

THE
SINNER'S
Bible



JENNI WILTZ

A NATALIE BRANDON THRILLER

THE SINNER'S
BIBLE

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

The Romanov Legacy: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Dante Deception: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Carmelite Prophecy: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

The Cherbourg Jewels

The Cherbourg Bodyguard

The Red Road

A Vampire in Versailles

I Never Arkansas It Coming

THE SINNER'S BIBLE

A Natalie Brandon Thriller

Jenni Wiltz



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PILOT HILL, CALIFORNIA

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For Sara

Stuart Family Tree

JAMES I: 1566 - 1625

Married: Anne of Denmark

Children: Elizabeth, Charles I

CHARLES I: 1600 - 1649

Married: Henrietta Maria, daughter of Henri IV

Children: Charles II, James II, Henriette

HENRIETTE ("MINETTE"): 1644 - 1670

Married: Philippe, duc d'Orléans

Children: Marie Louise d'Orléans, Anne Marie d'Orléans

CHARLES II: 1630 - 1685

Married: Catherine of Braganza

Children: no legitimate children

JAMES II: 1633 - 1701

Married: Anne Hyde (1); Mary of Modena (2)

Children: Mary II, Anne, James Francis Edward

MARY II: 1662 - 1694

Married: William of Orange

Children: no children

ANNE: 1665 - 1714

Married: George of Denmark

Children: no surviving children

CHAPTER ONE

JANUARY 1632

WHITEHALL PALACE, LONDON

William Laud, the Bishop of London, clutched a small book to his chest. He spread his palms over the cover, as if he could blot out its existence by hiding it from view.

There was no fire in the grate.

He shivered as he stood before the double doors of the presence chamber. The men-at-arms on either side stared straight ahead, giving no indication of the king's mood...or how willing they were to carry out an order to kill the bringer of bad tidings.

He closed his eyes and wondered how much longer Charles would make him wait.

How could this have happened? he wondered. How could so many people have seen it and said nothing? It had been a year. An entire bloody year, without a word from anyone.

Either God had blinded them to it, or they had become estranged from Him, setting aside His word. No matter how he couched it in his mind, it boded ill for himself and for England.

God was testing them, and they had failed for an entire year.

But what threat was He warning them against? It had been twenty-six years since the Jesuit Treason. Digby, Wintour, Fawkes, and the lot of them were rotting in their nameless graves. Princess Elizabeth, the girl they would have made queen, had been shipped off to Bohemia. James I, the king they would have murdered, had instead brought the world the most holy translation of the Bible ever wrought by man.

That should have been the end of it.

But it was not.

Because King James's son had married a Papist.

Since the death of Buckingham, she'd become Charles's sole confidant and advisor. She, with her sloe eyes and soft voice, who could barely speak English seven years after her arrival. She who kept her own confessor and chapel and flaunted them before his eyes.

William sighed. Was this how it began? The slow slide into Papal dominion? First the queen, then the royal children, then perhaps the whole kingdom when her son, a second Charles, ascended the throne. All that Good Queen Bess had hoped to preserve by murdering her Catholic cousin Mary, Queen of Scots would be torn away from them again.

The gallows or the stake, he wondered. Which would it be for him?

The presence chamber's doors flew open and the men-at-arms stamped their halberds as King Charles I passed into the antechamber. The queen followed him, swathed in pearls and a fox-fur wrap. William bowed low as the king and queen swept toward him. "Your Majesties," he said.

"William," Charles replied warmly. "What brings you here on such a cold day? I'd have thought the warmth of your hearth would suit you better than this drafty old place."

The king spoke French, as he always did in the queen's presence, requiring him to reply in kind. "My duty suits me in any weather, Your Majesty."

"And what is your duty today?"

His hands shook as he held out the book. "The devil is at work in England, sire."

Charles glanced at the book, with the words *Holy Bible* stamped on the cover. "Looks to be the opposite," he said.

The dark-haired queen leaned over Charles's shoulder. "Your father's translation?"

Charles nodded. "A new printing, is it not, Laud?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, commissioned last year in the house of Barker and Lucas."

"We placed the order, they printed it," Charles said. "What do you wish me to do with it now?"

"Please take it, Your Majesty," he begged. "Open to the page I have marked."

Charles took the book from his shaking hand. A red ribbon marked a page near the beginning, and the king thumbed straight to it.

He watched the sovereign's face as he read the small type. He could have done more to draw the king's attention to

the passage, but he wanted to see how it happened, how the awareness dawned on him.

