

THE
DANTE
Deception



A NATALIE BRANDON THRILLER

JENNI WILTZ

THE DANTE
DECEPTION

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

The Romanov Legacy: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Red Road

The Cherbourg Jewels

A Vampire in Versailles

I Never Arkansas It Coming

THE DANTE DECEPTION

A Natalie Brandon Thriller

Jenni Wiltz



Decanter Press
PILOT HILL, CALIFORNIA

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Published in the United States by Decanter Press.
For information, contact:
P.O. Box 277
Pilot Hill, CA 95664
<http://decanterpress.com>

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wiltz, Jenni.

The dante deception / Jenni Wiltz.

549 p. ; 22 cm.

ISBN 978-1-942348-06-1 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-942348-05-4 (eBook)

1. Dante Alighieri, 1265 - 1321. — Fiction. 2. Art forgers — Fiction.
3. Suspense fiction. 4. Russia — Fiction. 5. Spy stories. I. Title.

PS3623.I48D36 2016

813'.6 — dc23

For Jacintha

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE BRANDONS

Natalie — diagnosed with early-onset paranoid delusional schizophrenia at age nine

Beth — Natalie's older sister and caretaker

Scott — Beth's boyfriend

Seth — Beth and Scott's son

THE SINCLAIRS & ASSOCIATES

Augustus — the seventh Baron Leighton, owner of Rocksavage

Severin — Augustus's son with Elena

Christof Ehrlichmann — forger; born in West Germany, befriended by Augustus Sinclair in 1972

THE LAZOVSKYS & ASSOCIATES

Makar — Member of the *vory v zakone*, a Russian brotherhood of thieves

Elena — Makar's wife

Valentin — Makar's son with Elena

Stepan — Makar's uncle; helped raise Valentin

Dragan — Makar's father; also a member of the *vory v zakone*

Vakhan Zyuganov — Stepan's friend; works for the Soviet Ministry of the Interior

Ruslan Kublanov — Valentin's cohort; collaborates with Christof

Maxim Starinov — FSB director

Andrei Patrushev — chief of the FSB's Investigation Directorate

THE MIRONOVS

Roza — dancer for the Bolshoi Ballet; Christof's girlfriend

Guryev — Roza's father

Klara — Roza's mother

THE PUBLIC SECURITY INTELLIGENCE BUREAU & ASSOCIATES

Vadim — Deputy Director; Liliya's father

Iosip — Vadim's brother; murdered in 1978

Liliya — Vadim's daughter; part-time security consultant and full-time hacker

Viktor — analyst; mercenary hired by the Russian army during the Second Chechen War

THE DASHKOVs

Constantine — analyst for the Public Security Intelligence Bureau; mercenary hired by the Russian army during the Second Chechen War

Lana — Constantine's sister

Galina — Constantine & Lana's mother

Alexander — Constantine & Lana's father

BRIGHTON'S AUCTION HOUSE & ASSOCIATES

Harry Fielding — Deputy Director; friend of Augustus Sinclair

Peter Seeley — lab manager; Alfie's boss

Alfie Granger — lab analyst; Severin's friend

Penfriends International — Alfie's mysterious benefactor

CHAPTER ONE

APRIL 1967

UNTERLENGENHARDT, WEST GERMANY

T*he old woman* cackled as a dog snatched the sandwich from her lap. The German shepherd carried the sandwich into a corner and nosed the black bread aside to get at the spicy sausage.

Christof Ehrlichmann held his breath. There were three half-eaten sandwiches under the couch. The cats — thirty, at last count — had coated the floor and furniture in urine. He had no idea how the old woman managed to eat anything without throwing up.

“Irma,” the woman said. “Make me another sandwich. Baby is wearing the first one.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” his mother said, hurrying into the kitchen.

Christof glared at her. If he dripped a single speck of paint on the floor, she sent him to bed without supper. But

people believed this filthy creature was a princess, so they let her do things even children knew they shouldn't.

He looked at the old woman's sweater, its sleeves streaked with excrement. The first thing his mother did when they arrived was open a window. Usually, the woman slammed it shut, her frail arms shaking with effort. "How dare you expose me to them!" she'd cry. "You know they want to kill me! Have you forgotten who I am and what I know?"

"No one wants to kill you," his mother always said.

"Everyone wants to kill me," she'd reply. "Even you."

Today, the windows were open. A breeze twirled the threads of the curtain's cat-clawed hem. It still smelled of death. The old woman buried animals by wrapping them in newspaper and setting them in the yard. "It stinks here," he said. "I want to go home."

"Christof," his mother snapped. "Don't speak like that in front of her."

The woman, called Anastasia, was supposed to be the daughter of a murdered king. Her house, a filthy barracks behind a six-foot fence, didn't look like a princess's castle. Inside, he had discovered a fair amount of treasure. The tabletops were stacked with books, gilded photo frames, and jewel-studded icons. When no one was looking, he traced the unfamiliar Cyrillic inscriptions in his notebook.

Nothing about the woman herself, however, resembled a princess. Her hair was short and white. Her lips were crooked and she hid them when she talked. Her eyes were blue, appropriate for a princess, but something still wasn't right. Other blue things, like cornflowers or the river Neckar, got darker

the deeper you looked. The old woman's eyes had no depth, no darkness. The only thing inside them was nothing.

That's how he knew — the old lady had no idea who she was.

Her visitors couldn't see it. They came in long black cars, the women in filmy skirts and the men in tweed jackets. They bowed and pressed their lips to her speckled hand, licked by a dog only moments ago. "Your Imperial Highness," they called her. Sometimes they gave her money. If they didn't, the old woman held a napkin to her face and demanded they leave her alone. His mother would escort the astonished guest to the door, apologizing for the woman's behavior.

It mystified him that anyone could leave this house still believing her a princess.

His mother emerged from the kitchen with another sandwich, bowing as she set it on the table. Christof looked away. He didn't want to see the old woman chew with her mouth open again. Through the slats of the fence, he saw a car pull up and its driver get out. "*Mutti!* Someone's outside."

"No, no, no, no, no," the woman moaned, slumping in her seat. "Make them go away."

"They will," Christof said. "As soon as they smell you."

His mother pinched his neck. "She needs our help, and we must give it. Do you want me to take away your paint?"

She doesn't need our help, he thought. *She needs a laundress and a straitjacket.* But the threat of losing his paint was enough to silence him as his mother met the man outside and escorted him to the threshold. The old woman reached for a sodden newspaper and crumpled it, holding it over her mouth.

Christof gagged.

The visitor, a tall man with a thin mustache, glanced inside and removed his hat. *He'll see*, Christof thought. *He'll take one look at her and know she isn't a princess.*

"Your Highness," the man said, "my name is Edward Turner. My father was a soldier in the Great War. He was injured on the Eastern Front, and taken to your hospital in Tsarskoe Selo."

"War," the woman mumbled. "It all started with the war."

"It changed all of us, Your Highness."

Her rheumy eyes narrowed. "Did it destroy you? Did it rob you of everyone you ever loved?"

"No, Your Highness."

"Then do not compare your suffering to mine!"

"I didn't mean to upset you, Your Highness. I just wanted to pay my respects."

The old woman paused, inspecting him over the edge of her newspaper. "You may enter."

Of course he can, Christof thought. *He said the magic word — pay.* His mother guided the stranger to the old woman's chair and stood in front of his own, blocking his view. "Mutti," he said, tugging on her apron strings. She swatted him without turning around.

Turner dropped to one knee beside the old woman. "My father's name was Peter. He said you spoke to him once. Do you remember him?"

She lowered the newspaper and clenched it in her disgusting hand. "What did I say?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. My father wouldn't talk about the war. The only thing he said had no words at all."

“What was it?” Christof asked, leaning around his mother.

Turner flashed him a ghost of a smile. “A leg, gone below the knee.”

Riding bikes, running, jumping, swimming...he couldn't imagine all that being taken away. “I'm sorry,” he said.

“Hospital,” the old woman muttered. “I had a hospital?”

His mother nodded. She'd read a book about the murdered princess's family and considered herself an expert now. His mother trusted books too much. “You worked at the hospital with your sister,” she said. “Do you remember, Your Highness?”

“You would never ask me that if you had seen the things I have seen!”

Here it comes, Christof thought. When faced with something she couldn't remember, the old woman claimed not to *want* to remember. With shouts and tears, she abused the person who asked. Because they thought she was royalty, they didn't press her. But playground bullies did the same thing every day, until the victim finally refused to give in. Had grown-ups forgotten how everything really worked?

He slid from his chair and stepped around his mother. “What did you say to this man's father?”

“Christof!” His mother picked him up and spun, depositing him behind her. “Forgive him, Your Highness. He didn't mean to offend you.”

