

THE
Cherbourg
JEWELS

The Cherbourg Saga - Book 1

JENNI WILTZ

THE
CHERBOURG
JEWELS

Jenni Wiltz



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*For Grandma Aimee,
whose pearl necklace means more
than all the diamonds in the Cherbourg vault.*

Chapter

ONE

THE MINUTE HAND ON her watch slipped six degrees closer to vertical. One more minute and she'd be late. *Not today, she thought. Please, not today.*

Ella Wilcox hefted her briefcase in one hand and a to-go cappuccino in the other. She watched each of the floor indicators light up and glow briefly as the marble-paneled elevator rose to the top of the building, to the office of Sébastien Cherbourg IV. She gulped the cappuccino nervously, hoping the caffeine would give her the energy boost she needed to close the deal.

This has to work, she thought. There's no other way.

The job was well within her skill level, and she had no doubt she was qualified. Still, she'd never met a member of the Cherbourg family in person before. One of the wealthiest

families in San Francisco, the Cherbourgs had contributed most of the California Pacific Museum's endowment. Without their generous support, the museum could never have afforded to hire her as an independent gem historian to catalog, research, and certify their collection.

Ella took another sip of the cappuccino and tried to calm the nerves fluttering in her stomach. She'd made sales pitches before, but never one like this. It didn't help to know that Sébastien Cherbourg had a reputation for being impatient, overbearing, and downright ruthless when it came to running his family's empire.

She glanced at her watch.

She was thirty seconds from being late.

Each floor indicator seemed to light up more slowly than the last, as if they were punishing her for what she was about to do. "Oh come on," she muttered, tapping her toe anxiously. "Throw me a bone, here."

If she got off on the wrong foot with Sébastien by arriving late, he might not choose her for the job. If he didn't choose her for the job, she wouldn't get to see the fabulous Cherbourg jewel collection. If she didn't get to see the collection, she'd never know if it contained any of the stones that had been stolen from her father's workshop.

She had to get access to that vault.

There was no other way.

"Wish me luck, Dad," she whispered.

It had been eighteen years since that night, the one that took her father away from her forever, but she still talked to him as if he were right next to her. She wanted him to know

that she'd never give up. That she still hoped to find his killers and the precious gems they'd stolen from him.

Even now, all these years later, it was hard to think of him without breaking down. Instead of playing outside after school as a girl, she'd joined him in his workshop as he restored and appraised antique jewelry. She'd listened carefully as he showed her how to tighten the setting of a stone in an old ring, or solder a broken prong back into place. As he worked, he'd regaled her with stories of long-dead emperors and kings and princes and princesses, the ones who had worn the most famous and priceless jewels in history.

Her father had been her window into a magical world — at least, he had been until he'd been brutally murdered.

Almost two decades later, she wasn't any closer to discovering who had ordered the robbery or who had pulled the trigger that night. But her work as a gem historian had given her access to the vaults of the country's rich and famous.

With every new commission, she hoped to find some of the stones stolen from her father's workshop. *And when I do, she thought, I'll have a way to trace the people responsible for taking his life and ruining mine.*

The elevator slowed to a crawl and she knew she'd be face to face with Sébastien Cherbourg in just a moment.

She brushed away a tear before it could ruin her makeup. Everything hinged on getting this job — and to do that, she had to impress a man famous for being impossible to impress. Smearred eyeliner and tears wouldn't help her. Only a cool, collected façade would get her in the door.

“I won’t let you down, Dad,” she said. “I promise.”

The elevator doors slid open. Ella glanced from side to side, noting the marble-topped receptionist’s desk and the leather club chairs lined up against the walls. She forced a confident smile to her lips and marched up to greet the receptionist. “Good morning!” she said cheerfully. “I have an appointment with Mr. Cherbourg.”

“You’re late,” the receptionist said. “He’s been waiting for you.”

Ella steeled herself and took a deep breath. This was not the way she wanted to start the day. *You can do this*, she told herself. *Just get in there and give him a run for his money. Show him you mean business.*

Behind the reception desk were two double doors, with Sébastien Cherbourg’s name on them in small gold letters. She ignored the visitor’s badge lying on the desk and swept past the receptionist, straight through the double doors. “Good morning, Mr. Cherbourg,” she said, closing the doors behind her. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve done a great deal of work for the museum and everyone there speaks very highly of your family.”

But the dark-haired man in the office wasn’t paying any attention to her.