The queen read over Charles's shoulder. It was her eyes that fell upon the abomination first, proving she had a better grasp of their language than she had led anyone to believe. She gasped and held a hand to her mouth.

A moment later, Charles found it. His face, normally soft and expressive, hardened like the effigies in Westminster Abbey. "How many?"

"I do not know, Your Majesty."

"How long?"

William blinked. This was the moment he revealed how far the devil had made inroads into their kingdom and their church. "A year," he whispered.

"Unacceptable!" Charles thundered, tossing the book into the grate. "This is no Holy Bible! This is a jest, committed at my expense! How could they let this happen?"

"I do not—"

"Bring the printers to me, Laud. Escort them into the Star Chamber and let them tell me to my face why they have made a mockery of my father's achievement."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said, lowering his head and taking one step back. Best to take Charles's command as a dismissal, lest there be a separate punishment in wait for him.

"Laud," Charles snapped.

He gulped. "Y—yes, Your Majesty?"

"Burn them," Charles said, his dark eyes alight with fury. "Burn them all."

CHAPTER TWO

JANUARY 2014
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Avi Druckman slipped on a respirator and a pair of vinyl gloves. The book in front of him wasn't particularly old or valuable in a scholarly sense, but the university had rules for this kind of thing. The book had been purchased at auction. They had only the seller's word that it had never been in a flood. Until he inspected it for himself, he'd have no idea what kind of mold might be present inside it. Once he made an assessment of its condition for the insurance paperwork, he was supposed to make a video of it for the library's Facebook page.

Avi sighed.

He'd earned bachelor's degrees in cultural anthropology and Jewish studies, and a master's in library science, but his main duty as Associate Librarian of the Rosemont University Rare Book & Manuscript Collection was to post stuff to

Facebook. *We'd really like you to be more active on Twitter*, the library's executive director had said. *Erik Kwakkel has ten times as many followers as we do. And what about Snapchat? I hear all the kids are on Snapchat.*

He made a mental note to dust off his resume after work. Maybe Berkeley was hiring.

All his favorite Indian restaurants were in Berkeley.

His stomach growled and he envisioned a plate of murghe korma. "Why couldn't you have been a Gutenberg?" he said, glaring at the small, brown Bible in front of him.

Most old books were comforting. He loved the musty smell of dried calfskin and the tang of mildew. He found pleasure in the smoothness of vellum or the textured weave of rag-cotton linen. Nothing in real life shone as brightly as the carmine and malachite in Rabbi Kantrowitz's illuminated Bible, produced in medieval Spain decades before the Expulsion.

Other kids had hurried home from school, ready to pop another CD into the computer for ten free hours on AOL. He'd gone to Rabbi Kantrowitz's to run his fingers along the gilded spines of the old man's books.

But this book was different.

Its plainness was almost oppressive.

The cracked leather cover had peeled away from the boards. The spine and pages were in decent condition, with no visible water damage. He took notes on their appearance, then lifted the cover carefully.

He shivered as soon as he touched it.

There was nothing comforting about this particular book. Plus, it was all that stood between him and a plate of samosas.

He took hurried notes on the condition of the endbands and lifted the back cover. A few chips of desiccated leather fell onto the last page.

He squinted at them.

There was something on the page beneath them.

Handwriting, he thought. His eyes followed the loops and swirls of a fanciful script in faded black ink. “What do we have here?” he said, reaching for his magnifying glass.

Every librarian dreamed of finding something historically significant in the scholarly equivalent of a dumpster. Was this his moment? He licked his lips and held the magnifying glass over the faint cursive script.

“Show me what you got,” he muttered, bending close over the page.

It was a list—a column of names.

His heart sank when he realized what it was.

An ordinary family had used what they thought was an ordinary Bible to record their births and deaths. They hadn’t even done a good job. In fact, they’d sucked royally at it. There were no dates, so you couldn’t even tell which was a birth and which was a death.

He put down the magnifying glass and sighed. What had he expected to find? An inscription from Ben Jonson? A dirty limerick from Milton?

It was useless.

Avi closed the book.

The Facebook video would have to wait until after lunch. His stomach was growling so loud that his phone's camera would capture his malnutrition for all posterity. He slid the book back onto one of the storage room's rolling metal shelves and stripped off his gloves.

Rajah's All-You-Can-Eat Indian Buffet was calling his name.

