

TOM CLANCY

**OATH
OF
OFFICE**

ALSO BY TOM CLANCY

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Patriot Games
The Cardinal of the Kremlin
Clear and Present Danger
The Sum of All Fears
Without Remorse
Debt of Honor
Executive Orders
Rainbow Six
The Bear and the Dragon
Red Rabbit
The Teeth of the Tiger
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Arnold “Arnie” van Damm: President Ryan’s chief of staff

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Robert Burgess: Secretary of defense

Mark Dehart: Secretary of homeland security

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Will Hyatt: U.S. Air Force Reaper pilot

Michelle Chadwick: United States senator

Randal Van Orden: Professor of astrophysics, U.S. Naval
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Alex Hardy: U.S. Naval Academy midshipman

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

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Nikita Yermilov: President of Russia

Maksim Dudko: Yermilov's aide

Erik Dovzhenko: Russian SVR officer assigned to Tehran

Colonel Pavel Mikhailov: Antonov 124 pilot, Russian Federation

Elizaveta Bobkova: Russian SVR operative stationed in Washington, D.C.

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Urbano Da Rocha: Portuguese arms dealer

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Ysabel Kashani: Iranian academic; Jack Junior's former girlfriend

Atash Yazdani: Iranian aeronautical engineer

Sahar Tabrizi: Iranian astrophysicist

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Adin Carr: Diplomatic security agent assigned to Cameroon

François Njaya: President of Cameroon

General Mbida: Cameroonian general

Sarah Porter: Wife of Deputy Chief of Mission, Cameroon

Sean Jolivette: F/A-18 Hornet pilot, USS *George H. W. Bush*

Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number of men who are not good. . . .

—Niccolò Machiavelli

1

In Mother Russia, secrets did not stay secret for long. Information was strength. Informing was ingrained. It was nothing short of miraculous that Colonel Pavel Mikhailov of the 224th Air Detachment, Military Transport Aviation, had been able to hide his sins at all.

The tribunal convened by his superiors had been a lengthy and embarrassing ordeal. But he was better for it, wasn't he? *Bez muki net nauki*—no torture, no science. No pain, no gain, the Americans said. Now he'd gotten back his wings—and he wasn't about to do anything that would jeopardize them again. He would be careful. He would be precise. Above all, he would be sober.

Flashlight in hand, the fifty-three-year-old colonel walked beneath the drooping wing of the monstrous Antonov An-124 cargo plane, taking comfort in the smell of jet fuel. A light wind tousled his thinning gray hair. Rosacea that never seemed to go away anymore pinked the round apples of his cheeks. The night had turned out chilly, but the day had been a pleasant one for spring in Moscow, and the black tarmac was still giving up its warmth. Colonel Mikhailov wore small foam earplugs to protect his hearing, but the whine of the auxiliary power unit and the hydraulic squeal of machinery were

MARC CAMERON

muffled music to his way of thinking. He played the flashlight under the broad surface of the swept wing, then carefully checked each of the twenty-four tires, as complete and thorough in this preflight as if he were still a pink-faced cadet at Gagarin Academy.

He never wrecked an aircraft, or even had a close call, but as his commanding general said, no matter how skilled a pilot he was, one could only show up for work “looking like a bag of ass” so many times before people began to talk. Ironically, his superiors had not begun to worry until after he attended his first weekly meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Russian government had long been wary of AA—secret meetings and deference to a higher power other than the state lent credence to the general lack of trust in any program created by the West. But more than that, it was Mikhailov’s new attitude that bothered them.

Vodka was as much a part of the Russian psyche as great coats and poems about troika rides.

In 1858 the government attempted to refill the state coffers drained by the Crimean War by tripling the price of a bucket of vodka. Peasants took oaths of sobriety to protest this tax. Temperance movements swelled as formerly sotted citizens swore off anything more potent than beer—and that just would not do. The Army intervened with crushing aggression on behalf of state alcohol interests, flogging the protesters and using funnels to force vodka down their throats. Temperance groups were outlawed, and more than seven hundred protesters were arrested as rebels.

If Colonel Mikhailov was suddenly worried about handling his liquor, perhaps everyone else should worry as well. Perhaps he was a rebel.

