

Dear Reader,

One morning over a decade ago I walked into my office as I'd done a thousand times before. But that morning something was in my office that every publisher dreams about but few publishers get to experience, something that literally changed the future of our company and shook the very foundations of the publishing industry. What caught my eye as I threw my coat across the chair was not the proposal resting in my in-box—I see those every day. No, what grabbed my attention immediately was the title of the proposal: *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*.

What a great title, I thought to myself. *But can the content deliver?* I jumped on that proposal and pushed every button at our publishing house to get the deal done and the book to market. The rest is history and still making history—a series of novels that has sold an astonishing 62 million copies and will sell millions more. The last seven books all have been #1 best-sellers on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Wall Street Journal* lists.

Why do I write this here? Because I want you to know, dear reader, that recently I had a very similar experience—a real *déjà vu*. Not many months ago my fiction director, Becky Nesbitt, sent me a proposal for a new novel by an author named Joel Rosenberg. I walked into my office one morning and there it was—something every publisher dreams about but few get to experience, something I now believe can once again shake up the publishing industry. This time it wasn't the title that caught my eye, nor was it Becky's note that told me to lock the door until I'd finished reading the proposal; it was the manuscript's first two sentences, which read:

*Boris Stuchenko would be dead in less than nineteen minutes.
And he had no idea why.*

What a great opening, I thought to myself. *But can the rest of the book deliver?* Deliver it did! I sat down with that manuscript, and was instantly propelled into a ride I'll never forget. Becky and I jumped on that proposal

and pushed every button at our publishing house to get the deal done and the book to market. Now it's your turn. Fasten your seat belt because this is not just a page-turner, it's a page-churner. You'll churn through the pages with the same heart-stopping intensity of viewing a great thriller movie for the first time. When you get to the end, you'll be a different person than you were at the beginning.

I have the same gut feeling about this novel as I did about *Left Behind*. That novel is a thrill ride bringing to life the prophecies of the book of Revelation. The book you hold in your hand is the same kind of thrill ride, but bringing to life the biblical prophecies leading up to the events of Revelation. So turn the page, and enjoy the ride of your life. Where you're going, there's no turning back.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ron Beers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

RON BEERS
Publishers

WHAT THE CRITICS ARE SAYING



- ★ The *New York Times* calls Rosenberg “a Washington success story.”
- ★ **Rush Limbaugh** says *The Last Jihad* is “amazing. . . . I could not put this book down. . . . You have to read this. . . . Rosenberg nails it. . . . *The Last Jihad* absolutely crackles with high energy and a chilling premise—what if the war on terror goes nuclear?”
- ★ **Sean Hannity** calls *The Last Days* “riveting to the point you can’t put it down—a heart-pounding, edge-of-your-seat roller-coaster ride. . . . So intertwined with modern events it’s scary.”
- ★ *U.S. News & World Report* says Rosenberg’s novels are so close to reality he seems like a “modern Nostradamus.”
- ★ *CNN Headline News* says, “J. K. Rowling may be the writer of the moment for the young and the young at heart. But for many adults Joel Rosenberg is the ‘it author’ right now. Inside and outside the Beltway in Washington, people are snatching up copies of his almost lifelike terrorist suspense novels.”
- ★ **Joe Scarborough of MSNBC** says, “Joel Rosenberg is almost a prophet. . . . I would recommend you read these books. This is a guy who understands what is going on in the Middle East.”
- ★ *The Jerusalem Post* calls *The Last Days* “a fast-paced thriller, packed with the authentic details and behind-the-scenes tidbits that only a Washington insider such as Rosenberg could know. . . . Screams ‘possible’ from every page.”
- ★ **Michael Reagan** says, “*The Last Days* is a gutsy new breed of political thriller—almost prophetically forecasting what you’ll read in tomorrow’s headlines. . . . Rosenberg is a rising new star on the American fiction scene.”

