

The background of the cover is a dark, textured blue with a large, circular seal of the President of the United States. The seal is partially obscured by numerous red splatters, resembling blood, which are scattered across the entire surface. The words "PRESIDENT OF" are visible at the top of the seal's border.

THE
FIRST
HOSTAGE

A J. B. COLLINS NOVEL

JOEL C.
ROSENBERG

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER *THE THIRD TARGET*

PRAISE FOR
JOEL C. ROSENBERG



“His penetrating knowledge of all things Mideastern—coupled with his intuitive knack for high-stakes intrigue—demand attention.”

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Former director of the Central Intelligence Agency

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“Joel paints an eerie, terrifying, page-turning picture of a worst-case scenario coming to pass. You have to read [*Damascus Countdown*], and then pray it never happens.”

RICK SANTORUM

Former U.S. senator



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The First Hostage: A J. B. Collins Novel

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The First Hostage 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.

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P R E F A C E



from *The Third Target*

AL-HUMMAR PALACE, AMMAN, JORDAN

Two Jordanian F-16s caught my eye.

They were flying combat air patrol, keeping any stray aircraft—Jordanian or otherwise—out of this corridor, away from the palace and away from the peace summit. Both were quite a ways off in the distance, but what seemed odd was that while they had been flying from left to right across the horizon, heading from south to north, one of them was now turning right and banking toward the palace. Was that normal? It didn't seem so. Several pairs of fighter jets had been crisscrossing the skies over Amman for the last half hour or so in the same predictable manner. So why the deviation?

The jet was still several miles away, but there was no question it was headed in our direction. I turned and whispered to Ali Sa'id, chief of security for the Royal Court.

"What's going on with that F-16?" I asked. "He's broken off from his wingman."

Sa'id had been scanning the crowd, not the skies, so he didn't immediately respond. But a moment later, he said something in Arabic over his wrist-mounted radio. Then he whispered back, "Stay calm, but come with me, both of you."

Startled, I had a hard time taking my eyes off the plane, but when I saw Sa'id get up and walk toward the doorway from which we had

come, I followed his lead. Yael Katzir was right behind me. The band was playing again.

“Where are we going?” I asked Sa’id.

“The command center.”

“Why? What do you think’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” he conceded. “But I’m not bringing His Majesty out here until I know.”

As he said this, I turned and took one last look at the F-16 before going inside. And at that very moment I saw a flash of light and a contrail. The pilot had just fired a missile.

A moment later we felt the explosion.

* * *

Inside the palace’s security command center, I turned to check on Yael.

The Mossad agent had a large gash on her forehead and was bleeding profusely. I called for a first aid kit, and one of the watch commanders rushed to my side with one. As I bandaged her up, though, Yael gasped. At first I thought I had hurt her further. But when I saw her eyes grow wide, I turned to see what she was looking at.

On the video monitors in the command post, I could now see dump trucks and cement trucks loaded with explosives making speed dashes for the outer gates of the royal compound. I watched as soldiers fired automatic weapons at them, but one by one the trucks were hitting their targets and erupting in massive explosions. Huge gaps appeared in the perimeter fences, and hundreds of fighters in black hoods and ski masks rushed through to engage in brutal gun battles with Jordanian soldiers fighting desperately to save themselves and their beloved king.

Just then the vault door opened behind us. Suddenly King Abdullah was coming out of the safe room and directly toward us.

“Ali,” he said, “we need to go now.”

* * *

Outside the palace, I could hear bullets whizzing over my head.

I could hear them smashing into the side of the armor-plated trucks. I could see round after round hitting the bulletproof windows, though fortunately they refused to shatter. But as I came around the far side of one of the U.S. president's Suburbans, I froze in my tracks. Prime Minister Lavi and President Mansour were lying side by side, surrounded by several more dead agents.

The king was crouched over them. I couldn't see what he was doing. Was he trying in vain to revive them or just mourning over them? Either way, it was no use. They were gone. Nothing was going to bring them back. We had to go. We couldn't stay out in the open like this.