CHAPTER THREE

JANUARY 2014

CROWS LANDING, CALIFORNIA

E*zra Hawkins* cut the crust from his last slice of bread. He picked up the spatula and scraped the peanut butter jar as if he were giving it a clean, close shave. The bread tore as he spread the peanut butter onto it.

There was one banana left on the counter.

Spots covered its peel like a Rorschach test.

Every goddamn one looked like the amorphous blue splotches on Jacob's fMRI.

He sliced the banana and cut each slice into quarters. He chose the biggest piece and pushed it into the center of the peanut butter, representing an atom's nucleus. *Sodium*, he thought. One valence electron on top, one on the bottom. He pushed more banana pieces into the peanut butter to represent the second orbital—two electrons on top, two on bottom, two on the left, and two on the right.

He picked up the last piece of banana.

If he set it in the third orbital, he'd be depicting sodium's elemental form, a highly unstable metal. If that metal touched water, the last electron would cause a violent explosion. But if he ate that piece instead, he'd be left with a stable and harmless sodium ion.

Ezra looked out the window.

Drought had killed their corn and alfalfa. Relentless pumping of the aquifer had dropped their elevation by a foot in thirteen months. Now there was no more water to pump.

He pushed the banana into the peanut butter.

"Boom," he said.

§

HE HEARD JACOB'S truck before he saw it. The heater was making a weird noise that neither of them could fix. The irregular thumping sounded like a heartbeat, audible over the hum of the old Chevy's V-8 engine.

The heater, Ezra thought. He's cold.

He reached into the fridge for their last piece of ginger. It was cheaper at the Asian market, which meant he'd have to make another stop next time he went out. He grated a few thin shavings onto the sandwich. Probably not enough for thermogenesis, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

He set the sandwich on a plate.

The doctor had warned him about the things Jacob would start to lose: balance, appetite, memory, feeling in his arms and legs. But his brother still looked like the All-County linebacker who'd gone to the state quarterfinals a decade

ago—thick neck, big arms, and thighs like tree trunks. The changes would happen fast, the doctor had said, like watching corn grow.

I don't remember what that looks like, he thought. Without water, cancer was the only thing that grew.

His brother opened the door to the double-wide.

"Boots off," Ezra said, sliding the plated sandwich down the counter. "I just swept."

Jacob ignored him, tossing a canvas bag onto the table. Then he peeled up the top slice of bread and frowned at the banana bits. "What's this one? A Picasso?"

"Electron diagram."

Jacob sat down and took a bite of the sandwich. "This tastes weird. What'd you do to it?"

"It's ginger. Supposed to make you warm."

Jacob chewed and swallowed. "There's a Stanford catalog in there."

"That's not what the money's for."

"It could be."

"No," he growled. "It couldn't." He picked up the canvas bag and shook its contents onto the table: letters, magazines, small parcels, and anything else the good mail carriers of Crows Landing had delivered to their intended recipients. "Did you switch license plates?"

"Give me a break."

"It was just a question."

"It's done," Jacob said, tilting his chair onto two legs. "I used the last one."

"Good thing license plates are a renewable resource." He plucked a long manila envelope from the pile and held

it up. He'd started stealing mail to pay for groceries, but soon learned it was good for a hell of a lot more than that. A padded envelope full of cocaine had kept them afloat for three months. If he'd known the cartels were using the U.S. postal service to move product, he'd have started stealing mail years ago.

He began sorting the day's haul into piles: burn, cash, sell, keep. When he held up an issue of *Car and Driver*, Jacob reached for it immediately.

It took so little to make his brother happy, but it would take a lot more for him. The property tax on their land was four and a half years overdue. In six months, the tax collector could sell the farm at auction. He'd put everything they had into a new well, just in time for it to run dry. There had been nothing left when Jacob needed surgery. He'd paid for that by stealing cars, but even that wasn't enough anymore.

Genetic abnormality, the doctor had said. *Epidermal growth factor*.

The tumor had reappeared almost immediately after surgery. Jacob would be dead before summer unless he found a doctor willing to try a second operation on a stage 4 glioblastoma.

Where the hell was he supposed to find that doctor? Or get that kind of money?

Ezra pushed his hair out of his eyes. He had to think.

"You look like a surfer," Jacob said. "That dude in *Point Break*."

"He's dead."

"You gonna read that Stanford catalog?"

"No."

"Why not? You got something better to do today?"

"You're looking at it," he said, dropping a mail-in-rebate check into the keep pile.

Jacob finished the sandwich and licked his fingers.

"Where to next, little brother?"

"The sink. Wash that plate."

"Can it sit?"

