



THE
cherbourg
BODYGUARD

The Cherbourg Saga - Book 2

JENNI WILTZ

THE
CHERBOURG
BODYGUARD

ALSO BY JENNI WILTZ

The Romanov Legacy: A Natalie Brandon Thriller

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I Never Arkansas It Coming

THE CHERBOURG BODYGUARD

Jenni Wiltz



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For Paul
Here's to another ten years.

Chapter

ONE

THE PENCIL MOVED IN her hand as if it already knew what it wanted to draw. Honorée Cherbourg gritted her teeth and tried to focus on the bed of blooming red roses alongside the fountain. But no matter how badly she wanted to capture the velvety texture of the petals, something kept stealing her attention — a little boy and his father, playing with a soccer ball.

She put down her pencil and watched them for a moment, absorbing the simple joy on the little boy's face as his foot connected with the ball. The afternoon sun bathed him in an opalescent glow and she found herself wanting to sketch him instead of the flowers.

All around her, the beauty of Paris in springtime unfolded like a flower. Water sparkled in the fountains of the Jardin

du Luxembourg. The delicious smell of buttery croissants and roasted peanuts wafted toward her from the vendors' rolling cars. Fat white geese honked and ambled down the sandy pathways through the park. The city was bursting with life and color and part of her felt like she would burst, too, if she didn't pack up her easel and join them.

But she'd come to the park for a reason, and it wasn't to run barefoot through the grass or splash around with the little kids in the fountain. The late afternoon light was perfect for sketching. She could see the rounded edges of the rose petals casting faint shadows onto the ground beneath them. If she didn't get focused and finish this sketch, she'd have nothing to paint from over the weekend. Her instructor, Monsieur Starck, expected a completed painting on Monday. It was already late Friday afternoon.

Damn it, Honorée thought. Where did my week go?

Her schedule was supposed to be easy: class on Monday and Wednesday, with the rest of her time free to draw and paint. But then her friend Anne-Marie needed help moving on Tuesday, and she'd gone out with Anne-Marie's friends Tuesday night. On Wednesday night, she'd gone clubbing with Sophie, and joined Sophie's friends for a picnic on Thursday that turned into dinner and another night of clubbing. So here she was, on Friday afternoon, behind on her sketching with absolutely no idea what to turn in for class on Monday.

She knew it was all her fault. She could have said no to Anne-Marie or Sophie...but she was twenty-four years old in Paris. Wasn't it practically her job to have fun? Sure, art

school was fun, too, but it didn't mean she had to give up on experiencing all the city had to offer, did it?

Honorée bit her lip as she remembered what her older brother Sébastien had told her when she left home. "You are representing the Cherbourg family," he'd said, olive-green eyes flashing with pride...and a warning. "And I expect you to behave accordingly. If I see your name in the tabloids for table dancing or playing strip poker in public...*again*...I'll send the plane for you faster than you can say *au revoir*." Then he'd sighed. "You have talent, Honorée. You know that, don't you? If you wanted to, you could be the next Renoir." He'd grabbed her hands and squeezed them. "Show me what you can do. When you come back, we'll have the museum arrange an exhibition of your work."

That had been eight months ago, and she still hadn't produced anything worthwhile. All she'd finished was a handful of generic landscapes that looked like they belonged in a crappy motel room. They weren't worth paying the freight to ship home, let alone worth displaying in the museum her family endowed. The ugly truth was there, waiting to be faced: she wasn't a great artist. She wasn't even a good one.

She wasn't good at business, like her brother.

She wasn't cool and elegant, like her mother.

She wasn't anything at all.

When she'd left San Francisco, she thought art would be her way out from her family's clutches. Artists were supposed to be eccentric. If she became one, her mother and her brother couldn't complain when she did things like walk in the rain

without an umbrella, or stay up all night to watch the sunrise. But pursuing art hadn't fulfilled her the way she thought it would. It was still full of rules, and as soon as someone her told she should do something a different way, she wanted to do the exact opposite, no matter how well-intentioned the advice had been.

It didn't make for a comfortable working relationship with her professors.

Honorée sighed.

Everyone in the Cherbourg family was good at something. Why wasn't she? No matter how hard she'd tried to find a career path that stuck, she always felt restless and unfulfilled. The restlessness led to self-doubt, which snowballed into recklessness. It was a pattern that had unfolded over and over again, for at least ten years. She knew Sébastien would be disappointed if she didn't settle down and get serious about her art, but she wasn't convinced it was her calling yet.

Honorée glanced back to the father and son kicking the soccer ball.

The father was drop-dead gorgeous in a very French way. He had sharply chiseled features, olive skin, short dark hair that flopped over his forehead, and thick eyebrows. He was a little taller than she was, but very muscular. He moved gracefully, stopping the ball with ease and kicking it gently back toward the boy. Just looking at him made something in her stomach tighten, as if she'd had too much coffee or was nervous about an exam.

She switched her gaze to the boy.

A miniature version of his father, he was also fast in his movements, but not nearly as graceful. He had to concentrate

when he wanted to stop or kick the ball. She could see his brow furrow as he stuck out the tip of his tongue. It made her smile to see his determination. He was one cute kid, that was for sure.

Before she could change her mind, she flipped to a new page in her sketchbook and began to draw him. Quick line drawings were all she could capture — he was moving too fast for anything more detailed. She sketched the curve of his leg as he aimed the center of his inner foot at the ball. *I would have kicked it with my toe*, she thought. *Shows how much I know.*

His father kicked the ball back to him.

This time, the boy hunkered down like a football linebacker. *This is it*, Honorée thought. *He's really going for this one.* She watched as he took three quick steps toward the ball, pulled one leg back, and kicked. The ball sailed up and over his father's head, landing in a dense thicket of oak trees.

The little boy laughed, raising his arms above his head. "Goal!" he cried. Honorée found herself applauding, even though she was too far away for him to hear her. "Way to go, kid," she said softly.

The father wagged a finger at the boy, then trotted off to retrieve the ball. Once he ducked into the thicket of trees, he was out of her line of sight. She waited, pencil at the ready, to see what the boy would do when his father wasn't looking.

First, he broke into a victory dance. As far as she could tell, it was a combination of the Twist and the Funky Chicken. He twisted from side to side, one leg off the ground at a time, index fingers raised in the air. Honorée laughed out loud. This was one *seriously* cute kid.

But as she watched, she saw a man approach the little boy.

A man who definitely wasn't his father.

A man in a black ski mask.

The man crept up behind the boy, arms outstretched as if to grab him.

"No!" Honorée cried. She stood up from her stool, knocking it and her easel to the ground with the violence of her movement. All she could think about was stopping whatever terrible thing was about to happen. It didn't seem real. How could a man in a mask just walk up to a little boy in this beautiful park on this beautiful day? Was she dreaming?

The man in the mask reached for the boy's arm.

