



JENNI WILTZ

THE
CARMELITE
Prophecy

A NATALIE BRANDON THRILLER

THE
CARMELITE
PROPHECY

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

The Romanov Legacy: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Dante Deception: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Red Road

The Cherbourg Jewels

A Vampire in Versailles

I Never Arkansas It Coming

THE CARMELITE PROPHECY

A Natalie Brandon Thriller

Jenni Wiltz



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For Uncle Mike & Aunt Molly

CHAPTER ONE

AUGUST 12, 1792

PARIS, FRANCE

Mother Marie-Aimée de Jésus held out the notice, delivered by special order of the Legislative Assembly. Printed on a sheet of flimsy tissue, the ink had bled in all directions. *Even the letters weep for what will come*, she thought.

Sister Léonie pulled the paper from her hand. Her gray eyes narrowed as she read it through. “They’re evicting us? But why?”

They stood before the arched window in Marie-Aimée’s cell. Its east-facing view had been designed to give a supplicant proof of God’s glory during morning prayers. Today, though, the sun was just a clock, ticking away all the time they had left. “You know why,” Marie-Aimée said.

“They’re tired of waiting, aren’t they?”

“You were always my best student.”

The novitiate’s hand fell to her side. “What will we do?”

Fight, she wanted to say. But with three hundred twelve souls in her care, she had more to think about than her principles. She sank into the chair beside her *escritoire* and buried her hands in the pleats of her heavy brown habit.

What the Assembly asked...it was impossible. They wanted her to abjure loyalty to the church in favor of a state that had imprisoned the anointed king, defied the pope, and failed to feed the starving populace any better than the old regime. Compliance would result in eternal damnation, she was sure of it. But rumors flew faster than crows, and every whisper spoke of terror, blood, and blades for those who refused to obey the order. Could she condemn these women to a martyr's fate? Were their lives more precious than an oath?

She looked at the girl standing beside her.

For ten years now, she'd watched and waited, wondering if Léonie's strange visions were a gift from God or the product of madness. There were times Léonie knew things it was impossible for a nineteen-year-old girl to know. When asked, the girl would only say that a voice in her head had told her.

None of the traditional means of punishment — raps on the wrist, fasting, a hair shirt — had changed her answers. By the time she'd given up on punishment, it was too late. The other women needed Léonie. They asked her where the best spot to plant a new rosebush was, or whether a beloved niece would ever find the time to write. Léonie and her voice were right too often to ignore. Outside these walls, they would brand her as a lunatic ... or a witch.

But Léonie wasn't the only problem.

If the Assembly took possession of the nunnery, they would find the door hidden behind the tapestry on the far wall. If they opened the door, they would find ... no.

It could not be allowed.

Marie-Aimée glanced sideways at her novitiate. The girl's face was long and narrow, with a sharp chin and long-lashed eyes. She was beautiful when she smiled, but she rarely did so. Her hands were red and rough from working in the garden and the laundry. *What if...*

No.

That could not be allowed, either, if only for the girl's safety. There had to be another way.

A breeze from the open casement teased the Assembly's declaration from Léonie's grip. It arced toward the door, then drifted back to rest against her feet. Marie-Aimée picked it up and sighed. "I remember many mornings like this one."

"Hot before sunrise?" Léonie said, pulling at the neck of her habit.

"And the only cool place was the schoolroom. Still, the other girls couldn't wait for lessons to end."

"Not me," Léonie said.

"No, not you," Marie-Aimée agreed. "Every time I dismissed the class, you stood up like a defeated gladiator. You loved history."

Léonie offered one of her rare smiles. "I still do."

"Then you know what happened the last time a government tried to divorce itself from the one true faith."

"King Henry VIII of England. He closed the monasteries and took everything they had." Léonie narrowed her eyes. "Is that why they're doing this to us?"

“The hearts of these men are closed to me, as are their minds.”

“But we have nothing worth taking! No jewels, no plate, no relics.”

“That is not entirely true,” Marie-Aimée said, glancing at the tapestry across the room.

Léonie gasped. Then she clamped her lips shut and closed her eyes.