He stood with his back to the door, looking a dozen stories down at the busy streets below. Silhouetted against the floor-to-ceiling glass, he cut an imposing figure — tall, broad shoulders, muscular biceps, and a narrow waist. His charcoal gray suit was exquisitely tailored, accommodating his muscular frame yet emphasizing his toned physique.

He didn’t turn to greet her.

When he spoke, his voice was cold and hard. “Ms. Wilcox, you are two minutes late. When I asked you to arrive at eight o’clock sharp, I meant it.”

Ella felt her cheeks burn. “Then let’s pretend we’ve spent two minutes on pleasantries and call it even.”

“I never engage in pleasantries. They’re for people who don’t know how to ask for what they want. Do you know how to ask for what you want, Ms. Wilcox?”

She glared at his back. *I know how to tell you you’re a jerk*, she thought.

Sébastien continued without waiting for her reply. “While I waited for you, I watched a woman standing on the sidewalk below. She stood outside this building for at least five minutes, staring at a handful of photographs. She’d look at one of the pictures, mutter something to herself, and then glance up toward my office. I only noticed her because you were late and because she had on the brightest red coat I’ve ever seen. But I have to tell you, she absolutely fascinated me. It was like she had to give herself a pep talk just to find the courage to enter the building. Why do you suppose that is?”

Ella looked down at her scarlet coat. “Not a clue,” she said quickly.

“Are you sure about that?” he replied, turning to face her.

Ella’s stomach clenched. Sébastien Cherbourg IV was, without a doubt, one of the handsomest men in the city. She’d seen his photo in philanthropic journals, but they failed to do him justice. The sharp planes of his cheekbones, the perfectly sculpted chin, the olive cast to his skin...his French heritage had given him looks and money, but apparently manners had been left out of the equation.

She took a deep, calming breath. She didn't have money or a mile-long pedigree, but she was good at her job and no one had a right to make her feel otherwise.

She stared him down as best she could. "What you see as hesitation, Mr. Cherbourg, is actually preparation. I've worked hard to get where I am, and I didn't get there by asking for what I want. I got there by earning it, every step of the way."

Sébastien Cherbourg raised one thick, dark eyebrow. "Is that all, Ms. Wilcox?"

"No," she said. "I look great in red. This coat is fantastic."

A slow smile graced his full lips, revealing perfect white teeth. The expression made him look almost friendly, and she wondered what he looked like when he smiled by choice. "All right, Ms. Wilcox. I'll overlook your tardiness if we can get down to business."

"Of course." Ella sat in one of the brocade-covered salon chairs pulled up to his polished mahogany desk. On top of the desk, she saw a laptop, an ormolu clock, a gold-plated pen, and a letter opener. Not a single picture, not a single clue as to who this man really was. The butterflies in her stomach began to flutter once more.

As soon as she'd taken a seat, Sébastien walked around the desk and leaned casually against it with one hip. "Ms. Wilcox," he said.

"Yes?" she answered, craning her neck to look up at him.

"Tell me why I should give you this job."

She blinked rapidly and tried to call her resume points to mind. It dawned on her that she'd given away the upper hand by sitting down. She'd thought she was taking control, but

now he was using her initiative against her. He was forcing her to look up at him, a psychological trick to reinforce his status and put her in her place.

Oh, no you don't, she thought. *Two can play at that game.*

Ella stood up and looked him in the eye. "I have a very good working relationship with the directors of the California Pacific Museum. The director of the natural history annex has recommended me specifically for this job. For each of the museum's last three rock and gem exhibitions, I've verified the provenance of every gem on loan."

Sébastien frowned, forming three parallel wrinkles on his forehead. "Why do they need to hire someone to do that at all? They should be doing it themselves. I've given them enough money over the years."

Ella tilted her head at him. "You have no idea what I do, do you?"

"I've never needed to," he said dryly. "Gem historians don't have a damn thing to do with running a successful import/export company."

"But they have everything to do with the fair purchase of exotic or famous jewels," she said. "And I understand that's one of your museum's primary objectives. Mr. Cherbourg, here's the bottom line...if you want the exhibition of your family's jewel collection to proceed as planned, you need to hire an independent contractor to verify the legal sale and provenance of every jewel that'll be shown on the museum's property. The museum's insurance requires it, and they aren't allowed to perform the audit themselves. Surely you've heard of a little thing called 'conflict of interest?'"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I can accept the fact that I have to waste my money and hire a paper pusher to tell me what I already know — that my family acquired its collection honestly. I just don’t understand why it has to be *you*.”

