"Berry pulls a Dan Brown, throwing the reader right into the action."

—The Florida Times-Union

ROMANOV PROPHECY

STEVEBERRY

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Russia—a country in which things that just don't happen happen.

-Peter the Great

A year shall come of Russia's blackest dread; Then will the crown fall from the royal head, The throne of tsars will perish in the mud, The food of many will be death and blood.

-Mikhail Lermontov (1830)

Russia: mysterious dark continent, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" in Winston Churchill's phrase, remote, inaccessible to foreigners, inexplicable even to natives. That is the myth, encouraged by Russians themselves, who would prefer that no one discover who they really are and how they really live.

-Robert Kaiser, Russia: The People and the Power (1984)

For all its trials, for all its mistakes, the story of Russia at the end of the [twentieth] century must be counted as a kind of revival, a resurrection.

—David Remnick, Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia (1997)

TIMELINE OF RELEVANT EVENTS OF RUSSIAN HISTORY

FEBRUARI 21, 1015	tsar
OCTOBER 20, 1894	Nicholas II ascends the throne
APRIL 5, 1898	Nicholas II presents Lilies-of-the-
·	Valley egg, created by Carl Fabergé, to his mother
DECEMBER 16, 1916	Rasputin murdered by Felix Youssoupov
March 15, 1917	Nicholas II abdicates his throne; he and his family are arrested and held
October 1917	Bolshevik Revolution; Lenin takes power
1918	Russian civil war begins; Whites fight Reds
JULY 17, 1918	Nicholas II, his wife, Alexandra, and their five children are murdered in Yekaterinburg
April 1919	Felix Youssoupov flees Russia
1921	Russian civil war ends; Reds, led by Lenin, triumph
SEPTEMBER 27, 1967	Felix Youssoupov dies
May 1979	Grave site of Nicholas II and his
	family is located outside Yekaterinburg
DECEMBER 1991	Soviet Union dissolves

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- JULY 1991 The remains of Nicholas II and his family are exhumed; two of the imperial children are not found in the mass grave
 - 1994 The remains are positively identified, but no evidence of the two missing children is ever found

PROLOGUE

ALEXANDER PALACE TSARSKOE SELO, RUSSIA OCTOBER 28, 1916

ALEXANDRA, EMPRESS OF ALL RUSSIA, TURNED FROM HER BEDside vigil as the door swung open, the first time in hours her gaze had been diverted from the pitiful child lying prone beneath the sheets.

Her Friend rushed into the bedroom, and she burst into tears. "Finally, Father Gregorii. Thanks to precious God. Alexei needs you terribly."

Rasputin swept close to the bed and made the sign of the cross. His blue silk blouse and velvet trousers reeked of alcohol, which tempered his usual stench, one her court ladies had said reminded them of a goat. But Alexandra had never cared about any odor. Not from Father Gregorii.

She'd sent the guards to look for him hours before, mindful of the stories of how he loved the Gypsies on the outskirts of the capital. Many times he would exhaust the night there with drink, in the company of prostitutes. One of the guardsmen even reported that the dear father had paraded across tabletops with his trousers down, proclaiming the delight his ample organ bestowed on the ladies of the Imperial Court. Alexandra refused to believe such talk about her Friend and promptly had the guard reassigned far from the capital.

"I have been searching for you since twilight," she said, trying to get his attention.

But Rasputin's focus was on the boy. He fell to his knees. Alexei was unconscious and had been for nearly an hour. Late in the afternoon, the boy had been playing in the garden when he fell. Within two hours the cycle of pain had started.

Alexandra watched as Rasputin peeled back the blanket and studied the right leg, blue and swollen to the point of grotesqueness. Blood was pulsating out of control beneath the skin, the hematoma now the size of a small melon, the leg drawn up against the chest. Her son's gaunt face was devoid of color, except for dark smears beneath both eyes.

She gently brushed the child's light brown hair.

Thank God the screaming had stopped. The spasms had been coming every quarter of an hour with morbid regularity. A high fever had already made him delirious, but he'd continued to sound a constant wail that ripped her heart.

Once he became lucid and pleaded, "Oh Lord, have mercy on me," and asked, "Mama, won't you help me?" Then he wanted to know if the pain would stop if he died. She could not bring herself to tell him the truth.