"Behind you!" she cried.

Startled, the boy jumped and turned around. Honorée could see the surprise and fear on his face. He began to back away, shaking his head. "Non," he said, at first softer and then louder.

When the masked man reached for the boy's arm a second time, Honorée couldn't help it. She tossed down her sketchbook and ran. Her flip-flops tripped her up and she kicked them off, leaving them in the grass. All she could think about was the fear on the boy's face...and what might happen to him if she didn't reach him in time.

She wasn't used to running, especially barefoot, and she winced as she stepped on acorns, rocks, and dry, sharp-edged leaves. But she spurred herself on, aware only of a desperate need to help the little boy.

She kept her eyes trained on him as he stepped back, away from the masked man. It seemed like the masked man was talking to him. *Maybe they know each other?* she wondered. But then why was the guy wearing a mask?

Honorée forced her legs to pump harder and faster. She was closing in on the masked man, who now had the boy's arm in a tight grip. The man's back was to her, but now she could definitely hear him talking to the boy. Her understanding of French wasn't great at the best of times, but now she was too wound up with adrenaline to have any shot at understanding his rapid dialogue.

The boy saw her coming. His blue eyes opened wide, and his mouth hung open with surprise.

The masked man paused, wondering what could bring on the kid's surprise. *Gotcha*, she thought. She took a flying leap and launched herself at the masked man. "Run!" she shouted to the boy.

The force of her impact knocked the man to the ground. He took the brunt of the fall, but she felt her bones crunch painfully as she landed directly on top of him. Dimly, she understood that she'd be in pain later. But as long as the adrenaline was coursing through her veins, she didn't care. All she knew was that she couldn't let the man get up and go after the boy again. With a fierceness she'd never expected and never felt before, she knew she'd do anything to keep that little boy safe.

She grasped the man's black jacket and twisted her fingers into the fabric, gripping it as fiercely as she could. He rolled over, putting her back against the warm grass. Honorée looked up into his eyes. They were brown, traced with angry red veins. She fought back a rising tide of fear and pushed up against his chest, trying to shake him off.

"*Qui êtes-vous?*" his angry voice asked. He shook her once and her head slammed against the ground.

“Who am I?” she croaked. “Who are *you*? What did you want with that boy?” She turned her head to the side. With a rush of relief, she saw the boy running for the clump of trees where his father had gone. *Thank goodness*, she thought.

But then she realized: the boy might be safe now, but she certainly wasn’t. What was to stop this masked man from kidnapping her? Or punching her to knock her out? How was she going to get out of this?

The masked man made the decision for her. He wrapped his arms around her throat and began to squeeze.

Honorée reached up to grab his wrists. She tried to pull his hands away, but his grip was as tight as a boa constrictor. The longer he squeezed, the harder it became to see. Black spots began to dance in her field of vision. She blinked to try and clear them away, but it didn’t work.

She turned her head and gasped for air, but nothing helped. He was choking her — and at the rate he was going, he was probably going to kill her.

Thoughts of Sébastien and San Francisco flashed through her mind. She’d miss Golden Gate Park, especially the Japanese Tea Garden. She’d even miss the annoying way her brother bossed her around. She realized there were lots of things she should have done differently — make that done better — and lots of things she should have apologized for. She wished she’d gotten a dog. She wished she’d traveled more. She wished she’d found someone to love, someone who made her want to be a better person.

Those wishes had been part of the reason she’d come to Paris in the first place. If a girl’s dreams couldn’t come true here, where on earth could they?

Honorée felt her vision fading and the strength of her grip faltering. She saw her hands fall away from his wrists and flop like dead fish onto the ground. Part of her wanted to keep fighting, but it would be so much easier to slip quietly into the black oblivion threatening to wash her away.

So much, she thought, for Paris in springtime.



Adrien Gerard dug through a clump of azaleas, looking for Collin's soccer ball. *He's getting better at distance, he thought. Now we just need to work on his aim.*

Adrien knew that Collin's lack of practice time was pretty much his fault. Lately, he hadn't been able to spend as much time with his son as he wanted. The reason was painfully clear to him — and he didn't know how to get past it.

As a detective for the Police Judiciare's white-collar crime bureau, he spent most of his time catching embezzlers, digital thieves, and hackers. He tolerated the job because, unlike the guys patrolling the streets, he wasn't dodging bullets day-in, day-out. It was a far cry from the excitement of the urban patrols he'd done when he first joined the force, but now that Collin was his primary responsibility, a white-collar job made sense. Sitting behind a desk kept him safe. It kept Collin safe. And he still got to catch criminals, even if he wasn't the one breaking down doors and locking the cuffs on a suspect.

His caseload was pretty heavy, but only because he kept putting aside his assigned cases and working on his pet project: tracking Rolland Delmar. Delmar was that rare combination of hacker, grifter, and all-around gentleman.

He was suave enough to get into corporate office buildings just by wearing a fancy suit and a smile...and wily enough to steal bank account numbers and passwords once he was on the inside. The newspapers loved him, women swooned over him, and the Police Nationale loathed him.

Delmar had been making them look bad for about three years now.

Adrien had been close to catching Delmar once, about a year ago. He'd figured out which telecom company Delmar was going to hit next, and had already planted an agent undercover as an executive assistant. The agent had been lucky enough to answer the phone when a man named Lucien Napolitano called to schedule a meeting to discuss the firm's cyber-security.

Lucien Napolitano was one of Delmar's known aliases.

Adrien had put his team on full alert, ready to arrest Delmar at the beginning of the meeting. But instead of being the day he finally caught Delmar, it was the day that everything had gone wrong.

It started when Delmar tripped one of the internal alarms at police headquarters. Instead of making his way to the scheduled meeting at the telecom company, suddenly it appeared as if Delmar were trying to hack into the police mainframe and view his criminal file instead. The tech guys traced the IP address Delmar had used — and it turned out to be Adrien's home computer.

He'd gone home immediately, terrified for Emilie and Collin. Instead of the criminal, however, he'd found Collin seated in front of the TV, sobbing, with a note from Emilie

pinned to his sweater. As soon as he read the note, he'd known how badly he'd screwed everything up.

In the note, Emilie told him she was leaving him for Delmar. Apparently, he'd been so obsessed with tracking and catching Delmar that he'd done nothing but talk about the man. He'd talked so much, in fact, that Emilie had become obsessed with the dashing hacker.

Obsessed enough to track Delmar down in an online chat room on the dark web.

Obsessed enough to start meeting him and keeping him informed on police progress.

Obsessed enough to begin an affair.

On that day, the day she'd decided to leave him, she'd intentionally tripped the police alarm by looking up Delmar's file from home.

Her brief note apologized for tricking him and for leaving Collin behind. *I have to follow my heart*, she'd written. *For a long time, I thought that meant you. I wish it still could. But I'd be lying if I said it did. Take good care of our little man. He was always more your son than mine.*

Just thinking about that day made him clench his fists in anger.

