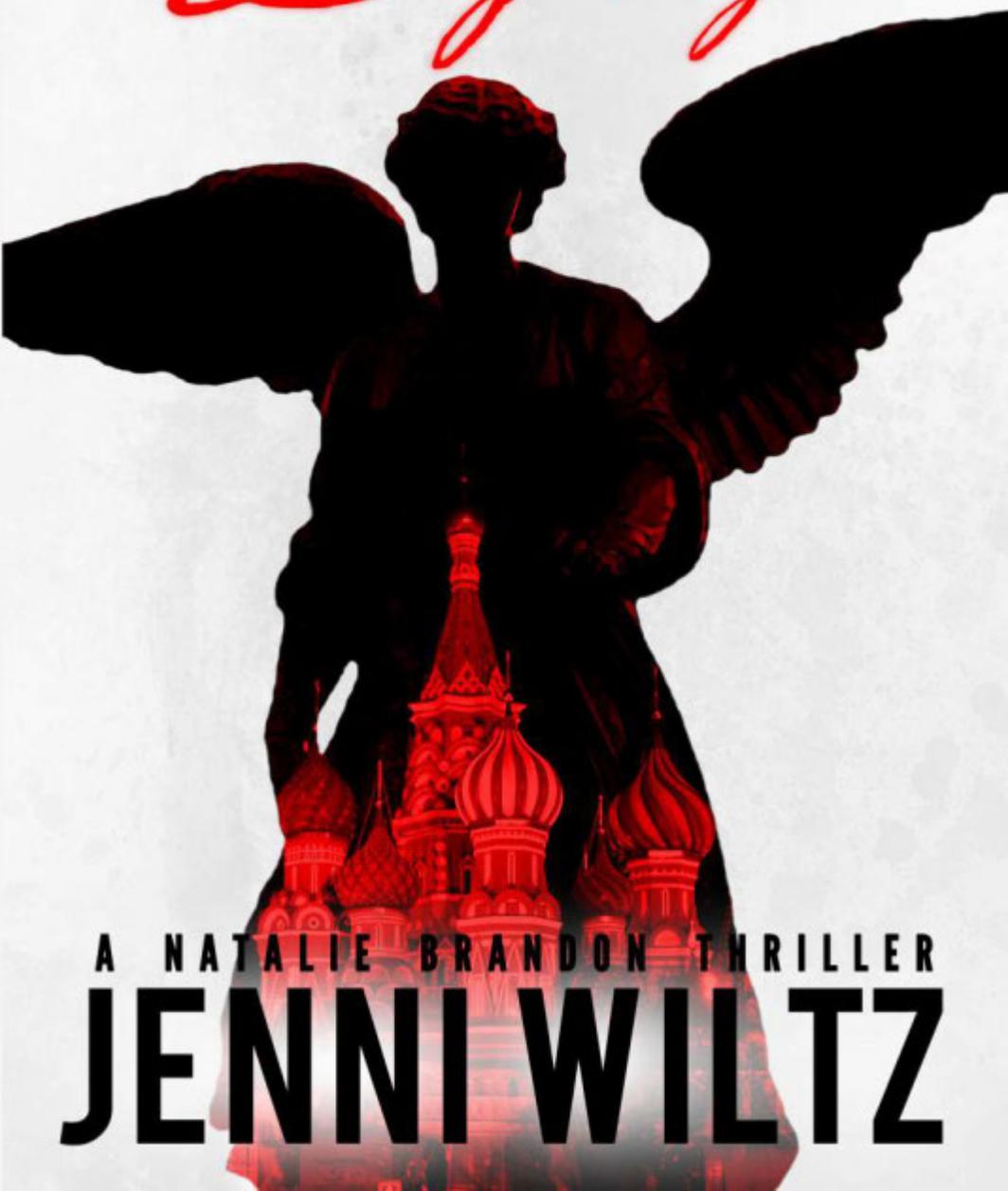


THE
ROMANOV
Legacy



A NATALIE BRANDON THRILLER

JENNI WILTZ

THE ROMANOV LEGACY

A Natalie Brandon Thriller

Jenni Wiltz



Decanter Press
PILOT HILL, CALIFORNIA

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For Sara

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 1918

EKATERINBURG, RUSSIA

The guards shot at anything that moved. Birds, stray dogs, even street vendors who came too close to the whitewashed palisade shielding the house from view—no one was safe and there were no warning shots. Target practice, they called it.

The men “practiced” every day after lunch, calling out the name of a different Romanov and shooting wildly at a tree trunk or a tin of food set on a fence post. They called this place “The House of Special Purpose,” and only the blind harbored illusions about what that purpose might be.