OATH OF OFFICE

Three decades of service had given Mikhailov guardian angels in high places, men who had flown with him in Afghanistan in the eighties, who still held some measure of loyalty, though they had risen to loftier heights. Skilled pilots with Mikhailov's experience were hard to find—and he told himself he was better while in his cups than half the kids in today's Federation Air Force when they were flying sober.

The disciplinary hearing had been excruciating. Listening to one's numerous shortcomings was difficult enough when drunk. A clear head made it nearly unbearable as the panel of generals ticked down the list, fault by disgusting fault. Those well-placed friends didn't stop the panel from threatening to have him cashiered, but even through the fog of shame he knew better. Had they wanted to take away his pension, they would have simply done it, not threatened it.

Though at times he felt a bucket would have been the perfect vessel from which to drink more vodka, Colonel Mikhailov managed to keep his mouth shut during the process. He did precisely as he was told, and he eventually earned back his wings—wings that brought with them enough trust for this mission.

He'd flown his Antonov 124 to Zhukovsky Airport from Migalovo the day before. The runway at the 6955th home base was adequate for the enormous bird, so long as she was empty, but load her up and it was a different story. Seventy-four thousand, three-hundred fifty-two kilograms heavier than it was the day before, the An-124 now needed substantially more runway on takeoff than Migalovo provided. Zhukovsky was located some thirty-six kilometers southeast of Moscow along the Moskva River. It served not only as a civilian international airport, but also as home to Gromov Flight Research Institute,

which added to the security protocols needed for sensitive missions like this one.

Apart from the performance and security reasons for changing airports, the two-hundred-kilometer flight served as a shakedown run for the crew of six—four of them new to Mikhailov. He had flown with one of the two engineers before, but the other, along with the radioman, navigator, and first officer, were not from the 224th. Substitutions like this happened, especially on this type of mission, but the An-124 community was relatively small, and he was surprised he'd never met any of these men. Had he stood on firmer ground with respect to his wings, he would have asked more questions. Mikhailov knew his reputation as a skilled pilot was unmatched in the notoriously tricky Antonov, but his reputation as a drunk was just as well known, even outside the military. The new crew members observed him carefully during the preflight briefing for any evidence of alcohol.

He'd arrived early this evening, used his identification card to badge his way through the concentric layers of gates, doors, and armed security personnel, making it to his airplane in time to watch the on-board overhead cranes and powerful winches load the two twenty-meter longwooden crates through the tail door. His flight manifest noted that the contents of each box was *osoboy vazhnosti*—of particular importance—what the United States called Top Secret. Their destination was Sary-Shagan in central Kazakhstan, making the classification somewhat moot. Sary-Shagan was a missile test facility, so there was no doubt as to what these were. There were no markings, other than computer barcodes, but dosimeters affixed to the fore end of each crate left little doubt that the items inside were nuclear. As pilot-in-command, he

OATH OF OFFICE

had to be informed that each item weighed a little over thirty-seven thousand kilos. The length and weight narrowed it down a bit, some kind of medium-range missile, surely a new model, since they were on their way to be tested. Mikhailov was paid to transport, not to deduce.

It didn't matter to him what he carried, so long as he was flying.

Attachment points on the missiles themselves protruded through small cutouts in the wood along the length of the crates, allowing the Antonov's internal crane system to load each item through the massive rear cargo door and nestle them all securely in the bay.

There was room to spare.

Mikhailov had moved a battalion of soldiers, huge military trucks, tanks, other aircraft, even a rescue submarine. He and his fellow pilots were fond of saying they were capable of transporting the Kremlin, so long as the weight was correctly distributed.

The loadmasters would stow the massive tow bar in the rear cargo area after the Antonov was pushed back; then they would stay behind in Zhukovsky, leaving the unloading of this cargo of particular importance to their counterparts at Sary-Shagan.

With his preflight inspection completed, Colonel Mikhailov walked up the open aft cargo ramp, hugged the wall to pass the secured missiles, and climbed the stairs to the upper deck. The rest of the crew had already taken up their positions in the cockpit. They bid him the customary welcome deserving of a colonel and pilot-in-command, and he settled himself into the left seat. No matter how many times he climbed in behind the yoke of any aircraft, he still felt a sense of wonder that heated his belly like . . . well, like a good drink.