It still hurt that her first impulse had been to leave, not to try and work it out. He'd thought Emilie was stronger than that. Instead of talking to him about any problems she'd found in their marriage, she'd run at the first sign of trouble. She took the coward's way out and hit the streets with a known criminal, while her sobbing child sat on the living room floor, cold and alone.

It had been almost a year now, and he still couldn't forgive her. His anger was getting harder and harder to hide from Collin. Part of him felt that unless he caught Delmar and showed Emilie the consequences of her actions, he'd never be able to move on. He wanted to see her face when she realized what a huge mistake she'd made. He knew it was childish and vindictive, the last thing he should be thinking as he was trying to raise a child on his own. But some days, it was the only reason he could get out of bed.

Deep down, he knew he couldn't base the rest of his life on making Emilie regret her decision. He'd have to find his own motivation for moving forward eventually. Friends at the office kept asking him when he was going to start dating again. He tried to be optimistic, but every time one of his friends described a woman they had in mind, he found a reason to be too busy or tired to call her.

His first priority had to be taking care of Collin. Once he'd wrapped his head around the idea of being a single father for the rest of his life, he'd be able to think about another romantic partner for himself. As depressing as it was to go to bed alone in a city known for its romantic possibilities, Adrien knew it was for the best.

He couldn't risk making another mistake, especially if it involved Collin.

He shook his head to clear away the troubling thoughts. *Not now*, he told himself. *This afternoon is about Collin, not you.*

Adrien pushed aside a clump of flowers and spotted the black-and-white ball. He bent down to pick it up. As he did so, he heard a woman's voice cry out. "Run!" the voice shrieked.

She's speaking English, he thought. She must be a tourist.

But the tone of her voice put his senses on full alert. Adrien knew the sound of fear when he heard it. The woman wasn't playing a game. Something had frightened her — badly.

Instantly, his policeman's instincts took over. He dropped the soccer ball and ran through the stand of trees, back to the wide grassy field where he'd left Collin. What he saw made every nerve in his body leap to the surface of his skin.

He saw Collin running toward him, a look of pure terror on his face. Behind Collin, a blonde woman struggled with a man in a ski mask.

He took off like a shot, racing for his son. He scooped Collin up in his arms and inspected him for injuries. "Are you all right?" he asked, running his hands over Collin's torso and legs.

"Dad, help her!" Collin cried, squirming in his arms to point at the woman and her attacker. "She tried to help me and that man attacked her!"

It went against every fatherly instinct he had to put Collin down when danger was still present. But he couldn't let the woman be harmed either, especially if she'd only tried to help Collin. "Run into those trees over there," he said, pointing at the clump of oaks. "Get your ball and hide. I'll come get you in a minute." He gave Collin a fierce hug and a push, and felt his heart rise up into his throat. *I would do anything to keep him safe*, he thought.

But someone else needed him, too. He turned and ran to the two tangled bodies lying on the ground. The woman's back was against the ground. The attacker bent over her, his hands wrapped around her throat. Adrien could see she was

losing strength. Her hands, pulling at the man's wrists, were loosening their grip and falling away.

Adrien paused. He was off-duty and didn't have his service weapon on him. He didn't even have his badge. *I'll have to do this the old-fashioned way*, he thought.

"*Arrêtez!*" he yelled in French. "Get away from her!"

Somewhat to his surprise, the masked man did stop. He paused and cocked his head, as if he were trying to remember something. Adrien took advantage of the man's momentary pause. He launched himself at the masked figure, knocking him off of the woman. Although he hadn't been in a dangerous situation like this in years, all his old instincts came flooding back. *Stun him*, he remembered. *Then disarm him, if he's got a weapon.*

Adrien punched the man in the stomach and then the jaw, hard enough to disorient him. He was surprised at how good it felt to release some of the tension that had been simmering inside him. The rush of adrenaline made him realize how much he missed his old beat. The danger was what kept him alert and on his toes...nothing like his desk job.

Plus, it soon became clear that the desk job hadn't done a thing for his timing.

In the brief moment he'd paused to think, the masked man had rolled away from him and stood up.

Adrien scrambled to his feet. He wanted to rip that mask off his face and find out who was cowardly enough to prey on women and children.

With an unexpected burst of speed, the masked man kicked out with his right foot. The attack caught Adrien unaware and the man's thick boot connected with his chest.

Adrien coughed and gasped for air.

That was all the head start the masked man needed. He dashed away, leaving Adrien to watch in disgust.

Adrien felt a bruising pain in his chest, but the embarrassment of letting the man get away was much worse. Part of him wanted to give chase. His legs twitched with the desire to take off at full speed and tackle the masked man again. This time, he'd keep him subdued until he could call for backup.

But Collin was waiting for him, and so was a woman who needed help.

He had responsibilities.

It wasn't like the old days, where he could run after fleeing criminals with little or no thought for his personal safety.

He turned back to the woman lying on the ground. Her head had fallen sideways when she lost consciousness, framed by a tumble of blonde hair. He bent over her and held his hand in front of her mouth. She was breathing, but slowly. He remembered that she'd cried out in English and spoke to her in her own language. "Miss?" he said, touching her shoulder gently. "Can you hear me?"

The woman moaned and moved her head toward the sound of his voice. She licked her lips and her lashes fluttered open gently. It wasn't until he saw her eyes staring back at him that he realized it. She was absolutely gorgeous. With her creamy skin and aristocratic nose, she would have been striking no matter what the rest of her looked like. But with her rosy lips and wide-set olive eyes, she was like a painting, something worthy of the Louvre.

Who was she? he wondered. *Where had she come from?*

Adrien swallowed heavily. "Are you all right?"

“The boy,” she murmured.

“Collin’s fine, thanks to you.”

“Thank goodness,” the woman said. She pressed her hands to the ground and tried to sit up.

“Let me help,” Adrien said. He put his arm around her, and a bolt of lightning shot through his veins when his fingers touched the bare skin of her arm. He took a deep breath and shook his head to clear it. *Adrenaline*, he thought. *It’s just the adrenaline talking.*

“You’re his father,” she said. “I was watching you play soccer.”

“That’s right,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Honorée Cherbourg,” she said, holding out her hand.

Adrien smiled. Only an American would try to shake hands a minute after being almost choked to death.

“Adrien Gerard,” he said, clasping her hand in his. Small and warm, it fit neatly within the outlines of his larger hands. “Do you think you can stand up?”

Honorée nodded. She stood up shakily and he kept his arm around her for balance. On her feet, she was tall enough to look him straight in the eye. A ring of reddened skin darkened her throat and he felt his adrenaline turn to anger. None of this should have happened to her, or to Collin.