- ★ *The Tampa Tribune* says, “Predicting the future can be risky business unless perhaps your name is Nostradamus. But Joel Rosenberg hit it in his first political thriller, *The Last Jihad*, written in 2001, in which he predicted a war between the United States and Iraq over weapons of mass destruction.”
- ★ **Steve Forbes** says, “What a timely tale. Rosenberg has written, à la Clancy, one of those rare novels that is riveting to read because it seems too real. A tingling triumph.”
- ★ **Vincent Flynn**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Memorial Day*, says, “A wild, rocketing read, *The Last Jihad* is Tom Clancy writ large.”
- ★ *Publishers Weekly* calls *The Last Days* “an action-packed Clancyesque political thriller.”
- ★ *Forbes magazine* says *The Last Days* is “a rip-roaring, heart-pounding, page-turning, high-octane geopolitical thriller . . . the action never stops from the first sentence to the last.”
- ★ **FaithfulReader.com** says, “Rosenberg creates the narrative vortex that sucks you in by warping the timeline and populating his story with real people in imaginary places.”
- ★ *WORLD* magazine says *The Last Days* is “dramatic . . . good entertainment . . . a *New York Times* best seller with the gospel tucked inside.”
- ★ **Michael D. Evans**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Beyond Iraq: The Next Move*, says, “The blazing narrative is fast-paced, bursting with action, and obviously based on an intimate grasp of America’s greatest threat. Joel Rosenberg is a brilliant storyteller; *The Ezekiel Option* is his finest work, a spellbinding tale of espionage and high intrigue, painted on a canvas as broad as its subject matter.”

THE EZEKIEL OPTION





THE EZEKIEL OPTION



★ ★ ★ JOEL C. ROSENBERG ★



Tyndale House
Publishers, Inc.,
Wheaton,
Illinois

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Tyndale's quill logo is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

The Ezekiel Option

Copyright © 2005 by Joel C. Rosenberg. All rights reserved.

Cover photo copyright © 2005 by Mark and Audrey Gibson/Stock Connection. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2005 by Joel Rosenberg. All rights reserved.

Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Scripture taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rosenberg, Joel C., date.

The Ezekiel option : a novel / Joel C. Rosenberg.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0343-7

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0343-2

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0344-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0344-0 (pbk.)

I. Title

PS3618.O832E97 2005

813'.6—dc22

2005005315

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



TUESDAY, JULY 29 – 3:16 P.M. – 52 MILES SOUTHEAST OF MANHATTAN

Boris Stuchenko would be dead in less than nineteen minutes.

And he had no idea why.

The fifty-three-year-old self-made billionaire had a long list of enemies; of this he had no doubt. Business competitors. Political rivals. Mistresses too numerous to count.

But this made no sense. Was it really a hit? Was he really the target? Or was the president and CEO of Lukoil—Russia’s largest oil company—simply in the wrong place at the wrong time for the first time in his life?

Stuchenko gripped the leather armrests. He couldn’t see the terrorists. At least one was behind him, back in business or economy class. But he didn’t dare turn and look.

He wasn’t even supposed to be on this flight. As the richest man in Russia, he never flew commercial. His fleet of private jets, including a gleaming new Gulfstream V, was the envy of the Russian oligarchs.

But over the past eighteen months, he’d become obsessed with buying Aeroflot, Russia’s aging airline—her jets, her routes, her infrastructure—and turning the much-ridiculed “Aero-*flop*” into a world-class competitor. To seal the deal with the Wall Street crowd, his strategists were positioning him as a man of the people, willing to fly one of the most troubled airlines on the planet before turning her into a profit-making superpower.

Now all that was about to change.

Stuchenko tried to slow his breathing and focus his thoughts. Two hijackers were in the cockpit. He'd seen them go in. But now the door was shut, and the pilots' screams had long since been silenced.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see two badly beaten flight attendants, huddled and shivering on the floor in the forward galley. Their hands and mouths were bound with duct tape. Their swollen eyes darted from face to face, silently pleading for help from anyone in the first-class cabin.

No one moved.

They were so young and innocent, the kind of exquisite and courteous Russian women around which he could have rebuilt this airline. He'd flirted with one for half the flight. But now Stuchenko refused even to make eye contact. The women had the air of hunted animals, and he wanted nothing to do with them.

What kind of man was he? He couldn't sit here like a coward.

Stuchenko had served his time in the Red Army. He'd fought in Afghanistan in the eighties against bin Laden and his demons. He'd been trained in hand-to-hand combat. And he'd have the element of surprise. Especially if he could enlist the help of his two top aides, sitting in the row behind him.