“It doesn’t,” she said. “But I have a strong track record with the museum. I’ve debunked fakes, pinpointed forgeries, and stopped sales that involved illegally obtained diamonds. Gemologists can tell you about the color, cut, and clarity of a stone, but I’m a gem historian. If you think you have Marie Antoinette’s diamond earrings or the queen of Romania’s tiara, I can tell you if you’re right.”

“How?” he asked, narrowing thick-lashed olive-green eyes.

She stopped, wondering whether to tell him why any of it mattered. Would he even believe her if she did? No, she decided, she could only tell him what he needed to know. “The truth is that I grew up around gems and jewelry. My father repaired and restored antique jewelry. So did his father, and his father before him. It would take a long time to learn what I’ve been absorbing my whole life. That, Mr. Cherbourg, is why you should hire me.”

Ella finished her sales pitch and looked up at him. It was almost impossible to stay cool knowing he was searching her face, looking for a sign of weakness.

She found herself wanting any advantage she could get, including the one that came from being a woman. She wondered if it would do any good to flick her hair, lick her lips, or adopt a sexy stance that showed off her curves. If he noticed, would that help her get the job...or prejudice him against her?

She decided to fight those instincts with the only weapon she had left: the memory of what Joey had done to her. She'd learned the hard way that lowering her guard only led to disappointment and pain. She didn't have the strength to go through that again — not for Sébastien Cherbourg and not for any man. She'd just have to hope her resume and letters of recommendation were enough.

"I see," Sébastien said.

But nothing in his tone of voice gave her a clue as to whether he'd actually hire her. She decided to press on. "I have letters of reference from the museum's provost and the special events coordinator. They've both worked with me numerous times over the past few years."

"I believe you."

Then what's the holdup? she wondered. Just hire me so I can get inside your family's vault!

Sébastien Cherbourg uncrossed his arms and rolled up his sleeves, revealing forearms that were strong and tan. She wondered where he found the time to get outside, in the midst of running one of the country's largest and most successful corporations. "What sort of time frame are you expecting?" he asked. "As you know, the exhibition is less than 72 hours away. I didn't know until last night that our prior appraisal wasn't valid. It was done more than ten years ago, and the museum's insurance company won't sign off on the exhibition unless we update it."

She nodded. "I can work quickly, Mr. Cherbourg. You may not need to postpone the exhibition more than a week."

Instantly, the famous Cherbourg temper reared its ugly head. He narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath. “A week? I’ve been doing publicity for six months! This exhibition is happening on time if I have to fly in every gemologist from here to Indonesia!”

Ella bit back a sharp reply. It was just like a Cherbourg to assume the world was at his beck and call, that he could bend everyone else to his will. She wanted to tell him to stuff it, that she wouldn’t work for him if she were starving and he held the key to the last grocery store on earth.

But her pride wasn’t what mattered most in this situation. She had to see what was in that vault.

If any of her father’s missing stones had ended up there, she’d know the Cherbourgs were involved in his death — or that they knew someone who was. If she didn’t pull this off, she might never get a second chance to access that vault.

She could see Sébastien’s face harden and knew her window of opportunity was closing. “Twenty-four hours!” she heard herself cry. “I’ll have it done in twenty-four hours!”

Sébastien’s green eyes sparkled. “That’s more like it, Miss Wilcox. So glad we could come to a mutual agreement.”

Ella smiled weakly, her stomach aflutter with uncertainty and fear. *What have I done?* she thought.



Sébastien watched Ella Wilcox walk out of his office, heels clacking violently against his polished marble floors. She’d put up a decent fight, but had finally given him what he

wanted: assurance that his exhibition would go forward as planned.

No one at the museum had thought to warn him that she was so difficult to deal with — or so distracting.

It had all started when she barged into his office. No one had *ever* barged into his office. His receptionist, Hannah, kept visitors on a short leash, but Ella had taken control immediately. Then she'd kept control by taking a seat without being invited. There was nothing wrong with that, of course, but he was used to having to *remind* people they could sit down. No one, it seemed, wanted to risk his ire by sitting before he did. But she hadn't hesitated for a second.

Then, she'd stood up just as quickly in order to look him in the eye while making her case. Most people he met with, men and women, looked at the floor or the file folders they clutched in their sweaty hands...anything not to look at him and invite the possibility of his scrutiny. But once more, she'd done the exact opposite of everyone else. She'd looked him straight in the eye, inviting — maybe even welcoming — his scrutiny.

She clearly wasn't afraid of him, which was a new feeling for him. She was also, hands-down, the sexiest gem historian he'd ever met. Technically, she was the *only* gem historian he'd ever met, but he doubted anyone else in her profession had such luscious curves. Hers weren't on obvious display, but she'd hinted at them with the tightly cinched belt of her coat.