“Yes, I did! I want her to help this man.”

“It's nothing, really,” Turner said. “Maybe I shouldn't have come.” He stepped back and his heel came down on a cat's tail. The cat howled and hissed as Turner's cheeks ripened like cherries.

Christof glared at the old woman's loose, flappy lips. All this man wanted was a word about his father, and she didn't even have the decency to lie. "Tell him!" he cried. "If you really were the princess, you'd tell him."

"And who are you," she hissed, "to give orders to the daughter of an emperor?"

"You're no one! You're lying and I hate you!"

The electric crack of his mother's palm against his cheek stole his breath. He looked into her eyes, but there was no softness, no hint of regret. "Mutti, she's not who she says she is."

"You're a stupid child, Christof, speaking of things you cannot understand."

But I do understand, he wanted to say. *She told a lie and you believe it, and now people kiss her hand and make her sandwiches and pretend she doesn't sleep in a room full of animal feces.* His mother, the old woman, the man... they all wanted him to be quiet so they could go on believing a lie. "She's not who she says she is! Why can't any of you see it?"

His mother gripped his face in one hand, squeezing until his teeth cut the tender flesh of his cheeks. "You think you're special, don't you? You think you know so much that it makes you better than the rest of us?"

Blood and saliva pooled in his mouth. His eyes burned with tears.

"I've caused too much trouble," Turner said. "And I apologize. But if I may, Your Highness..."

"Yes?" the false princess said.

The man reached into his pocket. Christof twisted in his mother's grip to see what he held. It was a photo of a man in a hospital bed. Two girls stood behind him with smiling

blurry faces. “It was the only thing my father had to give. I’d be honored if you would sign it for me.”

The old woman reached for the photo, curling it in her filthy hand as she picked up a pen. She drew a pointed arc—an A—the first letter in a name that wasn’t hers. Christof saw her hesitate twice during the inscription, as if she didn’t remember how to form the letters. “Life is hard now,” she said, handing it back to Turner. “It is not like it was then.”

“I understand.” Turner reached into his pocket. “If I may...”

“No!” Christof shouted. “That’s what she wants!” His warning emerged as a gurgle, launching a flue of blood and saliva onto his mother’s hand.

She shrieked and pushed him away.

The marmalade cat under his feet howled when he stepped on it.

He lost his balance.

His arms flailed, but they couldn’t save him. As he fell, he saw Turner hand a stack of bills to the old woman. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am, Your Highness.”

But I told him the truth, Christof thought. And it didn’t matter at all.

Behind the blood-red rush of anger, the realization came: Turner wanted to be deceived.

Christof smiled.

So let it be, he thought, as his head struck the table and a white light exploded behind his eyelids. I warned them.

CHAPTER TWO

SEPTEMBER 4, 1972
MONTRÉAL, CANADA

Augustus Wolverton Sinclair, seventh Baron Leighton, tightened his grip on the painting he'd come for. The Frenchmen had already stripped the backings, extracted the canvases, and smashed the frames of the others on his list. "Allez," he said, stepping over splintered wood and canvas shavings. "*Nous sommes finis.*"

"*Mais il y'en a plus.*" Yves pointed to the far gallery, where three guards lay bound and gagged.

"I don't care," Sinclair said, pulling a Smith & Wesson Model 36. "Start loading."

Anger brightened the younger man's eyes, but he held his tongue. He bent over the pile stacked in the doorway and scooped up a Picasso.

Sinclair let out his breath. Art students. *French* art students. What had he been thinking?

All they had to do was prop open the service door and transfer the jewelry and paintings to the panel van. Alain, their climber, had already loaded the Rembrandt and a Gainsborough. When the theft was discovered, everyone would think he'd been after one of them.

It bought him time, but not much.

He still had to figure out how to get in and out of Moscow undetected. He didn't trust Russians in general, and his client in particular, but the inheritance taxes were due on Rocksavage and his mother was buried in the family plot. Losing either was not an option.

Sinclair pinched the bridge of his nose. What had the poet said? Something about miles to go and promises to keep. Typically American, bland and dogged, but with a terse merit he admired. Someday he'd visit the cities they said compared with his own. Princess Margaret had quite liked New York, he heard.

A piercing electronic wail dissolved his memory of the princess.

Sinclair froze. The contractor repairing the skylight had assured him a rooftop entry wouldn't trigger the alarm. "That lying bastard," he hissed.

Yves dashed back into the room. "What the hell is going on?"

Spiked boot soles clanked behind him. Alain reappeared with a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun under his right arm. "We need to go — get in the van."

"No." If the contractor had lied about the alarm, he might also have lied about the museum's van. For all he knew, it had no petrol or a potato in the tailpipe. Once upon a time,

thieves had helped each other out of professional courtesy. Now it was every man for himself. “Get the Rembrandt and the Gainsborough. Carry what else you can.”

“We’re going on *foot*?”

“Unless you had the foresight to park an unregistered car nearby, in which case I would mistake that foresight for prior knowledge of such a need.” He drew back the hammer for show. “And then I’d have to kill you.”

“My brother has the shotgun,” Yves said. “You don’t have time to kill both of us.”

“I don’t have to.” Sinclair shifted his gaze to the younger brother. The boy’s forehead gleamed with sweat and he hadn’t even raised the gun yet. “Keep the Rembrandt. You earned it.”

“What about me?” Yves asked.

“There’s a Tintoretto by the door. You’re holding a Picasso.”

“Let’s go,” Alain said. He turned and fled through the service door.

Sinclair smiled at Yves. “After you.”

Yves stuffed a handful of jewels in his pocket, grabbed a stack of canvases, and ran. Sinclair slid the revolver into its holster and reached for a few small landscapes as he passed. His heart quivered at the sight of an El Greco lying frameless on the floor, but he had what he’d come for. The rest couldn’t be helped.

They ran out the side door, past the ladder still propped against the museum’s granite exterior. Two blocks down Sherbrooke, Sinclair cut left and pressed himself around the corner of another tall building. Alain stopped to rebalance

the canvases clutched to his chest. The shotgun slid out from under his arm and he grasped at it awkwardly. “What now?”

“Now,” Sinclair panted, “we bid each other adieu.”

Yves and Alain exchanged a glance. “And then?”

“If you have the Tintoretto, the Italians will probably be interested. Get thirty percent of market value in cash, and you can live happily ever after as an art school dropout.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” Yves asked.

“Of course not.” Sinclair shuffled through his stack and pulled out a brown landscape of trees and cows. “I’d never enroll in art school to begin with. Here. This is for you.”

It had caught his eye when they pulled it off the wall. Signed Brueghel, the light falling on the horseflesh was right, but the windmill lacked dignity, the blades of grass lacked distinction, and the bird was anemic. He’d be damned if Brueghel—whose graceful avians flocked as warnings to the humans in and out of his paintings—had signed his name to that single blurry fleck of a bird. “This should set you up nicely.”

Yves pointed at the only painting still in its frame, clutched in Sinclair’s gloved hands. “I want that one.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Yves snapped his fingers and Alain hefted the shotgun. “You haven’t let go of that painting all night. You already have a buyer willing to pay, *non?* Give me the Corot.”

Sinclair swore. He was as good as dead if he obeyed. The boys might damage the painting or sell it to another before he had a chance to stop it. His client had made it clear that only one outcome was acceptable. “You’ll regret this.”

Yves's teeth were yellow and bent, like eroded tombstones. "*Je crois que non.*"

Sinclair's fingers itched for the Smith & Wesson. It was just a game for these two, a chance to earn some extra money and put one over on the art world that had shattered their dreams. They knew nothing of love, desperation, or the weight of expectation. He felt older than his thirty-two years. "This is your last chance."

"No," Yves said, holding out his hand. "It is yours."

Sinclair raised his arm over his head and whirled his index finger. A Luton van on the opposite side of the street roared to life. The driver pulled up alongside them, facing the wrong way on a one-way street.

"You planned this!" Yves snapped. "You meant to abandon us so they would catch us first!"

"No," Sinclair said. "But it would have been nice." He slapped the roller back door with an open palm. "Let's go."

Alain hooked a finger around the shotgun's trigger. "How do we know this isn't a trap?"

"You don't," Sinclair said. "But the alarm has been ringing for three minutes now. You can run, carrying all those canvases, or you can come with me and continue our negotiations far from the Golden Mile."

The brothers exchanged glances.

The sky was still black, but the first slivers of dawn would seek them out soon and they knew it.

Yves nodded their acceptance.

Sinclair flipped the metal latch on the roller door. He flung it up and jumped aside.

