# JOEL C. ROSENBERG

"A taut plot, riveting action, and characters that will make you stand up and cheer."

**DON BENTLEY**
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Hostile Intent* and *Tom Clancy Zero Hour*

# THE LIBYAN DIVERSION

## A MARCUS RYKER NOVEL

# PRAISE FOR JOEL C. ROSENBERG

"Rosenberg's imagination is a tumultuous place where Middle Eastern geopolitics combine with devious minds. Authentic, fast-paced, and totally engrossing."

**KYLE MILLS,** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Total Power*

"Rosenberg once again proves to be at the top of his game. . . . The plot is all too possible. Marcus Ryker is a perfect hero, right where we need him, at just the right time. *The Beirut Protocol* will take your breath away as Rosenberg marches to the brink of a war only Ryker can stop—if he can save himself first!"

**ANDREWS & WILSON,** bestselling authors of the Tier One, Sons of Valor, and Shepherds series

"Nobody builds tension and suspense like Rosenberg, who has quickly developed his hero Marcus Ryker into one of the most formidable action stars the genre has to offer. . . . Fast, twist-filled, and ripped-from-the-headlines, *The Beirut Protocol* soars with authenticity and will leave readers breathless. At this point, Rosenberg's stuff is pretty much mandatory reading for all lovers of high-octane thrillers."

**RYAN STECK,** *The Real Book Spy*

"A taut, brilliant thriller ripped right from today's headlines. Joel Rosenberg is masterful! *The Jerusalem Assassin* is an absolute home run."

**BRAD THOR,** #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Backlash*

"Gripping. . . . Readers will tear through the final pages to see whether Marcus can once again triumph over evil."

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** on *The Jerusalem Assassin*

"Joel C. Rosenberg continues to mix his unique blend of prophetic fiction and nonstop action unlike anyone else working today."

**THE REAL BOOK SPY** on *The Persian Gamble*

"Joel C. Rosenberg writes taut, intelligent thrillers that are as timely as they are well-written. Pairing a fast-paced plot with an impressive understanding of the inner workings in the corridors of power of the Russian government, *The Kremlin Conspiracy* is a stellar novel of riveting action and political intrigue."

MARK GREANEY, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Agent in Place*

"*The Kremlin Conspiracy* is my first Joel C. Rosenberg novel, and I am absolutely blown away by how good this guy is. The story moves at a blistering pace, it's crackling with tension, and you won't put it down until you reach the end. Guaranteed. Simply masterful."

SEAN PARNELL, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Outlaw Platoon*

"Rosenberg cranks up the suspense, delivering his most stunning, high-stakes thriller yet."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *The Kremlin Conspiracy*

"Joel Rosenberg has an uncanny talent for focusing his storytelling on real-world hot spots just as they are heating up. He has done it again in *The Kremlin Conspiracy*."

PORTER GOSS, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency

"Marcus Ryker rocks! Breakneck action, political brinksmanship, authentic scenarios, and sharply defined characters make Joel C. Rosenberg's *Kremlin Conspiracy* a full-throttle and frightening ride through tomorrow's headlines."

BRIGADIER GENERAL (U.S. ARMY, RETIRED) A. J. TATA, national bestselling author of *Direct Fire*

"If you love the ABC drama *Designated Survivor* or are always looking for the next well-written novel about America and her fight against terrorism, you'll definitely want to pick up *Without Warning*."

BOOK REPORTER

"A compelling and complicated political thriller that includes an edge-of-your-seat climax—impossible to put down."

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW on *The First Hostage*

"Rosenberg has ripped a page from current headlines with a heart-stopping plot about the Islamic State."

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* on *The Third Target*

"If there were a *Forbes* 400 list of great current novelists, Joel Rosenberg would be among the top ten. . . . One of the most entertaining and intriguing authors of international political thrillers in the country. . . . His novels are un-put-downable."

**STEVE FORBES,** editor in chief, *Forbes* magazine

"[Joel Rosenberg] understands the grave dangers posed by Iran and Syria, and he's been a bold and courageous voice for true peace and security in the Middle East."