Her bright red coat.

Sébastien shook his head. He'd had no idea the woman on the sidewalk was Ella. Even if he had, he might still have said

something about her odd behavior before entering the building. He found himself intensely curious about her. What was in those photographs, and what had she been muttering to herself before looking up at his office window? If she had an ulterior motive in seeking him out, she'd done a hell of a job hiding it.

It begged the question... what else was she hiding?

It was possible that she was exactly who she said she was.

It was also possible that, like virtually everyone else he came into contact with, she wanted something from him. Maybe she was just waiting for the right moment to get it.

He pressed the intercom button on his desk phone and asked Hannah to have a car meet Ella downstairs. He gave instructions to the driver to shuttle Ella to her office to pick up her equipment, then take her straight to his home, where she'd begin work in the vault immediately.

If she was as good as her word, nothing could stop his exhibition from happening now.

Sébastien smiled.

Finally, he'd prove to his mother and everyone else that he was ready to resume his place at the head of the Cherbourg family. Just last night, his mother had raised a toast to him before supper, praising the dedication he'd shown in arranging this exhibition of the family's prized jewelry collection. Although she'd left for Dallas that morning on a shopping trip, she'd promised to return in time for the grand opening.

He hated to admit it — and wouldn't, not to anyone — but his mother's praise made him feel like he was on the right track again. This exhibition was exactly what he needed to

cement his status within the family. It was the only way he could prove to them that he was still in control of himself, that Amanda hadn't thrown him for a loop.

Amanda Lessing, his former fiancée, had left him two days before their wedding when he'd presented her with the Cherbourg family pre-nuptial agreement. He'd explained it to her several times before, but for some reason, seeing it in person had had a different effect entirely. She'd torn it up, sobbed, screamed, and raged — and walked out the door when he admitted the pre-nuptial agreement was a condition of his father's will. It was non-negotiable, something he couldn't get around if he tried. The endowment for the museum, the trust fund, the company shares, the house, the cars, everything — it was all his by the good graces of his father's will for one more year, until he inherited it outright at the age of thirty-five. Until then, he was bound to every codicil of that will.

But Amanda hadn't been willing to wait. Once she understood that he didn't yet control his own destiny, she'd packed her things and fled into the gray San Francisco fog. That had been a year ago. She'd never talked to him again, not even when his 35th birthday came and went. Part of him had hoped she'd come back. Maybe then he could have convinced himself there was some part of him, other than his trust fund, that she'd liked.

It didn't happen.

The worst part of it was that his family had warned him. His mother, in particular, had tried to tell him she was a gold-digging virago, but he'd refused to listen. Like any son raised with a silver spoon, however, he'd assumed he knew

best and forbid his aunts, uncles, and mother from speaking against Amanda in his presence.

That rule remained in effect until her departure, when he'd thrown all of her remaining possessions and any pictures of her over the staircase, frames and all, to watch them plummet to the foyer floor fifty feet below.

Now no one mentioned her at all.

He'd learned his lesson the hard way. Women wanted the Cherbourg name and they didn't care who was attached to it. It didn't matter how kind or generous or loving he was toward them. They never saw it. They didn't care. He was just a walking bank account to them.

He knew he'd never forget the look on Amanda's face when he'd told her that the conditions of his father's will were inviolable. Her eyes, so big and chocolate brown, had turned hard and unfeeling. In a heartbeat, all the emotions he thought he'd seen in them, ranging from desire to admiration, changed to disgust.

Once he'd gotten over the shock, he realized how big a mistake he'd almost made. What if he'd married Amanda? What if she'd gotten her hooks into his family?

Never again, he thought. I will never sacrifice my family's future for the sake of a woman.

He knew he'd have to marry someday, if only to perpetuate the Cherbourg name. But when the time came, he'd select a willing young bride from the legions of Upper East Side debutantes presented in New York. He planned to whisk her home to San Francisco, where she'd bear his children and sit on the board of as many charities as he could wrangle, all while wearing a tidy strand of pearls and taking care to keep

her hair the perfect shade of ash blonde. He never wanted to be asked about money, and he never wanted to feel the pain that came with the realization that he came second in her affections, behind a pile of dead presidents.

He picked up the file folder that the red-coated woman had left for him. It held a copy of her resume and letters of recommendation. Her credentials were impeccable, but something about her made him feel ill at ease...and it wasn't just because of the hourglass figure he couldn't forget. He closed his eyes and pictured her once more. From the swell of her breasts to her tiny waist to her shapely calves, she made him want to see what was under that red coat...to *feel* what was under that red coat.