The cockpit wasn't sealed shut. The terrorists had jammed the lock. He'd seen them do it. He'd seen them come in and out, and the door had swung easily every time.

A quick glance to his right confirmed that no one was coming up the aisle. He reached for his fountain pen and wrote quickly in German on the napkin beside him. His aides knew German, but it was unlikely the terrorists did.

"We must storm the cabin, like the Americans did on 9/11," he wrote. "We have no choice. We must retake the plane, or die. Cough if you're with me."

He set down the pen, crumpled the napkin in his right hand, then slipped it back between the seats, hoping one of them would see it and take it.

One did. The napkin slid from his fingers. He waited.

He could hear the muffled cries of children behind him, but mostly there was an eerie quiet, save for the roar of the jet engines. The acrid

stench of gunpowder still hung in the air. For the life of him he couldn't imagine how they'd gotten weapons on board. But he could see the results. On the floor ahead of him lay his personal bodyguard, a pool of crimson growing around his head.



The young air-traffic controller tried to stay calm.

“Aeroflot six-six-one-seven heavy, once again, this is New York Center; acknowledge.”

Still no response.

“Aeroflot six-six-one-seven, this is New York Center. Execute immediate course change to three-four-five—repeat, three-four-five—and acknowledge, over.”

Again, no response.

The controller took a deep breath and scanned his instruments again. He'd only been on the job for a year, but he'd been well trained. The jumbo jet was inbound from Moscow and scheduled to land at JFK within the half hour. But instead of heading into a landing pattern, the plane had banked sharply to the southwest, bypassed New York City, and refused to acknowledge his radio instructions.

He picked up the phone and dialed his supervisor.

Seconds later, his call was relayed to the FAA's operations center in Virginia.

No, the transponder was still on, he told the watch officer.

Yes, it appeared to be transmitting properly.

No, the jet had not squawked 7500, the international hijacking code. Or 7600, for radio malfunction. Or 7700, for a general emergency.

No, the pilots had not flashed an *HJK* text message for a hijacking in progress.

No, there was no evidence of depressurization.

Or reports of a fire or shots on board.

But something was seriously wrong.

The FAA watch officer now speed-dialed NORAD. He was patched through to the North East Air Defense Sector at Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, New York, and explained the situation. The NEADS commander

didn't hesitate. He scrambled fighter jets out of the 119th Fighter Squadron in Atlantic City and the 121st out of Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, then called the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon.

Moving at 550 miles an hour—with clear skies, unlimited visibility, and no headwinds—Aeroflot 6617 was now less than two hundred miles from Washington, D.C.



The briefing wasn't going well.

President James "Mac" MacPherson had just begun a meeting with his Council of Economic Advisors. The first-quarter growth numbers were dismal. The second-quarter estimates were worse. The recovery had stalled. Unemployment was climbing, and his approval ratings were slipping.

But the instant Secret Service Agent Jackie Sanchez burst into the Oval Office without warning, MacPherson knew the meeting was over.

Sanchez leaned in and whispered, "Mr. President, you need to come with me."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Right away, sir. I'm sorry. I'll brief you on the way."

MacPherson rose and apologized to his economic team. He started to gather his papers, but gave up as three more agents took up positions and rushed him toward the door.

"Gambit's moving," Sanchez said into her wrist-mounted radio.

"What's going on?" MacPherson demanded.

"Mr. President, NORAD is presently tracking a Russian passenger jet headed for D.C. Probable hijacking. Possible suicide mission. ETA about fourteen minutes. NMCC has initiated Noble Eagle, and they're waiting for you, sir."

MacPherson hurried through a set of steel blast doors and down three flights of stairs to the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, a nuclear-bomb-proof communications bunker deep underneath the White House.

"Julie and the girls?"

“They’re being airlifted to Mount Weather, sir, along with the VP’s wife.”

“Where’s the vice president?”

“Checkmate is inbound to the White House. Should be here in a few minutes.”

“What about the Speaker?”

“En route to New York for a fund-raiser, Mr. President. We’ve re-routed his plane and are giving him a fighter escort out of the northeast corridor. House and Senate leadership are all being secured. The Hill is being evacuated as we speak, and the army is deploying triple-A batteries around the Capitol, the Pentagon, and Langley.”

“And your guys?”