“Can you walk?” he said. “I don’t want to leave Collin alone.”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

Adrien slowed his pace to match hers and they walked over to the clump of oak trees. “Collin?” he called. “It’s me. You can come out now.”

His son peeked out from behind a thick oak tree, clutching his soccer ball to his chest. As soon as he saw Honorée, he dropped the ball and hopped to his feet. He ran to her and threw his arms around her, even though his head barely came to her hip. “Merci,” he said. “Merci, merci, merci.”

Adrien hurried to pull Collin away from her. “*Arrêtes-toi*,” he said gently. “Give her some space.”

“It’s all right,” Honorée said, resting a hand on Collin’s shoulder. Her lips parted in a ghost of a smile. “I’m just glad he’s okay. Who on earth was that guy?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s what scares me.”

The smile fell from Honorée’s lips. “Should we call the police?”

“I am the police. Miss Cherbourg, I’m going to need you to come down to my office so we can file a report.”

He watched her entire body tense up, from her shoulders to the hand that still lay on Collin’s shoulder. Collin felt it, too. He tilted his head up to her. “It’s okay,” he said in perfect English. “You can trust my dad. He won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

One of Honorée’s slim wrists rose up to circle her throat, exactly where the masked man had choked her. Red welts from the man’s gloves seemed to glow on her pale skin.

He felt a pang of guilt deep in his gut. This woman had nearly been killed trying to help his son. How many people would do that for a boy they didn’t even know? And he hadn’t even thanked her for what she’d done. *What the hell’s wrong with me?* he thought.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “You saved my son’s life.”

Collin crossed his arms over his chest. "I already said that, Dad."

Honorée smiled. It only took a moment for the smile to fall, though, and then she began to cry. Adrien kicked himself. *Great*, he thought. *What else can go wrong today?*

While he debated whether he should take her in his arms or just give her a moment to gather her thoughts, Collin beat him to it. He tugged on the hem of Honorée's T-shirt. Surprised, she stopped crying and knelt down beside him. Collin cupped one small hand and placed it beside her ear. Then he whispered something to her that made her smile.

"Thanks, kiddo," Honorée said, leaning her forehead against Collin's.

"No problem," Collin replied easily.

Adrien felt the tightness in his muscles relax. Leave it to Collin to do what he couldn't. When he let his guard down, his son had a natural way of relating to people that must have come from Emilie. Adrien himself preferred to keep people at a distance. It was safer that way, for them and for him.

Still, he couldn't afford to forget what had almost happened. He fixed his son with a stern expression. "Come on," he said. "We're going down to my office to figure out what this is all about." Although Honorée was the one who had almost died, Collin was the one the masked man had been after. That thought scared him more than anything in life, more than disease or war or terrorism.

He took his son by the hand and nodded at Honorée. "You're a part of this, too. Let's go."

Honorée stopped. He watched her blink as she tried to come up with a good reason not to venture any further with

them. Her reaction puzzled him. Why wouldn't she want to help the police catch the guy who'd just choked her? He didn't want to have to force her, but if that's what it came to, that's exactly what he'd do. Besides, she might need medical care, and he had no intention of letting her go without a thorough check-up.

"Please," Collin said softly. He reached out his other hand to Honorée. "Come with us."

She gulped and looked over her shoulder. "What about my easel?"

"I'll get it," Adrien said. "The car's already parked on that side of the park."

"Come on," Collin said. "My dad won't let anything happen to us. I promise." His son squeezed her hand and the three of them marched hand-in-hand across the park.

Adrien glanced over his shoulder as they headed toward the car. Whoever had tried to take Collin would be sorry — he'd make sure of it.

Chapter

T W O

HONORÉE SANK INTO THE hard plastic chair in front of the commissioner's desk. Adrien had driven them straight to his office, which wasn't a regular police station at all. In fact, it looked more like a regular office building: desks, chairs, computers, phones. No holding cells, no interrogation rooms, no nothing. The plaque on the desk in front of her read, "Jean-Luc Sauville, Commissaire Divisionnaire."

Adrien stood beside his boss's desk, hands clasped behind his back. Aside from his rumpled clothing, no one would guess that he'd just chased off a would-be murderer and kidnapper. In fact, no one would guess he was a cop, either. In her limited experience, cops were older men with beer bellies who hung out at donut shops and gave parking tickets.

Adrien Gerard looked more like a hunky tycoon.

The seams of his blue striped button-down strained over his broad shoulders, but if he wore a larger size, it would be too baggy on his trim, muscular torso. He had close-cropped black hair and bright blue eyes. Up close, she'd seen a small, thin scar above his left eyebrow. His face was square and rugged, with lines so straight she could have sketched him using only ninety-degree angles. *Except for those lips*, she thought. Those lips were all curves.

She sighed and slumped in her chair. "I thought you said you were a cop."

"I am," he answered smoothly.

"Why isn't anyone here in uniform?"

"Our division catches...how do you say...business criminals."

"White-collar crime?"

"Exactly."

Honorée waved a hand to indicate the empty office. "Then where is everyone?"

Adrien shrugged. "It's a beautiful afternoon. Why should they be here when the world is outside?"

She tilted her head and looked at him quizzically. Her brother Sébastien would have a fit if any of his employees tried to ditch the office during regular working hours, beautiful weather or not. "Won't they get in trouble?"

"It's good for us to remember what we're protecting."

Honorée nodded. Sébastien would never agree, but she did. Life was short. Did anyone on their deathbed ever wish they had worked *more*? Maybe the French had the right idea, valuing family and leisure time as much as their careers, if not more. She thought of all the times Sébastien had missed

her ballet recitals or her high school plays. He was always working, always closing the next deal, always upholding the family honor. But wasn't there honor in seeing your little sister grow up, too?

Honorée looked at Collin, seated beside her. She still couldn't explain the impulse that had made her struggle to save him. She was only twenty-four, way too young for any sort of biological clock to start ticking. She'd never even considered herself parenting material at all. *Hell*, she thought. *I still feel like I'm the kid*. But something about this little boy had drawn her in like a moth to a flame. He was cute — that much was undeniable. With his floppy hair, big blue eyes, and gap-toothed grin, it was impossible not to fall for him. But she'd never experienced anything like the feeling in her gut when she'd watched the masked man reach for him.

Or, a few minutes later, anything like the tingle deep in her belly when Adrien had put his arms around her.

Adrenaline, she thought. *It was just the adrenaline talking*.

It was probably some sort of near-death survivor's adrenaline.

Probably just the body's way of celebrating being alive after a close call.

That was a real thing, wasn't it?

The problem was that nothing about that afternoon seemed real. Had she really been sketching flowers just over an hour ago? Had someone really watched her gasp for her last breath and then lose consciousness? What kind of human being could wrap their hands around someone else's throat and literally choke the life out of them? She swallowed, and had to admit that the rawness she felt there was all too real.