But her body wasn't what made him nervous.

It was the rest of her — or, to be more precise, the way she'd looked at him.

She had none of the usual nervousness of a job applicant, or the sugary-sweet flattery of a woman asking for a favor. Instead, there was something deeper, something stronger, lurking behind her pretty face. That face, framed by shoulder-length brown hair and dappled with freckles just beneath her eyes, had actually looked frightened just before he'd given her the job. Her gray-blue eyes, the color of the bay on a stormy day, were no stranger to fear, although she clearly knew how to manage it.

What did she have to be scared of? With credentials like hers, he'd be an idiot not to hire her. Any hesitation she felt had to result from a personal fear, not a professional one. But she couldn't possibly be frightened of him. They'd never even met until this morning.

He scanned her resume and made a mental note to contact Jake Grodin about it later. Perhaps his private investigator could dig up some more information and find out what the hell had her running scared.

He looked out his floor-to-ceiling window and sighed. He didn't want to find out that she'd lied to him, or that she was a gold digger like Amanda. Women had tried all sorts of things to claw their way into his heart and home, but he'd held them all at arm's length. He had to, unless he wanted to risk another Amanda situation. His money was what those women wanted, but in an ironic twist, that money was what kept him out of their clutches. Anyone who thought they could take advantage of him would get eaten alive, either by his fleet of private investigators or his fleet of flesh-eating lawyers.

Sébastien closed her file. "What are you hiding, Ella Wilcox? And how long will it take me to find out?"

Chapter

T W O

THE AIR IN THE vault was hot and sticky. Ella had been working for twelve hours straight and her blouse was soaked through with sweat.

Sébastien had been as good as his word. He'd arranged for a car to take her from the Cherbourg tower to her office and then to Joyeuse, his mansion in Russian Hill. She'd gotten the key to the vault from the estate manager, Yves, and set up shop about 11 o'clock that morning. With her loupe, her digital camera, and her laptop, she'd cataloged about one-third of the Cherbourg family jewel collection.

She'd seen an emerald and diamond tiara that was undoubtedly Russian in provenance, and a sapphire brooch that looked suspiciously like something that used to belong to the Shah of Iran. Sébastien's grandmother, Annaliese

Cherbourg, had been a notorious admirer of beautiful jewels and her deceased husband had circled the earth to buy them for her.

So far, Ella hadn't found anything illegal, let alone anything that linked the Cherbourgs to the stones that had disappeared from her father's workshop. Even though she had more than half of the vault to go through, it was already past 11 o'clock in the evening. She'd have to work fast to meet her 24-hour deadline.

The jewels were all stored in their original padded velvet boxes, stacked on stainless steel shelves arranged against each wall. She worked as quickly and methodically as she could, cataloging each piece with a photo, an appraisal, and a rubber stamp on the piece's existing paperwork. If the receipt and certificate of provenance were from a reliable vendor, such as Harry Winston or Van Cleef & Arpels, she bypassed it almost immediately. For jewels without such documentation, however, her job became much more difficult.

First, she had to search the jewel itself in order to find the craftsman's insignia, usually stamped or carved into the back of the frame. Then she had to cross-reference it with her online catalog to try and match the jewel to a published listing of the artist's work. If the piece had no signature, she was up a creek — it was up to her to analyze the stones, metal, and style, and then form an opinion about the jewel's origins.

Sometimes she had helpful clues, like the true "pigeon's blood" red color of a Burmese ruby. Other times, she found herself stumped, wishing she had more than 24 hours. Given a few days, she could uncover much more, but in a few hours, she had no time for exhaustive research. What's worse, none

of the stones she'd seen in unmarked pieces matched the photographs she still carried with her — photographs from her father's workshop, taken a week before the robbery.

Ella replaced a domed necklace case on the steel shelf and leaned against it wearily. She could feel beads of sweat pooling between and under her breasts. Her body ached as if she'd been beaten up by a playground bully. "Twelve hours and not a thing," she groaned.

It had never occurred to her that the Cherbourgs weren't involved in her father's murder.

Her father, Frederick Wilcox, had been the best jewelry restoration craftsman in the Bay Area. At the time of the robbery, he'd just gotten a big write-up in the *Chronicle* for the restoration of a Romanov prince's family heirlooms. San Francisco was filled with the sons and daughters of Russian émigrés who had fled the revolution. Her father had always loved seeing the treasured jewels their parents and grandparents had brought with them from Russia. He would labor for hours to reset loose stones and make paste copies of stones that had been lost. He believed gems were fossilized pieces of fire and light, and their beauty had never ceased to amaze him.