Two flashes of light burst from the darkness.
Two bodies fell to the pavement below.
Sinclair breathed a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER THREE

OCTOBER 1972

THE BLACK FOREST, WEST GERMANY

The Mercedes rumbled down the dark forest lane, black smoke billowing from the tailpipe. Sinclair glanced at the temperature gauge and grimaced. Time was running out and he still hadn't found the turnoff to the old man's cottage.

The last time he'd come, they met in town for a drink. Best beer he'd ever had — thick as Marmite, and sweeter the warmer it got. But the man was nearly eighty now and rarely left home. *His memory isn't what it used to be, his wife had said. That nosy bartender asks what you're doing, and Gerhardt's likely to tell him. How long do you think we'll last if that happens?*

Sinclair stepped on the brake and looked out the window. At this point, he could keep going and hope the engine didn't overheat, or turn around and find someone to guide him. The sun was setting big and round, like the pool of blood on the floor of the Luton van.

He gripped the steering wheel and slid his knuckles toward the sky. *It couldn't be helped*, he thought. *They made you do it*. The engine made a noise that sounded like a moan. It would be dark soon, and cold. There were no lights along the road.

He shifted into reverse and backed from the dirt road to the paved. A hundred yards down the road, something caught his eye — a flash of yellow against the forest's unrelenting gray. He slowed the car as he approached and leaned over to roll down the passenger window. "*Guten Abend*," he said.

The boy — not yet a teenager, still wearing a child's rucksack — gave him a cold stare. "What do you want?"

"I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine, but I think I've lost my way. I'm a tourist, you see, and these unmarked roads are difficult to navigate."

"A tourist wouldn't have friends here." The boy paused. "No one does."

"Call it business, then."

The boy dipped his chin into the neck of his parka. Sharp cheekbones echoed the fierce look in his blue eyes. "Did you come to see *her*? If you did, you're a few years too late."

"I came to see a man."

"Tourists always ask about *her*. They want to see where she lived."

"Who?"

"They think she's a Russian princess. They call her Anna Anderson."

Sinclair tilted his head. There had been quite a row in London over this woman who claimed to be Grand Duchess Anastasia: Is she, isn't she, did anyone survive the massacre

in Ekaterinburg, was there really a secret tsarist fortune hidden away? “She was here? In this godforsaken place?”

“I could take you there.” The boy’s eyes swept the length of the car, taking in the make, model, and generally deplorable condition.

Sinclair recognized that mercenary glint, along with the sudden desire to be helpful. It might have been Harrow, eighteen years ago, when he’d been the forgotten boy angry at the whole world. “I’m late for a meeting, but perhaps we can come to an agreement.”

The boy shifted his weight. “What do you want?”

“I want you to get in the car.” Sinclair felt the boy’s eyes travel from his gloved hands to his wool overcoat to the leather attaché case on the floor. “I’m harmless, I assure you.”

“Even if you aren’t, I can handle myself.” The boy reached for the door handle and slipped inside. “So who’s your friend?”

“What’s your name?”

“Christof.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me what my name is?”

“I don’t care,” the boy said. “This car isn’t yours, is it?”

“No,” Sinclair said. “It’s not.”

“It needs work. I might be able to help, for the right price.”

Sinclair laughed. “Let’s just get to Brodbeckgasse, shall we?”

“Turn around, take your first right, go about five hundred meters. The house you’re looking for is in a grove of pine trees on the right. You can’t see it from the road.”

“How do you know that’s the house I’m looking for?”

“There’s no such place as Brodbeckgasse, but there is such a person as Gerhardt Brodbeck.”

“Fair enough,” Sinclair said. “Let’s see how far this car will take us, shall we?” He followed Christof’s directions, which led him precisely to Brodbeck’s door. He switched off the engine and a cloud of steam billowed from the bonnet. “Best to let it rest a bit, I think. Do you mind waiting here while I meet my friend? Is there anyone who’ll be worried about you?”

The boy turned and stared into the forest. “No.”

“I’ll try to be quick,” he said, glancing at Christof’s ungloved hands and bare head. “We’ll get something to eat before you show me where your grand duchess lived.”

“She’s not my —” the boy began. “That is, she’s not here anymore. But she did leave some things behind. No one knows I have them. I’ll show them to you if...”

“If the price is right,” Sinclair said, smiling. “I think we can work something out.”



The boy ate as if he’d never tasted spätzle before. The tavern didn’t have anything other than schnitzel and spätzle, but Christof devoured a plate of each. Sinclair sipped his doppelbock — Good God, how did they get it so thick? — and kept up an easy chatter devoid of significance.

The room was warm, thanks to the logs smoldering in the fireplace, and he was in no hurry. The package from the old man was in the boot of the Mercedes, wrapped in butcher’s paper and tied with string the color of Christof’s

parka. He didn't believe in signs and had no superstitions. He preferred to think of such occurrences as happy reminders of things he already knew.

The boy was a find.

He'd come out of the old man's cottage to find Christof in the passenger seat with the heater on, the car's engine purring. "That'll be a thousand marks," the boy said, looking up at him without a shred of guilt. He'd gladly paid the car's ransom, dropping the bills into the boy's oil-streaked hand.

At least he'd *thought* it was oil until the boy returned from the toilets, hands washed, with round black specks still dotting his right fingers. It was all he could do to hide the smile that threatened to splash across his face. Gerhardt was finished; his hands shook with a palsy that had almost turned the Corot into a Monet.

Sinclair waited until Christof pressed his fork over a single crumb. Then he sat back, crossed his legs, and raised his glass. "Now, what can you tell me about that grand duchess?"

Christof's jawline hardened. "She lived in a barracks. Local women would come to take care of her. She moved away a few years ago, but everyone still wants to know something about her. Or touch something she touched." He glanced at the bartender, drying beer steins with a towel. "Sometimes they want to buy things that belonged to her."

"And you can make that happen?" Sinclair said softly.

Christof's gaze stayed with the bartender. His left hand slipped down to his rucksack. A few deft movements of his fingers and he pulled something up to the table.

A photograph.

Sinclair slid the photo toward him, inspecting it under the table. It was old, printed on thick corrugated paper. It showed two girls in white dresses, sitting primly on fauteuil chairs. Both had chubby cheeks, but only one was beautiful. “Which one is she?”

“The pretty one,” the boy said quickly. “She signed it for me.”

Sinclair looked at the signature. Deep black ink, probably iron gall, thick nib, Cyrillic characters. The “A” was sharply pointed, but the “Я” was loose and unformed.

He looked the boy in the eye. “Did she... sign... anything else for you?”

Christof reached into his rucksack. He brought up three more photographs and slid them across the table: one glossy, one matte, and a postcard on cream-colored stock. Each bore the same signature: Анастасия. Sinclair made sure to frown as he asked, “How did you get these?”

“My mother worked for her.”

“And she liked you?”

The boy’s thin lips quivered. “She would have done anything for me.”

He can't lie, Sinclair thought, *not with his voice and not with his face*. But on paper, he was brilliant. For a twelve-year-old to forge a believable signature in a foreign alphabet was quite an achievement. To do it consistently from photo to photo was another thing entirely. The signatures weren't the product of a stamp — they were each hand drawn, yet nearly identical. The control exhibited in letter formation, spacing, stroke width, and height was unbelievable. “These are good,” he said. “Very good.”

Christof's eyes flashed toward the bartender. "I'll give you a fair price to say thank you for buying me dinner."

"I'm sure we can make a deal."

"Not a deal." The boy shook his head. "I'll name my price, and you'll accept or decline."

"Tell me how you learned to forge this signature and I won't tell your mother that her little boy is robbing helpless tourists."

"You don't believe these signatures are real?"

"My dear boy, I know they aren't."

"Prove it."

He pointed at Christof's hand. "The ink is still on your fingers because you made these in the car while I met with Mr. Brodbeck. You had to camouflage the ink stains, so you fiddled with the engine, and by luck or other means, you actually fixed it. Were I to look in that rucksack, I'd probably find the pen, ink, and nib you used to make these fine trinkets here, along with — stop me if I'm wrong — a fresh supply of unsigned photos and cards?"

The boy's cheeks reddened. His hands gripped the seat of his chair.

"Don't be afraid," Sinclair said softly. Across the room, a fire popped and hissed, sending orange sparks in asymmetrical arcs toward the floor. He could have sworn they all imitated the sweep of the boy's A. "I have no intention of turning you in. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"What do you want, then?"

He picked up his stein and drained the last delicious gulp. "Isn't your mother worried about her boy having dinner with a strange man after dark?"

“My mother is dead,” Christof said. “I do what I want.”

“Who takes care of you?”

“No one.”

“What do you mean, no one?”

“I’m dead, too.”

“You look real to me.”

“I meant on paper.”