At that moment, I went numb. I could feel myself beginning to slip into shock, and I couldn't help it, couldn't stop it. And then, as if through a tunnel, I thought I heard the sound of someone calling my name.

"Collins, they're alive!" the king yelled. *"They're unconscious, but they're still breathing. They both have a pulse. But we need to get them into the Suburban. Cover us!"*

I couldn't believe it. They weren't dead? They looked dead. They weren't moving. But at the very thought, I snapped to.

Sa'id opened the back of the truck and put down the rear seat to make space while Yael covered his right flank. Then Sa'id helped the king lift the Israeli prime minister and gently set him inside the SUV.

Reengaged, I pivoted hard to my left and followed my orders. Firing the MP5 in short bursts in multiple directions, I had no illusions I was going to kill many rebels. But I was determined not to let them get to the king or his family or these other leaders. All I had to do was buy time. The question was whether it would possibly be enough.

As the king and Sa'id put the Palestinian leader in the back, I continued firing. Then I heard one of the other SUVs roar to life. For a moment I stopped shooting. I looked to my right and saw a Suburban peeling off without us with two American agents in the front seat.

The Secret Service wasn't waiting. They'd gotten their man into a bulletproof vehicle and now they were getting him to the airport. We had to move too, and fast.

* * *

The king directed me onto Route 40—the Al Kodos Highway—and soon we were heading southwest out of Amman. We were now going nearly a hundred miles an hour, and we had a new problem. The king was on the satphone with his brother, who informed us that there was a police checkpoint at the upcoming interchange with Route 35, the Queen Alia Highway. The checkpoint itself wasn't the issue. The problem, the king said, was that it had apparently been overrun by ISIS rebels, and they were waiting for us with RPGs and .50-caliber machine guns.

“How long to the interchange?” I asked.

“At this rate, two minutes, no more,” the king replied.

“What do you recommend, Your Majesty?” I asked, not sure if I should try to go any faster or slow down.

“Do you believe in prayer, Collins?” he said. “Because now would be a good time to start.”

“I'm out of ammunition,” Yael said. “Does anyone have more?”

“There's a full mag in my weapon,” I replied.

“Where's that?” she asked.

“Here,” the crown prince said from the backseat. He picked up my machine gun from the floor, removed the magazine, and handed it to Yael.

In the distance, I could see the interchange approaching. Were we

going to try to blow through this checkpoint? That, it seemed, was a suicide mission. And I wasn't ready to die.

A second later the issue was moot. Rising over a ridge off to our right were two Apache helicopter gunships coming low and fast. Yael noticed them first and pointed them out to the rest of us. Now we were all riveted on them, and one question loomed over everything, though no one spoke it aloud: which side were they on?

The checkpoint was fast approaching. So were the Apaches.

And then in my mirror I saw the 30mm open up.

"They're shooting at us!" I shouted.

I saw a flash. I knew what it was. I'd seen it a hundred times or more, from Fallujah to Kabul. Someone had just fired an RPG. I could see the contrail streaking down the highway behind us. The queen screamed. I hit the gas and swerved to the right just in time. The RPG knocked off my side mirror and sliced past. It hadn't killed us.

But the next one might.

I saw another flash, this one from the lead Apache. He too had just fired, and this wasn't a mere RPG. This was a heat-seeking Hellfire missile. There was no swerving or avoiding it. It was coming straight for us, and there was nothing we could do about it. We were about to die in a ball of fire. It was all over.

But to my relief, the missile didn't slam into us. Instead, we watched it strike one of the Humvees at the checkpoint ahead. In the blink of an eye, the entire checkpoint was obliterated in a giant explosion. Stunned—mesmerized by the fireball in front of me—I forgot to exit. I just kept driving. Then we were crashing through the burning remains of the checkpoint, racing through the interchange, and getting on Route 35, bound for the airport.