Marie was not blind.

She watched one of the guards through a crack in the bedroom door, which they were not allowed to close all the way. The rest of the family had gone into the dining room

for supper. She stayed behind to wake her sister, Olga, who lay suffering with a headache. “Two minutes,” the guard had said. “Then I will drag you into the dining room by your hair.”

It was not enough time. Still, they had to try.

She glanced at Olga, feigning sleep while stiff as a tree trunk. “Olga, darling,” Marie called. “It’s time for supper. You must get up.”

Squinting through the crack, Marie followed the guard’s gaze to the pendulum clock in the hall. He was timing them. She took a deep breath and snapped her fingers.

At Marie’s signal, Olga sprang to life. She reached beneath the mattress and removed a pen and sheet of paper, torn from the front of Alexei’s diary. Scratching fiercely, she punctured the paper in several places and spattered her white dress with ink.

“Slow down,” Marie hissed.

Olga ignored the warning. Her pen flew across the paper, giving shape to the words she’d chosen while lying in bed last night. No one must know what she and her sister were doing: not the guards, not the Cheka, not the Bolshevik censors, and certainly not their father. This letter had to slip past all of them, dismissed as the lovelorn ramblings of a doomed princess. The lovelorn part was not difficult; she would die with Pavel’s name on her lips and the memory of that Crimean autumn in her breast. *Yes, she thought. I know how to keep a secret.*

MY DEAR PAVEL,

I MISS YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN KNOW. WE ARE
SURVIVING, SO YOU MUSTN’T WORRY TOO MUCH.

BABY'S KNEE IS SWOLLEN AGAIN, BUT HE LIVES UP TO HIS NICKNAME AND WE THANK GOD FOR EVERY MOMENT HE IS HEALTHY. THERE IS NOTHING TO DO HERE BUT READ, AND I HAVE BEEN THROUGH EVERY SCRAP OF TYPE SIX TIMES ALREADY. I WISH YOU COULD SEND ME SOMETHING NEW. JUST ONE WORD WOULD BE ENOUGH. WHAT WAS THE BOOK WE READ TOGETHER IN THE CRIMEA? A SILLY STORY ABOUT A DANCING GIRL WHO BECAME AN EMPRESS. IF SHE WERE A MAN, IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO SCANDALOUS, DON'T YOU THINK? THEY WOULD HAVE GIVEN HIM THE WORLD. WHAT POWER THERE IS IN A NAME! DO YOU SUPPOSE ANYONE WILL REMEMBER MINE WHEN IT IS ALL OVER? LIKE ME, IT IS SO VERY PLAIN. VERY FITTING FOR A HUMBLE SAILOR'S WIFE, WHICH IS ALL I EVER WISHED TO BE.

OLGA NIKOLAEVNA

She stared at her signature and wondered why the letters looked so childish. Then she raised her hand from the paper and realized it was shaking. "Your turn," she whispered.

Marie flung herself onto the bed and pulled a second sheet of paper from beneath the mattress. But instead of writing, she grabbed Olga's dress sash and untied it. "What are you doing?" Olga hissed, swatting at her sister's hands.

"Leave it," Marie said. "Just keep watch."

Olga clutched the bedclothes and listened for the soldier's footsteps in the hallway. He made one more circuit from end to end and stopped in front of their door.

“Finish,” Olga whispered. “Now.”

The guard rapped on the door, pressing hard enough to swing it open. “What’s taking so long?”

Olga swallowed the peppery lump of fear in her throat. “One more moment, please?”

The guard’s suspicious eyes flickered over Olga and then Marie, hunched behind her sister. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Olga lied.

“What are those?” He pointed at the ink spots on Olga’s dress.

Olga’s lips struggled to form words. She could think of no lie he would not see through. *It is over*, she thought. *We are dead.*

“It’s no use,” Marie said, reaching for the ends of Olga’s sash and tying them in a large bow. Olga felt her sister’s nimble fingers slip the folded sheets of paper between the sash and the dress, hiding them from view. “You’d better tell him.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “Tell me what?”
“She’s too embarrassed to speak,” Marie said. “She lay down on a pen. Can you believe how clumsy she is?”

Olga felt her sister’s warm hands push her up from the bed. “You see?” Marie said, holding up the pen. “Her headache was so bad she collapsed without noticing it.”

The guard held out his hand. “Come here,” he said.

Olga looked at his open palm, its threaded crevices stained with something dark. Her throat swelled with fear. *I do not want to die*, she thought.

“Come here,” he said again.