Sinclair set down his stein. “Do you mean to tell me you forged your own death certificate?”

The boy smiled. “And paid a man to file it for me.”

“So you’re a ghost.”

“I like it that way.”

“How would you like to be a ghost who paints?”

“Oil or watercolor?”

This gets better and better, Sinclair thought. The beer had brought a haze to the room, but it wasn’t the only reason he felt like laughing. The boy was small for twelve, with the sallow skin of the undernourished. Dark blond hair hung to his ears. The ends were uneven, as if he cut them himself with scissors.

He held up his empty stein to catch the bartender’s attention. “Bring me another,” he said. And then, with a glance at Christof, “Make that two.”

CHAPTER FOUR

FEBRUARY 1973
MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.

T*he river was frozen, its surface faceted with crystals and cracks. New-fallen snow blurred the outlines of bridges, street signs, cars, and lampposts. It would have been bearable but for the wind. His cheeks stung like open wounds. "Are we there yet?" Christof asked.*

"Almost," Sinclair said, glancing behind them.

"They're not there, you know."

"Doesn't mean they won't come back."

"They're not following us," Christof said. Once Sinclair had shown him what to look for, the KGB men were easy to spot in their fedoras and blue raincoats. "I promise."

Sinclair smiled and draped an arm around his shoulders. "I believe you."

Across the river, a building rose impossibly high, with a gleaming metal spire and ornate pilasters on every side. Christof traced the spire with his eyes, wishing he could stop

to draw it. They crossed the bridge and entered a residential neighborhood, some of the buildings almost pretty with their plaster decorations and faded pastel paint. Sinclair stopped in front of a seven-story pale brick building with no decorations, curves, or pilasters.

“Is that where we’re going?” Christof said. “It’s ugly.”

Sinclair tightened his grip on the leather portfolio in his right hand. “Don’t say things like that once we’re inside. We can’t afford to make this one angry.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

“A little.”

Christof couldn’t imagine Sinclair being scared of anyone. Everywhere they went, people scrambled to offer him a better seat or bigger room, even before they found out he was a baron. He looked the part — tall and well-dressed, with blond hair slicked back from his forehead. Deep-set eyes beneath pale brows gave him the look of a death’s head. The spell was broken the moment he smiled or laughed, which he did often. It made people want to keep pleasing him.

Somewhere behind them, a door slammed. Heavy footsteps beat against the pavement.

Sinclair’s arm stiffened across his shoulders. He tried to turn his head, but the baron’s gloved fingers bit into his shoulder. “*Nyet*,” Sinclair whispered.

They stood, frozen, until a car door closed and an engine started.

Sinclair’s eyes followed the black Zhiguli down the street. “If anyone asks, we’re looking for Pushkin.”

“He’s dead.”

“Just let me do the talking.”

“You’re afraid,” Christof said. “Why? What did you steal for —”

Gloved fingers spun him hard and gripped his jaw, just like his mother had. “Never say that word out loud, do you understand? Anyone hears you and we disappear into the Lubyanka.”

Christof’s cheeks burned with sudden anger, but not at Sinclair. Happiness had made him careless. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Sinclair let him go and patted his cheek. “You and I will accomplish great things, my boy. I’m just trying to make sure we live long enough to do it. Remember, no more English until Lazovsky’s door closes behind us.”

Christof nodded and followed Sinclair into the building’s vestibule, stomping his feet to shake off the slush. The air was thick with fish and onions. At the end of the vestibule, an old woman sat at a desk. *The dezhurnaya*, Christof thought. He didn’t believe it the first time Sinclair told him about the old ladies who guarded elevators and spied on their neighbors for the KGB. Christof swallowed and felt the saliva catch in his dry throat.

Sinclair made for the elevator. “*Dobry dyehn*,” he said to the *dezhurnaya*.

Christof was afraid to look at her. *She’ll get suspicious*, he thought. *She’ll call everyone in the building and ask where we go, what we say*. He only knew one complete sentence in Russian, provided by Sinclair — “I’m sorry, I’m not feeling well right now” — but he couldn’t pronounce it the same way a native would.

The old woman shifted in her seat and muttered.

Sinclair shot back a cheerful reply.

When the elevator opened, Christof took a giant step forward. Sinclair made one more reply, then smiled at the old woman as the door closed.

He looked up at Sinclair. “What did she say?”

“She said it was unseasonably cold out.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it wasn’t nearly as cold as the winter of ’53.”

Christof smiled. Of course that’s what Sinclair would say.

When the elevator doors shuddered open, they stepped into the hallway. Metal sconces with flickering bulbs glowed in the dark passageway. A man in a fur cap emerged from the shadows. Christof flattened himself sideways as the man passed. *Pockmarked cheeks, gray eyes, blond mustache*, he thought, committing the man’s face to memory as they proceeded down the hall.

Sinclair stopped in front of the very last door and raised his fist.

It opened before he knocked.

“*Dobro pažálovat*,” said a tall man with long black hair. His big nose and small eyes reminded Christof of a mole, or any underground rodent who relied on a sense other than sight. “Come in, come in, I’ve been waiting all day!”

Christof gulped and followed Sinclair inside.

“Mr. Lazovsky, it is a pleasure —” Sinclair began.

But Lazovsky wasn’t listening. He dropped to his knees beside the portfolio in Sinclair’s hand. “She’s finally here.”

“And worth the wait, I hope. Where do you want her?”

Lazovsky swept his arm across a sideboard. A book and two candlesticks crashed to the floor, one rolling in a lazy circle at Christof’s feet. Sinclair unzipped the portfolio and

pulled out a bundle of canvas, tissue paper, and burlap. His long fingers peeled back one layer at a time. Christof caught a whiff of wood shavings, dry and fragrant, that reminded him of his mother's coffin. "Mutti," he whispered, before he could stop himself.

No one heard him.

Both Sinclair and Lazovsky were transfixed by the painting of a beautiful peasant woman standing at a well. Her left hand curled up to her cheek, while her right lay across the edge of the well. The way she stood, her left hip slightly turned... *She knows*, Christof thought. *She knows you're watching, but won't look you in the eye.*

"Spasibo," Lazovsky whispered. Christof looked up, surprised to see tears in the big man's eyes. "You don't understand what this means to me."

Sinclair folded the burlap and tissue back into his portfolio and zipped it shut. "I understand that you wanted her badly enough to hire me."

The Russian glanced sideways. "Do you think less of me because I would pay a man to steal rather than do it myself?"

"Technically speaking, you haven't paid anyone yet."

Lazovsky curled his lip. "Money is all you Westerners care about. You do not have a poet's soul." He held his hand over the painted girl's face. "Not like my Elena." His eyes drifted down to Christof. "What about him? Is this boy your son? Does he have a poet's soul?"

"He has an artist's soul." Sinclair's fingers squeezed his shoulder. "And yes, he is my son. Together, we are building an empire."

Christof tucked his chin into his coat and smiled.

Sinclair was *proud* of him.

No one had ever been proud of him before.

He knew Sinclair liked their arrangement — traveling through Europe, taking advantage of people who were stupid and rich. Sinclair would bring him paper, pen, ink, rubber, glue, wax, or anything else he needed. In return, he'd give Sinclair a document that proved they were the heirs to the forgotten safety deposit box of the fifth viscount's wife's cousin. But he never thought he'd be anyone's son until now. He wanted to trap the moment under glass. *I won't disappoint you*, he thought.

"An empire," Lazovsky said, raising one thick eyebrow. "And here I thought yours had already crumbled." He turned back to the painting and set one fat fingertip on the girl's painted cheekbone.

Christof gasped.

"What?" Lazovsky said. "Are you jealous?"

Christof's heart beat fast enough to burst. If Sinclair was afraid of this man, it was with good reason. But he couldn't let him do that again. "Y — you shouldn't touch her."

"She's mine. I paid for her."

"Technically speaking —" Sinclair began.

"Let the boy speak. Let him tell me why I shouldn't be allowed to touch what is mine."

The Russian's eyes were so black Christof couldn't tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. *Sinclair always knows what to say*, he thought. *And so should his son*. He swallowed the wave of nausea rising from his stomach. "W — when you touch her, the oil from your fingers changes the color of the

pigment. If you keep doing it, she'll get darker. She'll stop glowing."

Lazovsky's face fell. "Is that so?"

"You can't see anything after one touch. But decades from now, you will."

"How do you know this? You are too young to be a painter."

Sinclair forced a laugh and stepped in front of him. "Oh, he dabbles. Pen and ink, mostly. Children's things."

Christof frowned. "It's not —"

"The boy is right, though. You should put her under glass if you want to touch her."

The big man bent down to his eye level. "Thank you. You may call me Makar Draganovich."

