

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • BOOK TWO

Written on the Wind

RITA Award-Winning Author

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN

THE BLACKSTONE LEGACY • 2

*Written
on the
Wind*

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SEPTEMBER 1900

Natalia Blackstone always considered the third floor of her family’s bank the most fascinating five thousand square feet in the entire United States. This was where the research used to fuel the industrial revolution was produced on a daily basis. It was filled with maps and blueprints and stacks of financial reports.

Unfortunately, her cousin Liam disliked it for the same reason.

“Too many books,” he growled as she gave him a tour of the Blackstone Bank’s library. “It’s like being in school again.”

“True,” she said, but that was why she loved it. As the bank’s leading analyst for Russian investment, Natalia needed access to vast amounts of research, and the bank was the only place she truly felt at home. The society events that most ladies of her class enjoyed were tedious affairs that made her itch, but the chance to learn more about the Russian timber market? Or help finance the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway? These challenges sparked her curiosity, and she wanted to share that love of business with Liam.

Her cousin was thirty-three years old and recently arrived in New York after working as a welder in the shipyards of

Philadelphia for most of his life. He needed a hard and fast education in high finance to succeed on Wall Street.

She gestured to a map of Russia on the library wall. A red line stretching across the country marked the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway, a monumental endeavor that would someday be the longest railway in the world.

“This is where the Trans-Siberian starts,” she said, pointing to Moscow. “Building the railroad was easy in the well-developed part of Russia, but everything is harder now.” She pointed to the blank part of the map east of the Ural Mountains, where the land was so sparsely populated that a person could ride for days on horseback without seeing a single village. “This is where our construction team is currently working. They need to build hundreds of bridges to cross all those rivers, and it’s slowing them down.”

“How does this affect the bank?” Liam asked.

“It makes planning my finance schedule a nightmare.” She laughed. “That’s why communication with the Russian manager is so important. He usually sends me daily updates to track the railway’s progress.”

Usually, lately those telegram communications had veered badly off-kilter, and it worried her. The bank had invested gigantic sums in the Trans-Siberian, all on her recommendation. Anything that endangered the account could upend Natalia’s entire world.

“Let me show you the communication room and how we monitor our overseas investments,” she said.

They crossed through a room where a dozen junior analysts were stationed at individual desks, busily compiling data. Like worker bees deep within a hive, the analysts on the third floor produced steady streams of research reports on potential new investments. These men—and all of them were men—looked so ordinary in their business suits and paper-strewn desks, but their appearance belied the extraordinary endeavors that occurred on this floor. It was here that Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and other business tycoons obtained loans to build the infra-

structure for the nation. This was where cities and states applied for bonds to build railroads and bridges. The White House controlled the political fate of the nation, but Wall Street had more impact on the daily life of Americans.

Natalia spent six days a week on the bank's third floor, the only kingdom she ever wanted to rule. Her father was president of the bank, which was how she'd attained such influence here. It was the dawn of the twentieth century, and although women had made strides in science and the arts, the world of finance was still closed to them. It was no secret that Natalia worked at the bank, but society would have a heart attack if they knew exactly how much power a twenty-eight-year-old woman had in managing the bank's largest investment in Russia.

"This is the communication room," she said to Liam, who ducked through the ornate wooden doorway. Men as tall as Liam probably had to duck a lot. She and Liam shared the same black hair and green eyes, but that was where their resemblance ended. She had the willowy figure of her ballerina mother, while Liam towered well over six feet and had the broad shoulders and brawny build of someone who grew up laboring in the shipyards.

Telegraph machines rattled a stream of intermittent clicks as messages arrived from as far away as London or Japan, or as close as the New York Stock Exchange two blocks down the street.

Aaron Jones, the supervisor of the communication room, munched on a bagel while monitoring the tape coming in off the London ticker. With his rolled-up shirtsleeves, full beard, and colorful suspenders, he looked like a younger version of Santa Claus.