None of us cheered. We were relieved beyond words, but we all knew this was not of our doing. Forces beyond us were keeping us alive and clearing the way for us.

Soon we saw one squadron after another of Jordanian F-16s and F-15s streaking across the sky. I had to believe they were headed to Amman to bomb the palace and crush the rebellion. I couldn't imagine how difficult a decision that must have been for the king, but I also knew he had no choice. He was the last of the Hashemite monarchs, and he seemed determined not to go down like those before him.

As we sped along Highway 35, against all odds, strangely enough I actually began to feel a sense of hope again. We were still alive. We were safe for now. And I had the strongest sense that the king was going to prevail. He had been blindsided, to be sure. But he had enormous personal courage. He had an army ready to fight back, and he had the Americans and the Israelis ready to fight with him. But when we arrived at the airport, those feelings instantly evaporated.

As I surveyed the devastation around us, all hope disappeared.

The gorgeous new multimillion-dollar terminal was a smoking crater. The roads and runways were pockmarked with the remains of mortars and artillery shells that apparently had been fired not long before we arrived. Jumbo jets were on fire. Dead and dying bodies lay everywhere. Fuel depots were ablaze. The stench of burning jet fuel was overwhelming.

And Air Force One was gone.



PART
ONE

1



AMMAN, JORDAN

“The president of the United States . . . is missing.”

Even as the words came out of my mouth, I could hardly believe what I was saying. Neither could my editor.

There was a long pause.

“What do you mean, *missing*?” said the crackling, garbled voice on the other end of the line, on the other side of the world.

Allen MacDonald had worked at the *New York Times* for the better part of forty years. He’d been the foreign editor since I was in high school. For as long as I had been with the *Times*—which was now well over a decade—we’d worked together on all kinds of stories, from assassinations to terror attacks to full-blown wars. I was sure he had heard it all in this business . . . until now.

“I mean missing, Allen. Gone. Lost. No one knows where he is, and all hell is breaking loose here,” I said as I looked out over the devastation.

Amman’s gorgeous new international airport was ablaze. Thick, black smoke darkened the midday sun. Bodies were everywhere. Soldiers. Policemen. Ground crew. And an untold number of jihadists in their signature black hoods, their cold, stiff hands still gripping Russian-made AK-47s. Anyone not already dead, myself included, was

wearing a protective chem-bio suit, breathing through a gas mask, and praying the worst of the sarin gas attacks were over.

“But I—I don’t understand,” Allen stammered. “CNN is reporting Air Force One is safe. That it’s already cleared Jordanian airspace. That it has a fighter escort.”

“It’s all true,” I replied. “But the president isn’t on it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“There’s no chance that you misheard.”

“No.”

“Misunderstood?”

“No.”

“Fog of war?” he pressed.

“Forget it.”

“Maybe somebody said it as a tactical diversion, to throw off ISIS or other enemies.”

“No, Allen, listen to me—the president is not on that plane. I’m telling you he’s missing, and people need to know.”

“Collins, if I go with this story and you’re wrong . . .”

Allen didn’t finish the sentence. But he didn’t have to. I understood the consequences.

“I’m not wrong, Allen,” I said. “This is solid.”

There was another pause. Then he said, “Do you realize what this means?”

“No,” I shot back. “I don’t know what this means. And neither do you. I don’t even know for sure if he’s been captured or injured or . . .” Now my voice trailed off.

“Or killed?” Allen asked.

“I’m not saying that.”

“What, then? Missing and presumed dead?”

“No, no—listen to me. I’m giving you precisely what I know. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“So where do you think he is?”

“I have no idea, Allen. No one does. But my sources were explicit. Air Force One took off without the president.”

“Okay, wait,” Allen said. “I’m putting you on speaker. I’m going to record you. And Janie is here. She’s going to type up everything you tell us.”

I could hear some commotion as he set up a digital recorder, cleared space on his desk, and shouted for Mary Jane, his executive assistant, to bring her laptop into his office immediately. A moment later they were ready.

