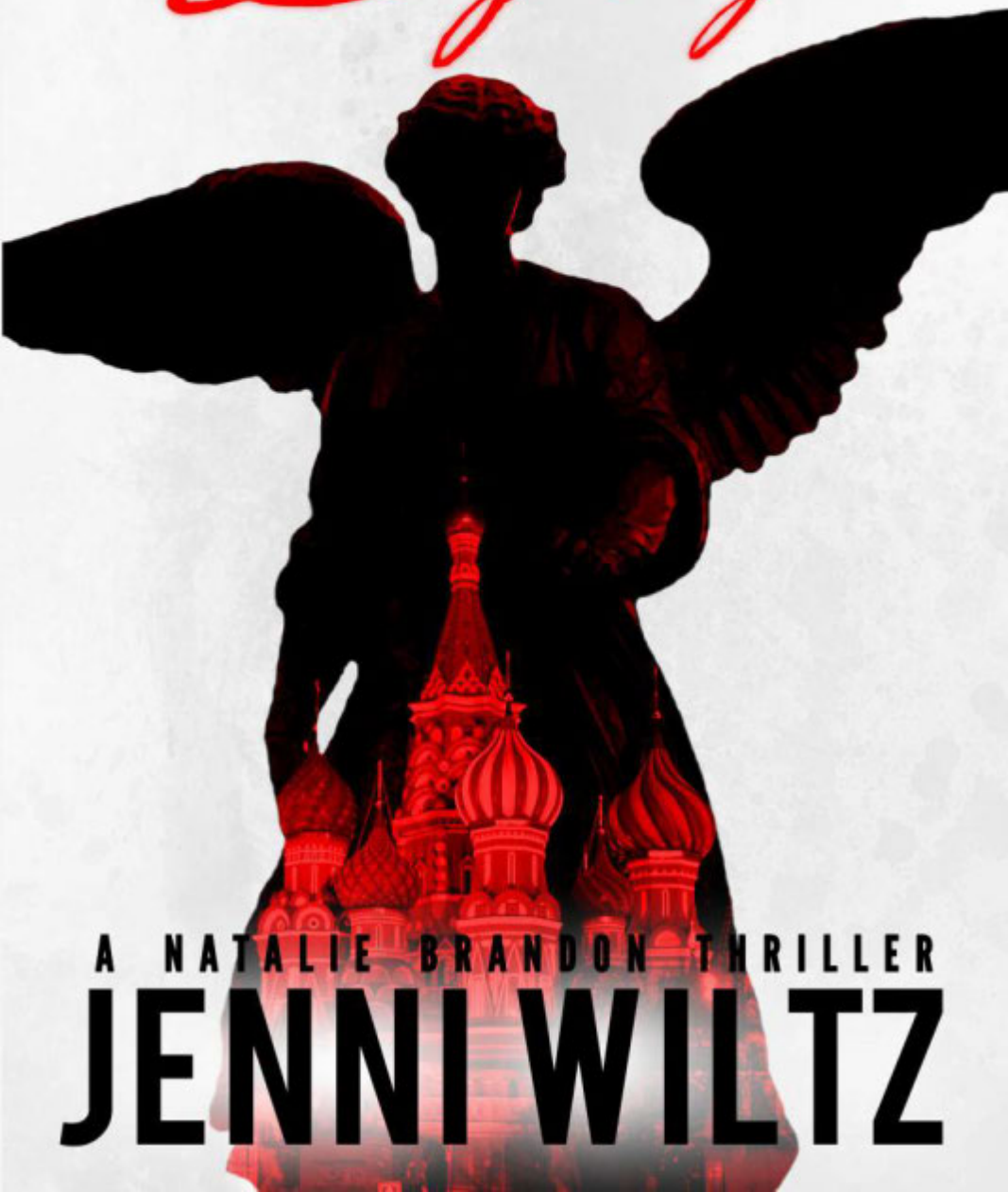


THE
ROMANOV
Legacy



A NATALIE BRANDON THRILLER

JENNI WILTZ

THE ROMANOV
LEGACY

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 fell asleep and dropped her 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 for the guard to see. “Her headache was so bad she didn’t know she’d dropped 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. "You dropped your pen and fell asleep?"

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 fall asleep. 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

JULY 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 had served for lunch, and every word of dialogue from that night’s episode of *The Muppet Show*.

It had all 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 had changed in fourth grade. One minute, she’d been 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,” he said. “Will you let me?”

When she nodded, her body had fallen in a faint at the chalkboard. The next thing she knew, she and the creature were floating 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 had 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 had 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 had died in a car accident. Natalie missed the funeral because she'd set the alarm clock for p.m. instead of a.m. Black-clad Beth had 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 — had 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.”

“Seriously, 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! 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 —”

“Forget 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.

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:

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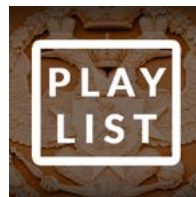
So, book trailers are cheesy, right? I don't care. I love the idea of telling a story in a compressed time frame with evocative music and imagery. Click the picture to watch my latest trailer for *The Romanov Legacy* - or just [click this link](#).



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The Romanov Legacy

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

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

THRILLER

THE DANTE DECEPTION

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. To stop the auction, she enlists the help of her sister Beth, a history professor. Can Natalie save her sister and catch the forger...without turning the forces of an international conspiracy against them?

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

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ABOUT JENNI

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

SOCIAL

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