"Makar Draganovich," he repeated.

"Or just Makar." The Russian's hand ruffled his hair.

Christof risked a smile.

Suddenly, a projectile whizzed past his head. An arrow slammed into the wall, its pointed tip the epicenter of a dozen fresh cracks in the plaster. A dark-haired little boy followed, shouting angrily in Russian.

Makar smiled at the newcomer. "What do you mean, you missed? I thought you were the best Cossack fighter who ever lived!"

The boy lowered his bow and glared at his father.

"You can try again tomorrow," Makar said, picking up his son and holding him above the sideboard. "Valentin, look what our guests have brought."

The boy's eyebrows flew up. "Mamochka!"

"Yes," Makar said softly. "Mamochka."

“Valentin, if you so much as —” A second pair of footsteps hurried into the foyer. “Oh! Makar, you didn’t tell me you were expecting company.”

Christof turned. It was the girl in the painting. Or it would have been, if Corot had painted a young Russian *hausfrau* instead of a French peasant. She had long black hair, brown eyes, and glowing skin. Her lips were a perfect bow, her face a perfect heart. He gulped. Even the flush of her cheek, a vivid rose, was the same.

“Mama, someone painted you!” the other boy said.

“I don’t have time to sit for a painting,” she replied, plucking her son’s arrow from the wall. “I’m too busy cleaning up after you.” She put her hand on Makar’s arm. “Have you asked your friends to stay for supper? They are welcome here.” She glanced over her shoulder, dark eyes glistening with an unspoken invitation.

Christof looked up at Sinclair. He didn’t want to stay for dinner. He wanted to get as far away from this place as possible. Better to spend a quiet night in the Intourist hotel, sketching and scheming. But Sinclair wasn’t looking at him. He was staring at Makar’s wife with his mouth open, the way the wolf stared at Little Red Riding Hood in the cartoons.

“Of course we’ll stay,” Sinclair said. “So kind of you to offer.”

Christof cleared his throat. “Aren’t we supposed to —”

“No,” Sinclair said. “We’re not.”

“I see my husband hasn’t offered you a drink,” the woman said. “What can I bring you?”

“Anything you like.”

“Kir royale,” Christof said.

Makar laughed. “What are you teaching your son, Sinclair? He’ll have vodka, like the rest of us.” He flicked a forefinger against his throat and clicked his tongue.

The boy, Valentin, wriggled in his father’s grasp. Makar put him down and he ran to yank his arrow out of his mother’s hand. She gasped and held the hand to her mouth, sucking a drop of blood out of the fresh cut. “Valentin!” she called, but the boy had already gone.

“You see?” Makar said. “My boy is wild, but he is a warrior. Worthy of an empire.”

Sinclair’s gaze followed the dark-haired woman as she walked into the next room. “Indeed.”

She pulled four glasses from a cabinet and retrieved a bottle of vodka. “Are you coming?” she called. “Or did you want to stand in the hallway all night?”

Christof stomped on Sinclair’s instep. “I’m afraid we —”

“Must let our host go first,” Sinclair said, a too-wide smile on his face. “After you.”

Makar nodded. “Excuse me for a moment. I’ll make sure Elena prepares enough *zakusi*.”

Once Makar had gone, Christof glared up at Sinclair. “I don’t want to stay.”

“Of course you do. We haven’t been paid yet.”

He had no argument for that, but something told him more than money was at stake. Everyone in that apartment gave him a bad feeling, from the bear of a man to the devil of a child. Why couldn’t Sinclair feel it, too? “You have to stop staring at her. It’s going to make him angry.”

“It’s a tribute, really.”

“That boy was shooting at me. I want to go.”

Sinclair nodded and for a moment, he thought he'd won.
"Do you know what Providence is, Christof?"

"I think so."

"Then trust in it to keep us safe."

"Why do we need to be kept safe?"

"Because that painting is a forgery."

"What?" Christof hissed. "He'll kill us if he finds out!"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"And now?"

Sinclair's eyes followed Elena Lazovskaya as she bent over the dining room table with a tray of glasses. "An even better one."

Christof swallowed, feeling a burn as potent as alcohol already building inside him.

CHAPTER FIVE

APRIL 1973

MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.

Stepan Lazovsky put on his overcoat, slipping the second button through the first hole. He fastened three more lopsided buttons on the way to the stairwell. In exactly two minutes, Vakhan Zyuganov would walk past the rear entrance to the General Staff building. They'd greet each other with surprise and shake hands. Stepan would ask the other man if he wanted a ride.

Vakhan would accept.

After a brief conversation, Vakhan would be deposited on Kalinin Prospekt. Stepan would make his usual stop at the cafeteria near the Voyentorg to pick up a ready-made meal for supper. His driver had already been paid to set the radio to static in case the other man was bugged.

Stepan looked at his watch. *Be on time*, he pleaded. *Be alone and bring me what I want.*

On the ground floor, he stopped near the front door. He looked down at the top button of his coat, hanging free, and the second button lodged in the wrong buttonhole. “Idiot,” he grumbled, setting to work with a calculated lack of dexterity. The ruse bothered him. He was a general, not a spy, and imprecision in any form made him grind his teeth.

While his fingers adjusted the buttons, his eyes scanned the street through a small plate-glass window. The rumbling black Volga was there, his driver standing ready to open the door. He wished he’d told the man to wait in the car. Now any miscalculation in timing would result in behavior outside his established pattern, the first thing the KGB would look for.

Stepan fumbled with his coat until he saw Vakhan’s blond head, then he burst through the door onto the street. “Vakhan Pavlovich!”

His quarry stopped short. “Stepan Danilovich!”

“I haven’t seen you in years, it seems! How are you?”

“I’m well.” Vakhan blinked twice, the signal he hadn’t been followed. “How are you?”

“Can’t complain,” Stepan lied. “Say, do you want a ride? I’m on my way around the corner. We can catch up for a few minutes.”

As soon as they were both seated, the driver turned a knob and the bleak crunch of static filled the cab. Stepan let the smile fall from his face. “Tell me you found her.”

Vakhan shook his head. “She’s not in Moscow, Leningrad, Novgorod, Voronezh, or Smolensk.”

“Not above the ground, you mean.”

“Not above, not below, not anywhere in between.”

The glimmer of hope that had warmed him all day vanished. “Is that all you know?”

“It’s not easy to find one woman in a country of 248 million.”

“That’s why I asked for your help.”

“And I narrowed the scope of your search considerably.”

Vakhan paused. “Are you sure she’s still alive?”

Stepan looked at the neon sign above the Arbatskaya metro station – *The Soviet Union Is the Source of Peace*. It wasn’t true. Any loyalty the Party had earned defending the motherland against the Third Reich vanished when they tossed his brother from the army back into prison. The *vory v zakone* had no tolerance for the convicts who accepted the government’s offer to fight the fascists. The criminal underworld prided itself on giving no help to the government, any government, not even in wartime. But Stalin sent them from the front lines back to prison, knowing full well what would happen to them. His brother had died in his cell, beaten faceless with a pipe, and Stepan had transferred his loyalty from the Party to his brother’s widow and fatherless child.

He brought them to live in his apartment, a reward from Khrushchev for his distinguished military career. He raised Makar as his own, teaching him to gather wild mushrooms at his dacha in Zhukova, then holding the boy’s hand at his mother’s burial.

Later, when Makar took steps to ingratiate himself with the vory leadership, Stepan provided the information about army supply shipments he needed to get their attention. When Makar moved against them, Stepan supplied the weapons and safe houses.

In the end, after Makar killed the men who participated in his father's murder, the vory allowed him to take his place. It would never have been permitted before the war, but many of the younger men had chosen to forgo the old ways, settling down with the wives and children that had been forbidden to their fathers and grandfathers. They overlooked Makar's wife, Elena, as the cost of peace in the underworld.

Until the day she went missing.

Then all hell broke loose.

At first, they thought she'd been kidnapped. The son of a collaborator, Makar knew his position among the vory had never been stable. But when no ransom demand arrived, Stepan began to suspect. There was nothing for anyone to gain. Elena was simply gone.

"Is she alive?" Stepan repeated. "I don't know. It's just a feeling."

"Maybe she went east, to the Urals. Or south, to the Crimea." Vakhan raised an eyebrow. "Is there anything you can give me to go on?"

Stepan realized how little he knew of Elena—where her family came from, or whether she had relatives outside the country. Without a permit to live anywhere but Moscow, she should have been at the mercy of the vory, the only secure channel to acquire a forged identification card and residence permit. But he'd already reached out to them with no luck. Vakhan was the first deputy to the Ministry of the Interior. If he couldn't find her, what were they left to conclude?

Stepan leaned his head against the glass. "East, south... try them all. Someone will talk."

