



## The Romanov Cross: A Novel

By Robert Masello

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**Nearly one hundred years ago, a desperate young woman crawled ashore on a desolate arctic island, carrying a terrible secret and a mysterious, emerald-encrusted cross. A century later, acts of man, nature, and history converge on that same forbidding shore with a power sufficient to shatter civilization as we know it.**

Army epidemiologist Frank Slater is facing a court-martial, but after his punishment is mysteriously lifted, Slater is offered a job no one else wants—to travel to a small island off the coast of Alaska and investigate a potentially lethal phenomenon: The permafrost has begun to melt, exposing bodies from a colony that was wiped out by the dreaded Spanish flu of 1918. Frank must determine if the thawed remains still carry the deadly virus in their frozen flesh and, if so, ensure that it doesn't come back to life.

Frank and his handpicked team arrive by helicopter, loaded down with high-tech tools, prepared to exhume history. The colony, it transpires, was once settled by a sect devoted to the mad Russian monk Rasputin, but there is even more hiding in the past than Frank's team is aware of. Any hope of success hinges on their willingness to accept the fact that even their cutting-edge science has its limits—and that the ancient wisdom of the Inuit people who once inhabited this eerie land is as essential as any serum. By the time Frank discovers that his mission has been compromised—crashed by a gang of reckless treasure hunters—he will be in a brutal race against time. With a young, strong-willed Inuit woman by his side, Frank must put a deadly genie back in the bottle before all of humanity pays the price.

*The Romanov Cross* is at once an alternate take on one of history's most profound mysteries, a love story as unlikely as it is inevitable, and a thriller of heart-stopping, supernatural suspense. With his signature blend of fascinating history and fantastic imagination, critically acclaimed author Robert Masello has once again crafted a terrifying story of past events coming back to haunt the present day . . . and of dark deeds aching to be unearthed.

### Praise for *The Romanov Cross*

"In this fascinating, funny, and frightening supernatural thriller, [Robert] Masello

skillfully weaves together the story of the deaths of the Russian royal family with the possibility of a new worldwide influenza pandemic. . . . Toss in a pack of slaving wolves, the undead, and a chilling ending, and the result is a terrific, can't-put-it-down read. Fine prose and plotting help solidify Masello's position at the top of this crowded subgenre.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A former Army epidemiologist contends with greedy locals and the harsh Alaskan terrain in order to prevent the recurrence of a deadly pandemic. . . . Masello weaves several disparate genres—medical thriller, historical novel, ghost story—into a coherent whole. A delicious sense of creeping dread permeates the first act, greatly enhanced by its setting in the stark but beautiful landscape of northwestern Alaska. . . . Tense, taut and impossible to put down.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"Tense, taut and impossible to put down." ---Kirkus Starred Review

### About the Author

Robert Masello is an award-winning journalist, TV writer, and the bestselling author of many supernatural thrillers, including *The Einstein Prophecy*, *The Medusa Amulet*, *Blood and Ice*, *The Romanov Cross*, and *Bestiary*, a sequel to the USA Today bestseller *Vigil*.

Paul Boehmer is a seasoned actor who has appeared on Broadway, film, and television, including *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *All My Children*. Coinciding with another of his passions, sci-fi, Paul has been cast in various roles in many episodes of *Star Trek*.

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Masello / THE ROMANOV CROSS

### Part One

### Chapter 1

Khan Neshin

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, July 10, 2011

"You okay, Major?"

Slater knew what he looked like, and he knew why Sergeant Groves was asking. He had taken a fistful of pills that morning, but the fever was back. He put out a hand to steady himself, then yanked it back off the hood of the jeep. The metal was as hot as a stove.

"I'll survive," he said, rubbing the tips of his fingers against his camo pants. That morning, he had visited the Marine barracks and watched as two more men had been airlifted out, both of them at death's door; he wasn't sure they'd make it. Despite all the normal precautions, the malaria, which he'd contracted himself a year before on a mission to Darfur, had decimated this camp. As a U.S. Army doctor and field epidemiologist, Major Frank Slater had been dispatched to figure out what else could be done—and fast.

The rice paddies he was looking at now were a prime breeding ground for the deadly mosquitoes, and the base had been built not only too close by, but directly downwind. At night, when they liked to feed, swarms of insects lifted off the paddies and descended en masse on the barracks and the canteen and the guard towers. Once, in the Euphrates Valley, Slater had seen a cloud of bugs rising so thick and high in the sky that he'd mistaken it for an oncoming storm.

"So, which way do you want to go with this?" Sergeant Groves asked. An African-American as tough and uncompromising as the Cleveland streets that he hailed from—"by the time I left, all we were making there

was icicles,” he’d once told Slater—he always spoke with purpose and brevity. “Spray the swamp or move the base?”

Slater was debating that very thing when he was distracted by a pair of travelers—a young girl, maybe nine or ten, and her father—slogging through the paddy with an overburdened mule. Nearly every- one in Afghanistan had been exposed to malaria—it was as common as the flu in the rest of the world—and over the generations they had either died or developed a rudimentary immunity. They often got sick, but they had learned to live with it.

The young Americans, on the other hand, fresh from farms in Wisconsin and mountain towns in Colorado, didn’t fare as well.

The girl was leading the mule, while her father steadied the huge baskets of grain thrown across its scrawny back.