**DANNY AYALON,** former Israeli deputy foreign minister

"Joel has a particularly clear understanding of what is going on in today's Iran and Syria and the grave threat these two countries pose to the rest of the world."

**REZA KAHLILI,** former CIA operative in Iran and bestselling author of *A Time to Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran*

"His novels seem to be ripped from the headlines—next year's headlines."

*WASHINGTON TIMES*

"Rip-roaring, heart-pounding, page-turning, high-octane, geopolitical thriller."

*FORBES* on *The Last Days*

"An action-packed, Clancyesque political thriller."

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* on *The Last Days*

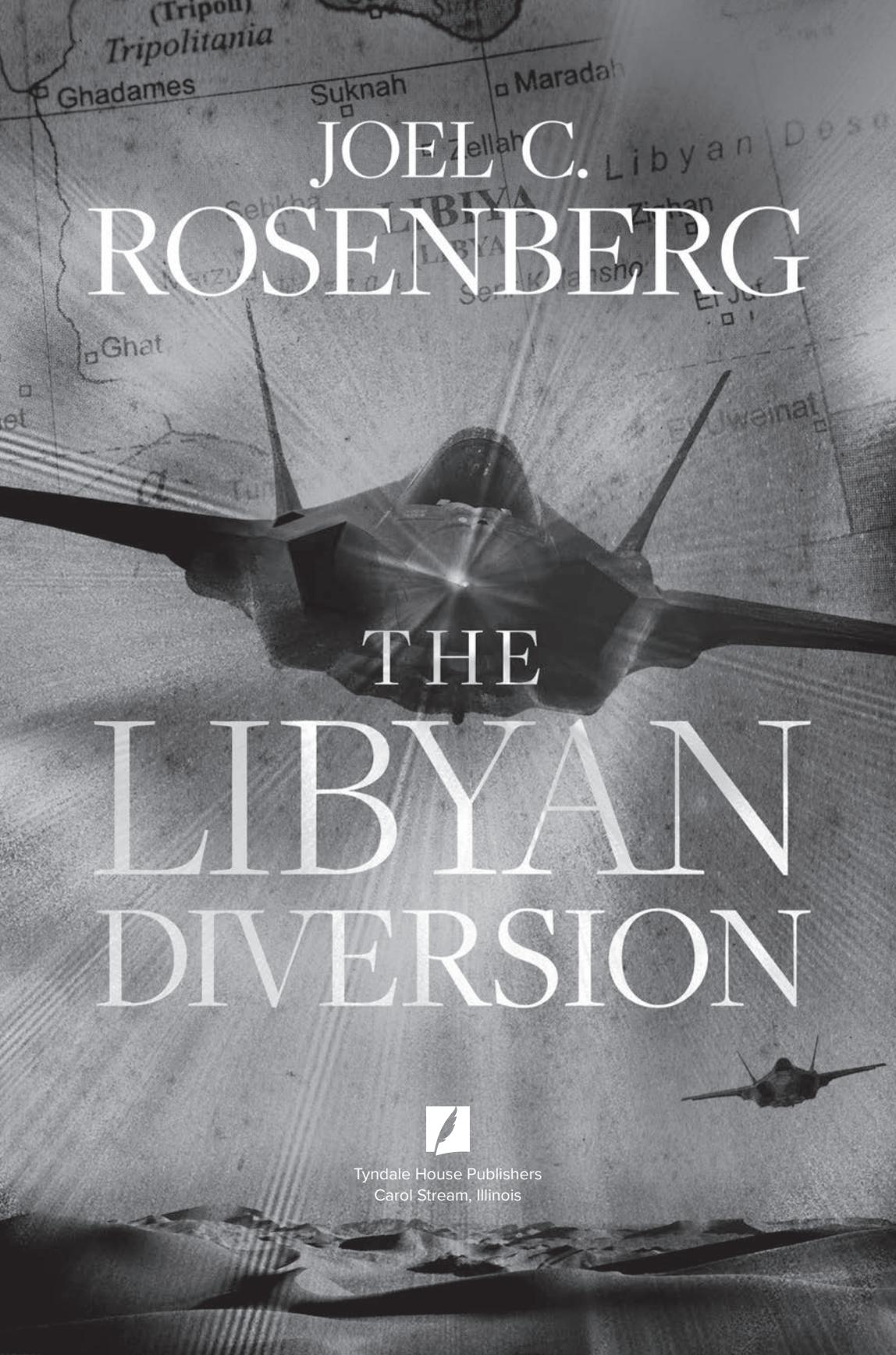"A wild, rocketing read. *The Last Jihad* is Tom Clancy writ large."