Olga shook her head. It would only anger him further, but no force in the world could make her step forward.

The guard ripped his revolver from his belt and aimed it at her forehead. “You are nothing! You are less than dirt!” Then he gathered a mouthful of spit and flung it on her. “Don’t you know there is no more tsar?”

Olga felt the spittle pelt her cheeks. She bit her lip to keep from screaming, *Yes, there is a tsar! He is my father and he sits in this very house. You will be sorry when the ghost of Great Peter rises up within him to defend all of Russia from the likes of you!* But even as she thought it, she knew it was not true. Her father was weak; no shade of Great Peter lived within him. Her eyes filled with tears and blood trickled over her tongue.

Sensing her submission, the guard grasped a handful of her skirt and twisted it to pull her near. Up close, she could see the mosaic of pores and stubble on his cheeks—they reminded her of the patterned tiles on the floor of the Hermitage. *We will never see Petersburg again*, she thought.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Did you lay on the pen?”

She swallowed thickly, a mouthful of blood and bile burning her throat. “Y—yes.”

The guard frisked his hand up her thigh and across her side, dangerously close to the bow of her sash. “Most women notice what is in their bed before they lie in it. Are you not so picky, princess?”

Olga twisted her body to keep the letters out of his reach. “I had a headache. You needn’t suggest more than that.”

His thick palm connected with her face. “You will never again tell anyone what to do! Do you understand?”

Olga's cheek blossomed with the sting of a thousand Crimean bees. *We will never leave this house*, she thought. *Their hatred will strip the flesh from our bones.*

"Hush," Marie said, moving forward and squeezing herself between them. She smiled brightly at the guard, blue eyes wide and lashes fluttering in a pattern Olga recognized. Marie had learned at an early age how to soften a father's punishment or warm a wounded soldier's heart.

No, Olga thought. *He is not worth your care.* She put a hand on her sister's arm but Marie shrugged it off. "Olga, go into the kitchen," she said softly. "You know Kharitonov hates to be kept waiting."

Olga's knees wobbled as she stumbled past the guard. When she turned around, she saw her sister's seraphic gaze locked on the guard's pockmarked face. "You may search our room if you like," Marie said. "I promise we have done nothing wrong."

The blood and bile in Olga's throat nearly choked her as she crept into the parlor and spotted the basket used by the Novo-Tikhvinsky nuns to deliver bread and eggs. Behind her, Marie's soft voice echoed in the hallway. "Shall I show you our diaries? Our prayer books? Is there anything else you might like to see?"

Olga imagined Marie's fingers touching the man's hand, trailing up his arm, promising a favor that would banish all thought of their possible transgressions: a kiss or perhaps an embrace. Her stomach clenched and she fought a pang of revulsion for the sister who was capable of such deception.

Olga pulled their two letters from her sash and held them to her lips. *This is the only way*, she thought. *The only way I can*

tell him I still love him. She had given up all hope that either recipient would be able to mount a rescue. Neither she nor Marie knew if their first letters had made it through. If they hadn't, the secret would die in this house and these second letters would be a benediction from the dead. Still, it would be enough to know that Pavel might touch the same piece of paper she had kissed with her still-breathing lips.

“Go with God,” she whispered, placing the letters between the layers of cloth folded in the nuns' basket. “May He have mercy on our souls.”

CHAPTER TWO

JUNE 2013

DALY CITY, CALIFORNIA

The old man rolled his head to the side and looked longingly at the carafe of water on his nightstand. He had spoken for nearly an hour and it still hadn't been enough to make his grandson understand. He should have known his breath would fail him when he needed it most.

"Yuri," he said, lifting a withered arm to reach for the carafe. His grandson came around the side of the bed and filled the glass to the rim, something the nurses never did. They knew, as Yuri did not, that a full glass of water was too heavy for many patients to lift.

"Who else knows about this?" Yuri asked.

Grigori held the heavy glass to his lips. The quick flash in Yuri's eyes told him he had just made a terrible mistake. "No one," he said.

"Are you sure it's still there?"

A hard lump formed at the back of Grigori's throat. He did not understand why their family had been chosen to carry this burden. His father, Filipp, said the tsar's own daughter had touched his hand. The tsar was God's anointed representative on earth. Surely anything his daughter touched would become holy, too. When he saw his father in heaven, he knew Filipp's right hand would glow with the same golden halo painted around the heads of Orthodox saints. "I have told you all I know," he lied.

Yuri moved from the bed to the window. He pushed open the blinds and looked at the terraced hills, stacked with low-slung houses in faded yellow and green. "All this time, it's been there waiting for me."