"Good morning, Aaron," Natalia said as she entered the room.

Aaron flushed and shot to his feet, brushing crumbs from his hands and then reaching for his jacket. "Yes, Miss Blackstone," he said, shrugging into his jacket. "How can I help you this morning?"

She wished he wouldn't be so formal, but some of the employees never felt comfortable around the boss's daughter. Her father was powerful, intimidating, and ran the bank with an iron fist, but he allowed her the freedom to set the tone among the third-floor employees.

"First names, please," she reminded Aaron, then winced as Aaron reached for a tie to wrap around his collar. "And there is certainly no need for a tie."

Aaron continued hastily knotting his tie. "When I dined with the senior Blackstones last week, Mrs. Blackstone said everyone should wear a tie, even in the back office."

Natalia's smile froze. Her stepmother might reign supreme at home, but Natalia refused to let Poppy bully her coworkers on the third floor.

"Mrs. Blackstone rarely visits the bank, and I would prefer to keep a more relaxed atmosphere here," she said, trying to conceal her dislike for her father's new wife. It was galling to think of Poppy as her stepmother. After all, she and Poppy were the same age.

She pushed the disagreeable thoughts aside to continue Liam's tour. "I'm showing my cousin how we communicate with our overseas accounts. Has there been any news from Count Sokolov?"

"Not a thing, ma'am."

Her spirit dimmed. Count Dimitri Sokolov was her point of contact for the railway, and his continued silence was worrisome. For the past three years, they had exchanged regular telegrams as she wired him funds to supply tons of coal and steel to his remote Siberian outpost. What began as a business arrangement had soon morphed into a friendship. The count's telegrams were long, chatty, and fascinating. After their initial formality, he soon addressed her simply as "Dearest Natalia." Then he would fire off all manner of questions and observations. He had opinions on everything from the proper way to brew tea to the merits of classical music. He was a bit of a hypochondriac, frequently bemoaning the state of his health in the desolate Siberian wilderness.

Dearest Natalia, he had written last week. I am glad to report that the sun has been shining, but this morning I noticed a rash on my hands. I fear it is sun poisoning and I am likely to catch my death. It can happen to even the strongest of men.

It was typical of Dimitri's melodramatic suffering, but she would send him words of teasing comfort, which he thrived upon. She didn't know if he was handsome or homely, but she knew his favorite ballet was *Swan Lake*, and that he crossbred apple trees at his summer estate. He was a bit of a snob, always praising the pomp and formality of Russian feudalism, and he teased her mercilessly over American informality. *Why do Americans shake hands instead of bowing like the rest of the civilized world? It is unsanitary, Natalia. One day I shall learn of your death by a pestilence contracted from your obsessive handshaking.*

When Natalia saw the world through Count Sokolov's eyes, everything became more vivid. Sunsets were not the end of the day, they were blazing fires of a dying sun as it reclined in exhaustion. The chocolates she sent him for Christmas weren't a simple gift, but quite possibly the finest culinary creation since God himself sent manna to the Hebrews wandering in the desert.

"Let me show you how we communicate," she said to Liam, taking a seat beside Aaron at the telegraph machine. Her message notified Count Sokolov of the incoming loan installment and projections for the next month. Even though the wire was going to Russia, they were always sent in English.

Natalia was fluent in Russian, of course. Her Russian mother had raised her from birth on Russian language, folklore, and customs. It was Natalia's ease with Russian culture that gave her father the confidence to assign her to the Russian account. Soon Natalia had a better understanding of the Russian economy than anyone else in the bank, and she was promoted to lead the Trans-Siberian project.

While Aaron tapped the brass sounder to send the message, she continued explaining to Liam how the Trans-Siberian

would soon reach the Pacific Ocean. It meant that Americans could start exporting their goods from California to the huge Russian market. It was a privilege to be a part of something that was going to change the world. Dreaming about the Trans-Siberian captured her imagination, even though she needed to keep this exuberant part of her soul hidden. It was essential to project the same logical formality as all the other soberly suited businessmen of Wall Street.