“We’re good, sir. I’ve got Avengers and Stingers on the roof. We’ve got two F-16s scrambled out of Andrews flying CAP and four more about to go up.”

The president entered the PEOC, where National Security Advisor Marsha Kirkpatrick and White House Chief of Staff Bob Corsetti were already working the phones along with another dozen military aides and Press Secretary Chuck Murray.

“Where are we?” asked MacPherson as he took a seat at the head of the conference table.

“Mr. President, NMCC just initiated the air threat conference,” said Kirkpatrick. “We’ve got all the relevant agencies on secure audio and video. The VP is still a few minutes out. The SecDef is choppering to the Pentagon and should be in place shortly. Right now I need you to speak with General Charlie Briggs—four star, air force, commander at NORAD. He’s on one of the secure feeds.”

“What’ve we got, General?” asked MacPherson.

“Sir, on the far left screen you can see the radar track of the Russian jet.”

“That’s real time?”

“Yes, sir—they’re 163 miles outside of D.C. In a moment we’ll have live video feeds from the F-16s involved in the intercept.”

“Who’s up there?” MacPherson asked.

“Two F-16s out of the 119th in Atlantic City, Mr. President.”

MacPherson watched another video screen flicker to life. He could now see the two F-16s roaring in behind the Russian jet, moving faster

than the speed of sound, and could overhear the pilots as they communicated with their commanders.

“NEADS, this is Devil One-One, in half-mile trail behind the airliner,” came the voice of the lead U.S. fighter pilot, thirty thousand feet above the coast of Delaware.

“Devil One-One, this is NEADS Command,” replied the two-star general from NORAD’s Continental Region at Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, Florida. “You are authorized to switch to Guard frequency and begin communications with the Russian jumbo.”

“Roger that, sir.”

MacPherson heard the F-16 pilot attempting to reach the Russian pilots on the standard frequency all aircraft were required to monitor. “Aeroflot six-six-one-seven, this is a United States Air Force F-16 off your left wing, transmitting on Guard.”

There was no answer.

“Six-six-one-seven, again, this is a United States Air Force F-16 off your left wing. Acknowledge.”

Nothing.

“Six-six-one-seven, this is Devil One-One, transmitting on Guard, two-four-three-point-zero, and one-two-one-point-five. If you can hear me, acknowledge with a wing rock, over.”

There was nothing but the hiss of static.

“Devil One-One, this is CONR Command. Son, can you see into the cockpit?”

“Negative, CONR. No frost. No signs of depressurization. But the sun’s pretty hot up here. We’re getting a wicked glare off the Russian’s windshield. Devil One-Two, this is Devil One-One. Do you have a line of sight into the cockpit from your side?”

The second F-16—positioned off the right wing of the Russian jet—tried to maneuver for a better look.

“Negative, Devil One-One. Can’t really tell.”

The two-star in Panama City came on again. “Devil One-One, what about the passenger windows? Any movement inside?”

“Negative, sir. All the shades are pulled down on this side. Can’t see a thing.”

His wingman fared no better.

“Roger that, Devil One-One,” came the word from Panama City. “Try the flares.”

“Copy that, CONR. Stand by one.”

The lead F-16 now banked away from the Russian’s left wing, then roared forward, pulling in front of the Russian by about half a mile.

Devil 12 banked right, slowed a bit, then pulled in behind the Russian jumbo.

Sixty seconds later, the lead fighter jet released a barrage of sizzling, red-hot flares. They were typically used as decoys to confuse heat-seeking missiles. Now they were trying to catch the attention of anyone who might be alive inside the Aeroflot cockpit.

Again the F-16s attempted radio contact.

Again there was nothing but hiss and static.

President MacPherson’s stomach tightened. He caught the eye of his chief of staff, then looked back at the radar track. Aeroflot 6617 was now only 109 miles outside of the nation’s capital and coming in at nearly the speed of sound.



The plan was almost set.

Stuchenko reached his hand back to receive one last crumpled note from his aides in the first-class seats behind him. His hands trembled. He glanced to his right, listened carefully, but saw and heard no one as he opened the napkin under the protection of his fold-out tray.

“We know there are two in the cockpit,” it read. “But what about behind us? Where’s #3? Is there a fourth? more? We must know before we move.”