MARC CAMERON

He put on a pair of reading glasses, ready to perform his portion of the pre-takeoff checklist, while the first officer, an imposing and broody man named Cherenko, read point by point from a laminated card. A civilian—or just as likely an FSB pilot—he wore dark slacks and a white shirt with three yellow stripes on the black shoulder boards.

A secondary warning light for the fire-suppression system in the cargo hold had not been replaced as per Mikhailov's order the previous day, but he made the decision to wait until they returned to Migalovo. The remainder of the checks were unremarkable.

Mikhailov turned to the navigator seated behind him, who'd already received clearance and instructions for takeoff from Delivery Control. "Flight time?"

Three hours and thirty-seven minutes, Colonel," the navigator said. "Winds are on the nose most of the way. A Ural Airbus 320 coming in from the south reported heavy turbulence at flight level one-nine-zero."

Mikhailov nodded, unperturbed. "Very well," he said. "Let us be on our way. I know a woman there who makes very good mutton stew."

"It is probably Kazakh horse cock," First Officer Cherenko said and chuckled as he stowed the preflight checklist in the binder beside his seat.

"Whatever it is"—Mikhailov shrugged, deciding he did not like the man—"the stew is delicious." He checked his watch—0104 hours—and leaned forward, adjusting the radio to hear the latest flight information service broadcast. He listened to the recorded message play all the way before giving a nod to the first officer. The trip from Migalovo the day before

OATH OF OFFICE

had established that Mikhailov preferred to let his copilot run the radios while he flew the airplane.

“Ground,” Cherenko said. “Antonov 2808 ready to taxi with information Bravo.”

“Antonov 2808,” a male voice said. *“Hold short Runway one-two, monitor Tower on one-one-niner-point-five.”*

Military pilots spoke in Russian among themselves, and, to the consternation of pilots transiting from other countries, the tower sometimes did as well. But English was the international language of aviation, and this air space was controlled by civilians. The tower controller put them in line behind an Il-76 heavy, cautioning them of wake turbulence from the departing giant.

“In line behind the heavy,” Cherenko responded. “Antonov 2808.”

A moment later the forty-six-meter, four-engine Ilyushin Il-76 lumbered down the runway, leaving invisible vortices of whirling wind behind it.

The controller spoke again. *“Antonov 2808 clear for takeoff on runway One-Two, fly runway heading until five thousand feet. Contact Moscow Departure.”*

Cherenko read back the instructions as Mikhailov pushed the throttles forward slowly. The airplane began to shudder in place as he babied the four Lotarev D-18T turbofan engines for almost five full minutes before he released the brakes and began his takeoff roll. Slowly, steadily, the great bird picked up enough speed to heave herself off the runway.

“Positive rate of climb, Colonel.” Cherenko’s voice came over the intercom in Russian now, eyes on the altimeter. “Landing gear up.”

MARC CAMERON

The massive Antonov was a touchy bird, but in Mikhailov's capable hands more than a half-million pounds of airplane, fuel, and secret cargo flew with remarkable grace.

Air traffic controller Svetlana Minsky licked chapped lips and pressed slender fingers against her headphones—as she was wont to do when she grew nervous. Her idiot boyfriend had convinced her to stop smoking, and she was feeling it tonight. A motivational poster tacked to the wall above her said in Cyrillic: *The same hammer that shatters glass forges steel.* The notion would have been hilarious had it not been so sad. The hammer that was Air Traffic Control was plenty capable of shattering steel. And anyway, Minsky was far too busy doing her job to be reading bullshit motivational posters. She and the dozens of other controllers on watch inside the windowless blue room of Moscow Center took care of the airspace for seventy airports in and around Moscow. Tonight was extra-hecktic, and she cursed her boyfriend for stealing her cigarettes.

The agitation in her gravel voice was apparent over the radio, earning her a side-eyed warning from her supervisor, who sat birdlike at a row of desks behind her, in the middle of the bullpen.

She watched a numbered blip appear on her radar screen as the sweep came around.

