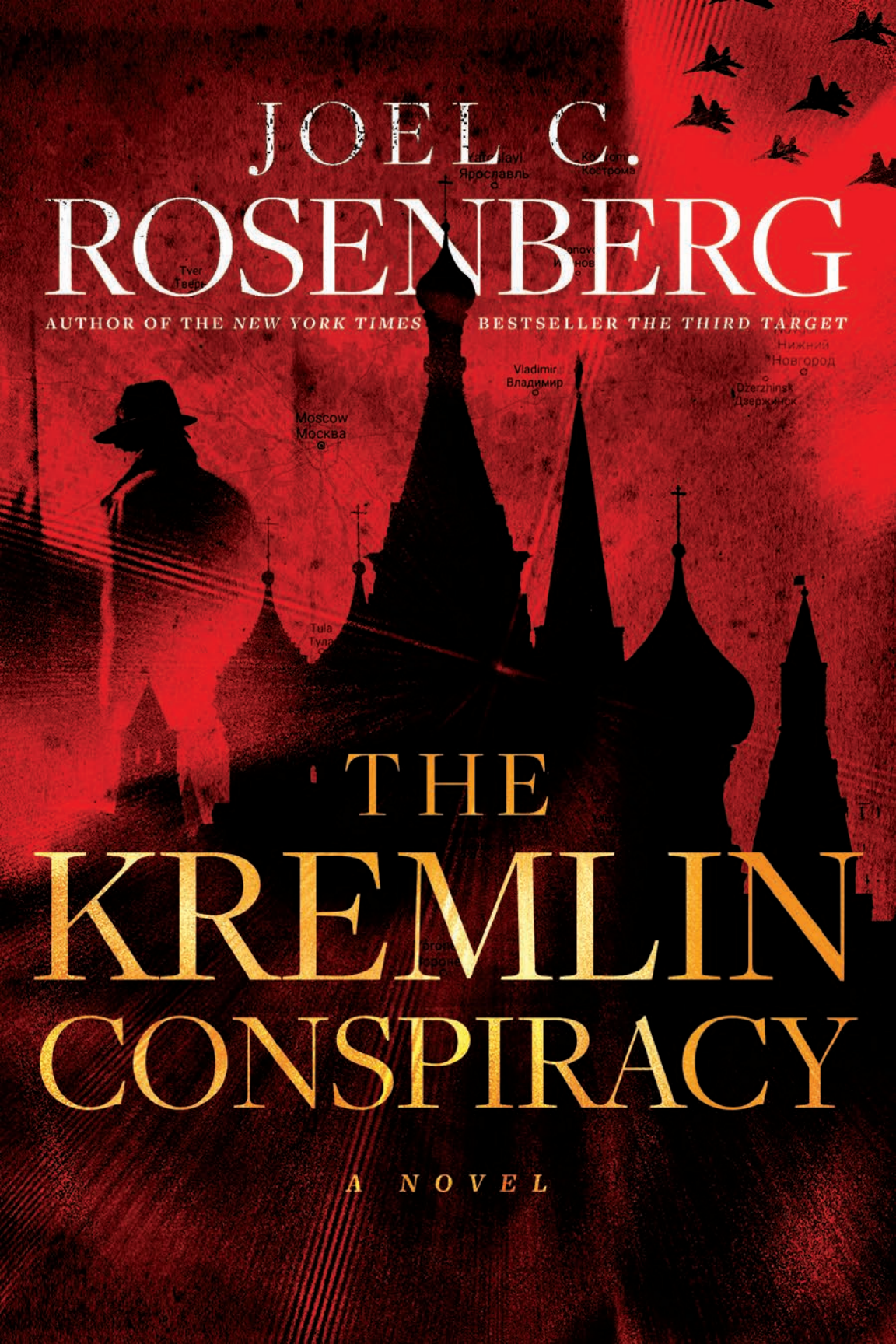


JOEL C.
Ярославль
Костром
Тверь
Иваново
РОSENBERG

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

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A NOVEL

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THE KREMLIN CONSPIRACY



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THE
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1

MOSCOW—9 SEPTEMBER 1999

Louisa Sherbatov had just turned six, but she would never turn seven.