Beside her, Collin sat with his hands folded in his lap. He fidgeted with his fingers as if he were holding a video game controller. His legs didn't even touch the floor. Honorée bit her lip. If she was struggling to process this, what must he be feeling? Who could possibly want to hurt him? It scared her...and it made her angry.

She looked at her surroundings once more. "Remind me again what we're doing here," she said. "Kidnapping isn't a white collar crime. Shouldn't we go to a real police station?"

Adrien clenched his jaw and Honorée realized how he'd interpreted her words. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant," he said. "And you may be right. But there's a reason I don't want many people to know about this, not even other policemen."

Before she could ask him what he meant, a short man with wild salt-and-pepper hair walked into the room. His unkempt mane stuck out at all angles like Albert Einstein's. His skin was dark and leathery, as if he'd spent his entire life under the hot sun. He pushed a pair of wire-rimmed glasses further up onto the bridge of his nose.

Jean-Luc Sauvville, I presume, she thought.

The man nodded at Adrien and sat down at his desk. "Agent Gerard," he said, glancing at Honorée and Collin. "What are you doing back in the office? I thought this was your day off."

"It was," Adrien said, speaking in English for Honorée's benefit. "Something happened, sir."

He proceeded to tell his boss what had happened in the Jardin du Luxembourg. As she listened, Honorée kept an eye

on Collin. So far, the kid seemed relatively unfazed. Was this what happened when you grew up with a cop for a father? Or could Collin be suppressing his fear and trying to put on a brave face?

As Adrien finished telling Commissioner Sauville the story, the older man drew his brows together and frowned. "I don't like what I'm hearing, Adrien."

"I don't either," Adrien replied. "That man was after my son."

Sauville trained his glittering black eyes on her and she found herself sitting up straighter. Something about him conveyed efficiency and a take-no-prisoners attitude, like her family's iron-willed housekeeper, Frau Müller. "Mademoiselle Cherbourg," he said. "Exactly what did you see? And at what point did you intervene?"

Honorée gulped and tried to get her thoughts in order. "I was sketching. I'd been watching Mr. Gerard and his son play soccer for a few minutes. Then I saw the ball fly over into the trees and Mr. Gerard went to get it. I kept my eye on Collin, because he was doing the cutest little victory dance."

Beside her, Collin went stiff as a board.

Crap, she thought. *Little boys don't want to be described as cute, especially when they're dancing.* "Sorry, kiddo," she said, flashing him a guilty smile. "But girls like boys who dance. You'll be in good shape in about eight years."

Adrien cleared his throat. Honorée looked up at him and saw that he was holding back a smile. The smile, willing or not, brightened his eyes. Suddenly, she had the distinct impression that he didn't smile very often, and it made her wonder why.

“Mademoiselle Cherbourg,” Sauville prompted. “Please continue.”

“Right. While Mr. Gerard was looking for the ball, I saw a man in a black ski mask start walking toward Collin. I’m not sure which direction he came from. Anyway, when he got close, he started reaching out his hands, like he wanted to grab Collin. I got up and ran toward them, hoping I could scare him away. I didn’t expect him to go after me next.”

She shivered, remembering what it had felt like to gasp for breath and feel all the air leave her lungs. There had been one moment — when the black spots took over her field of vision — that she hadn’t expected to wake up again. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared,” she finished softly.

Sauville adjusted his glasses. “I’m very sorry this happened to you, mademoiselle,” he said. “I think we need to consider very carefully that this attack might not have been random.”

“What are you saying?” Adrien asked. He moved to stand behind his son, putting his hands on the boy’s shoulders protectively.

“I think you know what I’m saying.” Sauville turned his attention back to her. “Mademoiselle, do you remember seeing other people playing in the park?”

“Of course,” she said. “There were some other kids with a dog, and what looked like a daycare group on a field trip.”

As soon as she said the words, she knew what they meant. If there’d been so many other targets, what made the masked man choose Collin?

Sauville nodded, as if she’d told him exactly what he expected to hear. “So we must consider the fact that Collin and Adrien were targeted specifically. Mademoiselle, did

anything happen during your struggle with the attacker that might help you identify him?"

Honorée bent her head and closed her eyes. If it were up to her, she never wanted to think about those terrible moments again. But she knew she had to tell the commissioner anything she could, anything that might help them protect Collin.

She tried to push past her fear and analyze the memory objectively. She didn't have to tell her brain to replay those horrible minutes—it had been doing it non-stop since leaving the park.

Think, she ordered herself. What did you see?

The cloudy images began to clear as she focused on specific colors and shapes. She realized her artist's training was actually coming in handy. She could put together a picture of the attacker's body in abstract parts, as if she were in figure drawing class. It depersonalized him, and made it easier to see him as a thing rather than a person.

She took a deep breath and started to speak, eyes still closed. "His face was long and narrow. He had brown eyes with lots of visible red veins. A long neck, too." She remembered the feel of his hands, tightening around her neck. "Long fingers," she whispered. "Overlapping behind my neck."

Then she remembered—the moment she'd turned her head to see if Collin had gotten away. "His gloves were too short," she said. "I could see his wrists. There was a tattoo."

She opened her eyes and saw Sauville leaning forward anxiously. "Oui?" he prompted.

"Some sort of symbol...I can draw it better than I can explain it."

Sauville handed her a pad of paper and a pen, and she sketched it as best as she could. It was something she'd never seen before. She didn't even realize she'd noticed it until she isolated the memory and analyzed it like an artist. She'd seen a set of scales weighing two objects. The scale was evenly balanced between the two.

When she handed the notepad back to Sauville, he squinted at it. "What are those things on the scales?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "It all happened so fast, I can't be sure."

Adrien leaned forward to get a better look at her sketch. "Can we cross-reference that tattoo in our database? Match it to someone who's already in the system?"

"We can try," Sauville said. "But we have a bigger problem on our hands."

"Are you serious?" Honorée blurted. "Bigger than attempted murder and kidnapping?"

"I think I know what's coming," Adrien said.

Sauville nodded. "If this was a targeted attack, they may try again."

"Why would anyone want to kidnap Collin?" Honorée said.

Sauville shook his head. "This division tracks criminals who are very smart. They think they're smarter than the police...and when we prove them otherwise, they lash out. Most of the criminals we hunt are afraid of violence. They only use it when there is no other option. It has happened before. Too many times, in fact. When we get close, they try to convince us to stop the investigation."

"You think this is about one of my cases?" Adrien asked, hands still clinging protectively to Collin's shoulders.

"I don't know what to think," Sauvville replied. "But I can tell you one thing, and you're not going to like it."

"What is it?" Adrien said.

"We know Collin is in danger since the kidnapper went after him specifically. We know Mademoiselle Cherbourg is in danger because she can describe him well enough to produce a sketch and identify him. Ordinarily, I would order both of them into protective custody while the case is in progress."