"Jewels are a collection of memories," he'd told her. "When you look at your golden locket or your mother's diamond ring, you'll always remember where you wore it, who gave it to you, and why. Now imagine wearing something a hundred years old. Imagine how many people lived and loved while wearing those stones close to their hearts! The stones hold onto all of it. When you wear them, you'll feel it. If you ever feel lonely, just slip one of these on." He'd handed

her one of his Victorian rings, a golden band set with an amethyst and a tourmaline. “You’ll never be alone, not with all this stone’s memories to keep you company.”

Even now, eighteen years later, her father’s words still had the power to affect her.

Ella bent her head and blinked back tears. “But I wanted *you* to keep me company, Dad,” she said.

Immediately, she began to think of all the things they never got the chance to do. He never met her at the finish line of her high school cross-country races. She never had to explain why she came home late after a first date. She never waved to him from a stage as she graduated from high school and then college.

It wasn’t fair.

She reached for the thin golden chain at her neck. It dipped deep below her blouse’s neckline, holding her parents’ wedding rings against her heart. Her mother had died of cancer when she was three. The shop had been robbed and her father shot to death a mere five years later.

No matter how many times she tried, she could never erase the terrible memory of that night: the angry shouts, the sight of a masked man pulling a gun on her father, the explosion of red droplets that pelted her face when the man shot her father in the chest. He’d collapsed on the floor and died in her arms as she cried and smoothed his hair, begging him not to leave her.

The robbers had taken everything of value in the shop, tossing every jewel on her father’s workbench into a sack and fleeing into the night. The police had never been able

to solve the crime, and they'd never located any of the stolen jewels.

Neither she nor the police could prove it, but both Ella and the investigating officer shared the same theory. They believed that since the stones never showed up on the black market, they must have gone straight into a private collection. It was the most logical explanation, but it still made her sick to think of some society woman like Annaliese Cherbourg draped in the jewels her father had given his life for. Ella had no idea what she'd do if she ever found one of the jewels from her father's workshop. All she knew was that she had to keep looking.

A tear slipped down her cheek and she brushed it away. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself, she commanded. You'll never find anything if you sit here and cry all night.*

She took a deep breath and brought her parents' wedding rings to her lips. "I'm still trying," she whispered. "Don't give up on me."



It was two hours later, just after one o'clock a.m., when she found it. On the fourteenth row of boxes, three down from the top, she pulled out a small velvet container. Cushioned on the blue satin interior lay a small brooch, oval in shape with a baroque pearl drop. Unusual for a piece of fine jewelry, the main stone was an uncut ruby. Uncut stones were usually found in ethnic, natural, or hippie-inspired jewelry — not attached to baroque pearls.

Ella reached for her loupe and took a closer look at the stone. She'd always loved the dusty pink color of uncut rubies. They reminded her of a painted desert or faded rose, very lush and romantic. But when she saw the magnified stone, she gasped and almost dropped the brooch.

She'd seen that stone before.

It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but the stone was actually a star ruby, with imperfections called rutile needles that made it look like a star was frozen beneath the gem's surface. Most star rubies had six rays, but this stone had twelve.

Twelve-star rubies were extremely rare.

Ella could still hear her father's voice describing the unique stone. "See here, Ellie?" he'd said, pointing with a needle at the striations. "That's called asterism, where a mineral called titanium dioxide forms thin lines inside the stone that look like a star."

Looking down at the Cherbourg brooch, she knew she was seeing the exact same stone her father had pointed out to her years ago. "I found it, Dad," she breathed, closing her fist over the brooch. "Now what?"

"Now what' what?" a deep voice behind her asked.

Ella shrieked and jumped. The brooch tumbled out of her hands and fell to the floor. She picked it up immediately, brushing it off and replacing it in the velvet box. "You scared me," she said, knowing she was blushing but unable to do anything about it.

Sébastien's face was hard and unforgiving, like a stone chiseled from the granite mountains of the Pyrenees. He wore the same gray slacks and white dress shirt he had earlier, minus the suit jacket. "Are we on schedule, Ms. Wilcox?"

Ella felt her thoughts scatter in all directions. “Y-yes,” she stuttered, hoping he would just let her work in peace.

“What have you got there?” He bent over her to look at the jewel. “I don’t remember seeing that one before.”