"I just did the goddamn dishes. I want an empty sink."

"The water's cold. I can't get warm after."

Ezra looked out the window to the propane tank. Their account had been delinquent so many times that the propane company wouldn't come unless he pre-paid for the fill-up. Every morning for two weeks now, he'd boiled a pot of water and dragged the bath mat next to the electric stove. They were out of propane. Out of food. After Jacob's last scan, he was almost out of hope.

"Shit." His fingers clutched the edge of the table. A splinter pierced the webbing of his right hand. "Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

He swept the pile of mail off the table.

"It's fine," Jacob said, setting his plate in the sink. "I'll do it."

"No. Go put my coat on." Jacob changed directions and plucked his puffer coat from the sofa. The sleeves hit two inches above his brother's wrists. "Hey princess," he said. "Don't forget the matching gloves."

Jacob reached out to ruffle his hair.

He ducked and batted his brother's hand away. "I hate it when you do that."

"I know."

"I mean I really hate it when you do that."

“I know.” Jacob ran one hand over his shaved head, resting it on the back of his neck. “Just be glad you have hair, man. You don’t miss it until it’s gone.”

“You want me to shave my head to prove you wrong? I will.”

“Hey Ezra,” Jacob said softly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t you say that. Not now.”

“You rather I waited?”

He held his breath. The trailer was shrinking, closing in on him. Everywhere he looked, he saw reminders of the time his brother didn’t have. The bills, the calendar, the magazine subscriptions with expiration dates further away than the doctors’ best-case scenario. “Don’t you thank me. All I did was make a sandwich.” He braced himself against the sink, turning his face to the floor. “All I did was make a fucking sandwich!”

Jacob rested one hand on his shoulder.

The cold leached through him, and he threw off his brother’s arm. “Why aren’t you angry?” he yelled. His eyes began to burn, and he pushed everything that made them burn into the black pit under his heart. “I’d be so goddamn angry.”

Jacob smiled. “Even after this big bad thing, I get the only thing I ever wanted. You’ll still be here when I’m gone.”

The blackness consumed him. He picked up a glass on the counter and hurled it to the floor. Shards hit the baseboards and ricocheted like bumper cars. He wanted one of them to hit him, maybe even nick an artery. *Serve him right if I went first*, he thought. *Make him see what it’s like.*

Jacob squatted and picked up the mail he'd swept onto the floor, dropping it on the table. "We got work to do. You going to help or not?"

Ezra sighed. He knew there'd be a day when he forgot what his brother looked like, when he'd give anything to be staring into Jacob's near-lashless blue eyes. But in that moment, seeing the placid acceptance on his brother's face, he wished he were in Timbuktu. "At least shake the glass out first, you dumbass."

He snatched the pile of mail and shook it over the floor, then resumed sorting. He tossed the car and health insurance bills back onto the floor. Then he pulled out a flyer printed on a glossy half-sheet. He scanned it once, then twice, wondering if he'd missed something. "This is it."

"What is?"

He held it up for Jacob to see.

His brother narrowed his eyes as he read the thick block type.

Come see the Sinners' Bible, the flyer said. You're invited to an informal Q&A session with Associate Librarian Avi Druckman. Our copy is one of only eleven in the world! See this priceless historical document and hear about its place in history from Professor Elizabeth Brandon. Join us in the Rare Book & Manuscript Room at Ford Library – 6 p.m. on March 15.

"I don't get it." Jacob frowned. "A book?"

"A priceless book." He shook his head. The only people who used that word were the ones with money. The rest of them knew everything had a price. "This is it. We can do this."

A university would be much easier to hit than a bank. Banks had security guards who carried guns. A handful of professors would never see it coming.

He glanced at the Farm Bureau calendar on the wall.

The presentation was a month and a half away. Plenty of time to plan.

The flyer showed a big gray building in the background, ugly and modern with tiny Lego windows that probably didn't open. Two people were in the foreground—a skinny white guy with glasses and an afro, and a smiling blonde who looked more like a movie star than a professor.

"She's hot," Jacob said, pointing at the blonde.

"Want to meet her?" he asked. "I think I can arrange it."

CHAPTER FOUR

JANUARY 1632

WHITEHALL PALACE, LONDON

H*enrietta Maria, Queen of England*, reached into the sooty grate to rescue the small book. Her fingertips slid through the soft pile of ash, closing around the spine. She shook it over the floor to remove most of the debris and looked over her shoulder.

Charles was gone.

