

JOEL C.
ROSENBERG

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER THE KREMLIN CONSPIRACY

THE
PERSIAN
GAMBLE

A NOVEL

PRAISE FOR JOEL C. ROSENBERG

“Joel Rosenberg has an uncanny talent for focusing his storytelling on real-world hot spots just as they are heating up. He has done it again in *The Kremlin Conspiracy*.”

PORTER GOSS, *former director of the Central Intelligence Agency*

“Marcus Ryker rocks! Breakneck action, political brinksmanship, authentic scenarios, and sharply defined characters make Joel C. Rosenberg’s *Kremlin Conspiracy* a full-throttle and frightening ride through tomorrow’s headlines.”

BRIGADIER GENERAL (U.S. ARMY, RETIRED) A. J. TATA,
national bestselling author of Direct Fire

“Joel C. Rosenberg writes taut, intelligent thrillers that are as timely as they are well-written. Pairing a fast-paced plot with an impressive understanding of the inner workings in the corridors of power of the Russian government, *The Kremlin Conspiracy* is a stellar novel of riveting action and political intrigue.”

MARK GREANEY, *#1 New York Times bestselling author of Agent in Place*

“*The Kremlin Conspiracy* is my first Joel C. Rosenberg novel, and I am absolutely blown away by how good this guy is. The story moves at a blistering pace, it’s crackling with tension, and you won’t put it down until you reach the end. Guaranteed. Simply masterful.”

SEAN PARNELL, *New York Times bestselling author of Outlaw Platoon*

“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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“One of my favorite things: An incredible thriller—it’s called *The Third Target* by Joel C. Rosenberg. . . . He’s amazing. . . . He writes the greatest thrillers set in the Middle East, with so much knowledge of that part of the world. . . . Fabulous! I’ve read every book he’s ever written!”

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“[Joel Rosenberg] understands the grave dangers posed by Iran and Syria, and he’s been a bold and courageous voice for true peace and security in the Middle East.”

DANNY AYALON, *former Israeli deputy foreign minister*

“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.”

REZA KAHLILI, *former CIA operative in Iran and bestselling author of A Time to Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran*

“Joel Rosenberg is unsurpassed as the writer of fiction thrillers! Sometimes I have to remind myself to breathe as I read one of his novels because I find myself holding my breath in suspense as I turn the pages.”

