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JOEL C.
ROSENBERG

DAMASCUS
COUNT
DOWN

A NOVEL



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ROSENBERG**

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DAMASCUS COUNT DOWN

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Damascus Countdown

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*To the captive and cruelly treated people of Syria—
especially those in Damascus—yearning to be free.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Tehran, Iran, is one and a half hours ahead of Jerusalem and
eight and a half hours ahead of New York and Washington, D.C.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AMERICANS

David Shirazi (aka Reza Tabrizi)—field officer, Central Intelligence Agency

Marseille Harper—schoolteacher; childhood friend of David Shirazi

Jack Zalinsky—senior operative, Central Intelligence Agency

Eva Fischer—field officer/analyst, Central Intelligence Agency/National Security Agency

Roger Allen—director, Central Intelligence Agency

Tom Murray—deputy director for operations, Central Intelligence Agency

William Jackson—president of the United States

Daniel Montgomery—U.S. ambassador to Israel

Marco Torres—commander, CIA paramilitary unit

Nick Crenshaw—field agent, CIA paramilitary unit

Steve Fox—field agent, CIA paramilitary unit

Matt Mays—field agent, CIA paramilitary unit

Dr. Mohammad Shirazi—cardiologist, father of David Shirazi

Chris and Lexi Vandermark—newlyweds; college friends of Marseille
Harper

IRANIANS

Dr. Alireza Birjandi—preeminent scholar of Shia Islamic eschatology

Najjar Malik—former physicist, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran;
defected to the U.S.

Ayatollah Hamid Hosseini—Supreme Leader

Ahmed Darazi—president of Iran

Mohsen Jazini—commander, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps; aide
to the Twelfth Imam

Dr. Jalal Zandi—nuclear physicist

Javad Nouri—personal aide to Ayatollah Hosseini and the Twelfth
Imam

Ali Faridzadeh—minister of defense

Ibrahim Asgari—commander of VEVAK, secret police

Daryush Rashidi—CEO, Iran Telecom; aide to the Twelfth Imam

Abdol Esfahani—deputy director, Iran Telecom; aide to the Twelfth Imam

ISRAELIS

Asher Naphtali—prime minister of Israel

Levi Shimon—defense minister

Zvi Dayan—director, Mossad

Gal Rinat—field operative, Mossad

Tolik Shalev—field operative, Mossad

OTHERS

Muhammad Ibn Hasan Ibn Ali—the Twelfth Imam

Iskander Farooq—president of Pakistan

Gamal Mustafa—president of Syria

General Youssef Hamdi—air marshal, Syrian Air Force

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THURSDAY
MARCH 10



PREFACE

FROM THE TEHRAN INITIATIVE

QOM, IRAN

David Shirazi glanced at his watch. He took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves. The plan required split-second timing. There could be no changes. No surprises. Time was short. The stakes were high. And there was no backing out now. But there was one thing he had to accept: in three minutes, he'd quite possibly be dead.

David ordered his cab driver to pull up in front of the famed Jamkaran Mosque. He paid the driver but asked him to pull over and wait. He had a package to deliver, he told the man, but it would only take a moment, and he'd be right back.

David carefully scanned the crowd. He did not yet see his contact, but he had no doubt the man would show. In the meantime, it was hard not to marvel at the structure, the mammoth turquoise dome of the mosque in the center, flanked by two smaller green domes and two exquisitely painted minarets. Built on a site revered since the tenth century, when a Shia cleric of the time, Sheikh Hassan Ibn Muthlih Jamkarani, was supposedly visited by the Twelfth Imam, it had once been farmland. Now it was one of the most visited religious destinations in all of Iran.

Over the last few years, Iran's Supreme Ayatollah and president—both of whom were devout “Twelvers,” passionate disciples of the so-called Islamic messiah—had funneled millions of dollars to renovate the mosque and its facilities and build beautiful new multilane highways from the mosque to Qom and Tehran. Both leaders visited regularly, and the mosque had become the subject of myriad books, television programs, and documentary films. After the recent emergence of the Twelfth Imam on the planet and the rumor that a little girl mute from

birth had been healed by the Mahdi after visiting the mosque, the crowds continued to build.

David paced back and forth in front of the main gate leading into the sacred complex. He felt the satellite phone in his pocket vibrating. He knew it was the Global Operations Center. He knew his superiors at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, were watching everything that was happening via a Predator drone hovering two miles or so above his head. But he didn't dare take the call. Not here. Not now. Whatever they had to say, it was too late. He didn't want to do anything that might spook the man he had come to meet. So he ignored the vibrating and glanced again at his watch. He was right on time. So where was Javad Nouri?

