team, you and me,” Oleg said.

The binders were inside a large cardboard box in the trunk of my other car, a black Corvette Z06, which was parked inside this huge auto-storage warehouse on a quiet back street in suburban Westchester County, twenty miles north of New York City. The box was too heavy to drag into a restaurant or a coffee shop, which was where Oleg and I usually met. So he and I came up with an alternate plan. He would take the Metro-North train from Grand Central. I’d meet him at the station in Hastings-on-Hudson. The warehouse was down by the water, two blocks away.

“You could make a lot of money,” Oleg said as I keyed my PIN into the security keypad outside the warehouse and the metal slats groaned up.

“What’s a lot?” I asked him.

“That Corvette you are so proud of?”

“What about it?”

“You could buy ten.”

I did love fast American cars.

As I pulled the Jeep inside, the warehouse was chilly and dark. But once I flipped my headlights on, I could see the rows and rows of parked vehicles. Expensive sports cars covered with monogrammed tarps. A Mustang, a Lotus, a Porsche, various Benzes and BMWs—the weekend cars of affluent city people. There was also a giant dump truck and a couple of vintage fire engines. Even in this light, I could tell the fire engines were gleaming red.

The warehouse was deathly quiet. As far as I could tell, Oleg and I were the only people around.

As I drove deeper inside, Oleg glanced left and right and then behind us. What was he expecting? A dozen FBI agents rushing the Jeep? A spetsnaz special-forces team from the Russian GRU? I understood why he might feel jumpy. I felt jumpy, too. “The Corvette is down this row and to the right,” I said as calmly as I could. So much was on the line, for Oleg and for me, I couldn’t afford to screw anything up.

Just then, a horrible squealing sound went off. I gasped, and Oleg froze. It took a second for me to realize where the alarm was coming from. For some reason, the Jeep’s radar detector had gotten tripped.

I scrambled to quiet it, but the off button wasn’t where I thought it should be. Damn, that thing was loud! The noise was designed to be heard over a roaring engine on the interstate with the windows open or the air conditioner on and the audio system blasting. In a closed-up Jeep at three miles an hour in a quiet suburban warehouse, that little sucker really screamed. After a couple of frantic seconds that felt like an hour and a half, I found the right button. “It’s okay,” I said to Oleg. “It’s only my radar detector.”

I wasn’t sure what had made the device go crazy. Maybe my hidden recorder had set it off somehow. Maybe Oleg had something on him. I didn’t know. I just didn’t want anything spooking him.

“We’re right up here,” I said, relieved to be in silence again.

Getting my hands on the cockpit manuals wasn’t nearly as difficult as I’d expected. All it took was a ride to Long Island and a couple of well-crafted lies. Ted and Terry drove me to the office of a major defense contractor and sent me inside alone. I told the friendly clerk I was a researcher with a small tech company preparing a digital database system, and I needed some test documents. The only question was what I wanted.

NATOPS, the blue binders said. Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization. “You wanna catch a spy, you gotta do a little spying,” Terry said with a shrug as we drove back to the city that day.

Now I was about to hand them directly to Oleg, who was finally breathing steadily once more. I parked the Jeep behind the black Corvette, pulling in at a careful angle.

“Before we start,” Oleg said, “can you turn off your phone, please?”

“My phone?” I answered. “Okay.”

He’d never asked me to do that. I knew he was worried I was recording him with my cell phone. He was right that I was recording him, just wrong about how. So I didn’t only turn the phone off. I opened my door. I quickly scanned the area, making sure no one was around. And I set the phone on the hood of a sleek black BMW M6 parked next to us.

“Better?” I asked Oleg.

“Thank you,” he said.

I had passed that test.

“You wanna have a look?” I asked him. Oleg stepped out of the Jeep and stood next to me behind the Corvette. I opened the trunk. The cockpit manuals were just where I’d left them.

Oleg stared for a moment. Then he picked up the manuals, confirming that both of them were there. One was for the F-14 Tomcat fighter jet. The other was for the E-2 Hawkeye early-warning aircraft.

Oleg concentrated first on the F-14 binder. As he flipped through the pages, I glimpsed a sketch of the fighter jet’s instrument panel. I saw several schematic diagrams and other charts and graphs. There were drawings and blocks of dense gray type. Oleg stared intently, looking almost transfixed.

“You wanna sit in the Jeep and have a closer look?” I asked him.

He nodded.

I lifted the big cardboard box from the Corvette trunk and placed it on the concrete. Then I reached with my right hand to close the trunk.

I don’t know what I was thinking. Obviously, I wasn’t thinking at all. Or at least I wasn’t paying attention to the precise location of Oleg’s head.