She knew where to find him, but it would be best to leave him alone for a few moments. He'd stalk down the hall to his study and reach for his father's book, the *Basilikon Doron*. Whenever he felt unsure of himself, he sought the comfort of his father's words. James I had been a firm believer in the Divine Right of Kings. As long as Charles believed that, too, he could find the strength to do what he must. He hated punishing people. He hated conflict. But in this case, she would

ensure his will held firm. Someone had made a terrible mistake, perhaps even committed a crime.

But that wasn't why she wanted this heretic Bible.

She wanted it because it was a sign from God.

He was reminding her of the many ways in which her family had failed Him.

She held it up and blew the last of the ash from the cover. It fell to the floor like snow. "Why must You punish me this way?" she whispered.

A punishment from God was the only explanation for the nightmare plaguing her sleep.

Every night, she saw a man dressed in green lying on a bed. His face was the color of an eel's belly, streaked with sweat and slime. Blood crusted his lips and chin. The assassin's knife had penetrated his torso, sliding easily between the second and third rib, and again between the fifth and sixth.

It was her father, Henri Quatre, the previous King of France. As she watched, an angel of the Lord appeared before him. Instead of embracing him and carrying him to eternal glory, the angel raised a sword of flame and struck off his head. The head fell to the floor and rolled toward her feet, long black hair trailing behind it. When it touched her, the eyes opened, weeping streams of blood.

The problem was that her father did not have long black hair.

Her husband, Charles, did.

She shivered and grasped at her furs. Even the memory of the dream made her cold. "Why must You punish me this way?" she said again.

Seven years ago, she had been sent from France to cement the alliance with England. But unlike most princesses, her mission was not simply to bear Charles Stuart's children. Her country had negotiated the right for her to remain a practicing Catholic, even as she married a prince sworn to defend the Anglican faith. The Holy Father himself had told her that her true mission was to rescue Charles from heresy. She was to convert him and, by extension, all of England back to the True Faith.

"I was fifteen," she whispered, sliding her fingers across the cover of the Bible. "How could You have asked such a thing of me?"

But age was no excuse.

Jeanne d'Arc had raised the siege of Orléans at eighteen.

God had sent her the dream as a warning. If she failed, Charles would be killed and it would all be her fault. She had to work faster.

But how?

Charles's court hated her.

They hated her confessor and her chapel. They hated her for refusing to be crowned as their queen in an Anglican sacrament. But how could she betray the Holy Father and the True Faith and participate in a heretic's ritual? She was a daughter of France, born of a king anointed by God.

But that thought was troublesome, too.

Her father had been baptized a Catholic. In his youth, he had turned from the True Faith to become a Huguenot, then turned again in order to win the crown. The great Henri IV, who joked that Paris was worth a Mass, had then spent his

entire married life humiliating her mother as he strayed from the marriage bed. No French king had ever bedded the number of women her father had. Indeed, her father had broken every vow it was possible to break, divorcing his first wife, changing religions, and betraying her mother. It had all ended in a Parisian alley, when a madman named Ravailac plunged a dagger between her father's ribs. She had been five months old, with no memory of him as king or father.

What was she supposed to think of him based on what he left behind? A trail of bastards, proof that he had violated the Seventh Commandment with no remorse whatsoever...yet he was the most beloved king in the nation's long history. Never had the French people wept as they had at his death.

She could not reconcile it in her mind.

How many times could one abjure a faith without attracting the wrath of God? How many times could one bend God's laws to satisfy one's own desires? Had God grown weary of her father's shifting loyalties? First Huguenot, now Catholic, first married to Margot, then Marie, first bedding the chambermaid and then the milkmaid, with a countess thrown in for sport.

God remembered such things.

Why else did the Bible say the Lord God will visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation? If there were any truth to that verse, Henri IV's sins would be visited upon her, her children, and her children's children.

Or upon Charles, as her dream seemed to foretell.

And now this Bible appeared, with its horrible misprint, calling to her of one of her father's two great sins.

It was no mistake.

God did not make mistakes.

“You seek vengeance on my blood,” she said. “To punish my father’s sins.”

She had to keep Charles close, both to her and to the True Faith. Converting him was the only way to release the curse her father had set upon them all with his wickedness. If she failed, the avenging angel with the sword would come for them all.

“No,” she whispered to the angel. “You shall not have him.”

She clutched the false Bible to her chest, a visible reminder of what she had to do, no matter the cost.