"No one's going to take my son from me," Adrien growled.

Sauville held up both hands. "I didn't say that, Adrien. Calm down and listen to me. Because of your past service and commendations, I know you're more than capable of protecting your son. But I'm also going to order that you take Mademoiselle Cherbourg into protective custody. I want this entire incident kept under wraps until we figure out who this tattooed man is. I don't want anyone else to know about her, not even the metropolitan stations."

Honorée blinked. "What do you mean, *protect* me?"

Protecting implied she was in real danger. But all she'd done was draw a sketch of the kidnapper's tattoo. What was so dangerous about that? The guy didn't even know she'd seen it. How could he possibly know who she was? Or where to find her? "This doesn't make any sense," she said weakly. "Can't I just go home?"

"Mademoiselle Cherbourg," Sauvville said, "you and Collin are not to leave Adrien's sight. You will go from here to his home, where I will post a plainclothes guard inside the building as well as outside. You will not leave the premises until we find that man and arrest him."

“What?” she cried. “Isn’t that like kidnapping, too? I have my own apartment. I have a life. I have painting class!”

Sauville smiled at her, apparently unconcerned by her outburst. “And I’m sure you’d like to stay alive to continue experiencing all those things. Mademoiselle, this man would have killed you in public in broad daylight...and that was *before* you could identify him. He is serious, and so am I. I will not have an American citizen murdered on French soil.”

“But —” she began.

“My word is final. Trust me, mademoiselle, I am only trying to help you.”

Honorée glanced up at Adrien, looking for help. He didn’t want this any more than she did — that much was obvious. He was glowering at Sauville as if the man had just signed his death warrant. “Do something!” she cried.

“There’s nothing he can do,” Sauville said. “Please, mademoiselle, try and understand. If you don’t care about your own safety, think of the boy. Surely you wouldn’t do anything that might cause him harm?”

“Of course not!” she said. “I almost got killed trying to save him, remember?”

“Then, please, do as I say. Agent Gerard is the most decorated agent in my division’s history. You and Collin are safe with him.”

Honorée’s heart sank to her shoes. *This is really happening*, she thought. It wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t a TV show or a movie. It was real life...her life. And she wasn’t in control of it anymore. “Shouldn’t I at least call the embassy or something?” she protested.

Sauville pointed at the phone on his desk. “You have every right to do so. However, you said you are a student, did you not? If you are residing here, even temporarily, you must abide by the laws and decrees of the French government. Your consulate would most likely speak with me regarding the necessity of your remaining in protective custody. I will tell them you must stay.”

“How could you do this to me?”

“You are a material witness, my dear,” Sauville said softly. “I cannot let you go just yet.”

“This is bull —”

Collin perked up beside her and she realized what she’d been about to say.

“Bullying,” she finished lamely. “You’re bullying me.”

“For that, I ask that you accept my sincere apologies,” Sauville said. “But know that I have your safety in mind. I will do everything I can to find and capture this man as soon as possible. In the meantime,” he said, rising from his chair. “You three must go. I will search the database for the tattoo. Adrien, I’ll let you know what I find. If we’re lucky, this will be wrapped up in a matter of hours.”

Behind her, Adrien sighed. She knew he didn’t have a choice in this, either, but it didn’t make her feel any better. “Let’s go,” Adrien sighed, patting Collin’s shoulder.

Honorée gulped. She had no clothes, no toiletries, no phone, and no idea when she’d be able to retrieve any of those things. Her whole life had been hijacked, when all she’d tried to do was help a child. She’d never take back what she’d done, but did that really mean she had to accept this

ridiculous bodyguard situation? How could she just crash in a strange man's house? What about his wife? What about their other kids or dogs or pets? She'd just be in the way. Why couldn't she just stay in a hotel for a few days? Even a crappy one would be preferable to disrupting an entire family's life for who-knows-how-long.

Did it really have to happen this way?

No, it doesn't, she thought. I'm a Cherbourg.

She bit her tongue, waiting for the right moment to plead her case.

She could sense Adrien's discomfort with the whole situation, and guessed he'd be willing to help her arrange a getaway. All she had to do was wait until they were away from his boss, then convince him to help her slip away. She had no doubt he'd be as glad to see her go as she'd be to return to real life.

Chapter

T H R E E

ADRIEN GERARD DROVE FROM his office, in the business district of La Défense, to his home in the 15th Arrondissement. Located in the southwestern corner of the city, the 15th Arrondissement lacked any tourist-friendly sites, so it remained mostly middle-class and residential.

That was just the way he liked it.

It was a good place to raise a kid — lots of friendly neighbors, small cafes, corner grocery shops, and good schools nearby. Tourists wandered through occasionally, looking for an off-the-beaten-path experience. But after a coffee and a croissant in a café, they usually left to go visit the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre. Because there were fewer tourists in this area, there was less crime — not nearly as many pick-pockets or thieves to worry about. That fact made him feel

much better about allowing Collin to ride his scooter to the corner market or play with the neighborhood kids after school.

He drove slowly through the narrow streets, winding toward his flat. Collin sat beside him in the passenger seat and Honorée sat in back, staring out the window. He'd tried to catch her eye in the rearview mirror, but she refused to look at him.

He could only imagine how upset she must be. What was the American saying he'd heard? *No good deed goes unpunished*. The poor woman had just tried to help Collin, and now Sauvville had taken over her life, if only temporarily.

He couldn't believe what the commissioner had asked him to do. The whole assignment put both of them in a very bad — and very uncomfortable — situation. There hadn't been a woman in his house since Emilie left, and he wasn't sure he wanted to relive the experience. Besides, Honorée probably had a boyfriend who was very worried about her. He hadn't seen a ring on her finger, so it wasn't likely that she was married. Still, a woman as striking as Honorée couldn't be single for long in a city like Paris.

He tried again to catch her eye, but it didn't work. While she wasn't looking, he took the opportunity to study her more closely than he had at the office. His first impression hadn't been wrong at all — Honorée Cherbourg could have modeled for the Venus de Milo or a portrait of Helen of Troy. Although her features were classically perfect, she downplayed them with a messy multi-layered haircut, smudged eye makeup, a wrinkled T-shirt, and dark narrow-leg jeans. If he'd met her in a café or a bar, he would never

have approached her. She looked like the type who dated rock stars, fashion designers, or billionaire tycoons. *And now I'm supposed to keep her caged in my apartment*, he thought.

But Honorée's looks weren't the only thing worrying him. Sauville had ordered him not to leave his apartment, to keep constant watch over Collin and Honorée. That meant he wouldn't be leading the chase for the kidnapper. He wanted to be working with Sauville at this very minute, interrogating witnesses or scanning Interpol databases for men who fit the description Honorée had given them. Instead, he was relegated to playing nursemaid and babysitter. It wasn't fair and Sauville knew it.