**VINCE FLYNN,** *New York Times* bestselling author of *Consent to Kill*

# JOEL C. ROSENBERG

# THE LIBYAN DIVERSION

*The Libyan Diversion* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

*Americans*

Marcus Ryker—special operative, Central Intelligence Agency

Peter Hwang—special operative, Central Intelligence Agency

Geoff Stone—special agent in charge, Diplomatic Security Service

Kailea Curtis—special agent, Diplomatic Security Service

Jennifer Morris—officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Noah Daniels—officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Donny Callaghan—special operative, Central Intelligence Agency; former commander, SEAL Team Six

Miguel Navarro—officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Richard Stephens—director of the Central Intelligence Agency

Martha Dell—deputy director of intelligence (DDI), Central Intelligence Agency

Andrew Clarke—president of the United States

Carlos Hernandez—vice president of the United States

William McDermott—national security advisor

Margaret "Meg" Whitney—secretary of state

Cal Foster—secretary of defense

James Meyers—chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Catherine Blackburn—attorney general

Carl Roseboro—deputy director, U.S. Secret Service

Robert Dayton—U.S. senator (D-Iowa)

Annie Stewart—senior foreign policy advisor to Senator Robert Dayton

Marjorie Ryker—Marcus's mother

Carolyn Tam—CNN anchor

Tanya Brighton—humanitarian aid worker in Yemen

Hannah Weiss—humanitarian aid worker in Yemen

Mia Minetti—humanitarian aid worker in Yemen

*Saudis*

Abdulaziz bin Faisal—crown prince and minister of defense

Abdullah bin Rashid—director of the General Intelligence Directorate

Abdul-Malik al-Hakim—intelligence officer

*Kairos*

Abu Nakba—commander of the Kairos terror organization

Hamdi Yaşar—senior advisor to Abu Nakba

Badr Hassan al-Ruzami—deputy commander, chief of operations

Tariq Youssef—deputy commander, chief of security

Zaid Farooq—deputy commander, chief of intelligence

Jibril bin Badr—terrorist

Ali bin Badr—terrorist

Mansour bin Badr—terrorist

Nasir Bhati—terrorist

*Iranians*

Yadollah Afshar—president of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Mahmoud Entezam—commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