He watched as buses filled with Shia pilgrims pulled in, dropped off their passengers and guides, and then circled around to the main parking lot, while other buses pulled up and loaded their passengers to head home. He estimated that there were a couple hundred people milling about out front, either coming or going. There were a few uniformed police officers around, but everything seemed quiet and orderly. Nouri, a close and trusted aide to the Twelfth Imam, was a shrewd man. He had chosen well. Any disturbance here would have scores of witnesses, and David worried about what might happen to the innocent bystanders.

David felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around, and there was Javad Nouri, surrounded by a half-dozen plainclothes bodyguards.

"Mr. Tabrizi, good to see you again," Javad Nouri said, referring to David by the only name the Iranian knew for him.

"Mr. Nouri, you as well."

"I trust you had no trouble getting here."

"Not at all," David said.

"Have you ever been here before?" Nouri asked.

It seemed like an odd question, given the moment.

"Actually, I'm ashamed to say I have not."

"Someday I will have to give you a tour."

"I would like that very much."

Nouri looked at the box in David's hands. "Is that the package we were expecting?"

"It is," David said, "but we have a problem."

“What is that?”

David glanced around. He noticed there were several more bodyguards taking up positions in a perimeter around them. There was also a large white SUV waiting by the curb with a guard holding the back door open. Ahead of it was another SUV, presumably serving as the lead security car. Behind it was a third, completing the package.

“Most of the phones are damaged and unusable,” David explained, handing the mangled box to the Mahdi’s aide. “Something must have happened in the shipping.”

Nouri cursed, and his expression darkened. “We *need* these.”

“I know,” David replied.

“Now what are we going to do?”

“Look, I can go back to Munich and get more. It’s what I wanted to do in the first place. But—”

“But Esfahani told you not to leave.”

“Well, I—”

“I know, I know. Allah help me. Esfahani is a fool. If he weren’t the nephew of Mohsen Jazini, he wouldn’t be involved at all.”

“What do you want me to do, Mr. Nouri?” David asked. “That’s all that matters, what you and the Promised One want. Please know that I will do anything to serve.”

The words had just fallen from his lips when David heard brakes screech behind him. Then everything seemed to go into slow motion. The plan his team had created began to unfold, and David could only hope it went as they anticipated. He heard the crack of a sniper rifle. One of Nouri’s bodyguards went down. *Crack, crack*. Two more of Nouri’s men went down. Then Nouri himself took a bullet in the right shoulder. He began to stagger. Blood was everywhere. David threw himself on Nouri to protect him as the gunfire intensified and more bodyguards were hit and collapsed to the ground.

David turned to look toward the shooters. He could see rows of buses. He saw taxis. He saw people running and screaming. Then his eyes fixed on a white van driving past. The side door was open. He could see flashes of gunfire pouring out of three muzzles inside, and he knew his teammates were the ones pulling the triggers.

An Iranian police officer—a guard assigned to the mosque—pulled out his revolver and began returning fire. Two of Nouri’s plainclothes agents on the periphery raised submachine guns and fired at the van as it sped away, weaving in and out of traffic and disappearing around the bend.

Now it was time for phase two, designed to slow down anyone from chasing after his men.

David anticipated the blast as a car bomb detonated just a hundred yards from them. He instinctively ducked down. He shielded his eyes and did his best to cover Nouri’s body from the shards of glass and molten metal that were coming down on top of them. The air was filled with the smell of burning and panic. As the thick, black smoke began to clear a bit, David could see flames shooting from what was left of the lead car in Nouri’s security package.

All around him, people were crying and bleeding and yelling for help. David now turned to Nouri. He could see the open wound in the man’s upper arm, but after a fast check he didn’t find any other bullet holes. He pulled out a handkerchief and applied pressure. Then he pulled off his belt and created a tourniquet to stanch the bleeding.

“Javad, look at me,” David said gently. “It’s going to be okay. Just keep your eyes on me. I’m going to pray for you.”

Nouri flickered to life for a moment and mouthed the words *Thank you*. Then his eyes closed again, and David called out for someone to help them.

Suddenly four fighter jets roared over the mosque. They were flying incredibly fast and low, and the sound was deafening. But these were not aging Iranian F-4 Phantoms, bought by the Shah from the U.S. before the Revolution. Nor were they Russian-built MiG-29s or any other jet in the Iranian arsenal. These were gleaming new F-16s, loaded with munitions and extra fuel tanks. David knew full well President Jackson hadn’t sent them. These weren’t American fighters. Which could only mean one thing: the Israelis were here. Prime Minister Naphtali had really done it. He had ordered a massive preemptive strike. The war everyone in the region had feared had begun.