The whirling dervish had fallen asleep on the couch just before midnight, still wearing her new magenta dress, still wearing the matching ribbon in her blonde tresses, having finally crashed after a sugar high. Snuggled up next to her mother, she looked so peaceful, so content as she hugged her favorite stuffed bear. The two lay surrounded by the dolls and books and sweaters and other gifts Louisa had received from her aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins as well as her friends from the elementary school just down the block at the end of Guryanova Street.

Strewn about the room were string and tape and wads of brightly colored wrapping paper. The kitchen sink was stacked high with dirty plates and cups and silverware. The dining room table was still littered with empty bottles of wine and vodka and scraps of leftover birthday pie—strawberry, Louisa's favorite.

The flat was a mess. But the guests were gone, and honestly her father, Feodor, couldn't have cared less. His little girl, the only child he and Irina had been able to bear after more than a decade and four heartbreaking miscarriages, was happy. Her friends were happy. Their families were happy. They were happy. Everything else could wait.

Feodor stared down at the two most precious people in his life and longed to reschedule this trip. He had loved planning the party with them both, had loved helping shop for the food, had loved helping Irina and her mother make all the preparations, had loved seeing the sheer delight on Louisa's face when he'd given her a shiny blue bicycle, her first. But business was business. If he was going to make his flight to Tashkent, he had to leave quickly. So he gently kissed mother and daughter on their foreheads, picked up his suitcase, and slipped out the front door as quietly as he could.

He stepped out the main entrance of the apartment building, relieved to see the cab he'd ordered waiting for him as planned. He moved briskly to the car and gave the driver his bag to put in the trunk. The night air was crisp and fresh. The moon was a tiny sliver in the dark sky, and leaves were beginning to fall and swirl in the light breeze coming from the west. Summer was finally over, Feodor thought as he climbed into the backseat, and not a moment too soon. The sweltering heat. The stifling humidity. The gnawing guilt of not being able to afford to provide his family a simple air conditioner, much less a little dacha out in the country, where he and Irina and Louisa and maybe his parents and hers could retreat now and again, somewhere in a forest, with lots of shade and a sparkling lake to go swimming and fishing, far from the traffic and pollution and frenetic pace of the capital.

"Autumn—finally," he half mumbled to himself as the driver slammed the trunk shut and got back behind the wheel.

Growing up, Feodor had always loved the cooler weather. The shorter days. The start of school. Making new friends. Meeting new teachers. Taking new classes. Fall meant change, and change had always been good to him. Autumn was a time of new beginnings, and

he wondered what this one might bring. He was not poor, exactly, but he was certainly not successful. Still, he was content, even hopeful, perhaps for the first time in his life. Maybe one day, if he continued to work very hard, he really could save enough money to move his family away from 19 Guryanova Street, away from this noisy, dirty, run-down, depressing hovel on the south side of Moscow, and find some place quaint and quiet. Some place worthy of raising a family. With a bit of grass, maybe even a garden, where he could till the soil with his own hands and grow his own vegetables.

As the cab pulled away from the curb, Feodor leaned back in the seat and folded his hands on his chest. *Autumn*. He smiled. He found himself reminiscing about the autumn day he'd first laid eyes on Irina. It was the first day of middle school, twenty-two years before.

At that moment, Feodor Sherbatov—so caught up in his own world, his own memories—barely noticed the two burly men dressed in black leather jackets and black leather gloves emerging from the basement of his own building. He paid scant attention to the car parked just down the street, the white Lada with its headlights off but its engine running, to which the two men headed. The driver was smoking a cigarette and tapping on the dashboard, but Feodor would never recall the face, shrouded in shadows and a hat of some kind. When the police later asked about the men and the car, this was all Feodor could tell them.

What he did remember—what he would never forget—was the deafening explosion behind him as the taxi gained speed along Guryanova Street, heading to Domodedovo International Airport. He remembered the searing fireball. He remembered his driver losing control and crashing into a lamppost. He remembered his head smashing against the Plexiglas screen dividing the front seat from the back, and the ghastly sensation of heat as he kicked open the back door of the cab. He remembered jumping out into the street, blood streaming down his face, heart pounding furiously, and looking back just in time to see a secondary explosion as his home—the drab nine-story apartment building at 19 Guryanova Street—collapsed in a blinding flash of fire and ash.