A new voice to go with the blip crackled in her headset. Thickly Slavic, the English would have been almost impossible for anyone but another Russian to understand. *“Moscow Departure, Antonov 2808 leaving eight hundred feet for five thousand.”*

“Antonov 2808, Radar contact. Continue climb as directed.”

OATH OF OFFICE

The Short-Term Conflict Alert on Minsky's computer showed a second Antonov, also with the Russian Air Force, bypassing Zhukovsky on a heading that would intercept 2808 at present speed and altitude. The planes were still eight miles apart. This gave her three miles before she'd have an "incident"—when two planes got closer than five lateral miles or a thousand feet of altitude.

Minsky dealt with other aircraft for a time, and gave a phlegmatic cough when she turned her attention back to the two Antonovs. All the open miles in the sky and these two bastards were determined to fly directly into each other.

Minsky wanted to curse almost as bad as she wanted a cigarette. *Antonov 2967, amend altitude to one four thousand, turn left thirty degrees for separation of company traffic departing Zhukovsky.*"

There was no response.

This was not unheard of. Pilots bumped radio knobs, switched to the wrong frequency, or became engrossed in some conversation with the flight deck. Sometimes they merely fell asleep.

Six miles apart.

Minsky tried again, repeating her command for 2967 to change altitude.

No response. The term to describe an aircraft that didn't respond over the radio was NORDO, but she didn't take the time to use it.

"Antonov 2808, maintain one six thousand, turn left thirty degrees without delay."

Closing in on five miles. This was too close to becoming an official "incident."

Both airplanes now climbed toward eighteen thousand feet,

MARC CAMERON

converging on the same point southwest along the Moskva River.

Minsky consoled herself that only one of them had to move out of the way.

The pilot answered with a read-back of her instructions. *"Maintain one six thousand, turn left thirty degrees, Antonov 2808."*

Minsky snatched up a small rubber alligator her boyfriend had given her to combat the stress of not smoking. She began to squeeze it, as if trying to obliterate the stupid thing from the world. She sighed in relief at the read-back as the number representing 2808 on her radar screen moved from its original path, following her instructions.

Inexplicably, the radar blip that was 2967 moved as well, directly toward 2808 in heading and rate of climb.

Minsky didn't waste time on the NORDO airplane.

"Antonov 2808, turn left thirty degrees immediately."

In the parlance of air traffic control, "immediately" meant exactly that. The pilot should not take time to disengage the autopilot or fool with the heading bug. He was to grab the yoke and turn the airplane the very moment he heard the command.

Antonov 2808 acknowledged, but did not alter course.

Fifteen feet away, across the dimly lit room, the "snitch" on the supervisor's computer alerted him that there was a problem at the same moment Minsky reached up and snapped her fingers to get his attention. He rolled his chair across the blue industrial carpeting, eyes wide when he saw the two blips on the screen coming closer.

Minsky didn't expect him to help, she just wanted a witness that she was doing everything by the book.

"Try the other one," the supervisor whispered.

OATH OF OFFICE

The conflict alert alarm sounded on her radar, signaling two minutes until a midair collision. The Americans called an incident like this a “deal”—certainly the most supreme of all understatements, Minsky thought.

She tried again.

“Antonov 2967, turn right thirty degrees, immediately. Maintain flight level one-niner-zero. Break. Antonov 2808, turn left thirty degrees for separation, company traffic three miles off your right wing. Break. Antonov 2967, turn right immediately.”

Nothing.

Minsky crushed the rubber alligator in her fist, smacking it over and over against her desk. She could have been singing “Bayu Bayushki Bayu” to these idiots for all the good it was doing.

Then, blessedly: *“Left thirty degrees, Antonov 2808.”*

The blip began to alter course with each radar sweep.

Minsky released a pent-up breath. “Thank you, 2808. 2967 is NORDO.”

“We will attempt contact,” 2808 replied.

Minsky allowed herself a moment to rub strained eyes with the heel of her hand, but a string of expletives from her supervisor snapped her back to attention. Antonov 2808 adjusted course as directed, but the second bird moved right along with it. At their present course and altitude, the two airplanes would very soon become a fireball over Russia.