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QOM, IRAN

David knew one of Iran's largest nuclear facilities—the uranium enrichment plant at Fordow—was just a few miles away over the ridge, and sure enough, a split second later, he heard the deafening roar of explosions, one after another in rapid succession. He turned and saw enormous balls of fire and plumes of smoke rising into the sky and the four Israeli jets disappearing into the clouds.

But then another strike package came swooping down behind them. Four more Israeli fighters—emblazoned with the blue Star of David on their wings—descended like lightning. He assumed their mission, too, was to attack the facility down the road. But David watched in horror as one of the jets first fired an air-to-ground missile at the heart of the mosque behind him. They were sending a message to the Twelfth Imam and to all his followers. But they were about to destroy David's plan.

His instinct was to get up and run for cover, but it was too late, and he had to do everything possible to protect Javad Nouri. That was his mission. Under no circumstances could he allow Nouri to die. He absolutely had to deliver the aide back to the Mahdi wounded but alive and indebted to David. It was, he believed, the only chance to gain the Mahdi's trust and the only shred of a chance he had to be invited into the inner circle. Then again, did any of that matter now? The war he had been sent to prevent was under way. The carnage on both sides was going to be incalculable. The entire region was about to go up in flames. What was left for him to do?

Suddenly the ground convulsed as a series of explosions ripped

through the complex. The minarets began to totter. People were screaming again, running in all directions as the first tower came crashing down and the second followed. David covered his head and made sure Nouri was covered too. Then, as the smoke began to clear, he turned and surveyed the carnage. Bodies were sprawled everywhere. Some were dead. Others were severely wounded. David turned Nouri over. He was covered in blood. His eyes were dilated, but he was breathing. He was still alive.

Guns drawn, three injured bodyguards soon rushed to David's side. With his help, they carefully picked up Nouri and carried him to the white SUV, severely damaged by the car bombing nearby but still intact and still running. Together, they laid Nouri down on the backseat. One security man climbed in the back with him. Another climbed into one of the middle seats. The third shut and locked the side door, then got in the front passenger seat.

"Wait, wait; you forgot these," David yelled just before the guard closed the door. He grabbed the box of satellite phones and gave them to the guard. "The Mahdi wanted these. They don't all work. But some of them do."

Then he pulled out a pen and quickly wrote his mobile number on the box. "Have the Mahdi's people call me and tell me how Javad is. And tell me if there's anything I can do for the Mahdi himself."

The guard thanked David and shook his hand vigorously. Then he shut the door, and what was left of the motorcade raced off.

David stood there alone as the ground shook again. More Israeli jets were swooping down from the heavens. They were firing more missiles and dropping more bombs on targets just over the mountains. For a moment, David couldn't move. He stared at the billows of smoke rising from the air strikes over the horizon and tried to calculate his next move.

He looked to the street, searching for the taxi he'd asked to wait. It was nowhere to be seen, but he could hardly blame the driver. People were panicked from the gunfire, the car bombing, and the air strikes. They were fleeing as rapidly as they could in every direction. David knew he had to get away as well. He couldn't afford to be caught by

the police and dragged in for questioning. He had a mission. He had a plan. He had a team that was counting on him. He knew he had to stay focused, yet he grieved for those wounded around him. So he turned and rushed to the side of one severely wounded guard who was slipping into unconsciousness. Hearing sirens approaching from every direction, David took off his jacket and used it to put pressure on the man's bleeding leg. As he did, he silently prayed over the man, asking the Lord to comfort and heal him.

Ambulances began arriving on the scene. Paramedics were soon rushing to the wounded to triage them and get the most critical cases to the nearest hospitals. Amid the chaos and confusion, David saw his opportunity. He took a pistol off the wounded bodyguard and slipped it into his pocket. Then he moved to another of the downed guards. The man seemed to be staring up at the sky. His mouth was open. But when David checked for a pulse, he found none. David closed the man's eyes, then quickly lifted a spare magazine and took the guard's two-way radio.

Firefighters were now arriving to battle multiple blazes. More police officers were pulling up as well. They began to secure the crime scene and interview what few witnesses had not fled the scene quickly enough. David tried to use the commotion as cover. He was determined not to be questioned, much less exposed. But then he heard someone shouting behind him. David turned and saw an elderly cleric, blood splattered all over his robes, pointing at him.

"Talk to that man!" the cleric said to a police officer. "He was here when all the shooting started. And I think he just took something off that dead body."

The policeman looked directly at David and ordered him to stop. David didn't dare. With a surge of adrenaline, he pivoted hard and began sprinting into the blazing wreckage of the mosque. The officer shouted again for him to halt and began running after him, blowing a whistle and calling other officers to join the pursuit.