"It is not yours," Grigori said.

Yuri's lower lip jutted out like it had when he was a boy, refused a foil-wrapped sweet before dinner. "It will be."

"My father was wrong. He should never have kept it."

"But he did," Yuri said, "and now they're all dead. Why shouldn't I have what they left behind?"

It is as I feared, Grigori thought. *He will sell the soul of an entire country and destroy what ninety years of revolution and war could not.* "Yuri, can you not see? The gulags, the alliance with England during the war, the incursion into Korea...what do you think the Soviets were looking for? Your great-grandfather and I only survived because we did

not reveal the tsar's secret. Death has always followed that family. If you break our silence, it will come for you, too."

His grandson turned from the blinds with a half-moon smile. "You always believed that horseshit, didn't you?"

Grigori let his head sag onto the pillow. He could not bear to watch greed devour his grandson before his very eyes. "I am afraid for you, Yuri."

"Don't be," Yuri said. "I'll take care of everything."

Dim fog light filtered through the plastic blinds, washing the room in lifeless gray. Grigori closed his eyes. *Forgive me, he prayed, for what I have just unleashed upon the world.*

CHAPTER THREE

JULY 2013

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Natalie Brandon pulled the flask out of her jacket pocket and looked for a place to pour the contents. Her sister's office was devoid of any useful drinkware, so she emptied the pencil cup over the trash and filled it with a generous helping of bourbon. She looked down into the cup, where wooden shavings and broken pencil tips floated like bits of shipwreck in an amber sea. "Ahoy, matey," she said.

The sour mash swirled over her tongue. She held it there, letting the alcohol soak into the skin of her mouth. When she swallowed, she looked up at the clock. Beth was late.

She slapped a bundle of index cards onto the desk, next to a framed photo of two little girls in sundresses. The taller girl, a blonde, smiled brightly to reveal an enormous gap

where her front teeth used to be. The smaller girl, a brunette, held her hand up to the camera with a face vacant of all expression. On her palm sat a fat, furry spider with one leg raised in greeting. “Medusa,” Natalie said.

She stared at the pale smear meant to represent her face. Her eyes never photographed well. They were too light, without enough contrast against her skin. Combined with her long, dark hair, they made her look like a ghost.

In the photo, she wore a pink Strawberry Shortcake dress. The photographer had cut her off at the waist, but she knew exactly what else she’d worn that day: red tights and Buster Brown shoes. She could still remember the Kix she’d eaten that morning, the cream cheese sandwiches her mother served for lunch, and every word of dialogue from that night’s episode of *The Muppet Show*.

It seemed so harmless at first—a little girl who could recite Shakespearean sonnets from memory and calculate the grocery bill to a penny before the cart ever reached the register. But everything changed in fourth grade. One minute she was standing at the chalkboard in Mrs. Norton’s class, diagramming a sentence. The next, a searing pain tore through her brain. She felt something moving beneath her skull, something with a human form and enormous, feather-covered wings.

The creature struggled to unfold itself, pressing its wings against her occipital lobe until she thought it would split open. When the creature realized her skull was the obstacle, it raised its head and looked at her from behind her own face. “I have things I want to show you, but I have to open my wings to do it. Will you let me?”

She nodded. Her body fell in a faint at the chalkboard and the next thing she knew, she and the creature floated side by side above it. “My name is Belial,” he said. “I live inside you now.”

“Are you an angel?” she asked.

“Look around you and tell me what you think I am.” He waved his arm and suddenly they were in a place where strange gray snow fell from the sky. A chimney spewed black smoke and men trudged past her wearing sooty pajamas. They were tired and they asked to stop, but a man in black whipped them until they moved again. One of them fell down and the man in black whipped him until the pajamas fell away and something red came out of his mouth. Then the man in black turned around and looked straight at her. She screamed and woke up in a hospital bed, choking on the taste of flesh and ashes.

The doctors couldn’t explain it. They told her parents that her heart rate had fallen to twenty-nine beats per minute, resulting in a coma. They didn’t say anything about Belial. True to his word, the angel had taken up residence in her head. He perched in the space between her brain tissue and her skull. It hurt when he moved and every time he shifted his wings, the tips of his feathers pricked her brain like needles. When she tried to explain this to the doctor, he shook his head and said it was impossible. She told him to look for Belial on an X-ray, but he found the wrong thing — all he wanted to talk about was something called the limbic system.

Her parents shuffled her between psychiatrists, psychologists, and neurologists but none of them could find Belial either, so she gave up and stopped talking altogether.