What had she done? This was all her fault. It was well known that women passed on the trait for hemophilia, but were never affected. Her uncle, brother, and nephews had all died from the disease. But she never considered herself a carrier. Four daughters had taught her nothing. Only when the blessed son finally arrived twelve years ago had she learned the painful reality. Beforehand, not one doctor had cautioned her of the possibility. But did she ever ask? No one seemed willing to volunteer anything. Even direct questions were many times avoided with nonsensical answers. That was why Father Gregorii was so special. The *starets* never held back.

Rasputin closed his eyes and nestled close to the stricken boy. Flecks of dried food littered his wiry beard. The gold cross she'd given him hung around his neck. He grasped it tight. The room was lit only by candles. She could hear him muttering, but could not make out the words. And she dare

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not say anything. Though she was Empress of All Russia, the tsarina, she never challenged Father Gregorii.

Only he could stop the bleeding. Through him God protected her precious Alexei. The tsarevich. Sole heir to the throne. Next tsar of Russia.

But only if he lived.

The boy opened his eyes.

"Don't be afraid, Alexei, everything is all right," Rasputin whispered. The voice was calm and melodious, but firm in its conclusion. He stroked Alexei's sweaty body from head to toe. "I have driven away your horrid pains. Nothing will hurt you anymore. Tomorrow you will be well, and we will play our jolly games again."

Rasputin continued to caress the boy.

"Remember what I told you about Siberia. It is full of huge forests and endless steppes, so large no one has seen the end of it. And it all belongs to your mama and papa and, one day, when you are healthy, strong, and big, it will be yours." He clutched the boy's hand in his. "One day I will take you to Siberia and show it all to you. The people there are so different from here. The majesty of it all, Alexei. You must see it." The voice stayed calm.

The boy's eyes brightened. Life returned, as quick as it had left hours ago. He started to raise himself from the pillow.

Alexandra became concerned, afraid he would inflict a fresh injury. "Take care, Alexei. You must be careful."

"Leave me alone, Mama. I must listen." Her son turned to Rasputin. "Tell me another story, Father."

Rasputin smiled and told him about humpbacked horses, the legless soldier and eyeless rider, and an unfaithful tsarina who was turned into a white duck. He spoke of the wildflowers on the vast Siberian steppes, where plants have souls and speak to one another, how the animals, too, could speak and how he, as a child, had learned to understand what horses whispered in the stable.

"See, Mama. I've always told you horses could speak."

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Tears welled in her eyes at the miracle before her. "You are so right. So right."

"And you will tell me everything you heard from the horses, won't you?" Alexei asked.

Rasputin smiled approvingly. "Tomorrow. I'll tell you more tomorrow. Now you must rest." He stroked the boy until the tsarevich dozed back to sleep.

Rasputin stood. "The Little One will survive."

"How can you be sure?"

"How can you not?"

His tone was indignant and she instantly regretted her doubting. She'd many times thought her own lack of faith was the cause of Alexei's pain. God was perhaps testing her through the curse of hemophilia to see the strength of her beliefs.

Rasputin stepped around the bed. He knelt before her chair and grasped her hand. "Mama, you must not forsake our Lord. Do not doubt His power."

Only the starets was allowed to address her with such informality. She was the Matushka, Little Mother; her husband, Nicholas II, the Batiushka, Little Father. It was how the peasantry viewed them—as stern parents. Everyone around her said Rasputin was a mere peasant himself. Perhaps so. But he alone could relieve Alexei's suffering. This peasant from Siberia with his tangled beard, stinking body, and long greasy hair was heaven's emissary.

"God has refused to listen to my prayers, Father. He has forsaken me."

Rasputin sprang to his feet. "Why do you speak this way?" He grasped her face and twisted her toward the bed. "Look at the Little One. He suffers horribly because you do not believe."

No one other than her husband would dare touch her without permission. But she did not resist. In fact, she welcomed it. He whipped her head back and bore a gaze deep into her eyes. The full expression of his personality seemed concentrated in those pale blue irises. They were unavoidable, like

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phosphorescent flames at once piercing and caressing, far off, yet intent. They could see directly into her soul, and she'd never been able to resist them.

"Matushka, you must not speak of our Lord this way. The Little One needs you to believe. He needs you to put your faith in God."

"My faith is in you."

He released her. "I am nothing. Merely the instrument through which God acts. I do nothing." He pointed skyward. "He does it all."