“I know that look,” Marie-Aimée said softly. “Is your voice telling you something?”

“Yes.”

“Is it my secret?”

Léonie shook her head. “He does not know it.”

“He will.” Marie-Aimée opened her mouth, but found she could not speak. Forty years of silence could not be easily overcome. Deep in her belly, a feeling of sickness rumbled like hunger and her fingers sought the comfort of the rosary beads at her waist. *Is this what You want from me?* she asked. *Is this why You sent her to me all those years ago?*

But there was no answer.

God wanted her to solve this problem on her own.

“Open your eyes,” she said. When the girl obeyed, she reached out and took the younger woman’s hands in hers. “What do you love most in all the world?”

Léonie’s forehead wrinkled. “I don’t understand.”

“It isn’t something you understand, my dear. It’s something you feel. What does your heart tell you?”

“Nothing,” Léonie said, pulling back her hands and wrapping them around her midsection. “I hear my own thoughts and I hear the voice, both of them, all the time. I

feel mad enough without listening to a heart, too. Even if it said anything, I wouldn't listen."

Marie-Aimée nodded.

What made Léonie blessed also made her strange, despised by the people of her village and feared by her own parents. She'd hoped to teach Léonie to hide her thoughts, to better prepare her for life outside the nunnery. The poor girl didn't belong here. She had too much anger in her heart to surrender it to God. Her plan had always been to send Léonie back out into the world, with the hope that she might expend all that anger and return of her own free will. But neither of them was ready — they needed more time.

This revolution was a disaster for them all.

Still, she had to try.

Marie-Aimée looked up at Léonie. "Have I ever told you where I was born?"

"Why should that matter?"

"I am from Reims," she said, rising to her feet. "The place where our kings are crowned and anointed by God. The place Clovis was baptized by Saint Remi, with chrism brought to him by the dove of the Holy Spirit. The place Jeanne d'Arc took from the English so that Charles VII might be crowned. There is no place more holy in all of France."

"So you love Reims above all."

"I love my city, yes, but now you know what it means when I say I love God more." She put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "What do you love most in all the world?"

Léonie closed her eyes. Marie-Aimée watched her sway, wondering what angels or demons held court inside the girl's head.

I'm the one who is mad, she thought, trusting a girl who claims to have no heart.

When Léonie opened her eyes, the pale gray orbs glimmered with tears. “The voice told me to say I love him. My head told me to say I love this place. But my heart told me it is you I love above all else.” She sniffed and shook her head. “I have no conception of God outside this place, and no conception of a mother who isn’t you. If God is love, then when I say I love you and I love this place, that must mean I love God, too.”

Marie-Aimée kissed the girl’s forehead. Suddenly, she felt old and tired and unequal to the task before her. *Let it be done*, she thought. “You saw the Assembly’s order. You know how little time we have. There are things I must tell you before they come for us. Things you must know in case I do not survive.”

Léonie gasped and stepped away. “Who would want to harm you? That’s not how it happened in Henry’s day.”

“We are not in Henry’s day, my dear.”

“The voice says . . .” Léonie put her hands to her temples and grimaced. “The voice says we are not in Henry’s day, but Mary’s. Bloody Mary, who burned those who did not share her faith.”

“I fear it is so.” It hurt her to think of this girl, intelligent and strange, being at the mercy of the Assembly and the mob it pretended to rule. “There are things I must call upon you to do for me in the coming days. Trust me when I tell you they are more important than anything else, even our lives. Are you ready to do what is necessary?”

“I don’t know,” Léonie said, taking a step back. “What must I do?”

“I know you’re afraid,” she said. “I am, too. But we must put aside our fear, like Daniel in the lions’ den. God will protect us as long as we do His work.” She walked to the other side of her *escritoire* and opened the widest drawer. The knife, when she drew it out, trailed thin cobwebs and sprinkles of dust.

She carried it to Léonie’s side and placed it in her hand, closing the girl’s fingers around the handle. “Are you ready to do what is necessary?”

