

JOEL C.
ROSENBERG

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

WITHOUT
WARNING

A J. B. COLLINS NOVEL

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

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

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

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Author and speaker

“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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P R E F A C E



From *The First Hostage*

The camera zoomed in on the president.

And then, on cue, Taylor spoke directly to the camera.

“My name is Harrison Beresford Taylor,” he said slowly, methodically, wincing several times as if in pain. As he spoke, Arabic subtitles scrolled across the bottom of the screen. “I am the forty-fifth president of the United States. I was captured by the Islamic State in Amman on December 5. I am being held by the Islamic State in a location that has not been disclosed to me, but I can say . . . I can say honestly . . . I can say honestly that I am being treated well and have been given the opportunity to give *ba’yah*—that is to say, to pledge allegiance . . . to the Islamic State. I ask my fellow Americans, including all my colleagues in Washington, to listen . . . to listen carefully . . . that is, to listen carefully and respectfully to the emir,

and to follow the instructions . . . he is about to set forth for my safe and expeditious return.”

When Taylor was finished, the camera panned back to Abu Khalif, emir of the Islamic State.

“Allah has given this infidel into our hands,” Khalif said in Arabic. “O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you! Raise your heads high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a sign of his favor upon you. You also have a state and caliphate, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. All praise and thanks are due to Allah. Therefore, rush, O Muslims, to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis, and Jordan is not for the Jordanians. The earth belongs to Allah.

“I make a special call to you, O soldiers of the Islamic State—do not be awestruck by the great numbers of your enemy, for Allah is with you. I do not fear the numbers of your opponents, nor do I fear your neediness and poverty, for Allah has promised your Prophet—peace be upon him—that you will not be wiped out by famine, and your enemy will not conquer you or continue to violate and control your land. I promised you that in the name of Allah we would capture the American president, and I have kept my word. The king of Jordan will soon be in our hands. So will all the infidel leaders in this region. So will all the dogs in Rome. The ancient prophecies tell us the End of Days is upon us and with it the judgment of all who will not bow the knee and submit to Allah and his commanders on the earth.”

Khalif now turned to his right and faced a new camera angle. Behind him was a shadowy stone wall. When he resumed speaking, it was in English.

“Now I speak directly to Vice President Holbrooke. Fearful and trembling, weak and unsteady, you and the infidels you lead have lost your way. Now you have three choices—convert to Islam, pay the *jizyah*, or die. You must choose your fate and choose it quickly.

If you and your country choose to convert, you must give a speech to the world doing so under the precise language and conditions of Sharia law, and you will be blessed by Allah and have peace with the caliphate. If you choose to pay the *jizyah*, you must pay \$1,000 U.S. for every man, woman, and child living in the United States of America. If you do not, or if you act with aggression in any matter against me or against the caliphate, the next video you see will be your beloved president beheaded or burned alive. From the time of this broadcast, you have forty-eight hours, and not a minute more.”

PART ONE



1



THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON, D.C.
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15

I had never been in the Oval Office before.

But I'd always imagined my first time going differently.

The tension wasn't immediately apparent as I stepped into the most coveted executive suite on the planet. But it would come. It had to. I would force it. And when it did, my fate would be sealed.

At first, the president and I were both on our best behavior. As far as he was concerned, our past battles were water under the bridge. Yes, in Amman he had been blindsided by an enemy he neither truly understood nor saw coming. But in his eyes, the successful rescue effort had been enough to shift the balance of power, and he had adapted quickly. Tonight, as he addressed the nation and the world in a live televised speech to a joint session of Congress, he was at the top of his game. Soaring in the polls. Confounding his critics. Seemingly destined to leave the American people the legacy of peace, prosperity, and security they so desperately longed for.

The president beckoned for me to be seated, then took a seat himself behind the *Resolute* desk, built from the timbers of a British naval vessel abandoned in a storm in 1854. As he did, he opened a black

leather binder embossed with the presidential seal. He picked up a Montblanc fountain pen and excused himself for a moment to make a few final edits to his speech before we loaded into the motorcade to head up to Capitol Hill together.

With every passing moment, my anxiety grew. In less than an hour, Harrison Beresford Taylor, the nation's forty-fifth president, would deliver his annual report to the legislature. He would assert unequivocally, as he had on every other such occasion, that "the state of the union is strong."

Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

I could take it no longer. It was time to say what I had come to say.

"Mr. President, I very much appreciate you inviting me here. I know you have a great deal on your plate right now. But I have to ask you, not as a reporter, just as me. Do you have a plan to kill Abu Khalif or not?"

It was a simple, direct question. But it immediately became apparent that Taylor was going to avoid giving me a simple, direct response.

"I think you're going to be very pleased with my speech tonight, Collins," he said, leaning back in his black leather chair.

"Why?" I asked.

"Trust me," he said with a smile.

"That's not exactly in my nature, sir."

"Well, do your best."

"Mr. President, are you going to lay out for the American people a plan to take down the ISIS emir?"

"Look, Collins, in case you haven't noticed, in the last two months we've ripped ISIL to shreds. We're targeting all of their leaders, including the emir. We've stepped up our drone strikes. We've taken out twenty-three high-value targets in the last six weeks alone. Is it going as fast as I'd like? No, and I'm pushing the Joint Chiefs. But you need to have patience. We're making great progress, and we're going to get this thing done. You'll see."

“Mr. President, with all due respect, how can you say we’re making progress?” I shot back. “Abu Khalif is on a genocidal rampage. As we speak, he’s slaughtering Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and anyone who gets in his way: beheading them, crucifying them, enslaving them—men, women, and children. We’re getting reports of unspeakable acts of cruelty, worse every day. He’s murdered your friends and mine. This is the guy who held you captive. If we hadn’t gotten there when we did, he would have taken a knife and personally sawed off your head—or put you in a cage and burned you alive—and uploaded the video to YouTube for the entire world to see.”

“And now we have them on the run,” Taylor countered. “We’re blowing up their oil fields. We’re seizing their assets. We’re blocking their ability to move money around the world. We’re shutting down their social media accounts and cutting off their communications.”

“It’s not enough, Mr. President,” I insisted. “Not unless you’re going after the emir directly. You’re hitting his men and his money, but, sir, you can’t kill the snake unless you cut off its head. So I must ask you again: have you signed a presidential directive to take Abu Khalif out, or not?”