So why had he done it?

Adrien turned into the Rue de Charles, a quiet but pretty street where he'd thought he and Emilie would live happily ever after. But she must have gotten tired of the bright boxes of flowers in their neighbors' windows, the streetlamps that hadn't changed in fifty years, and the waiters who knew them by name at their favorite local brasserie, Chez Jacques.

Stop thinking about her, he told himself. *You have bigger problems now.*

He parallel parked on the street in front of his building. Before he got out of the car, he scanned the road and the narrow sidewalks. He felt his old instincts returning quickly, making him wish yet again that he were part of the hunt for the kidnapper. The fear, the anger, the adrenaline — the chase was the perfect outlet for all of it. Kicking down doors and chasing suspects used to be part of his daily life, and until he got a taste of it earlier today, he hadn't realized how much he missed it. How much it calmed him down. How much it

let him empty himself before coming home to Emilie and Collin.

But there he was, being selfish again.

If he were out on the hunt with Sauville, who'd be watching Collin? Could he actually say he trusted anyone else on the planet with his son's life?

When it came right down to it, he knew the answer was no.

His place was with Collin, even if that meant passing up the chance to flex his muscles.

He glanced in the car's rearview mirror. It was still relatively early — only about 6 o'clock p.m. Most of the families who lived here would still be out enjoying themselves at a park or the cinema, or taking their children to an early dinner.

He waited for one car to drive out of sight, then turned to Collin. "Come on," he said, unbuckling his seat belt and exiting the car. "Let's hurry."

Honorée and Collin followed his example. He took Collin by the hand as he walked up to the door of his building and inserted his key. He opened the vestibule door and ushered both of them inside. Then he made sure the door closed securely behind them.

Adrien scanned the vestibule, but no one was there. *So far, so good*, he thought.

On a regular day, he'd let Collin get the mail from the long row of brass boxes mounted on the wall. Today, however, he didn't want them lingering in view of the front window any longer than they had to. If someone happened to be watching with a telescopic lens, they could see Adrien's unit number printed on the mailbox.

“Let’s go,” he said, giving Collin a nudge.

“But the mail!” Collin protested.

“We’ll get it later.”

Collin frowned, but trudged up the stairs without protest. Adrien waved Honorée ahead of him, and he brought up the rear.

His apartment was on the second floor, a two-bedroom unit with a back patio that overlooked the residents’ private fountain and courtyard, shared with the building behind them. The apartment had hardwood floors, three radiator heaters, and a modernized kitchen with stainless steel appliances. He’d put in those appliances for Emilie; she’d been shocked to discover the ancient refrigerator and oven he’d lived with during his bachelor days.

You’re doing it again, he reprimanded himself. Stop bringing Emilie into everything. She’s gone, and thinking about it only makes you bitter.

He climbed the stairs to find Collin and Honorée standing in the hallway, unmoving. He glanced past them to his front door.

It was open.

Yet again, he’d been caught unaware—his badge and service weapon were inside, since he was still technically off-duty. Instantly, his mind concocted a number of frightening scenarios. What if the kidnapper was inside? What if he found Adrien’s service weapon and used it against them?

Not on my watch, he thought.

He motioned for Collin and Honorée to step away. They scrunched themselves against the wall in the hallway. Surprisingly, he saw Honorée place herself in front of Collin,

shielding him should anything unexpected happen. The gesture touched him. That was twice now she'd put herself in harm's way for his son.

He met her eyes and mouthed, "Thank you."

She nodded back at him, and he transferred his attention to the open door. Was the kidnapper already inside? How had he figured out where they lived?

One problem at a time, he thought.

He positioned himself near the door and took one deep, calming breath. Then he crouched and rolled through the doorway. He took cover on the far side of the entryway, behind a table. From his position of relative safety, he glanced around the foyer — no one was there.

From the kitchen, he heard a banging noise. Was the kidnapper searching for something? What the hell did he think he would find in the kitchen?

Adrien crept from behind the hall table to the living room, where he had a clear view into the kitchen. As soon as he craned his neck to see what was making the noise, he sighed in relief.

His father was digging in the large cupboard beside the oven, pulling out pots and pans until he found the one he was looking for.

Adrien sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Why had his father left the door open? Didn't he know what could happen?

He felt his heart pumping quickly, still reacting to his body's surge of adrenaline. *Calm down*, he told himself. *Everyone is safe. The kidnapper hasn't found you yet.*

He rose to his feet and walked back out to the hallway. Honorée stood with her arms extended and Collin peeked through them. “It’s all right,” he told them. “It’s just grand-père.”

“Grand-père?” Honorée asked.

“My father,” Adrien said. “He has a key. He’s inside making supper. He must have left the door open.”

Collin hesitated, hiding behind Honorée’s tall, slender form. “Are you going to tell him what happened?” his son asked.

Adrien nodded. “No secrets, remember?”

It was a motto he and Collin had sworn to uphold after Emilie left. Her betrayal had blindsided them both. The only way past it had been to promise to tell each other everything — every pain, every joy, and every question, no matter how hard and awkward. If they did that, they both knew they’d avoid the pent-up anger and frustration that drove Emilie to leave without a word.

Even though he knew it was the right thing to do, Adrien hated to involve his father and put him in danger. But there was no other way to explain Honorée’s presence without asking his son to lie, and there was no way in hell he’d do that. “Go inside,” he said. “It’s all right.”

Collin grabbed Honorée’s hand and pulled her through the doorway.

Adrien followed, watching the clasped hands of the two people in front of him. It was weird — Collin was usually reserved around strangers. Although he related well to people, he relied on others to start the interaction. At school,

his teachers praised his work, but always asked why he seemed so reserved. Aidan had lost count of the number of times he'd given an edited version of their family history, enough to explain why Collin might be sad or quiet sometimes.

But that wasn't the Collin he was seeing now. Despite the horror of the afternoon's experiences, his normally taciturn son was smiling and leading a stranger into their home. Apparently he wasn't the only one who felt unexplained urges when he was around Honorée.

He followed them inside, making sure the door was closed and locked securely. "Dad," he said, striding into the kitchen. "You left the door open."

His white-haired father, Julien, looked up from the frying pan he'd set on the stove. Adrien saw pats of butter and fresh rosemary sitting on top of breaded fish filets. His father had always been an excellent cook, far better than Adrien or Adrien's mother. "Well, that's a fine hello," the older man said. "Especially after I brought you and my grandson dinner. But it appears I should have brought a bit more."

Adrien watched Julien's eyes travel to Honorée. Despite being almost forty years older than her, his eyes canvassed her from head to toe the way a sailor inspected the young women waiting for him on shore.

"Dad," he sighed. "Really?"