Tears sprang in her eyes and she slumped from the chair in shame. Her hair was unkempt, the once beautiful face sallow and wizened from years of worry. Her eyes ached from crying. She hoped no one entered the room. Only with the *starets* could she openly express herself as a woman and mother. She started to cry and wrapped her arms around his legs, her cheeks pressed tight to clothes that stank of horses and mud.

"You are the only one who can help him," she said.

Rasputin stood rigid. Like a tree trunk, she thought. Trees were able to withstand the harshest Russian winter, then bloom anew every spring. This holy man, whom God had certainly sent, was her tree.

"Mama, this solves nothing. God wants your devotion, not your tears. He is not impressed with emotion. He demands faith. The kind of faith that never doubts—"

She felt Rasputin tremble. She released her hold and stared up. His face had gone blank, his eyes rolled to the top of his head. A shiver quaked through him. His legs went limp and he crumpled to the floor.

"What is it?" she asked.

He did not reply.

She grabbed him by his shirt and shook him. "Speak to me, starets."

Slowly he opened his eyes. "I see heaps, masses of corpses, several grand dukes and hundreds of counts. The Neva will be all red with blood."

"What do you mean, Father?"

"A vision, Mama. It has come again. Do you realize before long I shall die in terrible agony?"

What was he saying?

He grabbed her arms and pulled her close. Fear filled his face, but he wasn't really looking at her. He was focused far off, beyond her.

"I shall leave this life before the new year. Remember, Mama, if I be killed by common assassins the tsar has nothing to fear. He will remain on his throne with nothing to fear for your children. They will reign for hundreds of years. But, Mama, if I am murdered by boyars, their hands will remain soiled by my blood for twenty-five years. They will leave Russia. Brother will rise against brother, and they will kill each other in hate. Then there will be no nobles in the country."

She was frightened. "Father, why are you speaking like this?"

His eyes came back from beyond and focused on her. "If one of the tsar's relatives carries out my murder, none of your family will live more than two years. They will all be killed by the Russian people. Be concerned for your salvation and tell your relatives I paid for them with my life."

"Father, this is nonsense."

"It is a vision, and I have had it more than once. The night is dark with the suffering that is before us. I shall not see it. My hour is near, but though it is bitter, I do not fear it."

He started to tremble again.

"Oh, Lord. The evil is so great that the Earth will tremble with famine and sickness. Mother Russia will be lost."

She shook him again. "Father, you must not talk like this. Alexei needs you."

A calm overtook him.

"Fear not, Mama. There is another vision. Salvation. This is the first time it has come to me. Oh, what a prophecy. I see it clearly."

PART ONE



MOSCOW, THE PRESENT TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12 I:24 PM

IN FIFTEEN SECONDS MILES LORD'S LIFE CHANGED FOREVER.

He first saw the sedan. A dark blue Volvo station wagon, the tint so deep that it appeared black in the bright midday sun. He next noticed the front tires cutting right, weaving a path around traffic on busy Nikolskaya Prospekt. Then the rear window, reflective as a mirror, descended, and a distorted reflection of the surrounding buildings was replaced by a dark rectangle pierced by the barrel of a gun.

Bullets exploded from the gun.

He dived flat. Screams arose around him as he slammed onto the oily pavement. The sidewalk was packed with afternoon shoppers, tourists, and workers, all now lunging for cover as lead raked a trail across the weathered stone of Stalinist-era buildings.

He rolled over and looked up at Artemy Bely, his lunch companion. He'd met the Russian two days back and taken him to be an amicable young lawyer with the Justice Ministry. Lawyer to lawyer they'd eaten dinner last night and breakfast this morning, talking of the new Russia and the great changes coming, both marveling at being part of history. His mouth opened to shout a warning, but before he could utter a sound Bely's chest erupted and blood and sinew splattered on the plate-glass window beyond.

The automatic fire came with a constant rat-tat that reminded him of old gangster movies. The plate glass gave way and jagged shards crashed to the sidewalk. Bely's body crumpled on top of him. A coppery stench rose from the gaping wounds. He shoved the lifeless Russian off, worried about the red tide soaking into his suit and dripping from his hands. He hardly knew Bely. Was he HIV-positive?

The Volvo screeched to a stop.

He looked to his left.