*Russians*

Mikhail Borisovich Petrovsky—president of the Russian Federation

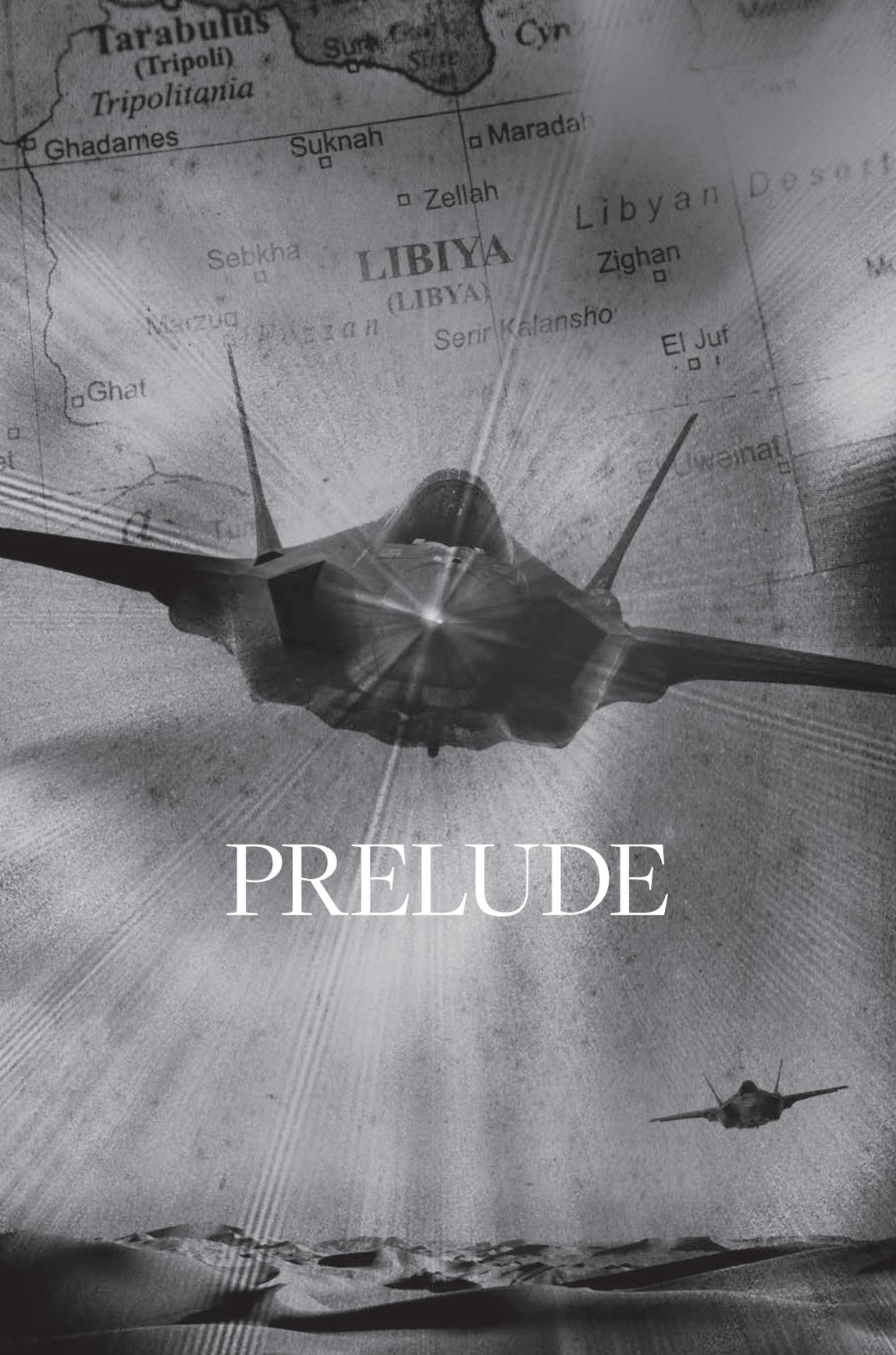Nikolay Vladimirovich Kropatkin—head of the FSB

Oleg Stefanovich Kraskin—son-in-law to the late President Aleksandr
   Luganov

*Others*

Pope Pius XIII—head of the Roman Catholic Church

Alphonso Gianetti—head of the Vatican security services

Khalid bin Ibrahim (KBI)—chief of intelligence, United Arab Emirates

# PRELUDE

*"A ship in harbor is safe,*
*but that is not what ships are built for."*

JOHN A. SHEDD

1

The inky-black skies over southern Iraq suddenly erupted with sound and fury.

It was as if the slumbering Babylonian gods had awoken from beneath the desert sands and begun hurling their javelins up, up, up into the heavens. The Basra skyline was filled with crisscrossing streaks of fire. All across the city, antiaircraft batteries were active. Air-raid sirens blared. A million residents were now awake and scrambling for basements and bomb shelters. They couldn't see the pair of F-16s scorching over their heads at the speed of sound. But they could hear the sonic booms. They could feel their apartments shaking, see their windows shattering. And in that moment, they knew Saddam Hussein had lied to them.

The Americans had come after all, and the war was on.

With triple-A fire exploding all around him, Captain Lars Ryker streaked toward his target. Upon reaching the Republican Guard base located on the city's north side, he found the massive weapons depot and fired his missiles. An instant later, Ryker felt his entire jet shudder from the subsequent shock wave.