Stuchenko was furious. They wanted *him* to turn around? They wanted *him* to look back to find the other terrorists? Wasn’t he *their* boss? Why didn’t *they* turn around? But Stuchenko knew full well why not. They were as terrified as he was. Everyone on the plane had been ordered not to move, not to stand, not to go to the bathroom, not to turn around. To disobey was suicide. But what other choice did they have?

Stuchenko closed his eyes, straining to hear any sign of trouble. But

aside from all the crying children, all he could hear now was his PR agent rubbing worry beads and mumbling some sort of prayer over and over again.

What a fool, thought Stuchenko. *The idiot is going to get us all killed.*

Stuchenko tried to breathe, tried to steel himself.

If he had to die, he would die like a man.



Marsha Kirkpatrick put the question directly.

“Mr. President, are you ready to order this plane shot down?”

MacPherson hesitated to say no out loud. Instead he began firing off questions.

“Are any U.S. marshals on board?”

“No,” said Kirkpatrick. “There aren’t enough marshals for every flight, and this route has never been a problem.”

“What about Russian marshals?”

“We’re not sure yet. Aeroflot is supposed to fax the flight manifest to the FBI’s field office in Moscow, but nothing has come in yet.”

“Is there any possibility that passengers on board might be able to overtake the hijackers?”

“Perhaps,” Kirkpatrick conceded. “But there isn’t much time, and if the flight gets within fifty miles of Washington, the situation will get infinitely more dangerous.”

“Why?”

“Because the plane would have to be shot down over land, sir. That puts the lives of innocent people on the ground at risk.”

MacPherson struggled to think clearly. “Is there any other way to stop the plane?”

“Unlikely,” Kirkpatrick said. “Mr. President, you should be under no illusions. If Chechen rebels are in control of the aircraft, they are likely on a kamikaze mission, and there will be no negotiations.”

MacPherson looked up at the radar track.

The jet was now less than one hundred miles from D.C.

The two F-16s took up flanking positions behind the jet. Each carried two AIM-120 air-to-air missiles, and two AIM-9 Sidewinder heat-seeking

missiles. Each was also armed with a front-mounted, 20 mm cannon loaded with five hundred rounds of ammunition.

MacPherson knew the pilots had trained for this moment. But it had never happened. Not yet. U.S. fighter jets had never shot down an unarmed civilian jetliner over Washington or anywhere else. And certainly not a civilian jetliner owned by Russia.

White House Press Secretary Chuck Murray put down his cell phone and began turning on a bank of television sets on the far wall of the PEOC. Every cable news channel and all four broadcast networks now had the story.

MacPherson could feel his chest constricting and reached for a glass of water.

Defense Secretary Burt Trainor had arrived at the Pentagon and was now linked in by a secure video feed. Trainor had run two wars for this president. A highly decorated Vietnam vet, he had previously served as the CEO of General Motors and had been named *Black Enterprise* magazine's "Leader of the Decade." He'd been a close personal friend of James and Julie MacPherson for more than twenty years. He had earned MacPherson's trust. Now Trainor needed the president's decision.

"Mr. President—," Trainor began, but MacPherson shook his head.

"What's the fail-safe point?" the president asked.

"Thirty miles, sir. But—"

"No, not yet," the president shot back.

MacPherson knew Trainor was fighting to keep his instincts in check. But he didn't care. He wasn't ready. "Marsha?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"You got that manifest for me?"

"We just got a partial copy, sir."

"Partial? Why?"

"I don't know, sir. We're checking."

MacPherson was furious, but he had to maintain focus. He was running out of time. "Whom would I be shooting down?" he asked the national security advisor.

Kirkpatrick seemed to hesitate, so MacPherson asked again. "*Who is on this plane?*"

Kirkpatrick swallowed hard. “Sir, we count 173 civilian passengers on board. Sixty-three families. Forty-one children.”

“God have mercy,” said the president.

“There’re more complications, sir. Three members of the Russian Duma are on board. They’re scheduled for meetings today and tomorrow at the U.N., then here in Washington later in the week.”

MacPherson looked to Bob Corsetti, his chief of staff and senior political advisor, who shook his head slowly, too stunned to say anything.

Kirkpatrick continued. “Also on board is Boris Stuchenko, president and CEO of Lukoil, as well as several members of his board of directors and top aides. They’re on their way to a series of meetings on Wall Street.”