CHAPTER TWO

JANUARY 2006
PARIS, FRANCE

E*vrard Baptiste surveyed* the cemetery. Bordered by a chain-link fence and surrounded by multi-story housing projects, it had none of the charm of Père Lachaise or Montparnasse. It was a place to put people no one would remember.

He could use that.

His footsteps crunched on the gravel pathway as he stepped toward one of the grave sites. In front of that grave knelt a man about ten years younger than him. Tall and broad-shouldered, the man had a deep tan and short blond hair. He was out of uniform, dressed in a nylon jacket and jeans.

"Bonjour," Baptiste said.

The kneeling man turned his head. His reflective sunglasses showed Baptiste the mass of clouds gathering in the

distance and his own mane of wiry hair. When he spoke, his voice was deep and raw. “Who are you?”

“Doctor Evrard Baptiste.” He paused, but the other man made no sign of recognition.

“What are you doing here?”

“The same thing you are.”

“I doubt that.” The man turned back to the raised granite tomb, unadorned with a cross, dates, or a name. “How do you even know who’s in there?”

“I know,” Baptiste said softly. He stepped alongside the tomb, dragging his gloved fingers across the surface. “Were you ashamed of him?”

The other man rose. “I asked who you are.”

“And I asked if you were ashamed that a hero of France lies beneath that cold stone without a name to remind the world of his existence.”

“That’s not what you said.”

Baptiste smiled. “My mistake.” He put his hands in his coat pockets and turned to look at the housing projects. A cold wind blew the tails of his scarf over his shoulder. “You came late in his life, didn’t you?”

“By necessity.” The other man widened his stance and folded his hands behind his back. “Did you serve with him?”

“I am a civilian.”

“I meant in prison.”

Baptiste glared at him. “When they told de Gaulle about the generals’ revolt, he was in the theater, watching Racine’s *Britannicus*. Did you know that?”

The blond man made no acknowledgement of the question or his answer.

“Of course you don’t,” he said softly. “Britannicus was the son of Emperor Claudius. He should have been his father’s heir, but Claudius’s stepson, Nero, took the throne instead. The boy did not live long afterward. By all accounts, he was bright and well-liked. His only crime was being inconvenient for those with more ambition and fewer scruples. Does that sound familiar?”

“What do you want from me?”

“De Gaulle abandoned Algeria. He abandoned every French citizen born there, despite the rights and protections our constitution promised them. When your father and the generals tried to stop him, he abandoned them, too.” He glanced up at the younger man. “De Gaulle was afraid to fight the Muslims. He was afraid of their bombs and their guerrilla warfare. Afraid of their desert and their language.” He paused. “Chirac was afraid, too. The bomb that killed your father was the first of how many ... four?”

“Seven,” the man answered. “If you count the ones that didn’t go off.”

“It was a tragedy that should have been met with force instead of fear. But not everyone is afraid.”

The other man peeled off his sunglasses. His eyes were the color of petrified amber, all emotion fossilized beneath their surface. “Are you?”

“No man who knows our history should be afraid. Who did Charles Martel defeat at the Battle of Tours? From whom did Charlemagne seize the islands of Corsica and Sardinia? Who did Napoleon destroy at the Battle of the Pyramids? For more than a thousand years, we have fought to protect our land and our faith from the threat of Islam. Now the

powers that he cannot even stop teenagers from lighting cars on fire.”

The other man curled his lip. “They never found the man who planted the bomb on my father’s train.”

“They didn’t want to. They would rather people forget.” Baptiste paused. “But I found him.”

“Tell me where.” His right hand fell to his hip, reaching for a weapon that wasn’t there.

“You are a Légionnaire, like your father before you.”

“Not like him,” the other man said softly. “Not yet.”

“France needs men like you. And she needs someone to lead them.”

“Is that your way of telling me who you are?”

Baptiste felt his heart beat faster. This was the moment it all began. “Do you want to mourn your father or do you want to avenge him?”

“Are you offering me a job?”

“A chance,” Baptiste said. “The benefits are better than the pay.”