CHAPTER FIVE

FEBRUARY 2014

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

“**T**hey totally *Photoshopped* you,” Natalie Brandon said, eyeing her sister’s faculty portrait. “Are you sure Crawford didn’t tell you about this?”

“It’s a punishment. He has the whole Religious Studies department to pull from, and I’m the one who gets the call.” Beth crumpled the pink message slip, delivered to her faculty mailbox that morning. “He didn’t even have the balls to tell me in person.”

“Seriously.” She held up the glossy flyer so Beth could see it. “No crows’ feet, no laugh lines, nothing. Maybe you should thank him.”

Beth snatched the flyer from her hand. “I’m only thirty-six, for Pete’s sake.”

“The freshmen in your Western Civ class were born in 1996.”

“How did we get so goddamn old?”

“Speak for yourself.” She pointed at the swear jar on her sister’s desk.

Beth dug in her purse and shoved a dollar into the jar. “What do I know about the Bible? Nothing. What do I know about seventeenth-century printing customs? Nothing. What do I know about the struggle between Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Catholics in early modern England? Next to nothing. Who the fuck—” her hand dove into her purse—“would pick me for this?”

Would you like my help? Belial asked. *I know everything about the Bible.*

“No one asked you,” she said.

“The Sinners’ Bible.” Beth shook her blonde bob. “It’s only famous because of a mistake. That’s what my career has come to—talking about typos.”

“Where’s the typo?”

Beth uncrumpled the chancellor’s note. “Exodus 20:14. Like we’re supposed to know it by heart or something.”

“Don’t look at me,” she said. “I don’t trust books without page numbers.”

“All I remember about Exodus is Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*.”

“He should have stayed with Anne Baxter.”

“We’re going to hell,” Beth said.

Yes, Belial answered.

“No,” she replied.

The angel flicked her with a wing and a white-hot streak of pain strobed behind her ear. She pressed her palms to the desk.

"Is it Belial?" Beth asked softly.

She nodded.

The angel, called Belial, crouched in the airless space above her brain, his wings folded over her parietal and frontal lobes. When they touched her, they lit up her skull like a pinball machine.

It had been that way since she was nine years old. She'd been in fourth grade, standing at the chalkboard in Mrs. Wilson's class. Suddenly, a searing pain had made her drop the chalk and press both palms to her head. She'd felt something moving beneath her skull, something with a human form and enormous feather-covered wings. She'd closed her eyes to shut out the blinding white light that accompanied the pain, but it only made the creature struggle harder to open its wings. When the creature realized her skull was the obstacle in its way, it spoke to her. "I have things I want to show you. But I have to open my wings to do it. Will you let me?"

Through the shock of fear and pain, she'd said yes.

Her body fell in a faint at the chalkboard. The next thing she knew, she was floating above it, with the creature at her side. All the pain and the noise and the light were gone. "My name is Belial," he said. "I live inside you now."

"Are you an angel?" she'd asked.

"Look around you and tell me what you think I am."

He waved his arm and she saw that they were no longer in a classroom. They were in a camp ringed with barbed wire. A man in black whipped a line of marching men, all emaciated, all wearing striped pajamas. A strange sort of snow fell from the sky, sticking to her hair and eyelashes. When the

man with the whip turned to her, smiling a black and broken smile, she'd woken up in a hospital bed, screaming.

The doctors had all sorts of official-sounding explanations for what had happened. A sudden drop in blood pressure had resulted in a coma, the body's protective reaction to a pulse of just twenty-nine beats per minute. But they couldn't explain what had caused the drop in the first place, and they couldn't find Belial, no matter how many X-rays and CAT scans they did. He was there, though. She felt him. Every time he shifted his wings, the feathers pricked her brain like needles.

No one believed her when she told them that was why she was crying.

Instead, they prodded and poked her and locked her up in strange rooms, with bright lights strobing for hours on end. *We can't treat her*, they said to her parents, *until we can reproduce the seizure*.

She'd begged Belial to show himself, to do something to help her. He refused. *I belong with you now, little one*, he'd said. In the end, the doctors had shrugged their shoulders and let the psychiatrists argue among themselves. The state children's hospital had finally decided Belial was a hallucination, strong enough to induce physical effects because of her overdeveloped hypothalamus. They settled on a diagnosis of early-onset paranoid schizophrenia, and prescribed her a flood of mind-numbing medication.

The embarrassment of having a mentally ill daughter who needed constant care was too much for her mother to bear. She made friends with bottles of all shapes and sizes, rousing herself only to put Natalie's next pill in a spoonful

of grape jelly. Her father worked in an office by day, and retreated into his study by night. Beth had been the one to feed her, wash her, dress her, and brush her hair. In return, she'd helped Beth with her homework, trying to remember not to do it in pink or purple ink.