“Anyone else I should know about?” MacPherson demanded.

“We believe several members of the Moscow Ballet may also be on the flight.”

“Get the secretary of state on the phone,” MacPherson said to his chief of staff.

Aeroflot 6617 was now just seventy-five miles from Washington.



Stuchenko knew this was it.

Carefully, quietly, he unbuckled his seat belt. The instant he gave the word, they would storm the cockpit. He gave them a one-in-three chance of successfully wresting control of the plane. How they’d land the enormous craft was another matter entirely. But he could only worry about so much at a time.

Stuchenko wiped his hands on the pants of his custom-tailored French suit. He shifted forward to the edge of his seat, then quickly turned his head for the look he’d been dreading.

But it was then that his heart stopped. He was staring into a silencer. Five shots later, his assistants were dead. He never heard the sixth shot.



MacPherson closed his eyes.

To blow a Russian passenger jet out of the sky would have unprece-

dented global ramifications. But so, too, would a decision not to defend the American capital.

What worried him most was the law of unintended consequences.

Relations with Moscow were already strained. The war in Iraq. Moscow's ties to Tehran. Rising anti-American sentiment among the ultra-nationalists in the State Duma. A sharp rise in anti-Semitic attacks throughout Russia. All exacerbated by falling oil and gas prices that were dragging down Russia's economy and causing the worst Russian unemployment since the collapse of the Soviet Empire.

On a personal level, MacPherson and Russian president Grigoriy Vadim liked each other a great deal. The two had developed a professional bond of trust over the past few years. But a question kept churning in MacPherson's gut: though U.S.-Russian rapprochement had taken years to build, how quickly could it be destroyed?

The president looked up and ordered General Briggs to have his fighters buzz the Russian jet to try to divert its course. Moments later, he watched the lead F-16 perform a "head butt"—flying directly at the front windshield of the Russian jumbo jet at Mach 1.2, then pulling up and away at the last possible moment.

It was a supersonic game of chicken. And the Russians didn't blink.

His heart racing, MacPherson then ordered the F-16s to fire their machine guns near the cockpit of the Russian jumbo. It was a last-ditch effort to convince the hijackers he would not let them reach Washington. But again, whoever was inside did not flinch.

The plane banked westward, boosted its power, and began its descent. Aeroflot 6617 was now just fifty miles from the White House.

MacPherson pressed his team harder.

"What about cell phones?" the president asked. "Can we establish contact with the hijacker—or anyone else on the plane—using a passenger's cell phone?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," Kirkpatrick said. "The FBI has been trying, without success. It's too late for any further attempts."

"The secretary of state is online, sir," an aide announced.

MacPherson turned to Nick Warner on the video feed from Foggy Bottom. "Nick, have we been able to get President Vadim on the hotline?"

"Not yet, Mr. President," Warner responded. The Russian leader was

currently in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, but thus far direct contact had not been possible, and the Russian Foreign Ministry was keeping quiet until it had specific instructions from Vadim.

MacPherson weighed his options. They were dwindling fast.

Now sixty-three, the president was no stranger to combat. A former navy pilot, MacPherson had flown F-4 Phantoms over Vietnam in the last years of the conflict. He'd downed three enemy planes during his tour and narrowly survived after his own plane had crashed in the Sea of Japan. As commander in chief, he believed his presidency was a quest to protect the American people and bring peace to a troubled world. But the price had been steep.

MacPherson had sent U.S. forces into harm's way numerous times over the past several years to wage war against the radical Islamic jihadists who, if given the chance, would launch attacks of almost unimaginable proportions against the American people. Scores of U.S. servicemen and servicewomen had died thus far, and many more had been wounded. MacPherson himself had almost been killed during a kamikaze attack in Denver. He'd lost one of his top counterterrorism operatives in a gun battle with Islamic militants in Jerusalem, and his first secretary of state and thirty-four American diplomats and security personnel had died in a suicide bombing attack in Gaza.

Not a day went by when he didn't count the cost. Was he doing the right thing? Was he honoring the memories of the dead by creating a safer, more secure world?

He was trying, and there had been good news.

The Taliban was dead, and Afghanistan was quiet.