She simply sat, uncommunicative, until they let her go. Some diagnosed her as autistic; others said she was an early-onset paranoid delusional schizophrenic. They pumped her full of olanzapine and sent her home, leaving her embarrassed parents full of apologies for their daughter's refusal to "get well."

When she was fourteen, her parents died in a car accident. Natalie missed the funeral because she set the alarm clock for p.m. instead of a.m. Black-clad Beth barged in afterward and demanded that Natalie recite the list of Plantagenet kings in sequential order. When Natalie mixed up Henry III and Edward III, Beth flushed every pill in the house down the toilet and moved back home.

The three of them — she, Beth, and Belial — eventually developed a comfortable working relationship. Belial dispensed angelic wisdom and acute physical pain in equal measure. Beth dosed her with cognitive therapy, and she herself had learned that alcohol was by far the most effective means of making it all just go away. There had been several occasions when alcohol failed her, but only one that had convinced Beth to take out a life insurance policy for each of them. The puffy white lines on her forearms still itched sometimes, as if the skin beneath fit too tightly.

Natalie looked at the clock again. It was after two, which meant Beth's lunch date had gone well. She refilled the pencil cup and sipped as slowly as she could until the familiar clomp of Beth's shoes echoed in the hallway.

Tall, thin, and blonde, Beth Brandon swept into the room in a cloud of Dolce & Gabbana perfume. "That's it," she said, tossing her tote bag into a chair. "No more blind dates with guys in the computer science department."

“What happened?”

“He ate sushi with his hands.” She stopped, staring at the *Yale Class of '01* mug in Natalie’s hands. “Nat, what are you doing?”

“Drinking whiskey.”

“Out of my pencil cup? That’s disgusting. Why didn’t you drink it from the flask?”

“Whiskey needs to breathe, Beth.”

“So does your liver.”

Natalie shrugged. “Sometimes I eat sushi with my hands.”

“You’re different.”

She’d heard those words all her life, even from Beth, who should have had the guts to tell her to just use the goddamn chopsticks. She raised the cup and drained it in a single gulp.

Beth sighed. “I’m sorry, babe, I didn’t mean it. Just put down the booze. How are my talking points coming?”

Natalie tapped the bundle of index cards on the desk. As Beth’s research assistant, it was her job to track down the information Beth needed for her books, speeches, and lecture notes. Rosemont University paid Natalie just enough to stay afloat, and having Beth as a boss kept her from having to explain Belial to a real employer. “Your speech is boring,” Natalie said.

“Boring will pay for Seth’s next year of private school. The chancellor said he’d put me on the top pay grade if this book performs.”

“The chancellor’s an asshole. He’s going to pass you up for department chair.”

Beth shrugged. “He thinks I’m too young.”

“Change his mind.”

“Nat, please. This is my career. Let me handle it my way.”

“Your way sucks,” Natalie said. “If you want the chancellor’s attention, you know how to get it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Come on, Nat, we discussed this before I wrote the book.”

“I told you it exists. Why won’t you believe me?”

Beth blinked twice. “I do believe you.”

“You only blink when you’re bullshitting people.”

“Jesus, Nat, are we back to this again? No one has ever found any evidence that there’s money out there with the tsar’s name on it. If there were, someone would have talked by now. They would have found a paper trail. Entire books have been written about this.”

“Book,” Natalie said. “And Clarke followed the wrong trail.”

“My book is about Nicholas II, not his money. I’m not a treasure hunter, Nat. I’m a professor.”

“But Clarke, Lovell, Fallows, Holtzmann... they were all looking for an account with the tsar’s name on it, something with deposits made before the abdication. Belial said that’s not how it happened.”

“How did it happen, then? Did he tell you that?”

“No,” Natalie grumbled, looking down at her untied shoes. “I don’t think he knows.”

Don’t I? Belial snickered. He flicked his wings and the movement sent bolts of lightning shooting through her skull. She sucked in her breath and gritted her teeth.

“Listen, kiddo,” Beth said, “I’d love for you to be right, but I can’t stake my reputation on something you don’t know. The book is already written... this is the press conference announcing its release, for God’s sake!” Beth sank into a folding chair next to the desk. Natalie stared at her without speaking. “Don’t look at me like that,” Beth said. “You know as well as I do that Stalin tore that country apart looking for extra money. If there were any tsarist accounts left, he would have found them.”

“Are you saying Stalin is smarter than us?”

“I’m saying you need to admit how improbable this is.”

Natalie held out her wrists. “As improbable as this?”

Beth shivered. “There’s only so much I can take on faith, Nat.”