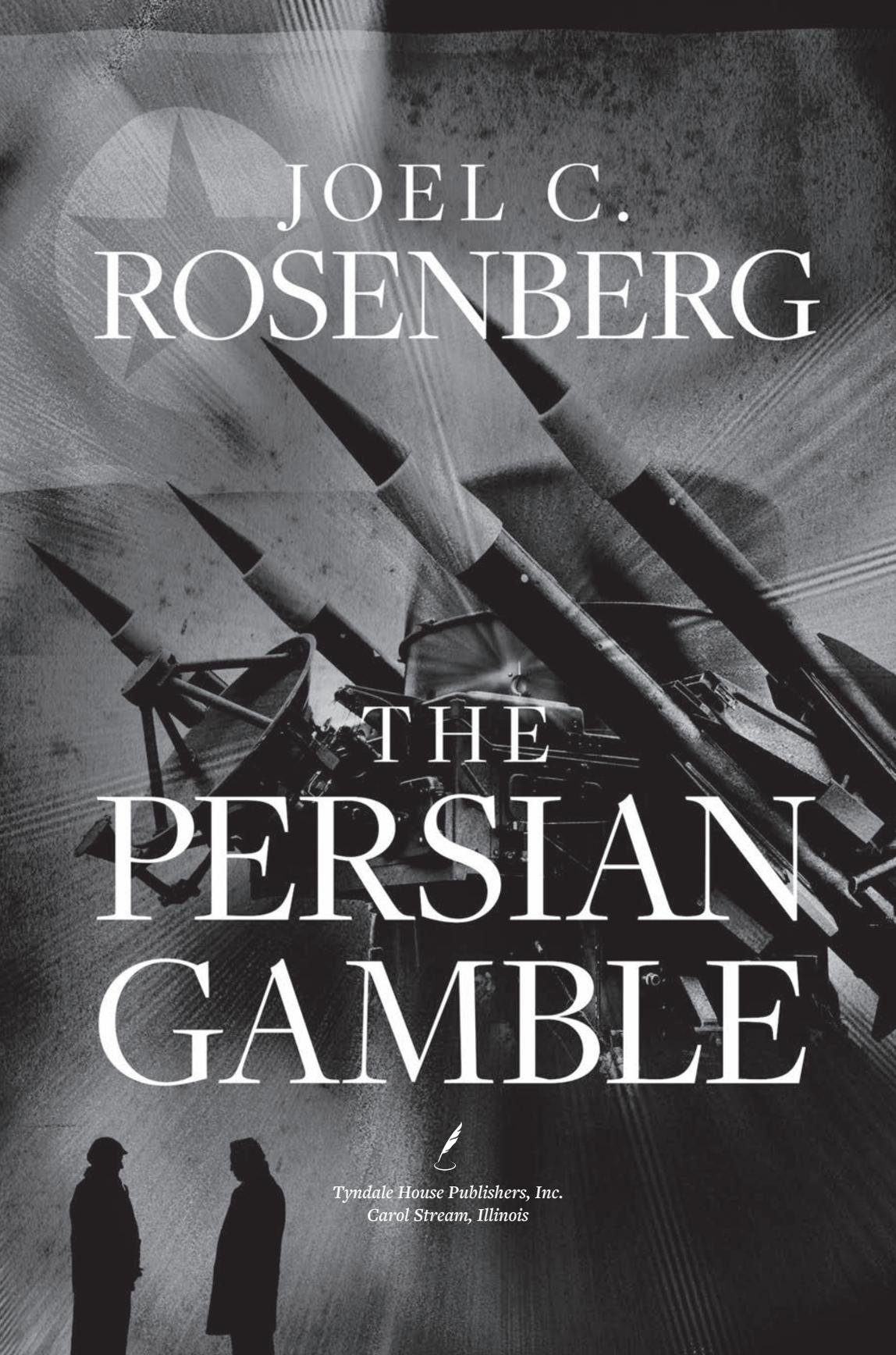
ANNE GRAHAM LOTZ, *author and speaker*

“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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The Persian Gamble

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The Persian Gamble 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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*To the noble, enslaved people of Persia, who have
suffered four decades of cruel and bloodthirsty tyranny—
may you soon breathe the sweet air of freedom.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Americans

Marcus Ryker—*former U.S. Secret Service agent; former U.S. Marine*

Jennifer Morris—*CIA station chief, Moscow*

Nick Vinetti—*deputy chief of mission, U.S. Embassy, Moscow;*
former U.S. Marine

William McDermott—*deputy national security advisor;*
former U.S. Marine

Andrew Clarke—*president of the United States*

Robert Dayton—*U.S. senator (D-Iowa); member of the Senate*
Intelligence Committee

Peter Hwang—*advisor to Senator Robert Dayton; former U.S. Marine*

Annie Stewart—*senior foreign policy advisor to Senator Robert Dayton*

Cal Foster—*U.S. secretary of defense*

Richard Stephens—*director of the Central Intelligence Agency*

Martha Dell—*deputy director of intelligence (DDI), Central*
Intelligence Agency

Barry Evans—*U.S. national security advisor*

Tyler Reed—*ambassador, U.S. Embassy, Moscow*

Carter Emerson—*pastor, Lincoln Park Baptist Church,*
Washington, D.C.

Marjorie Ryker—*Marcus's mother*

Curt Berenger—*commander of SEAL Team Six*

Héctor Sanchez—*Blue Team leader, SEAL Team Six*

Donny Callaghan—*Red Team leader, SEAL Team Six*

Russians

Oleg Stefanovich Kraskin—*senior aide and son-in-law to the late
President Luganov*

Mikhail Borisovich Petrovsky—*minister of defense*

Maxim Grigarin—*prime minister*

Boris Zakharov—*former chief of staff to President Luganov*

Boris Yamirev—*deputy defense minister*

Nikolay Kropatkin—*deputy director of the FSB*

Marina Kraskin—*Oleg's wife; Luganov's daughter*

Iranians

Alireza al-Zanjani—*deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary
Guard Corps*

Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ansari—*Supreme Leader of Iran*

Yadollah Afshar—*president of the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Mahmoud Entezam—*commander of the Iranian Revolutionary
Guard Corps*

Haydar Abbasi—*director of Iran's missile program*

North Koreans

Hyong Ja Park—*Dear Leader of North Korea*

Yong-Jin Yoon—*deputy chief of military intelligence*

Others

Reuven Eitan—*prime minister of Israel*

Asher Gilad—*director of Mossad*

Abdulaziz bin Faisal—*minister of defense; heir to the throne of
Saudi Arabia*

Abdullah bin Rashid—*director of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence
Directorate*

Khalid bin Ibrahim—*chief of intelligence for the United Arab Emirates*

Mohammed Yakub—*Pakistani nuclear physicist*



PART
ONE

1

**SOMEWHERE OVER NORTHWESTERN RUSSIA—29 SEPTEMBER
NINETY MINUTES AFTER THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT'S ASSASSINATION**

Don't die, and don't get arrested.

Marcus Ryker hurtled through frigid darkness at terminal velocity as words from his childhood echoed through his head.

From the day he'd become a teenager, his mother had uttered these words to him more times than he could possibly remember. Every time he left for school. Every time he went out with friends. Every time he borrowed the car or hiked a fourteener or went white-water rafting. Marjorie Ryker knew her only son well. Marcus wasn't simply a kid who loved adventure and pushing all limits all the time. He was an adrenaline junkie, and she'd genuinely—and rightly—feared one mis-step could prove catastrophic.