His father had always been a flirt, but as the years passed since Adrien's mother's death, it was only getting worse. He knew his father had no intention of remarrying, or even dating seriously. He simply needed the social interaction, and Adrien couldn't fault him for that. He wanted his father alive as long as possible. Still, he found himself irritated beyond

belief that his father's gaze had stopped when it reached Honorée's full breasts. *Now I'm doing it, too*, he thought, tearing his eyes away.

"Dad, this is Honorée Cherbourg," he said. "She's going to be staying with us for...awhile."

Julien dropped the spatula onto the counter and came to take Honorée's hand. "Enchanté," he said, raising Honorée's hand to his lips.

"Cut it out," Adrien said gruffly. "You'll burn the fish."

Julien pecked Honorée's hand and hurried back to his frying pan. "How did you meet my son?" he asked her in French. "Tell me everything."

Collin piped up. "Honorée's American. You have to talk in English so she'll understand you."

"My apologies, mademoiselle," Julien said in English. "With a name like yours, I assumed you were one of us."

"My family came from France originally," Honorée said. "We try to keep the connection alive with our names." Then she frowned. "Although I'm not doing a very good job with the language. I still need subtitles to watch the news."

Julien winked at her. Then he nudged Collin and held up his hand, as if he didn't want Honorée to hear what he was saying. "Don't just stand there, my boy. Slice the bread and pour the wine. There's a lady present."

Collin smiled, jumping up to slice the crusty baguette on the counter. He grabbed an extra place setting and rearranged the table to accommodate four people.

Adrien shook his head.

Things weren't normal, and he couldn't allow them to act like it was just an ordinary family dinner, no matter how

comfortable it felt. “Dad,” he said. “Something happened today.”

He told his father everything as Collin sliced the bread. When he paused for breath, the only sound was Collin’s knife scraping against the cutting board. As he talked, he watched his father’s posture change. The hand gripping the spatula went from loose to white-knuckled.

When he finished, he looked to Honorée and was rewarded with a tight-lipped smile. Even though he barely knew her, something about the intensity of the afternoon made him feel as if they’d already been through a war together.

Julien sighed and set the spatula on the counter again. He turned slowly, meeting Adrien’s eyes with concern. “And so we’re supposed to stay here until Sauvville catches the man responsible?”

Adrien nodded. “I’m sorry you had to get caught up in this, too. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

Julien turned and made sure the kitchen window was closed and locked. Then he made a quick circuit around the room, checking the rest of the windows. At the end of his lap, his father came to stand at his side. The older man gripped his arms with all the strength his sixty-four years could summon — which was still considerable. “If you and my grandson are in trouble, there’s no place I’d rather be. We’ll get through this together,” he said softly. Then he reached out and took Honorée’s hand, too. “Thank you for what you did for Collin. We owe you a tremendous debt.”

“Oh, no, you don’t owe me a thing,” Honorée began. She bit her bottom lip, and Adrien tilted his head. He’d noticed that was her tic, the small gesture she made when she felt

uncomfortable. But she *had* saved Collin. She deserved praise, and he wanted her to know that.

He leaned over to whisper in her ear.

Up close, her skin smelled of lilac — soft, warm lilac — and it was all he could do not to bury his face against it and breathe her in. Before he could stop it, he imagined pressing his face to other parts of her body — the hollow between her breasts, the curve of her waist. *Stop it*, he ordered himself. *She's a guest in your home, and you're acting like a stalker.* “Tell him thank you,” he said to her. “Or he’ll never serve dinner.”

“T — thank you,” Honorée said quickly, glancing up at Julien and rubbing her arms.

He looked down and saw goosebumps rising along her arms. *She felt it, too*, he thought.

This time, the feeling couldn't be explained away by the adrenaline of a life-and-death situation. Not much made him uncomfortable — he'd seen it all during his days on the beat. But this, his body and brain reacting to a woman he barely knew, was enough to put him on edge.

He got up from his chair and stepped toward the refrigerator. He had to keep his mind sharp, his senses on full alert. Collin's safety depended on it. He glanced at his father, but the older man didn't seem to notice his discomfort.

“You're very welcome,” Julien replied to her. “You'll be our guest of honor tonight. If there's anything we can do to make you more comfortable, you must allow us to do it.”

Honorée gave in, smiling. “I could use a glass of wine,” she said. “I'm pretty sure someone mentioned wine, right?”

“Then let us have a toast,” Julien said. “Eat, drink, be merry.”

Adrien shivered, remembering the second half of the famous quote. *Eat, drink, and be merry...for tomorrow we may die*. His eyes sought Honorée's and he wondered if she, too, felt a sense of foreboding. She wrapped her arms around herself as if she were cold. Instantly, he knew she felt the same lingering sense of unease that he did.

"I'm sorry," he said to her. "I know you didn't ask for any of this."

"You didn't either," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He could see several holes lined up along the edge of the cartilage and couldn't help wondering what she looked like with earrings in all of them.

And where else she might be pierced.

Christ, you need to calm down, he told himself.

He reached into the refrigerator for a beer.

She'd been in his kitchen all of five minutes and already he'd pictured her naked twice. The situation was unacceptable. He chalked his reaction up to his lack of female companionship in the past year. He hadn't so much as kissed another woman since Emilie, let alone seen someone he'd wanted to fantasize about. It was the ridiculousness of the situation, being thrown together in such close proximity, that was sending his hormones into overdrive. The important thing was that he keep it under wraps.

Besides, even if they'd met socially, he'd want to know a hell of a lot more about her before letting his mind run straight into the gutter. Yes, she had saved his son's life. Yes, Collin obviously trusted her. She had a good heart, that much was obvious. But what was she really doing here? Why was

she all alone in a foreign country? Was she running from something — or someone?

His father interrupted his train of thought, walking past him with a platter of sizzling fish topped with lemon, butter, rosemary, and garlic. “Come,” Julien said. “I’ll open an extra bottle of wine. Just for an hour, let’s forget everything that happened this afternoon. Pretend we’re a normal family eating a normal supper.”

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day,” Honorée said. “Besides, that smells better than anything I’ve eaten in my whole life.”

Adrien saw the renewed sparkle in her eyes and realized that, just like his father, she had the ability to compartmentalize her fear and worry. She and Julien could both sit down to eat, enjoy the simple pleasure of a home-cooked meal, and live in the moment. He, on the other hand, would be listening for car alarms and breaking glass the entire time.

He closed his eyes for a moment to try and relax before sitting down at the table. But when he tried to picture something calming, like the sun glinting on the sea, he saw Honorée Cherbourg’s smile lighting up her gorgeous green eyes.

I’m in deep trouble, he thought.

The Cherbourg Bodyguard

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the beginning of the story. There's a lot more coming for Honorée and Adrien. Here's where you can buy the book to find out what happens next:

DIGITAL



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JENNIWILTZ.COM/THE-CHERBOURG-BODYGUARD

The Cherbourg Bodyguard

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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.