“Awwwww!” he screamed.

Somehow I’d managed to slam the trunk on the back of Oleg’s skull. I heard a horrible clunk as the metal hit bone, and then two more very loud screams. “Owww! Eewwww!”

It all happened so quickly, I didn’t know what to think.

I knew I’d done something profoundly stupid. I had done it at the worst possible time. Just as Oleg and I were moving together from covert to operational. Just as the noose was settling around his neck. Just as I was convincing him that he could really trust me. Just as I was proving what a valuable asset I could be. We were taking this leap together into espionage—and I’d slammed the damn trunk on his head.

As I leaned over to check how badly I had hurt him, terrible thoughts were racing through my head.

I had just blown the whole operation. I had maimed a senior Russian diplomat. Certainly, he would think I was trying to kill him. It was all being recorded. Would Oleg be convinced he should never do business with the likes of me again?

* * *

For three nerve-wracking years, I spied on America for the Russians, trading thumb drives of sensitive technical data for envelopes of cash, selling out my own beloved country across noisy restaurant tables and in quiet parking lots.

Or so the Russians believed.

In fact, I was a secret double agent working closely with the FBI. The Cold War wasn't really over. It had just gone high-tech.

I had no previous experience as a counterespionage operative. Everything I knew about undercover work I'd learned from books, movies, school assignments, and Magnum P.I. episodes. Ronin, Spy Game, anything with Bond or Bourne in the title—I devoured that stuff. I was in my late twenties by then, a bright but aimless New York University graduate, working in a family business with my immigrant parents, trying to figure out what to do with my life. I had a nice apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a young wife freshly out of grad school, and a tendency to spend way too much time in front of computer screens. I'd read a bunch of books about the Cold War and the Soviet Union, and I'd seen almost every war movie ever made. But I didn't speak Russian. I never liked borscht. And the closest I'd gotten to Moscow or St. Petersburg was a medium-priced bottle of Stolichnaya from International Wine & Spirits on Broadway and 113th Street. I certainly didn't fit anyone's stereotype of a smooth double agent.

Jamali, Naveed Jamali? Don't make me laugh!

And yet there I was, at the center of a long-running counterespionage operation that I cooked up mostly on my own (thanks to an unusual family connection), then convinced the FBI and the Russians to go along. It was proactive, not reactive—and I was the active one. Looking back, I can hardly believe I pulled it off. How I did it, why it worked, and what I learned about my country, my family, and myself—that's a story I want to tell.

By the time we were finished, we had cast a bright light on an active espionage campaign operating out of the Russian Mission to the United Nations in New York. We had suckered an experienced Russian military-intelligence officer into trusting a young American amateur, embarrassing him and his nation. We had earned a solid American win in the escalating hostilities between Moscow and Washington. And we had helped to disprove, for those who had any doubt, the supposedly benign intentions of Russia's post-Cold War leaders, Vladimir Putin especially, who kept telling America how much they wanted to be our partners and our friends.

* * *

I apologized profusely to Oleg that day in the storage garage. "Oh my God," I said when he finally looked up. "I'm so sorry!"

He seemed dazed but alert. "Are you all right?" I asked, putting my hand on his shoulder.

"All right," he said. "I have a very hard head." Then he flashed a faint smile. "A hard head," he repeated.

It was a lame joke, in Russian or in English, but a welcome one. I was relieved that Oleg was conscious enough to deliver it. I knew right then that he and I had crossed a crucial line. Despite my squealing radar detector, my clumsy trunk slam, and my amateur's nerves, Oleg wanted me as much as I wanted him. Even more so. By the time we left the warehouse, I had an envelope of Oleg's cash inside my jacket pocket. I'd fed him a story he could validate from the outside. I had solidified his personal confidence.

The experienced Russian military man was convinced he could trust the young American amateur. He would not turn back. He did not want to. He was persuaded that I was for real. Oleg wasn't letting anything,

including a trunk lid to his hard skull, divert the two of us from where we were headed next.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Leonard Dail:

This How to Catch a Russian Spy: The True Story of an American Civilian Turned Double Agent book is just not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you get by reading this book is actually information inside this publication incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper an individual read a lot of information you will get. This specific How to Catch a Russian Spy: The True Story of an American Civilian Turned Double Agent without we understand teach the one who looking at it become critical in pondering and analyzing. Don't be worry How to Catch a Russian Spy: The True Story of an American Civilian Turned Double Agent can bring any time you are and not make your case space or bookshelves' turn out to be full because you can have it inside your lovely laptop even telephone. This How to Catch a Russian Spy: The True Story of an American Civilian Turned Double Agent having good arrangement in word and also layout, so you will not truly feel uninterested in reading.

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