Even before Belial, her brain could do things most others couldn't. When Beth stayed at school for track practice, she'd watch her sister's favorite shows and recite them word-for-word when Beth came home. She'd been able to tally grocery bills to the penny before she even knew what fabric softener was. After Belial, she could still do those things, but now she had his commentary to provide the context a nine-year-old lacked.

It had taken her a long time to realize he didn't always have her best interests at heart.

Beth was the only one she could trust.

Not Belial.

Never Belial.

He was the reason the other kids at school hated her. Before she'd learned to keep her mouth shut when he spoke to her, she'd answered him out loud. The other kids called her Nuthouse Natalie. After her second suspension for fighting, midway through fifth grade, her parents had pulled her out of school. Until the day they died and Beth moved home to take care of her, she'd barely left the house.

The three of them—she, Beth, and Belial—had developed a tense but stable working relationship. Beth believed in cognitive therapy, Belial believed in himself, and she believed in the welcoming numbness of whiskey and vodka. There were still times when Belial overwhelmed her, making

her do things she didn't really want to do. She snaked her hand under the right sleeve of her sweatshirt and stroked the puffy silver scarflesh. She had one scar on each arm, a thin slit running from wrist to elbow. They itched when it was cold.

"And here's the best part," Beth continued. "Crawford will be at the presentation. Watching me. Judging me."

She opened her mouth to say it wasn't true, but it was.

Are you surprised he feels this way? Belial asked. *You lie to him on a daily basis.*

"He doesn't know that," she grumbled.

He knows you're lying about something. That's far worse.

They were lying about lots of things, actually.

Crawford didn't know about Belial, thanks to HIPAA regulations. All he knew was that she'd had health issues in the past, requiring Beth to act as her legal guardian. He didn't trust either of them, and made no secret of it. She'd have felt bad if he wasn't a dick. "I'll protect you from Crawford."

"You and what army?" Beth glanced at the message slip. "Looks like the book is already on campus. Avi has it in the rare book room."

It's cursed, you know, the angel said.

"So am I."

That whole family is cursed.

"What's he saying?" Beth asked.

"The Kennedys are cursed."

That's not the family I meant, little one.

"Honest mistake."

"What do the Kennedys have to do with this?" Beth asked.

“Nothing, apparently.” A flicker of interest roused her attention. If not the Kennedys, who was Belial talking about? “Beth, when was the Sinners’ Bible printed?”

Her sister glanced at the message slip. “1631.”

Now do you know which family I mean?

She visualized the chronology of English kings, a series of portraits from a book she’d read in her father’s library. The chronology stopped when she reached a man with long, dark hair and a melancholy face. “You’re not serious.”

Look what happened to him. To all of them. Are you saying you don’t believe me?

“Not serious?” Beth asked. “Who’s not serious?”

“The Joker.”

“I thought Anne Baxter’s episodes were with the Penguin.”

“Egghead,” she said absent-mindedly. Her heart beat faster as she ran through the chronology of rulers again, moving a few slots back and a few slots forward from the sad, long-haired man. “Beth, Belial’s not talking about the Kennedys.”

“Oh, good. Because looks, money, power, charisma, why should they have everything? Leave some curses for the rest of us, right?”

“If the Sinners’ Bible was printed in 1631, it’s the King James version. As in James Stuart, son of Mary Stuart and father of Charles Stuart.”

Beth blinked. “No. Absolutely not.”

“There’s a Stuart curse,” she breathed. “An honest-to-God curse.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Belial was right about the Romanov letters. Why couldn’t he be right about this?”

“Those were letters. Actual physical things that could be found.”

“So is this book. What if it has something to do with the Stuart curse?”

“The Stuart curse was venereal disease. Besides, Mary, Queen of Scots was beheaded in 1587, way before the Sinners’ Bible was printed. The timeline is off.”

Belial shuffled his wings, careful to keep the edges from touching her skull. *Did the Bible curse the family? Or did the family curse the Bible? Do you even know how a curse is cast?*

“He says it’s real,” she said. “And he’s going to teach us how to curse people.”

That is not what I said.