“What if they don’t?”

He thought of the horrible things he’d seen on the march to Berlin — living bodies sliced open, oil or gasoline poured inside, and all of it set on fire. “We’ll make them talk.”

Vakhan placed a warm palm on Stepan’s arm. “I don’t want to say this, but you’re a friend, so I feel I must. Is it possible she doesn’t want to be found?”

“She married my nephew and gave him a son. I don’t care what she wants.”

Vakhan said nothing.

A moment later, the car stopped in front of a gray three-story building. The night stretched before him, endless and cold, and Stepan knew it might last for the rest of his life. “Please continue the search and keep me informed,” he said. “If you find yourself without dinner plans, call me at home. I’ll take you to the Armed Forces Officers’ Club.”

“I will.” Vakhan smiled. “Thank you.”

They shook hands when they got out of the car. Stepan unbuttoned his coat and re-fastened the buttons correctly. Vakhan was a good man, but not the right one for the job. He wasn’t ruthless enough.

They had to find Elena soon.

Makar was losing the ability to make decisions. He’d already authorized the capture and torture of three other vory leaders, hoping they had news of Elena. They didn’t. A shipment of produce from Nizhny-Novgorod had arrived by train and Makar let it rot because finding his wife was more important than feeding the men in Butyrka. The vory were criminals, true, but their connections allowed them to bring food into prisons and work camps that the government

ignored. Men would starve unless certain procedures were followed.

And then there was Valentin.

Stepan sighed as he entered the unmarked building and made his way to the basement. Here, the military's elite lined up for ready-made meals that weren't available to the public. Caviar, expensive cuts of meat, fresh fruit, and Georgian wine were all available to the upper echelons at the expense of the masses. Tonight's meal was Valentin's favorite — lamb *shashlik* marinated in lemon juice with potato salad, bread, and fruit soup. Stepan couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Valentin laugh like a regular child. He had every reason to be angry, but...

There was something about the boy that frightened him.

It started before Elena went missing, but had worsened over the long, lonely winter. He began finding toys dismembered for parts that were then sharpened and used to impale moths or spiders. Rat poison went missing from the kitchen a day before a neighbor's cat was found dead. Sometimes there were thin, sharp wires stretched across doorways at ankle level. When confronted, Valentin met Stepan's gaze with vacant eyes, biding his time until he was dismissed.

A light push against his back moved him forward in line. Stepan placed his order and watched the kitchen staff box it up. As the attendant handed him a plain brown shopping bag, a cold feeling stirred in his gut.

Elena wasn't dead. She couldn't be. Neither the vory nor the bureaucracy had found a body.

She hadn't been kidnapped because no one had asked for a ransom.

Maybe she was ill.

But illness didn't confer residence permits for other cities.

Stepan left the cafeteria and walked back up to street level. His driver opened the car door and he slid inside, the bag of food warming his lap. A sudden flash of memory played like a filmstrip in his mind. A week after Elena went missing, he'd reached into the flatware drawer for a spoon to stir his tea. Something long and sharp stabbed him under his fingernail, leaving wooden splinters in the nail bed.

Now he realized what it had been.

A shashlik skewer, thinned and sharpened, and placed there intentionally.

His fingers clenched the top of the brown bag.

Elena, he thought. *What have you done?*

CHAPTER SIX

JUNE 1978

MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.

Three loud raps on the door startled him. Valentin Lazovsky looked up from his dinner, a plate of *pirogi* Stepan had left in the icebox for him. He glanced at his father, slumped in a moss-colored chair in the next room. Makar's head twitched at the knock, but nothing more.

Valentin made a fist.

He got up from the table and unlatched all three deadbolts plus the sliding chain, its tarnished metal cold to the touch. The man in the hallway wore a short black jacket and pants. He leaned against the doorframe, one arm casually raised to reveal the knife sheath hung from his belt.

Valentin glared up at him. "What do you want?"

"Your father is expecting me."

"No, he's not."

"I'm here to make a report. Are you sure he's not in?"

"I didn't say he wasn't in."

The man tilted his head to look into the apartment. “I need to see him.”

“Who sent you?”

“The general.”

I doubt that, Valentin thought. Stepan had gone to the dacha for the weekend, leaving behind three frozen meals and instructions not to go anywhere without a guard.

Valentin looked at the man’s face, moving his gaze from eyes to lips to dimpled chin. Sometimes, when he stared hard enough at his father, Makar’s mouth would twitch. The past five years had taught him just how much of the human body was driven by electrical impulse.

But this one didn’t twitch, not even when telling a lie.

Valentin glanced at the knife — almost nine centimeters, he guessed, like the ones they’d used at the Young Pioneer camp. “All right,” he said. “You can come in.”

The man’s rubber-soled boots squeaked as he stepped inside. “Comrade Lazovsky?” he asked, eyeing the single plate of food on the table.

“That’s mine,” Valentin said. He led the man through the dining room into the fireplace room, and bent over the inert form that still bore his father’s name. “Papa, someone came to see you.”

Makar’s black eyes stared into the distance.

The visitor looked from Makar to Valentin. “What’s wrong with him?”

Valentin smiled. *Now I know Stepan didn’t send you.* “I thought everyone knew.”

“I heard rumors, but I didn’t believe them.”

“Good.” Something fluttered in the pit of Valentin’s stomach. His body was trying to warn him, to get him to run, but that was the last thing he wanted to do. “Talk to him, then,” he told the visitor. “If that’s what you came to do.”

The man leaned forward, as if Makar’s ears were broken instead of his soul. “Comrade Lazovsky, the general asked me to come in person to receive your orders.”

One quiet breath raised Makar’s chest.

The visitor turned his head. “Can he even —”

“Of course he can.” With his eyes on the stranger’s face, Valentin whispered in his father’s ear. “Are you listening, Papa? This man wants to talk about Mamochka.”

Makar’s hand twitched. The great bear-like body groaned and leaned forward.

“Tell him again,” Valentin said. “He’ll listen now.”

The man nodded. “The general received word that the shipment from Astana will be late. Voroshilov is asking questions. He wants to know what to do.”

Makar coughed. The words, when they came, broke like waves over rocks. “What general?”

“Stepan Danilovich. Your uncle.”

“W — what does he want from me?”

“He wants an order.”

“My w — wife is missing. Tell the general I have to find her.”

The man paused. Valentin saw his Adam’s apple bounce as he swallowed. “How long has he been like this?”

“The whole time.”

A muscle in the thug's jaw clenched. *I was right*, Valentin thought. The metallic taste in his throat intensified. He licked his lips and smiled. "You shouldn't have come."

The thug's hand slipped toward his knife. "If he's not the one giving orders..."

Now, Valentin thought, lunging toward the pot-bellied stove. From the wrought-iron stand, he grabbed the kindling axe. He spun on the balls of his feet and struck a backhand blow, burying the axe in the other man's calf. The impact of the strike rattled the bones in his arm and he smiled. *Harmony*.

The other man yanked the axe from his calf with a grimace. "You think you're so smart?"

Valentin shook his head. Stepan was smart. Maybe his father had been, too. Look where it had gotten them — their home was being defended by a twelve-year-old boy. "I don't need to be smart," he said.

The other man stood between him and the rest of the room, blocking access to the dining room, where there was a knife on the table. His father was useless. He doubted Makar could hear anything over the sound of the voices in his head. But he didn't need him. In the corner to his left, hidden behind the bookcase, was his old Cossack bow.

The man limped toward him, dragging his wounded leg. "Don't be afraid, boy. I didn't come here to hurt you."

Valentin retreated until his spine touched the window sill. "You reached for your knife."

"I made a mistake." The man grimaced. "I thought this was a trap."

"It might be. You're the one who's bleeding."

"Who directs your father's shipments?"

Stepan, Valentin thought. Somehow his great-uncle was managing to run a smuggling ring, raise a boy, hold a position in the General Staff, and do it all under the nose of the Party. He thought of the stew in the icebox, carefully portioned for him by day. Sooner or later, someone would figure out who was running the Lazovsky family empire...and then they'd come for Stepan, too.

He couldn't let that happen.

He dove into the corner and reached for his bow. The fingers of his left hand closed around its upper limb. He'd left two arrows beside it, firewood shafts tipped with broken knife points. He scrabbled for a shaft as the other man slashed his Achilles tendon from behind.

Valentin swore.

He felt pain and then warmth, like when little boys wet themselves in bed at night.

"I don't want to hurt you," the man said. "Hold your hands where I can see them."

Valentin rolled from his stomach to his back, the bow and arrow in his hands. They were only toys, but he'd learned long ago that size didn't matter. It was speed that killed. He pulled back with his right hand and let the sharpened missile fly. Its serrated arrowhead nicked the artery in the man's neck.