A cascade of clicks from the telegraph sounder came to life with an incoming message. Its brevity made it obvious it did not come from Count Sokolov, who would have berated Natalia for such a terse message without a salutation or an inquiry about his health.

Aaron passed her the message:

Confirmation received. Payroll next month anticipated to hold steady.

“That’s all?” she asked in dismay.

“That’s all,” Aaron confirmed.

She wouldn’t tolerate it. Dimitri’s continuing absence worried her. “Send a message asking for the whereabouts of Count Sokolov,” she ordered. The miracle of modern telegraphy meant that messages arrived at their destination after only a few minutes, but her growing unease made her impatient. When the answer to her message arrived five minutes later, the news was not good:

Count Sokolov has been reassigned.

“I don’t believe it,” she insisted. Dimitri would love to be transferred back to Saint Petersburg, but he would *not* have left his post without telling her goodbye. If Count Sokolov no longer worked on the railroad, she had no idea how to contact him. But she knew who could help.



The police department of New York City served the most diverse community in America. Immigrants from all over the world clustered into ethnic enclaves, where their native languages continued to thrive for generations. Many of those bilingual immigrants found work in the police department, and Boris Kozlov was just such a man.

Boris arrived from the Ukraine twelve years ago and patrolled a Russian-speaking section of the city informally known as Little Odessa. He strolled the two-mile loop through the neighborhood and often stopped in at The Samovar, a Russian market and tea shop that catered to the Slavic community. If Natalia waited at the tea shop long enough, Boris would eventually make an appearance.

As always, customers filled the stools at the service counter of the crowded shop. Tightly packed shelves covered the walls, weighed down with jars of pickles, herring, and sauerkraut. Ropes of garlic and dried sausages hung from hooks near the ceiling, and barrels of imported spices filled the remaining floor space.

“Has Officer Kozlov been through recently?” Natalia asked the young waitress in Russian.

“Not yet,” the woman replied, also in Russian. “He’ll probably come by soon.”

It was a rough neighborhood, and the owners of The Samovar usually slipped Officer Kozlov a pastry or a mug of something hot in exchange for regularly stopping in.

Natalia took a seat at the counter and ordered a pirozhki, a fried yeasty bun filled with cabbage and onions. This sort of peasant food would never be served at her father’s Fifth Avenue mansion, but when Natalia’s mother was alive, they came here often, and Galina delighted in sharing the comforting food of her youth and filling Natalia with tales of her faraway homeland.

Natalia had just finished her pirozhki when Officer Kozlov entered the shop. The police officer’s uniform did little to disguise his rough edges. Everything from Boris’s bulldog expression and

thick mustache to his barrel chest made him seem tough and intimidating. He'd been walking the beat for years but aspired to become a detective and thus sought investigative work on the side to prove himself to the police hierarchy.

Natalia waved for him to join her at the last remaining seat at the counter and ordered him a pirozhki. "I need information about a man in Russia," she said.

"Name?" Boris asked.

"Dimitri Sokolov. *Count* Dimitri Sokolov."

Boris looked surprised by the lofty title, but only for a moment. "I've never heard of him. Where does he live?"

"He's originally from Saint Petersburg but has been posted to the far eastern provinces for the past three years, working on the railroad. He left his post a few weeks ago. He may have returned to Saint Petersburg, but I can't be sure."

"This one is going to cost you," he said.

Anything Boris did for her always cost plenty. She slipped him a few bills, which was probably more than he earned in a week.

"That should get you started," she said. "There may be fees for wires or informants in Russia. I'll pay for those too. And if you find him, there will be a nice reward."

"How nice?" Boris asked, his eyes gleaming.

"*Very* nice," she said simply. Coming from one of the wealthiest families in America meant Natalia never had to scrimp. She would give almost anything to learn what had happened to Dimitri, because his abrupt disappearance did not bode well.