“I can’t deal with this right now.” Beth sank into her desk chair and massaged both temples with her index fingers. Her teeth scraped a piece of dry skin on her lip. “I have an op-ed on the new Russian imperialism due at the *New York Times* in a week, a book proposal due in four, and I’m still trying to wrangle that RFP from the National Endowment for the Arts. Then, last night, Seth asked me for help with advanced algebra.” Her sister looked up, tears gleaming in her eyes. “I’m a bad mother, Nat.”

“I’ve never seen a better mother,” she said softly. “Not in the whole world.”

“What the hell is a polynomial?” Beth wailed. “I can’t help my own kid because I don’t have time to re-learn math and I feel like shit about it.”

“Let me help.”

“You know I hate asking you for things.”

“You can ask, Beth.” Her scars started to tingle and she scratched the right one with a jagged fingernail. “You’re the only one who can.”

“That’s not the impression I got in London.”

She closed her eyes. *Constantine*. He believed in her, she knew that much. But he had his own problems, and they were occupying most of his time. “He’s not here. You are.”

“And I always will be. I love you, sis.”

“Then bring Seth over and we’ll kick the shit out of some polynomials.” This time, she scratched the scar on her left arm.

I can feel it when you do that, Belial said. I don’t like it.

Beth sighed. “So I’m really doing this, then...a talk on the Sinners’ Bible.”

“Let me help with that, too. What kind of background info do you need me to dig up?”

“It’s been so long since I studied pre-industrial England.” Beth shrugged out of her black blazer and hung it on the coat rack next to her desk. “Charles Stuart was the only English king to be condemned to death in a court of law by his own people. What are the odds?”

“One point six percent. If you start with the House of Wessex, and count William and Mary as one.”

“Poor Charles.”

“Beth, what if there really is a Stuart curse?”

I told you, Belial said.

“Belial says—”

“I know what bastard says.” Beth picked up the crumpled pink message slip and aimed a jump shot, bouncing it off the rim of the trash can.

Natalie smiled. She couldn’t help it. Her perfect sister, the one with the perfect job and the perfect house and the perfect wardrobe, couldn’t shoot a basket to save her life. “The Warriors called. The Heisman’s yours.”

Beth grinned. “I always wanted to play in the World Series.”

“You could bring Crawford one of those big foam fingers.”

“He’d just use it to point at me during staff meetings.” Beth sighed. “Seriously, Nat, whatever you do, don’t mention a curse in front of Crawford. I don’t think he has a sense of humor about these things.”

He’ll need one, Belial said.

She shivered and dug her nails into her scar. “No curse,” she said. “I promise.”

The Sinner's Bible

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the beginning of the story. There's a lot more coming for Natalie, Beth, Ezra, and the Stuarts.

DIGITAL

AMAZON

B & N

KOBO

GOOGLE
PLAY

iBOOKS

PAPERBACK

AMAZON

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WHAT READERS SAY
ABOUT NATALIE:



*"...wildly
entertaining,
very well written,
highly inventive,
and just*

plain fun."

- AMAZON
REVIEWER

BOOK TRAILER



MEET THE CHARACTERS



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The Sinner's Bible

THE NATALIE BRANDON THRILLERS

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BOOK 1

THE ROMANOV LEGACY

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

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Natalie knows a 700-year-old Dante manuscript up for auction is a fake, but no one believes her because she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Working with her sister, Natalie disrupts the forger's scheme...and exposes a web of lies spun over forty years. Can they catch the forger without turning an international conspiracy against them?

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Brett isn't adapting to life in Arkansas very well. Whisked into the Witness Protection Program, she soon realizes the Mafia have followed her to Little Falls. To stay alive, she and her dog, Dude, will tangle with a liar, a truck driver, and a shoplifter named Rick James who might be the best friend she's been waiting for.

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Ella Wilcox is cataloging the jewelry collection of the wealthy Cherbourg family when someone steals the gems out from under her. As Ella and Sébastien Cherbourg race to find the thief, danger ignites an uncontrollable passion...and reveals a secret that threatens to destroy them both.

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The Sinner's Bible

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

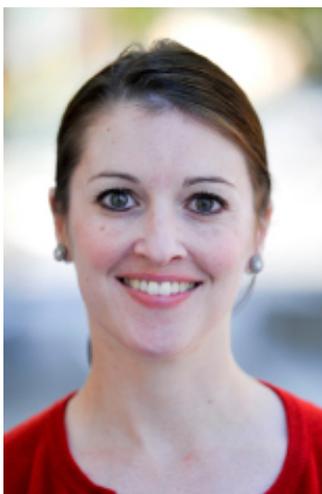
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EMAIL

jenni@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.