The other man paused. He curled his lip, then stepped backward. One hand slid into his pocket and he pulled out a centime, which he twirled up and over each finger. “My father used to take me to the Fontaine des Innocents every Sunday. He would twirl a coin, just like this, until I pulled it out of his hand and tossed it into the fountain. You’ve spent our lunch money, he would say. So I always wished for more money.” He sighed. “I should have wished for more time with him.”

“He was sent to prison for his willingness to fight the Muslim rebels in Algeria. Then he was taken from you by

a Muslim coward who thought planting a bomb would help create an Islamic state in Algeria. I cannot give you back the time he lost, or the time you lost with him. But I can give you the opportunity to take that time from others.”

“What is this thing you want to do?”

“We will find people like us. We will educate them ... and we will arm them. There are skills you can teach that we will need when the time is right.”

“And you’ll tell me where that man is, the one who planted the bomb?”

“I’ll take you to him now.” Baptiste smiled. “Consider it a signing bonus.”

The man placed his hand flat on the tomb. “He wanted me to be a priest. Did you know that?” Then he splayed his fingers, releasing the centime he’d clutched between them. It rolled and rounded to a stop at the head of the granite slab. “The day I buried him, I burned his Bible and went to the Légion’s recruiting office. I spent more time escorting diplomats in the Côte d’Ivoire than killing mujahideen.”

“There will be no diplomats this time,” Baptiste said. “But I do have one condition of employment.” When the younger man turned his head, he said, “Put your father’s name on that tomb.”

The other man stood up and put on his sunglasses. “When do we start?”

CHAPTER THREE

PRESENT DAY
PARIS, FRANCE

“**I**t’s official,” Beth Brandon said, flinging her leather tote into a chair. “We just survived a near-death experience.” She collapsed onto the queen-sized bed, arms laid out in the shape of a cross.

“I liked it,” Natalie said, moving toward the hotel room’s third-story window. She pushed aside the filmy curtain liner and looked out over the angular rooftops of Paris. The cab driver had taken them from Orly to the Marais in record time, with complete disregard for speed limits, traffic signs, and according to her sister, human life. Their hotel, a rectangular building enclosing a cement courtyard, had wrought-iron balconies painted bright turquoise. The floor squeaked in four places walking from the door to the window.

Natalie touched the glass with her nose. Her eyes, too pale a blue to darken her reflection, glanced from spire to rooftop to dome. She wanted to go exploring, but knew she’d

have to wait for Beth. She couldn't go out alone in a new city, alone, with only Belial for company.

"Are you hungry?" Beth asked.

Natalie shrugged.

"Is Belial behaving?"

"So far," she said, looking south toward the Seine. A whisper of movement behind her eyes unleashed a flood of goosebumps under her T-shirt. "But the alprazolam is wearing off. He's starting to breathe again."

Beth pulled back a cashmere sleeve to glance at her watch. "I need to check in at the venue and have them run through my slides. If I leave now, I can get back in time for dinner. You think you can wait that long?"

"I could wait forever," Natalie said, perching on the windowsill. The peaked roofs, embellished corners, and laundry lines strung across courtyards looked like the setting of an urban fairytale. In San Francisco, from her apartment on the corner of Valencia and 26th, she mostly saw power lines, pigeons, and people who sucked at parallel parking.

"You have what you need?" Beth asked.

"It's in my bag."

Beth grabbed Natalie's canvas messenger bag and brought it to her. "Just in case," her sister said, unlatching the flap to reveal a dozen airport-sized liquor bottles.

Natalie reached for her sister's hand. "Thank you for bringing me. I know it would have been easier if you didn't."

Beth folded her into a hug and Natalie breathed in the warm, golden scent of her sister's perfume. "Everything that happens, good and bad, we're in it together, remember?"

We've gone through too much to change that now. Besides, I wouldn't have missed this for the world."

Belial stirred and shifted his wings. The movement sent tentacles of pain coiling deep behind her eyes. *Me neither*, the angel said.

Natalie reached for one of the bottles in the messenger bag.

"Already?" Beth said softly.

"He's talking now." Natalie unscrewed the cap and tilted the plastic bottle to her lips. The rye whiskey burned a peppery trail from tongue to stomach.