“Belial said there’s a password. Do you remember that confession I found? The one that said Marie planned to give the password to the guard she’d fallen in love with?”

Beth slipped off her jacket and hung it over the back of the chair. “I thought we went over this. There isn’t one shred of evidence to prove Marie went through with it. It’s not mentioned in any of the Romanov diaries, in statements from the guards, or the Sokolov report.”

“That guard might not have talked, but his granddaughter did. On her deathbed, she swore to a priest that Grand Duchess Marie told her grandfather how to retrieve Nicholas’s money. There was a password, she said, that Marie had sent him in a letter.”

“A letter that never arrived. Nat, they’re all lying. Why can’t you see that?”

“The letter exists! Russians are superstitious. They don’t swear to a priest unless they’re telling the truth. It must still be out there, in someone’s attic or sewn into the lining of a coat that’s hanging in the Moscow Goodwill.”

“How many people swore Anna Anderson was Anastasia?” Beth circled the room, a black-clad vulture in Blahniks. “I humored you the first time you brought this up and I bit my tongue the second. But I have to tell you, Nat, you’re going kind of Rain Man on me with this one. There is no missing money. The guard’s granddaughter lied and you fell for it. Just accept it, all right?”

She’s wrong, Belial said. Why can’t you make her see?

I’m trying, Natalie thought. Tears stung her eyes and she fought the urge to crawl under Beth’s desk. “The Bank of England said — ”

“Fuck the Bank of England!” Beth looked up at the clock. “I have a make-or-break press conference in an hour, Nat! I have a kid to raise, an ex draining me for alimony, a chancellor breathing down my neck, and I just went on a date with someone who thinks the Weimar Republic is part of the Hoth System. I don’t have the luxury of living in an alternate universe right now. If you’re going to help me, fine. If not, go find someone else to listen to your nutball conspiracy theories.”

“Oh, I helped you,” Natalie said, glancing at the pile of cards on the desk. “I was going to ease you into it before you decided to be a bitch about it.”

Beth turned the color of calamine lotion. “Nat, you didn’t! Tell me you didn’t!” She snatched up the cards, shuffling through them.

“You’ll have everyone’s attention around the two-minute mark. Be ready.” She grabbed her flask and stumbled out of the room before her sister could see her cry.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed the story — and there's a lot more mayhem coming for Natalie, Beth, and Constantine. Turn the page for a preview of the next book in the series, *The Dante Deception*. If you want to be notified when it comes out, sign up for my mailing list on my website, JenniWiltz.com.

Readers like you are an inspiration, and I love hearing from you. Email me anytime at author@jenniwiltz.com.

Jenni

The Dante Deception: Preview

In Chapter Ten of The Romanov Legacy, Natalie told Constantine about the German forger she helped catch. This is the story of what really happened. Join Natalie, Beth, Constantine, Vadim, Liliya, and Viktor—and meet the enemies they never knew they had. Every saga has an origin story. This is theirs.

APRIL 1967

UNTERLENGENHARDT, GERMANY

The old woman cackled as her dog snatched a sandwich from her lap. The German shepherd carried it into a corner, circled three times, and lay down on it with a contented sigh. When he rolled over, a smear of spicy brown mustard streaked his belly.

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

Christof Ehrlichmann sank his teeth into his lip. This happened every time his mother prepared a meal for the ugly little woman. There were three desiccated sandwiches under the couch that even the dog wouldn’t touch. The cats had covered the floor in urine, which made him wonder how anyone managed to eat without vomiting.

“Yes, your highness,” his mother said, hurrying into the kitchen.

If he did something as bad as what the dog had done, she'd have sent him to his room with no lunch at all. But since people believed this filthy creature was really a princess, they let her do things even children knew they shouldn't.

Christof looked at the old woman's clothing, covered in animal hair and dotted with excrement. He'd counted forty-six cats that came and went as they pleased, as did the dog. The first thing his mother did when they arrived was open a window. Usually, the woman slammed it shut, her frail arms shaking with the effort. "How dare you expose me to them!" she would shriek. "You know they would kill me just as soon as look at me!"

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

"Everyone wants to kill me," the woman would reply. "Even you."

Today, she'd left the window open. A breeze lifted the linen curtain, the loose threads of its cat-clawed hem dangling like dancing worms. It carried the smell of feces straight into his nostrils. "It stinks here," he said. "I want to go home."

"Christof," his mother snapped. "Don't speak to her that way. Remember who she is."