“I’m on it,” Private Diaz said, stepping out from the driver’s seat of the jeep. His M4 was already cradled in his hands. One thing the soldiers learned fast in the Middle East was that even the most innocuous sight could be their last. Baskets could carry explosives. Mules could be time bombs. Even kids could be used as decoys, or sacrificed altogether by the jihadis. On a previous mission, Slater had had to sort through the rubble of a girls’ school in Kandahar province after a Taliban, working undercover as a school custodian, had driven a motorcycle festooned with explosives straight into the classroom.

“Allahu Akbar!” the janitor had shouted with jubilation, “God is great!” just before blowing them all to kingdom come.

For the past ten years, Slater had seen death, in one form or another, nearly every day, but he still wasn’t sure which was worse—the fact that it could still shock him or the fact that on most days it didn’t. Just how hard, he often wondered, could a man let his heart become? How hard did it need to be?

The girl was looking back at him now with big dark eyes under her headscarf as she led the mule out of the paddy and up onto the embankment. The father switched at its rump with a hollow reed. The private, his rifle slung forward, ordered them to stop where they were. His Arabic was pretty basic, but the hand gesture and the loaded gun were universally understood.

Slater and Groves—his right-hand man on every mission he had undertaken from Iraq to Somalia—watched as Private Diaz approached them.

“Open the baskets,” he said, making a motion with one hand to indicate what he wanted. The father issued an order to his daughter, who flipped the lid off one basket, then waited as the soldier peered inside.

“The other one, too,” Diaz said, stepping around the mule’s lowered head.

The girl did as he ordered, standing beside the basket as Diaz poked the muzzle of his gun into the grain.

And just as Slater was about to order him to let them move along—was this any way to win hearts and minds?—a bright ribbon of iridescent green shot up out of the basket, fast as a lightning bolt, and struck the girl on the face. She went down as if hit by a mallet, writhing on the ground, and the private jumped back in surprise.

“Jesus,” he was saying over and over as he pointed the rifle futilely at the thrashing body of the girl. “It’s a viper!”

But Slater already knew that, and even as her father was wailing in terror, he was racing to her side. The snake still had its fangs buried in her cheek, secreting its venom, its tail shaking ferociously. Slater pulled his field knife from its scabbard—a knife he normally used to cut tissue samples from diseased cadavers—and with the other hand grabbed for the viper’s tail. Twice he felt its rough mottled surface, strong as a steel pipe, slip through his fingers, but on the third try he held it taut and was able to slice through the vertebrae. Half of the snake came away with a spill of blood, but the head was still fixed in its mortal bite.

The girl’s eyes were shut and her limbs were flailing, and it was only after Groves used his own broad hands to hold her down that Slater was able to pinch the back of the dying viper’s head and pull the fangs loose. The snake’s tongue flicked like a whip, but the light in its yellow eyes was fading. Slater pinched harder until the tongue slowed and the eyes lost their luster altogether. He tossed the carcass down the embankment, and Diaz, for good measure, unleashed a burst of shots from his rifle that rolled the coils down into the murky water.

“Get me my kit!” Slater hollered, and Diaz ran to the jeep.

Groves—as burly as a fullback but tender as a nurse—was crouched over the girl, examining the wound. There were two long gashes in her cheek, bloody smears on her tawny skin. The venom, some of the most powerful in the animal kingdom, was already coursing through her veins.

Her father, wailing and praying aloud, rocked on his sandaled feet. Even the mule brayed in dumb alarm.

Diaz handed Slater the kit, already open, and Slater, his hands moving on automatic pilot, went about administering the anticoagulant and doing his best to stabilize her, but he knew that only the antivenin, in short supply these days, could save the girl’s life.

And even then, only if it was used in the next hour.

“Round up the nearest chopper,” he said to Diaz. “We need to get this girl to the med center.”

But the soldier hesitated. “No offense, sir, but orders are that the med runs are only for military casualties. They won’t come for a civilian.”

Groves looked over at Slater with mournful eyes and said, “He’s right. Ever since that chopper was shot down three days ago, the orders have been ironclad. EMS duties are out.”

Slater heard them, but wondered if they were really prepared to stand by and let the girl die. Her father was screaming the few words of English he knew, “Help! U.S.A! Please, help!” He was on his knees in the dust, wringing his woven cap in his hands.

Her little heart was beating like a trip-hammer and her limbs were convulsing, and Slater knew that any further delay would seal the girl’s fate forever. Someone this size and weight, injected with a full dose of a pit viper’s poison—and he had seen enough of these snakes to know that this one had been fully mature—could not last long before her blood cells began to disintegrate.

“Keep her as still as you can,” he said to Groves and Diaz, then ran back to the jeep, grabbed the radio mike

and called it in to the main base.

“Marine down!” Slater said, “viper bite. Immediate—I say, immediate—evac needed!”

He saw Groves and the private exchange a glance.

“Your coordinates?” a voice on the radio crackled.

The coordinates? Slater, the blood pounding in his head from his own fever, fumbled to muster them. “We’re about two klicks from the Khan Neshin outpost,” he said, focusing as hard as he could, “just southwest of the rice paddies.”

Groves suddenly appeared at his side and grabbed the mike out of his hands, but instead of countermanding the major’s order, he gave the exact coordinates.

“Tell ’em they can finish the rations dump later,” Groves barked. “We need that chopper over here now! And tell the med center to get as much of the antivenin ready as they’ve got!”

Slater, his legs unsteady, crouched down in the shade of the jeep.

“You didn’t need to get mixed up in this,” Slater said after Groves signed off. “I’ll take the heat.”

“Don’t worry,” Groves said. “There’ll be plenty to go around.”

For the next half hour, Slater kept the girl as tranquilized as he could—the more she thrashed, the faster the poison circulated in her system—while the sergeant and the private kept a close w...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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