Now pushing forty, Marcus was free-falling through a thick band of cloud cover, somewhere over northwestern Russia. He could see

nothing. Not the moon nor the stars. Not the twinkling lights of a single city or village or hamlet below. Nor could he hear a sound, save the steady hiss of the oxygen flowing into his helmet. He couldn't hear the air whipping past at 120 miles per hour. He couldn't even hear the scream of jet engines as six MiG fighters bore down on him from multiple angles at twice the speed of sound.

Only moments before, Marcus and his two colleagues had lunged out of the side of a Gulfstream IV at an altitude of eighteen thousand feet. Now they were quickly passing under ten thousand feet. But they had swerved far off their intended flight path before jumping. What actually lay below them now was anyone's guess.

To their left was the Gulf of Finland. Off to their right—*far* off, Marcus hoped—was Lake Ladoga. Were they to hit either body of water during the unseasonably early and intense blizzard engulfing the region, their fate would be sealed. They would freeze to death in minutes. Yet if his calculations were correct, they should more likely come down somewhere on a spit of land known as the Karelian Isthmus. That would still put them in Russian territory and thus in serious risk of being hunted down and found. Should that happen, he'd rather die than be arrested. But they could also land within striking distance of the Finnish border, giving them a shot at reaching safety.

In the early morning darkness, Marcus forced his mother's words from his thoughts and began mentally ticking through all the gear he'd asked the Agency to load onto the plane ahead of their escape. It would be all they'd have to keep them alive. There were a sniper rifle, an AK-47, and two pistols, all Russian-made. There was a box of ammunition, though certainly not enough to get them through more than limited contact with Russian forces. They had a handheld GPS unit and a satellite phone. They also had an all-weather tent, a hatchet, a hunting knife, ropes, three water bottles, a medical kit, matches, and—

A massive explosion erupted above them. The heat-seeking missiles had finally found their target. The dark sky was engulfed in

a blinding fireball of searing orange and red. In moments, molten metal—remnants of the \$40 million business jet—would begin raining down around them, and the icy earth was rushing up fast.

Plunging downward in a spread-eagle posture, Marcus wiped away the ice crystals forming on the altimeter strapped to his wrist. *Six thousand feet. Five thousand feet. Four thousand. Three thousand.* Had he been alone, he would have held out longer, until he was closer to the ground and far less likely to be spotted. But while Marcus had trained for HALO jumps during his stint in the Marines, the forty-six-year-old Russian at his side had not.

Oleg Kraskin—code-named the Raven—had served in the Red Army. He'd completed basic training but had gone on to work as a clerk in the office of military attorneys. He'd neither jumped out of a plane in his life nor imagined having to do so. Marcus had seen the terror in the man's eyes when he'd briefed him on the escape plan. But there was no other way. He needed the Raven alive, so the decision wasn't hard. Better they should pull their rip cords now than delay any further and risk a miscalculation that could prove fatal.

As they broke through the cloud cover around twenty-three hundred feet, Marcus spotted his Russian comrade thirty yards to his right and gave the signal that it was time.

There was no response.

Again Marcus signaled with a wave of his arms, but again Oleg neither acknowledged him nor opened his chute.

Something was wrong. Marcus had drilled into Oleg the few essential things he needed to remember to survive this jump. Why wasn't he responding?

Plunging beneath fifteen hundred feet, Marcus tried again to get the Russian's attention, to no avail. Now he had mere seconds to act. He could feel his heart rate spiking. A massive shot of adrenaline surged through his system. Pulling his arms to his sides and bringing his feet together, Marcus leaned right, cutting a path through the rushing wind and blowing snow. It was an awkward maneuver, made more so by the

wounded woman slipping in and out of consciousness strapped to the front of his tandem jumpsuit, complicating his every move.

A moment later, Marcus slammed into Oleg's side. Still no response. The Raven had blacked out. Marcus forced himself to stay calm. Back in his earliest days in the Marines, during jump school at Parris Island, he had practiced helping a fellow diver in distress, though they'd never trained him to do so during a tandem jump. Marcus had no idea whether his canopy built for two could adequately slow the rate of descent for three jumpers without killing them all. But as he flipped on his night vision gear and got his bearings, he knew there was no other way.

They were coming down over land, not water. But below them were forests thick with snow-covered pines. Off to his left, Marcus could see a small clearing. He could steer to it if he deployed his own chute immediately. But if he pulled Oleg's rip cord first, he had no way to direct the Russian's descent. Oleg could easily get caught in trees sixty to eighty feet high, unreachable by Marcus from the ground. Or Oleg could simply become impaled on one of the soaring pines.

They were now passing below a thousand feet. Marcus maneuvered himself forward through the near-blinding snowfall, grabbed Oleg's harness with one gloved hand, and yanked the man toward him. Reaching into his vest with his other gloved hand, he drew out a carabiner and bound Oleg's harness to his own.

Eight hundred feet.

Seven hundred feet.

Now or never. Gripping Oleg with one hand as tightly as he could, Marcus pulled his own rip cord with the other. His chute instantly deployed. The metal fastener binding the two men held fast, so Marcus desperately tried to steer the three of them out of danger and toward the clearing he had spotted.

They didn't make it.