Belial made a noise like thunder, letting it rumble in his throat. *You don't want to do that. We'll be going out soon.*

"No," she said. "I'm waiting here for Beth."

"You tell him." Beth squeezed her hand. "Pick out something we can go see tonight, okay?" She grabbed the makeup bag from her suitcase and headed for the bathroom.

Natalie screwed the cap onto the empty bottle. It had all happened so fast — the call, and then the trip. First, Beth's dean at the university had gone in for emergency gallstone surgery. As they wheeled him into the OR, the department secretary had called and asked Beth to take his place at a conference in Paris on four days' notice. Beth had scrambled to familiarize herself with his paper ("Going out as a Ghazi: Latin and Arabic Depictions of Faith, Weaponry, and Destiny in the Battle of Tours"), make some slides, bribe the neighbor to babysit Seth, and ... figure out what to do with her.

I can't be left alone for three goddamn days, she thought. What kind of person can't be trusted for three days?

You, little one, Belial answered.

Natalie took a deep breath and looked out over the city. As part of her cognitive therapy, Beth had taught her to run through facts, names, numbers, and dates when she felt overwhelmed or on the verge of losing control. It was easier when Beth quizzed her, bombarding her with questions like those machines that shot tennis balls at people who had no one to play with. But here, the city itself bombarded her with questions. Every glance revealed another place where something had happened, where someone had lived and breathed and died and seen things only described in history books.

I can do this, she thought.

Just a few blocks southeast was the Place de la Bastille. Although there was nothing left of the building itself, the spot marked the location of the infamous prison.

“The Bastille,” she said, closing her eyes.

For as long as she could remember, facts and numbers had come easily to her. Once she read them in a book or heard them spoken aloud, they stayed in her brain. Retrieving them and getting them past Belial was another story.

“Attacked on July 14, 1789.” She paused as the calculation whirred in her head. “A Tuesday. There were seven prisoners inside: four forgers, two nut jobs, and a count. Ninety-eight attackers killed, plus seven garrison members and the governor. Lafayette mailed the key to George Washington as a token of respect.”

Interesting choice, Belial said. *But that’s not where we’re going.*

“We’re not going anywhere,” she said, pulling a second bottle from her bag. “I told you that already.” She chugged the contents, feeling a heady warmth spread through her chest.

You know you're destroying your liver, don't you?

"Not fast enough," she said.

The angel, perched in the space between her brain and her skull, was not a fan of alcohol. It was the only thing that slowed him down and let her out-think him. Beth preferred therapy, but even she admitted that the fastest, easiest way to get Belial to shut up was to drink him into silence.

The bathroom door squeaked against the uneven floor as Beth emerged, lipstick reapplied. Thin, blonde, and blue-eyed, Beth had given birth without drugs, run a marathon, made pie crust from scratch, published three books, and given the university's graduation commencement speech. The fact that she still threw up before every speaking engagement made Natalie smile. Her sister was human after all.

"You're not even speaking today," she said as Beth dropped her makeup bag back into her suitcase. "What's with the nerves?"

"It's a meet-and-greet in a language I barely speak with guys I quoted in my dissertation. Five bucks says I hurl all over Evrard Baptiste's shoes."

"They know you're not presenting your own research, right?"

"That's the only reason I agreed to do it." Beth shivered. "I need a new specialty. Russia still gives me nightmares."

Natalie bit her lip. *Me too*, she thought, remembering everything that had happened after Beth's book on Nicholas II came out. The tsar's missing treasure had almost gotten them killed... but it had also shown her that it was possible to love someone other than her sister or her nephew.

Constantine, she thought, wishing he were with her. But he was still in Moscow, visiting his parents and his sister, Lana. She had to be patient.

“I know what makes nightmares go away,” she said, reaching into her bag and holding out one of the plastic bottles.

Beth shook her head. “Those are yours.”

“Beth, you’ll be gone all of what... two hours? I’d pass out if I drank all these.”

“I feel weird leaving you in a strange place. We just got here. What if Belial —”

“I’ll be fine,” Natalie said. “I can do this.”