She was acutely conscious of his towering gaze. From his vantage point, he could definitely see down her shirt. She pinched the neck of her blouse closed. “D-did your mother ever wear it?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Do you know when your family acquired it?”

“Ms. Wilcox,” he said, stepping back and placing one hand high up on the shelf. “I hope we’re not going to have a problem here. Your job is to tell the museum my family didn’t steal this jewelry. Are you really going to waste our time and quiz me on how often my mother wore a brooch?”

“No, there’s no problem,” she lied. “I’m just trying to be thorough.”

“Be fast, not thorough.”

Anger flared in her chest. How dare he order her around? Just because he was rich didn’t mean he could control her. “I’ll work as quickly as I can,” she said, “but the museum expects my work to be of a certain quality and I intend to give it to them.”

Sébastien’s green eyes flashed with fury. “I don’t care what you intend. I want the job finished by sunrise. Do I make myself clear?”

She clamped her lips shut to keep from making a sarcastic reply. As he stalked out of the vault, she glared over her shoulder at him. “Would it have killed you to offer me some water?”

From halfway down the hall, his voice came booming back at her. “I’m disappointed in you, Ms. Wilcox. I thought you knew how to ask for what you wanted.”

Even though he couldn’t see it, Ella performed an angry salute. Then she turned back to her work, more aware than ever of how little time she had.



Sébastien left the vault and went upstairs to the kitchen, where he found his housekeeper, Gertrude Müller. A gray-haired drill sergeant, she ran Joyeuse as if she were in charge of a military incursion. She bossed everyone around as if the house were her own, including Sébastien, his mother, the valet, the cook, their personal physician, and the rest of the staff.

Ordinarily, he would never have allowed anyone on his payroll to talk back to him, but he knew how hard it was to find people who could tolerate his family. His mother was absent-minded, strong-willed, and heavily medicated—a dangerous combination. He’d never given his wild little sister an order she wouldn’t ignore or violate. The various aunts, uncles, and cousins who drifted by from time to time would have walked out with the silver if Frau Müller hadn’t taken it upon herself to manage everyone under her roof with a will of iron. With never a hair out of place or a button unbuttoned, Frau Müller viewed life as black and white: her way or the highway.

“Gertrude,” he said, to catch her attention.

She was making her final rounds before retiring to her room for the night. Despite the late hour, she was still dressed in a plain black housedress with a gray cable-knit cardigan buttoned over it. She adjusted her iron-rimmed glasses before speaking. "Yes, sir?"

"I know it's late, but I'd appreciate it if you took a tray down to the vault. The woman the museum sent over is finishing her appraisal for the exhibition on Saturday. I just checked on her and she looked very...hot."

Frau Müller raised a steely gray eyebrow.

"Overheated," he snapped. "You know what I meant."

He stayed in the kitchen long enough to see Gertrude nod, then retreated upstairs to his suite. He wasn't accustomed to embarrassment, but he could feel his cheeks redden beneath his daily accumulation of stubble.

"Hot" was *exactly* what he'd meant, in more ways than one.

Underneath her coat, Ella had looked exactly as he'd pictured her: soft and curvy, rounded in all the right places. He'd watched her bend over to pick up the fallen brooch, eyeing the lush curve of her derriere and the way her tight jeans clung to her body. Her cream-colored blouse, soaked through with sweat, had revealed the outlines of her generous bosom, with pert pink nipples he'd been able to see through her thin bra. Despite the heat, he'd noticed, her nipples had perked right up as soon as she'd seen him.

This is the last thing I need, he thought, trying to calm the rush of blood that swept through his veins when he pictured her hardened nipples. Kissable or not, she'd been salivating over his mother's brooch. He replayed the scene in his mind

over and over again, but something bothered him every time. The emotion on her face as she handled the brooch hadn't been greed, which was what he'd expect. Instead, she'd been looking at it with an expression of fear. Just like the fear she'd shown, if only for a moment, when she was afraid she wouldn't get the job.

Ella was definitely hiding something...but what?

Whatever it was, it would have to wait until daylight.

Sébastien unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it over the back of a chair. He stripped off the rest of his clothes, more than ready to slip into bed and get some sleep. He'd put so much effort into organizing this exhibition that he hardly had the energy to fantasize about having a woman in his bed, let alone seeking out a real one.

There was no shortage of willing women among the city's society belles and hangers-on, but no matter how many of them he dated, he always felt he was missing something. They soothed his body and stroked his ego, but nothing they said or did made him feel anything for them.

An image of Ella flashed through his mind as he slipped under the covers.