Minsky continued to give voice commands. Her supervisor typed the identical flight instructions into the Sintez computer system, sending them to the aircraft via electronic message. At the same time, other traffic was diverted far away from the area. The second Antonov seemed bent on a midair collision. She watched in horror as the two blips on her screen

MARC CAMERON

grew closer with each sweep of the radar, squawking the ident numbers of their respective transponders.

“Antonov 2967,” Minsky said again. The pleading ran like a fissure of softer stone through her granite voice. “You must maintain altitude and present heading.” She repeated the same in Russian, just in case.

The targets momentarily froze into what was called a “ghost track” as the confused radar and computer processors worked to reacquire the two airplanes.

The supervisor groaned, leaning in almost on top of Minsky for emotional support. His voice cracked. “Twenty seconds. Then we will know.”

The high perch of the Antonov’s flight deck gave 2808’s crew a terrifying view of the belly of the aircraft above as it overflew them, bearing down like an eagle swooping on her prey. Colonel Mikhailov cursed through gritted teeth, pushing the yoke forward as the other plane flew directly overhead at four hundred feet, matching course as if shadowing in a tight formation.

The instruments flickered momentarily, along with the cabin lights. Mikhailov heard the flight engineer seated behind him say something unintelligible, but his hands were full and he didn’t have time to check in.

“I have the airplane,” Cherenko said from the right seat.

Mikhailov’s head snapped around. “Negative, it is still my air—”

The cold steel of a pistol barrel against his neck caused the colonel to freeze. Very slowly, he lifted his hands from the yoke.

“You have the airplane,” he said.

OATH OF OFFICE

He half turned to see the first engineer, unconscious in a heap on the floor, drugged or struck in the head. It was impossible to tell. The engineer he did not know held the pistol in a sure hand. Smiling serenely.

The second Antonov continued to shadow them. The transponder blinked off and then came back on, flashing a completely different ident number.

The radio squawked and a new voice came across as the second plane peeled away, wing lifting into the night.

“Moscow Departure, Antonov 2808. We are in the clear. 2967 passed directly beneath us.”

The radioman behind Mikhailov spoke now. *“Moscow Departure, Antonov 2967. Sorry about that. We experienced an intense electrical storm that had us all flying blind. We have it worked out.”*

“2967, do you wish to declare an emergency?” the female controller asked, her voice strained from the near miss on her watch.

“Captain advises negative,” Cherenko said. “We will land in Saratov and perform required systems check. Antonov 2967.”

The controller gave him a telephone number to call to “discuss the matter further.” A report would certainly be logged. He acknowledged receipt but did not write anything down.

Mikhailov started to lower his hands, but the engineer prodded him with the pistol until he rested them on top of his head.

“So,” Mikhailov muttered, “we have become 2967 and they are now us.” The radioman continued to speak with Departure, and Mikhailov felt the airplane bank sharply to the right, heading almost due south. He looked at his first officer, pained at the stupid futility of all this. “There are other ways for them to figure out who we are.”

MARC CAMERON

“True enough,” the engineer with the pistol said. “But with the right equipment and the right people supporting. . . .”

“What could you hope to gain? The missiles will be useless without the launch-control devices.”

“That is true as well,” the radioman said, smiling down at the two leather briefcases at his feet.

Mikhailov felt as if his insides had broken.

“I see,” he said. “What will happen when the other airplane reaches Kazakhstan with no nuclear missiles onboard?”

“It will fly in that direction,” Cherenko said. “Unfortunately, the same electrical storm we just experienced must have damaged that aircraft’s navigation and communication systems. It will drop out of radar contact somewhere over the wooded hills of the Bashkiriya forest and be lost en route. I can assure you, that plane will not be found.”

“Then what is our destination?”

Cherenko glanced sideways and shook his head. “That, I am afraid, Comrade Colonel, is no longer your concern. For, you see, you are supposed to be aboard the doomed aircraft.” He twisted a little farther in his seat to make eye contact with the radioman seated at the workstation behind him. “Yuri, it is already Thursday—little Friday. Would you be so kind as to get the colonel some vodka?”

“No . . . I . . .” Mikhailov stammered. “I . . . do not drink—”

“My friend,” Cherenko said softly. “Do yourself a favor and have some vodka. It will make what comes next . . . easier.”