The old woman, whom others called Anastasia, was supposed to be the daughter of a murdered king. His mother had told the story as they walked to the old woman's house. "I'm filling in for Barbara," she said. "We need the money, so please sit quietly and let me do my job. And remember — you must never speak to her unless she speaks to you first. This woman is royalty."

“Matthias says she’s just a crazy lady who lives in the forest.”

“Matthias knows nothing about it. This is something children cannot understand.”

The house, a filthy barracks behind a six-foot palisade, didn’t look like a princess’s castle. On the inside, however, he discovered a fair amount of treasure. The tabletops were stacked with gilded photo frames, jewel-studded icons, and books with golden words stamped on the covers. He liked to sit near them and draw or paint while his mother did the housework. When no one was looking, he’d open one of the books and read the inscription. Sometimes, he’d copy it on paper with pen and ink, changing the old woman’s name to his.

His mother ignored all the treasure, stacking the day’s mail on top of the beautiful books. The old woman ignored the treasure, too, but she was very interested in the mail. She opened all the envelopes that contained bills or coins and threw everything else on the floor.

Despite her treasure, nothing about the woman resembled a princess. Her back was crooked and so were her lips, which is why she hid them when she talked. Her eyes were blue, an appropriate color for a princess, but something wasn’t right. Other blue things, like cornflowers or the river Neckar, got darker the deeper you looked. It happened with people, too. If you wanted to, you could see the color of a person’s soul, churning with feelings darker and heavier than the air around them. But the old woman’s eyes had no depth and no darkness. The only thing inside them was nothing.

It didn't take him long to figure out why — she had no idea who she was.

Her visitors couldn't see it. They came in long black cars, the women in filmy skirts and ropes of pearls and the men in hats and tweed jackets. They bowed and pressed their lips to her speckled hand, which only moments ago had been licked by a dog. "Your imperial highness," they called her. Sometimes they left money or added to her collection of photographs. If they didn't, the old woman slouched in her seat and held a napkin to her face, demanding they leave her alone. His mother had to escort the astonished guest to the door and apologize for the woman's behavior.

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

His mother emerged from the kitchen with another sandwich. She bowed her head when she set it in front of the old woman. Christof looked away. The old woman had a habit of chewing with her mouth open. Through the slats in the palisade, he saw a car pull up. The driver got out and stepped up to the fence. "Someone's outside."

The old woman's head swiveled left then right. "Who is speaking to me?"

His mother looked out the window. "Were you expecting anyone, your highness?"

"No, no, no, no, no." The woman moaned and slid down in her seat. The first sandwich plate, still on her lap, slid to the floor. Two cats howled and ran from the splintering shards. "You must make them go away."

Christof looked at the dog, still panting in the corner, still swathed in spicy mustard. “Why can’t you do it? It’s your house.”

“Hush,” his mother said, gripping his shoulder. “She needs our help, and we must give it.”

She doesn’t need our help, he thought. She needs a laundress and a straitjacket.

But he said nothing as his mother went to meet the man at the fence and brought him to the front door. “Your highness,” she said, red fingers smoothing her apron. “There’s someone here to see you.”

The old woman grabbed a crumpled piece of newspaper and held it over her mouth. Christof looked at the sodden newsprint, streaked with an unidentified brown substance, and almost gagged. “That’s disgusting,” he said.

“Christof!” his mother snapped. “Say nothing unless you are spoken to.”

The dog looked up at his mother’s sharp tone. It howled and pressed its feet to the wall, painting it with mustardy paw prints. “My baby,” the old woman crooned.

The man in the doorway cleared his throat and leaned around his mother. “Please, your highness,” he said in English. “I came all the way from America to see you. My father was a soldier in the Great War. He was injured on the Eastern Front, and taken to your hospital in Tsarskoe Selo. He never forgot it, or you.”

“War,” the woman mumbled in German. “It all started with the war.”

The man removed his hat. “I promise I won’t take much of your time. I just want to pay my respects.”

The old woman lowered the newspaper. “You may enter,” she said in English.

Of course he can, Christof thought. *He said the magic word—pay.*

The man stepped across the threshold, his cologne temporarily masking the stench of urine. Christof inhaled, absorbing the smell of salt and sand and trees. “My name is Edward Turner,” he said, approaching her chair as if it were a throne. “My father’s name was Peter Turner. You probably didn’t know his name, but you spoke to him once.”

“What did I say?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. My father died this past winter. He never told me much about the war. The only thing he said had no words at all.”

Christof leaned forward. “What was it?”

The man turned, a wry smile on his face. “A leg, gone below the knee.”

Christof gasped. Riding bikes, running, jumping, swimming... what would he do if all that were taken away? “I’m sorry.”