Car doors popped open and two men sprang out, both armed with automatic weapons. They wore the blue-and-gray uniforms with red lapels of the *militsya*—the police. Neither, though, sported the regulation gray caps with red brim. The man from the front seat had the sloped forehead, bushy hair, and bulbous nose of a Cro-Magnon. The man who slid from the rear was stocky with a pockmarked face and dark, slicked-back hair. The man's right eye caught Lord's attention. The space between the pupil and eyebrow was wide, creating a noticeable droop—as if one eye was closed, the other open—and provided the only indication of emotion on an otherwise expressionless face.

Droopy said to Cro-Magnon in Russian, "The damn chornye survived."

Did he hear right?

Chornye.

The Russian equivalent for nigger.

His was the only black face he'd seen since arriving in Moscow eight weeks ago, so he knew he had a problem. He recalled something from a Russian travel book he'd read a few months back. Anyone dark-skinned can expect to arouse a certain amount of curiosity. What an understatement.

Cro-Magnon acknowledged the comment with a nod. The two men stood thirty yards away, and Lord wasn't about to wait around to find out what they wanted. He sprang to his feet and raced in the opposite direction. With a quick glance

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over his shoulder he saw the two calmly crouch and ready themselves to shoot. An intersection loomed ahead, and he leaped the remaining distance just as gunfire blasted from behind.

Bullets strafed the stone, puffing cloud bursts into the chilly air.

More people dived for cover.

He sprang from the sidewalk and faced a tolkuchki—street market—lining the curb as far as he could see.

"Gunmen. Run," he screamed in Russian.

A bobushka peddling dolls understood instantly and shuffled to a nearby doorway, jerking tight a scarf around her weathered face. Half a dozen children hawking newspapers and Pepsis darted into a grocery. Vendors abandoned their kiosks and scattered like roaches. The appearance of the mafiya was not uncommon. He knew that a hundred or more gangs operated throughout Moscow. People being shot, knifed, or blown up had become as common as traffic jams, simply the risk of doing business on the streets.

He bolted ahead into the crowded prospekt, traffic merely inching along and starting to congeal in the mayhem. A horn blared and a braking taxi stopped just short of him. His bloodied hands came down hard on the hood. The driver continued to lean on the horn. He looked back and saw the two men with guns round the corner. The crowd parted, which provided a clear shot. He dived behind the taxi as bullets obliterated the driver's side.

The horn stopped blaring.

He raised himself up and stared into the driver's bloodied face, smushed against the passenger-side window, one eye cocked open, the pane stained crimson. The men were now fifty yards away, on the other side of the congested prospekt. He studied the storefronts on both sides of the street and registered a men's fashion salon, children's clothing boutique, and several antiques galleries. He searched for someplace in which to disappear and chose McDonald's. For some reason the golden arches harked of safety.

He raced down the sidewalk and shoved open its glass doors. Several hundred people packed the chest-high tables and booths. More stood in line. He recalled that this was at one point the busiest restaurant in the world.

He was gulping air fast and a scent of grilled burgers, fries, and cigarettes accompanied each breath. His hands and clothes were still bloody. Several women started to scream that he'd been shot. A pamic overtook the young crowds and there was a mad push for the doors. He shouldered forward, deeper into the throng, and quickly realized this was a mistake. He pushed through the dining room toward stairs that led down to bathrooms. He slipped out of the panicked mob and skipped down the stairs three at a time, his bloodied right hand gliding across a slick iron rail.

"Back. Away. Back," deep voices ordered in Russian from above.

Gunfire erupted.

More screams and rushed footsteps.

He found the bottom of the stairs and faced three closed doors. One led to the ladies' room, the other to the men's. He opened the third. A large storage room spanned before him, its walls shiny white tile like the rest of the restaurant. In one corner three people huddled around a table smoking. He noticed their T-shirts—Lenin's face superimposed over McDonald's golden arches. Their gazes met his.

"Gunmen. Hide," he said in Russian.

Without a word, all three bolted from the table and shot toward the far end of the brightly lit room. The lead man flung open a door, and they disappeared outside. Lord stopped only an instant to slam shut the door from which he'd entered and lock it from the inside, then he followed.

He dashed out into the chilly afternoon and stood in an alley behind the multistory building that accommodated the restaurant. He half expected Gypsies or bemedaled war veterans to be in residence. Every nook and cranny of Moscow seemed to provide shelter to one or another dispossessed social group.