Iraq, too, was largely pacified—finally—and, despite all the hardships, had a democratically elected government as well. Saddam Hussein's regime was dead and buried. The vast majority of U.S. and coalition troops were finally out of Iraq. And the new government, while still working to firmly establish its legitimacy, was—for now, at least—peaceful, only lightly armed, and friendly to American interests.

What's more, Yasser Arafat was dead. A moderate, democratically elected Palestinian prime minister was in power. An interim Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement—MacPherson's baby—was bearing fruit, and a final status agreement could very possibly be completed by the end

of the summer. In fact, if the Russians would sign off on the deal, a signing ceremony at the White House could occur as soon as the fall.

Now all that was at risk.

MacPherson and his chief of staff stepped to the side of the room. “Tell me you’re seeing something I’m not, Bob,” MacPherson said, praying for a miracle.

Bob Corsetti was the man who had persuaded him to enter politics almost fifteen years before. It was Corsetti who had gotten him elected—and reelected—governor of Colorado. It was Corsetti who had managed his presidential campaign and served as his only White House chief of staff. MacPherson relied on Corsetti to see around corners and compensate for his blind spots. They were almost brothers at this point, and though MacPherson had paid him well, he knew Corsetti, ten years his junior, would have done it all for free.

“I’m afraid I’m not, Mr. President. It’s clearly an aggressive profile. Everything’s been done by the book. But you don’t have a choice. You need to take this guy out fast.”

The president said nothing. He turned to look again at the radar track. The Russian jet was now just thirty-five miles out and coming in red-hot. Corsetti was right. He was out of options and out of time.

“God forgive me,” MacPherson said.

The president finally gave the order to Defense Secretary Trainor.

On the monitor, MacPherson saw Trainor pick up a phone and say into it, “It’s a go. Repeat, mission is a go.”

“That’s affirmative,” came the response from Panama City on another monitor.

All eyes turned to the live video feed coming in from the lead F-16.

“Devil One-One,” said the two-star in Panama City. “POTUS declares the target is hostile. You are cleared to engage.”

“CONR Command, do I understand you right? . . . Target is hostile? . . . You want me to engage? You want me to fire on an unarmed civilian jetliner?”

MacPherson could hear the tremor in the flight leader’s voice.

He shot a hard look to his national security advisor. It was the president’s job—not a pilot’s—to wrestle through the moral justification of a

call like this. The commander in chief had just issued an order. Why wasn't it being obeyed?

The Aeroflot jet was now twenty-five miles out.

Marsha Kirkpatrick picked up the open line to NORAD just as another voice came over the intercom.

"Devil One-One, this is General Briggs at NORAD. Son, you are ordered to take this Russian jet down. *Repeat, take the target down.*"

For a moment, there was nothing but silence.

"I can't, sir."

It was the voice of the lead pilot.

"I'm sorry, sir. . . . I . . . I just can't do it. . . . It's not right."

MacPherson saw Kirkpatrick gasp and instinctively cover her mouth with her hands. Chuck Murray was ashen.

"General Briggs," MacPherson said, grabbing the phone from Kirkpatrick, "this is the president of the United States. The capital of the country is under attack. I am ordering you to take that plane down *now.*"

"Yes, sir. I'm on it, sir."

Aeroflot 6617 was now only fourteen miles out and picking up speed.

"Devil One-One, this is General Briggs at NORAD. Peel off immediately. Devil One-Two, do you have a shot? I repeat, do you have a shot?"

Silence.

"*Devil One-Two, do you have a shot?*"

"Roger that, General."

"*Then take it, son—before ten thousand people die.*"

"Roger that, sir."

All eyes in the PEOC were glued to the video feed coming in from the second F-16. The fighter jet maneuvered into position behind the Russian jumbo.

MacPherson glanced at the TV monitors. Every network now had its own images of the Russian jet screaming down the Potomac River and two F-16s in hot pursuit.

They were chilling, mesmerizing pictures, and MacPherson had no doubt they had the power to set the world on fire.

"Sir, I have radar lock. . . . I have tone. . . ."

The planes were now just eight miles from the White House.

"*Fox two!*"

An AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missile suddenly exploded from the right side of the F-16. The missile streaked through the morning sky. It sliced into the Russian plane's fuselage, and then, in a fraction of a second, Aeroflot 6617 erupted in a massive fireball that would alter the course of human events forever.