He could sense the magnitude of the destruction he had just wrought. But there was no time to marvel at his handiwork—the night was young, and there were hundreds more targets to take down.

Ryker banked his Fighting Falcon hard to the left, then leveled out, gained altitude, and increased speed. An instant later, his wingman—right behind him—fired his missiles at a series of fuel tanks. He scored direct hits, and the fireworks were spectacular.

For Ryker, it was surreal to think that he was back in combat. In July, he had put in his paperwork to end a twenty-year career in the U.S. Air Force. It was enough already. It was time to retire, to go back to the Front Range of Colorado, back to his wife and three children, back to his golf game. Time to find a job that operated at far lower speeds and with far less danger. But Saddam Hussein had changed everything. The Butcher of Baghdad invaded Kuwait on August 2. A half-million American troops and thousands of American fighter pilots were deployed to the Persian Gulf. And Ryker had been asked to stay a little longer. He had more enemy kills and had logged more hours in battle conditions than anyone else on active duty. How could he abandon his squadron in the biggest military buildup since D-Day?

Amped up on the thrill of the hunt, adrenaline coursing through his system, Ryker turned south, veering away from the city to race back across the desert for their base in Saudi Arabia to rearm. His wingman followed.

*"Stroke Five, Stroke Six, this is Manila Hotel—climb to 15,000 and turn right heading zero-three-zero—now."*

The urgency in the voice of the combat air controller—forty miles away on a U.S. Air Force AWACs jet—was unmistakable. Ryker responded instantly, but the controller wasn't done.

*"You've got two bandits at your eleven o'clock—five miles out—southwest bound, ascending from 3,500."*

Ryker—call sign "Stroke Five"—pulled the yoke back and punched it.

5,000 feet.

6,000.

7,000.

The threat of antiaircraft fire was soon behind him, but two Soviet-built MiG-29s, the fastest and most maneuverable fighters in the Iraqi arsenal, were

coming up fast. A moment later, Ryker could see them on his radar. He could hear his wingman shouting in his headset for him to get out of there as Ryker kept climbing.

8,000 feet.

9,000 feet.

10,000.

But it was becoming clear they weren't going to be able to outrun these guys.

*"Stroke Six, break right, break right,"* Ryker suddenly ordered.

Captain Mike Merkle didn't question the order. He just obeyed it, breaking right the instant he was told. But Ryker was still climbing.

11,000 feet.

12,000.

13,000.

Suddenly new warning sirens sounded in his headset. One of the MiGs had just fired on him. With only a split second to decide, Ryker broke left, forced his yoke down, and began diving for the deck.

12,000 feet.

11,000.

10,000.

9,000.

And now Merkle was in trouble.

*"Stroke Five, Stroke Five, this guy is right on my tail."*

But Ryker was in no position to help. A Soviet-made R-73 guided missile had locked onto his jet and was coming in red-hot. Sweat was pouring down the inside of his flight suit. He was sucking in oxygen as fast as it entered his helmet. The g-forces were rising fast. He was in danger of blacking out. Yet Ryker kept diving.

8,000 feet.

7,000.

*"Stroke Five, Stroke Five, where are you?"* Merkle shouted. *"Get back here. I need you now."*

But there was nothing Ryker could do. Not yet. Not unless he found a way to break free of this missile and the MiG-29 getting ready to fire another. What's more, there was no time to think. No time for calculations. No time to ask the

controller for guidance. Ryker was flying purely by instinct now, and he understood the stakes.

Hurtling toward the ground, he knew full well that if he waited too long, he wouldn't have enough time to pull out of the dive. But if he pulled out too quickly, the missile would catch him and blow him to kingdom come. And he didn't want to die. Not here. Not yet. Not on the first night of air operations.

*"Pull up! Pull up!"* he could hear the controller screaming in his headset.

But Ryker still kept diving.

6,000 feet.

5,000.

4,000.

Just then, he broke through the cloud cover. He was no longer over the desert. With all his high-speed zigzagging, he was now back over Basra. That was a critical mistake. One that could cost him. He could see triple-A contrails all around him. Even if he did shake the missile, he could still get shot down by artillery fire. But one battle at a time.