"Good shot," the man said. "Too bad you missed."

"Did I?"

The man frowned and pressed a hand to his neck. Red rivulets coursed through his fingers.

People were much bigger targets than the wrens he'd learned to hit from his bedroom window. While his father

met with vory leaders and his mother sighed and moped in the kitchen, he'd had nothing to do but force other creatures to pay attention to him. "Maybe I am smart," he said.

The other man swayed on his feet, eyes wide with sudden fear. Blood dripped down his arm, splattering the floor beneath him.

From his moss-colored chair, Makar gurgled. "V — Valentin."

"Hush, Papa," he said. "I'm playing with my bow and arrow."

The stranger lurched toward him, arms outstretched. Valentin extended his foot.

The man tripped and crashed to the floor.

He put his foot on the man's neck, pressing it until the blood began to spurt. He'd read books that described the light leaving a man's eyes as he died. He waited a few seconds, but the man's eyes were still bright, dilated with fear as he bled and gasped and flailed.

His dinner was probably cold by now.

Valentin sighed. He still had to prepare, in case there were more men on the way.

He limped into the corner, retrieved his second arrow, and sent it through the man's right eye.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JUNE 1978

ROCKSAVAGE, SURREY, ENGLAND

T*he brat wouldn't* shut up. Christof had given him juice, candy, and Sinclair's favorite whisky. Nothing worked. The ear-splitting wails kept coming, making it impossible to concentrate on the calligraphy for the Goethe letter.

He threw down his quill and stalked up the grand staircase, wishing ears could be shut as easily as eyes. *I can't live like this*, he thought. But he also couldn't live without the money Sinclair had promised him for the Goethe. He wondered what would happen if he poured his iron gall ink down the baby's throat. *Here's your Young Werther*, he'd say. *Sell him if you can.*

His fingers gripped the bannister rail, chipped and worn by almost two hundred years of Sinclairs. The tapestry runner was bald in the middle. Sinclair only ever walked on one side of it. He could have used his take from last year's

Raphael to have it rewoven, but no — *she'd* wanted to spend the winter in Buenos Aires. Just like the Giacometti should have fixed the leaking roof, not decked her in vintage mink.

It was Unterlengenhardt all over again, except this time, he'd become his mother, feeding sandwich after sandwich to a false princess who deserved to make her own food or go hungry. *No more*, he thought. *Let them find someone else.*

He lifted his foot to climb the next step.

In that instant, something crashed at the top of the staircase. Pottery shards skittered in every direction. He tucked his hair behind his ears and tilted his head. Two angry voices echoed from the library. He pressed his back to the wall and crept upstairs.

"You can't do this," Sinclair said. "I won't allow it!"

"I don't care what you allow!" Elena shouted, her Russian accent stretching "care" into two syllables.

"You don't love anything, do you?" Sinclair hissed. "Not me, not this house, not your son..."

"Oh, I love my son," Elena said softly. "Maybe things would be different if you did, too."

"Severin is my child. Of course I love him."

"Not the way you love the other one."

Christof felt his cheeks redden. *The bitch can't even say my name*, he thought.

He crept down the hall toward the library and peeked through the slit between the open door and the frame. Sinclair's back was to the door. He was angry or afraid or both. Sweat darkened the underarms and spine of his shirt. Elena stood next to the fireplace, its mantel conspicuously depopulated. Multicolored shards of glass and porcelain lay

at her feet. Her long black hair hung loose, one strand stuck to her glossy lips.

“He’s not your blood,” Elena said. “He knows too much.”

“We need him. We always have.”

“If he turned on you...”

“He won’t,” Sinclair said.

“He hates me. I can see it in his eyes.”

“Of course he hates you! You treat him like a servant.”

Elena’s hand reached for something else to throw, but the mantel was empty. She curled it into a fist instead. “I made my decision. You can’t change it.”

“You’re abandoning me and our child because you’re afraid of an eighteen-year-old boy?”

“You depend on him to pay every bill you have! You’re a pathetic excuse for a man.”

“Get out of my house!” Sinclair roared, pointing toward the door. “Leave us the way you left your other family. But Elena Lazovskaya is dead, and I won’t let you drag the Sinclair name through the mud. Who will you be when you walk out that door?”

“Myself, for the first time in my life.” Christof watched her eyes rake Sinclair from head to toe. “I was a child, sold to Makar because my father couldn’t feed his three other daughters. I was a slave to him, and then to his child, and then to you. I don’t want his name or yours. I have one of my own.”

Christof held his breath. That was it — the answer he’d been looking for all along.

Sinclair curled his lip. “You’re either very brave or very stupid. All I have to do is tell him where you are.”

“He’d kill you. You won’t risk that just to hurt me.”

Sinclair grabbed her wrist. She tried to rip it from his grasp, but he held firm. “Are you sure?”

Her smile framed a slightly crooked front tooth. “Send the German boy away.”

“I won’t do that.”

“You love him more than all of us! That strange, ugly boy who hates you in his heart —” Sinclair let go of her wrist and cracked his palm across her cheek. She shrieked, but the look in her eyes was one of joy.

“I raised Christof like my own, but he is not my son.”

The words echoed from Sinclair’s lips to the ceiling to the fireplace to the churning black hole in Christof’s heart. *Not my son, not my son, not my son.* The glass under which he’d kept Sinclair’s other statement to the contrary shattered in an instant.

Elena stepped closer to Sinclair, raising one hand to caress his cheek. “You are a good liar,” she said. “Be good to Severin.” Then she dropped her hand and walked toward the door.

Sinclair turned. The sweat on his face pooled in the deep bruised pouches under his eyes. “Stay,” he whispered. “Please.”

“I told you what I want.” She twirled the golden band on her left hand. “This is your last chance.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

Elena hurled the ring into the fireplace. “*Proschai, Augustus.*”



When the moon rose high over Rocksavage, Christof opened his bedroom door. He put on his jacket and shoes and walked down the grand staircase, out the front door, and across the lawn. The oak grove shielded him as he crossed the formal garden and approached the guest cottage. He knocked on the door even though there were no lights visible, inside or out.

She answered in a red silk robe, black braid hanging over her shoulder. He hadn't understood how beautiful she was, that day in Moscow. The heart-shaped face, the high cheekbones — she was a Reynolds portrait come to life.

Elena crossed her arms over her chest. "Did he send you to beg?"

He reached into his pocket and held up two British passports. "Take the boy with you."

"How long have you had those?"

"Take him with you." He pressed both passports to her chest. His fingertips rested on her warm skin, naked beneath the V of her silken robe.

Elena's black eyes glittered in the moonlight. She pressed his hand to her chest, holding it in place. "If I had known you would help me, I would have gone long ago."

He slid his hand out from under hers. "Take him with you."

Then he walked back along the gravel path to the main house, closing the door slowly behind him so the great lions-head door knocker made no sound.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEPTEMBER 1994

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Natalie Brandon reached into her backpack for the slip of paper documenting how long she'd practiced the piano. The music teacher, Mr. Chan, expected everyone to practice for thirty minutes a day, then get a parent's signature before turning in their time sheet.

Hers clearly indicated her subpar status as a musician: twenty minutes on Tuesday, fifteen minutes on Wednesday, and ten minutes last night. No one knew that the big, bold signature belonged to her older sister. Beth, a senior in high school, refused to let her cheat.

You've got to talk some sense into her, Belial said, looking through her eyes at the time sheet. *You don't want to fail, do you?*

"Shut up," Natalie said. "I'm at school. You need to leave me alone now."

You didn't want me to leave you alone during your social studies test.

"That's different. Stop poking me. It hurts."

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pounding in her head. A year ago, in fourth grade, an angel had come to her, asking if he could unfold his wings and show her something. When she agreed, she fell in a dead faint and woke up in the hospital, tethered to a machine that beeped and scrolled two never-ending jagged lines. The pain was gone but the angel was still there, living inside her head.

When they asked her what happened, she told them his name was Belial.

No one believed her.

Not her parents, not the first doctor, not the second doctor, not the one who did her MRI, not the one who talked about her limbic system, not the one who asked how she felt about everything, not the one who used her as a pincushion for all those needles, and not the one who put her under flashing lights for hours at a time.

Her mom cried and asked her to tell them she made it all up. But Belial was *there*, he was a voice inside her head, and even though she couldn't see him, she knew he was telling the truth. He crouched in the space beneath her skull, his big feathered wings floating over her brain. If he moved too fast and a wingtip touched her, white-hot lightning snapped through her veins.

Eventually, one of the doctors said she was something called an early-onset paranoid schizophrenic. They called Belial a "persistent auditory hallucination." Belial snickered when he heard the news. *Is that what they think I am?*

Aren't you? she'd asked.