“He managed, of course. But my mother said he was never the same.”

“The hospital,” the old woman said. “I had a hospital.”

Christof’s mother nodded. “With your sister. You worked there together.” She’d read a book about the person they believed this old woman to be. His mother trusted books too much.

“I don’t want to think of that! You would never ask me to think of 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. Because they thought she was royalty, they didn't press her. But anyone who could manufacture distress could do what this ugly woman did—playground bullies did it every day at school. Had grown-ups forgotten how everything really worked?

He stepped out of the corner. "What did you say to this man's father?"

"Christof!" His mother swooped down and wrapped her arms around him. With a grunt, she picked him up and levered him behind her. "You must forgive him, your highness. He didn't mean to offend you."

"Yes, I did," he said, sidestepping his mother. "I want her to help this man."

"Listen, I—I didn't mean to upset anyone," the man said. He stepped back and his heel came down on a cat's tail. It howled and hissed as his cheeks turned the color of summer cherries. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come."

Christof focused his anger on the woman's shrunken face. All this poor man wanted was a simple word about his dead father and she didn't even have the decency to lie. She was incapable of making anyone happy. All she wanted was money and cats and people to do things for her.

In that moment, Christof knew he hated her. He'd never hated anyone before— not even Gerhardt Mueller, who stole a full bottle of ink out of his desk at school. "I hate you!" he cried. "You're no good for anything."

His mother slapped him, open-palmed, across the cheek. "Never say that again, you little beast!"

Hot tears seared his eyes. “She’s not who she says she is. She’s no different than we are. Why can’t you see that?”

His mother slapped him again. “Don’t speak of things you do not 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.* He blinked and a stream of tears flooded his cheeks. He looked at his mother, at the old woman, at the man. None of them could see it. They all wanted him to go away and be quiet so they could go on believing a lie. “I hate all of you! She’s a fraud! Why can’t you see it?”

His mother whirled and gripped his chin in her strong hand. She squeezed his cheeks against his teeth until he felt their edges cut the tender flesh. “You think you know so much, but you’re just a child. One day you’ll be like the rest of us. You will know your place.”

Blood and saliva pooled in his mouth.

The man, hat held awkwardly in hand, cleared his throat. “I must go. I’ve caused too much trouble already. But if I may, your highness...”

“Yes?” the false princess said.

The man reached into his pocket and Christof twisted his jaw in his mother’s grasp to see what he held. It was a photo of a white room and a man lying in a bed. Two girls stood behind him with smiling blurry faces. One of them had her hand on his shoulder. “It was the only thing my father had to give. I would be honored if you would sign it for me.”

The lines in the old woman’s face moved as she worked her crooked lips. Finally, she sighed and reached for the

photo. She curled it in her filthy hand and picked up a pen lying on the table. Her shaking fingers drew a pointed arc—an A—the first letter in a name that wasn't hers. Christof watched her hesitate twice during the inscription, as if she didn't remember how to form the letters. Then she held the finished product in her hand and stared at it. "Life is hard now. It is not like it was then."

You didn't even remember that life a minute ago, Christof thought.

"If I may," said the man, reaching into his pocket.

"Don't!" Christof cried. A trickle of blood and saliva sluiced onto his mother's hand. "That's what she wants!"

His mother felt the warm trickle on her hand. She let go of his jaw with a disgusted gasp and pushed him away. He stumbled over a marmalade cat and fell. As his head hit the corner of a table, he saw a foggy version of the scene before him: the man handing a stack of bills to the monkey-faced woman with one hand as he held the signed photograph to his chest with the other. "Thank you, your highness," he said. "I will treasure it always."

Red bursts of light exploded behind Christof's eyelids. The vision grew dimmer.

He wondered exactly how much money the man had given her to deface his photo. *I told him the truth,* he thought. *And it didn't matter at all.* Quick behind the rush of anger came a second thought: *Now I know what your weakness is.*

He smiled as the floor flew up to meet him.



The Romanov Legacy

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! There's a lot more coming for Natalie, Beth, and Constantine - you haven't even met him yet! Here's where you can buy the book to find out what happens next:

DIGITAL

PAPERBACK

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BOOK TRAILER

So, book trailers are cheesy, right? I don't care. I love the idea of telling a story in a compressed time frame with evocative music and imagery. Click the picture to watch my latest trailer for *The Romanov Legacy* - or just [click this link](#).



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The Romanov Legacy

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Click or tap to read the first three chapters on my website.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

EMAIL

author@jenniwiltz.com

WEBSITE

<http://jenniwiltz.com>



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.