I took a deep breath, did my best to wipe some of the soot from my gas mask, and checked my grandfather’s pocket watch. It was now 3:19 p.m. local time on Sunday, December 5.

“Okay, take this down,” I began. “The president of the United States is missing. Stop. Air Force One took off from the Amman airport under a U.S. fighter jet escort shortly after 2:30 p.m. Stop. But President Harrison Taylor was not on the plane. Stop. U.S. and Jordanian security forces are presently engaged in a massive search-and-rescue effort in Jordan to find the president. Stop. But at the moment the president’s whereabouts and safety are unknown. Stop.”

My hands were trembling. My throat was dry. And my left arm was killing me. I’d been shot—grazed, really—above the elbow in a firefight back at the Al-Hummar Palace during the ISIS attack. It had been bleeding something fierce until Yael Katzir, the beautiful and mysterious Mossad agent who had assisted me in getting King Abdullah and his family to safety, had tied a tourniquet on it. That was just after we arrived at the airport, just before she boarded the chopper that was taking Prime Minister Daniel Lavi back to Israel for emergency medical treatment. I was going to need something for the pain, and soon, but I knew Allen required more details, so I kept going.

“The devastating chain of events began unfolding early Sunday

afternoon in the northeast suburbs of Amman. Stop. Forces of the Islamic State launched a multipronged terrorist attack on the Israeli–Palestinian peace summit being held at Al-Hummar Palace. Stop. Just before the ceremony to sign a comprehensive peace treaty began, a Jordanian F-16 flying a combat air patrol fired an air-to-ground missile at the crowds gathered for the summit. Stop. The pilot of the F-16 then flew a suicide mission into the palace. Stop. Simultaneously, thousands of heavily armed Islamic State terrorists penetrated the grounds of the palace. Stop. Under heavy fire, security forces evacuated President Taylor, Jordan’s King Abdullah II, Israeli prime minister Daniel Lavi, and Palestinian president Salim Mansour from the palace grounds. Stop. Lavi and Mansour were severely wounded and are being airlifted to Jerusalem and Ramallah, respectively. Stop. Witnesses saw a black, bulletproof Chevy Suburban driven by U.S. Secret Service agents whisking President Taylor away from the scene of the attacks. Stop. But that vehicle never reached the airport. Stop. Sources tell the *Times* the president learned the airport was under attack by ISIS terrorists and called the commander of Air Force One and ordered him to take off immediately to protect the plane and crew. Stop. The president reportedly told the pilots he would recall them once Jordanian military forces regained control of the airport grounds. Stop. However, at this moment, senior U.S. government officials say they do not know where the president is, nor can they confirm his safety. Stop. Neither the president nor his Secret Service detail is responding to calls. Stop.”

I paused, in part to allow Janie to get it all down, but she was a pro and had had no trouble keeping pace.

“I’m with you,” she said. “Keep going.”

“I think that’s it for now,” I said. “We need to get that out there. I can call back and dictate more details of the attack in a few minutes.”

“That’s fine, but who are your sources, J. B.?” Allen asked.

“I can’t say.”

“J. B., you have to.”

“Allen, I can’t—not on an open line.”

“J. B., this isn’t a request. It’s an order.”

“I have to protect my sources. You know that.”

“Obviously. I’m not saying we’re going to include them in the story, but I have to know that the sources are solid and so is the story.”

“Allen, come on; you’re wasting time. You need to get this out immediately.”

“J. B., listen to me.”

“No, Allen, I—”

“*James!*” he suddenly shouted. I’d never heard him do it before. “I can’t just go on your word. Not on this. The stakes are too high. A story like this puts lives in danger. And getting it wrong is only half the issue. I’m not saying you’re wrong. I can hear in your voice that you believe it’s true. And I’m inclined to believe you. But I have to answer to New York. And they’re going to have the White House and Pentagon and Secret Service going crazy if we publish this story. So tell me what you know, or the story doesn’t run.”