Tell me, little one, does this feel like a hallucination? He pressed one wing against her brain and her vision went black.

No, she whispered, gritting her teeth through a wave of nausea.

Then let's agree to disagree with the doctors, shall we? They don't have your best interests at heart.

Natalie knew she had no choice. From that moment on, she did the best she could to hide him. Her mom stuffed her full of pills, which she had to throw up because they made her forget things, important things, like which of the Prydain Chronicles she'd already read. If Belial hurt her and she moaned, she said it was just a toothache.

The problem was that Beth knew she was lying.

She asked Natalie about it every night while she combed the tangles from her hair. Natalie loved the feel of her sister's hands moving over her skull, as if she were casting a protective spell. It was the only time Belial never bothered her. *Did you lie today?* Beth would ask. If she said no, Beth combed until she fell asleep. If she said yes, Beth set down the comb. *I wish you wouldn't hide who you are*, she'd say.

But Beth didn't know what it was like. In kindergarten, they hated her for reading grown-up books. In second grade, they hated her for turning in her math test first. After Belial, they called her Nuthouse Natalie. She'd already been suspended twice for fighting. After the second one, she heard Beth crying in her room late at night.

No matter what she did, someone was disappointed in her.

Natalie sighed.

The boy sitting next to her in music class, Shane Pritchett, turned his head. “Who were you talking to just now?”

“I wasn’t talking.”

“But I heard you.”

Mr. Chan’s head snapped in their direction as he explained the difference between quarter-notes and eighth-notes. When he turned back to the chalkboard, Shane tried again. “So who was it?”

“No one. Just leave me alone.”

Shane shrugged and pulled out his time sheet. Natalie stared at his numbers, black and crisp inside the bars of the printed table: 30, 30, 30, 30, 30, 30, 30.

I hate you, she thought.

Then she looked at the signature — a broken line with a single dot above it.

He signed that himself, you know, Belial said.

“Shut up,” she said. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

Then stop answering me. Stop believing in me.

“You won’t let me.”

Are you going to let him get away with that?

“You’re doing it again,” Shane said.

Mr. Chan set down the chalk. “Is there something the back row would like to share with the class?”

“No,” Natalie said, relieved she could answer without lying.

“Mr. Pritchett, how about you?”

Shane smoothed his time sheet across his knees. “I asked who she was talking to.”

“Well, Miss Brandon, it appears you are the one with something to say. Share with the class, please.”

Three girls in the second row turned to face her, Cheshire cat smiles from ear to ear.

They hate you, Belial said. They're going to talk about you after class.

"Well, Miss Brandon? What were you about to say to Mr. Pritchett?"

Natalie took a deep breath. It was either Shane or Beth, and there was no question who she'd rather disappoint. She sat up straight in her plastic seat. "The signature on his time sheet is fake."

"Mr. Pritchett, is this true?"

"Bitch," whispered Shane. And then, louder, "My dad signed it this morning."

Tsk, tsk, Belial said. I believe our Mr. Pritchett is going to have a prosperous career as a personal injury attorney. Or a hedge fund manager.

"There's only one way to get to the bottom of this," Mr. Chan said, stepping toward the big desk in the front of the room. "Mr. Pritchett, please bring your time sheet to me."

The mean girls in the second row turned *ooooohhhhh* into a four-syllable chorus.

Shane shuffled to the front of the classroom with a murderous glare. Mr. Chan retrieved his grading binder and made a show of opening it in front of the entire class. He compared the current time sheet to the previous weeks' sheets. "The signature is exactly the same," he declared, snapping the binder shut.

Of course it is, Belial said. He forged them all.

Natalie gasped.

"Now, Miss Brandon," said Mr. Chan, stalking down the aisle to her desk. "I'd appreciate it if you stopped accusing

your classmates of things they didn't do." He gave her a stern look over the rim of his glasses. "The next time you tell a lie, I'll rip up your time sheet and you'll take a zero for the week."

"But I didn't lie! I promised Beth I wouldn't and I didn't."

"Are you calling *me* a liar, then?"

"No!" She glanced from side to side, looking for a friendly face. Outside, the kindergartners were streaming onto the blacktop. She wished she were one of them, running for a swing with both arms stretched in front of her. "I would never do that."

Mr. Chan lowered his glasses. "No more disruptions today, if that's all right with you?"

Natalie nodded, relieved she didn't have to lie.

A clear conscience is overrated, Belial replied. *Someday you'll understand that.*

"Go away," she snarled.

Mr. Chan whirled in the aisle. "Excuse me? Did I hear you correctly, Miss Brandon?"

Claws of fear clutched her heart. Whispers floated over lips and tongues as her classmates held their hands to each other's ears. Her breath came hot and quick and she knew tears weren't far behind.

"Pack up your things," Mr. Chan snapped. "You just earned a trip to the principal's office."

"I didn't mean it! I mean, I didn't say that to you."

Mr. Chan looked around the classroom. "Is someone else speaking to you right now?"

Her eyes searched his face for a flicker of understanding. She couldn't tell him. Not here, in front of everyone. They'd laugh at her, more than they already did.

"I'm waiting, Miss Brandon."

Are you going to let him talk to you that way? Belial asked.

Suddenly, she wished she'd swallowed that morning's pills instead of sticking her toothbrush down her throat. *I just want to be normal*, she thought. *I want to be like everyone else.* She gulped down the sob in her throat and pushed away all thoughts of Beth. "No," she said. "There's no one else speaking to me."

"All right. Now we're getting somewhere."

Natalie breathed a shaky sigh of relief. If Mr. Chan could understand, maybe she could make Beth understand, too.

"And we'll get even farther once you pack up your things and go to the principal's office."

She looked up at him in alarm. "Don't send me away. I'll be quiet."

"I won't tolerate this kind of disruption, Miss Brandon. This isn't your first warning."

"But I —"

Mr. Chan tapped a finger against her desk. "Now, Miss Brandon."

A drop of sweat trickled from the nape of her neck. She gulped and picked up her backpack, dragging it behind her as she shuffled to the door. With her hand on the knob, she looked over her shoulder.

Mr. Chan stood, arms crossed, waiting for her to leave. The mean girls crossed their eyes and spun their index fingers next to their temples. Shane held his hand against his pant leg, middle finger clearly extended.

When she blinked, hot tears coursed down her cheeks.

Natalie closed the door behind her.

The principal's office was across the playground, in a peach building with rounded columns. She walked in the opposite direction, across the kickball field and through a hole in the chain-link fence. It took forty-five minutes to walk home, according to the Hello Kitty watch Beth gave her for her birthday. Natalie unlocked the back door with the spare key Beth kept under a basket of shells. Her dad would be at work and her mom would be in a stupor on the couch, surrounded by little bottles.

The coast is clear, little one, said Belial.

"You did this," she said, stepping inside. "You made them hate me."

They already hated you, Belial said. *I just made you see it.*

Natalie bit her lower lip. A moment later, she tasted blood.

She tiptoed into her father's study and grabbed a slim green book lying on the desk: *Dante's Inferno*. Whatever it was about would be better than school. She tucked it in her sweatshirt and went to hide in the empty doghouse in the corner of the garage. It must have come with the house, because they'd never had a dog. It was big enough for a person and no one went near it because it was full of daddy-long-legs spiders.

She crawled inside and blew on a reluctant spider to convince it to move out of her way. When she was settled, cross-legged on the dusty dog blanket, she pulled the book out of her sweatshirt.

What have you got there? Belial asked.

Natalie looked at the unfamiliar words. "*Dante's Inferno. Doré's Illustrations.*"

Oh, dear, Belial replied. *And you thought fifth grade was hell.*

The Dante Deception

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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PLAYLIST

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The Dante Deception

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. 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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BOOK 3

THE CARMELITE PROPHECY

When Belial guides Natalie to the church of Saint-Joseph-des-Carmes in Paris, she discovers a family connection to the massacre that took place there during the French Revolution...and a long-lost relic buried deep within its walls. Can she stop an ultra-nationalist terrorist group before they steal the relic and start another French Revolution?

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NOVELLA

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Natalie doesn't believe in curses - except the one afflicting her. When Belial tells her that a copy of the rare Sinners' Bible is linked to the tragic Stuart dynasty and its mystical curse, she doesn't believe him. But strange things happen when a desperate duo attempts to steal the Bible, and Belial is the only one who can help her stop them.

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Emma's dad has always promised to send her to college. But when an act of gang violence almost takes his life, Emma can't move on. Her family and friends all want her to focus on school. Will she do what they want and focus on her future...or will she jeopardize everything to seek revenge?

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The Dante Deception

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

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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.