It was now or never. Ryker quickly throttled back his engines, reduced speed, and pulled back on the yoke with every ounce of strength he had. He could see the Shatt al-Arab River rushing up at him. He was certain this was going to be the end. The faces of his wife and three kids flashed before him just as he was about to—

But then the nose of the F-16 began to rise. The trajectory of the world's most advanced fighter jet finally began to correct. With no time left and no margin for error, Ryker pulled out of the dive, leveled, and found himself skimming over the banks of the river. That's when he felt the shock wave of the R-73 detonating behind him. Once again the entire cockpit shuddered. So did the wings and fuselage. It had been close—too close—but the F-16 held together. Ryker was alive. And he was itching to get back on offense.

He hit the afterburner and felt his body jolt back in his seat. His Fighting Falcon now had an instant 50 percent boost in speed, though it was also burning eight times as much fuel. But fuel wasn't his concern. Saving Merkle was.

Ryker radioed the AWACs, received Merkle's coordinates, and raced to catch up.

Stroke Six was in an epic aerial battle. He now had both of the original MiGs

on his tail. But that wasn't all. The controller said two more MiGs were readying for takeoff from a nearby enemy airfield that was under allied bombardment at that very moment but not yet out of commission.

Seconds later, Ryker spotted the two bandits directly above him, three miles out and closing fast on Merkle.

*"Stroke Six, Stroke Six—when I count to three, break right and dive. I'm coming up underneath these guys and I don't think they see me yet."*

Merkle confirmed, and Ryker began the count.

But just at that moment, Ryker saw the lead MiG fire. Merkle couldn't wait. For some reason he broke left instead of right, then went into a spiraling nose-dive. The Iraqis followed suit. Ryker had no shot to light up the lead bandit, but the second MiG was in perfect position.

*"I have tone—I have a lock—Fox Two,"* Ryker shouted.

The AIM-9 Sidewinder exploded from under Ryker's right wing. Banking left and following the three jets into another suicidal dive, Ryker watched the missile home in on the closest Iraqi fighter. An instant later a blinding explosion filled the night sky.

*"Splash one, splash one,"* Ryker erupted.

But there was no time to celebrate. Merkle radioed that he had just successfully eluded the first missile, which had slammed into an office building. But no matter what he did, he couldn't shake the remaining MiG. The Iraqi was hot on his tail as Merkle streaked down city streets, under bridges, and dangerously close to power lines. Merkle was doing exactly what the controller was telling him to do—stay low and hug the terrain as best he could until Ryker could take this guy out.

But Ryker now told his wingman to do exactly the opposite.

"Stroke Six, I'm right behind you guys," he said, his voice calm and steady. "Pull up—shoot for the sky at maximum speed—that's when I'll take him out."

*"What? No. Are you crazy, Stroke Five?"* the controller shot back. *"Negative, Stroke Six, negative. Stay low. I'm scrambling more jets to your position."*

*"This guy's got tone,"* Merkle shouted. *"He's locked on. He's going to fire."*

*"Pull up, Stroke Six,"* Ryker ordered. *"I've got him. Trust me, I've got him. Pull up."*

The controller was countermanding the order. But just as the MiG fired,

Merkle pulled up and hit his afterburner. The instant the Iraqi followed suit, Ryker's radar locked on. He fired two Sidewinders, just to be sure. The first one went wide, but the second hit its mark. The explosion could be seen and heard by everyone in Basra. Simultaneously, Merkle pulled his F-16 into a death-defying loop, dove back toward the deck, leveled out, and banked hard to the right, skimming just above the rooftops. The missile trailing him plowed into a skyscraper and detonated on impact.

Ryker's headset erupted with the sounds of whoops and hollers. Everyone on the AWACs was cheering, including Merkle. But not for long.

New warning sirens suddenly began screaming in both their cockpits. Two Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles—and then two more—exploded from batteries no one had told them were there. Merkle immediately took evasive action. So did Ryker, but it was too late. His F-16 was blown out of the sky at twenty-seven minutes after 4 a.m., the first night of air operations in the battle to liberate Kuwait.