“Battles of the Hundred Years’ War, in order, beginning with Crécy. Go.”

“Beth. You’re stalling.”

“Shit.” Her sister bit back a grimace. “I think I’m gonna throw up again.”

“You’re not. Just go. I’m fine, I promise.”

“Think about what you want to eat tonight, okay?” Beth grabbed her tote and leaned her head against the doorframe. “Just one,” she said softly.

It was a promise they’d made to each other after Russia: just one more smile, one more try, one more gasp of hope, one more breath, when everything else had gone wrong. “Just one,” Natalie replied, smiling until Beth closed the door.

Finally, Belial said. *I thought she’d never leave.*

“Fuck off,” she said, unscrewing the cap of the bottle she’d offered Beth.

There is a great evil in this place.

“There’s evil everywhere.”

Evil doesn’t die, little one. It can be neither created nor destroyed.

“Did you whisper that in Newton’s ear, too?”

She turned her head toward the window. Suddenly, there were no people visible at all—no women watering geraniums in a planter box, no kids leaning out a window to smoke while their parents weren’t home. “What do you want from me?”

There is someone I want you to meet.

“Not gonna happen.”

Two people, actually.

“Let it go.”

What if I told you there were things here, places here, that carry a part of your bloodline?

“I wouldn’t give a shit. Beth is the genealogy freak, not me.”

Don’t lie to me, little one. I’m a part of you, remember?

She reached for another plastic bottle. “Whiskey,” she said. “Whiskey’s about to be a part of me.”

Belial tapped her with the tip of a wing. The lightning bolt of pain made her drop the tiny bottle. *If I made it sound like you have a choice, then I am sorry.*

She pressed her hands to her temples, trying to fight the pounding inside. “I’m waiting for Beth. I don’t want to go anywhere without her.”

I need you, little one.

Tears of pain squeezed from behind her closed eyelids. “I don’t need you.”

This affliction you believe me to be...do you think you are the only one to have it? It has marked your family many times before.

It skipped your sister, but who might it strike in the next generation?

“Seth,” Natalie whispered. Her nephew was still in grade school. He knew nothing about the evil of the world and she wanted to keep it that way as long as possible. “You promised you’d leave him alone.”

I promised and I obey, little one. But I am not the only one you need to worry about.

This was her nightmare, one she never seemed to be able to wake from — a future where Beth or Seth or Constantine got hurt because of her. Because of something a power beyond her control had brought upon them. “If something threatens Seth, swear to me you’ll fight for him against anything, living or dead. Promise me that, and I’ll do what you want.”

With all the power bestowed on me, I will protect your sister’s child if you come with me now.

She dropped the empty plastic bottle onto the floor. “Let’s go.”

The Carmelite Prophecy

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the beginning of the story. There's a lot more coming for Natalie, Beth, Léonie, and Marius. Here's where you can buy the book to find out what happens next:

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ABOUT NATALIE:



*“Strange as the
main character is,
she was
feisty,
capable
and
highly
entertaining.”*

- AMAZON
REVIEWER

WHAT'S IN STORE



She heard something else, too. It filled the air, shrieking through the chapel's limestone façade, slipping through everything made by the hands of men. It was the sky. It was screaming, choking on blood, gargling with sulfur. The devil's trill, Belial said. May you never live to hear it.

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The Carmelite Prophecy

THE NATALIE BRANDON THRILLERS

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BOOK 1

THE ROMANOV LEGACY

Natalie knows Nicholas II, last Russian tsar, left behind a secret bank account. But getting someone to believe her is harder than finding it. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Natalie hears the voice of an angel named Belial. No one takes her seriously...until a Russian spy kidnaps her, claiming she's the only one who can lead him to the treasure.

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**READ
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The Carmelite Prophecy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Readers like you are an inspiration –
I'd love to hear from you!*

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ABOUT JENNI

Jenni Wiltz writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She's won national writing awards for romantic suspense and creative nonfiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Gargoyle* and the *Portland Review*, as well as several small-press anthologies. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California.

SOCIAL

I'm shy and anti-social in real life, but pretty darn social online.