He dismissed it instantly.

She was clearly smart and sexy as hell, but she had a job to do. He was the one who'd imposed the 24-hour deadline on her. He couldn't very well go down and ask if she'd like to take a break...in his bed. Besides, he still didn't know what she was hiding, and that bothered him more than he wanted to admit. As much as he wanted slide his fingers over those pert nipples, he couldn't stop thinking about what she'd kept hidden from him.

Chapter

T H R E E

ELLA HAD JUST FINISHED inspecting the fifteenth row of stacked jewelry boxes when she heard footsteps echoing in the hallway. They were coming toward her. Immediately, she pictured Sébastien coming back to prod her onward, or ask why she wasn't finished yet.

I'll never finish if you don't leave me alone, she thought.

Ella set her lips in a snarl and spun to face him.

But it wasn't Sébastien. It was a short, older woman with gray hair twisted into a bun. She wore thin wire-rimmed glasses that made her brown eyes look bigger than they were. She held a tray of refreshments, including a glass of water and small pot of tea.

"Sébastien said you'd like something to drink," the woman said, setting the tray down inside the vault on one of the

stainless steel shelves. “I’ve brought you some water and some Earl Gray tea.”

The scent of the bergamot-flavored tea made her mouth water. Suddenly, Ella realized just how thirsty she really was. “Thank you,” she said gratefully, hurrying toward the tray. She lifted the water glass to her lips and chugged it all. Then she poured a small cup of the tea and did the same, ignoring the tray’s miniature sugar bowl and creamer. “This is perfect. I thought he was going to let me die of thirst down here.”

The older woman shook her head. “He didn’t tell me anyone was here or I’d have brought you something sooner. My name is Gertrude Müller.”

“I’m Ella Wilcox,” she said, shaking the older woman’s hand. “Did he tell you what I’m doing here?”

When Gertrude shook her head, Ella explained all about the need to certify and catalog the Cherbourg jewels for insurance purposes before transporting them to the museum. As she explained, she realized again how insane it was to attempt to have it all done in 24 hours.

Ella looked at the remaining racks and felt her heart sink to the floor. “He wants me to be done by sunrise, but I don’t know if I can. I’d love to get the hell out of here, but if I rush, I’m more likely to make a mistake.”

She looked at the older woman’s face and recognized honesty in the lines around her eyes and mouth. “Can I ask you something, Mrs. Müller?”

“Of course, my dear,” Gertrude said, nodding her head.

“What’s Sébastien like when he’s really angry?”

A smile played around the corners of Gertrude’s lips, and her brown eyes flashed with amusement. “Not very different

than he is at any other time, I suppose. Only more things tend to get broken.”

Ella grimaced. “So he’s a thrower.” Joey had been a thrower, too.

Gertrude frowned. “A thrower?”

“Yep,” Ella said. “It’s my personal theory that there are four kinds of angry people in the world: screamers, criers, pouters, and throwers. For some reason, I always end up with the throwers. I guess that’s why I don’t hang onto very many knick-knacks.”

“You could stop making people angry.”

“I could,” Ella said. “But then I guess I just wouldn’t be me.”

Gertrude smiled. “Don’t stop on Sébastien’s account. The boy needs to be made angry. Too many people give him what he wants because of his name.”

Big surprise, Ella thought. But she bit back the sarcastic reply because she didn’t want to put the older woman in an uncomfortable position. “Believe me,” she said, “I’d love to cause him some grief. I’d just prefer to do it when I don’t have a paycheck on the line.”

She drained a second cup of tea and polished off the small plate of cookies also on the tray. “This is a beautiful piece of china,” she said, touching the tray’s ruffled edge.

“Meissen,” Gertrude said.

Ella gulped and pulled her hand back. “This is worth more than what I make in a year.”

She remembered some of the vases and statuary she’d seen in the mansion’s front rooms on her way down to the vault. “The Cherbourg family certainly does have some

lovely things. I can only imagine what it's like to see them every day."

"The family or their things?"

"Their things," she said, smiling. "I can hazard a guess what it's like to see them all the time."

She let herself touch the lovely porcelain once more, admiring the beautiful colors in its hand-painted spray of flowers. "I'd feel like a bull in a china shop around things like this."

"You prefer the jewels?"

Ella nodded. "My dad restored jewelry. Sometimes he'd make me little lockets or bracelets. He always made sure my pieces were reinforced, sturdy enough to withstand a fall or a drop. He knew me. He was the only one who did."

She let her voice trail off as her mind descended back into the black hole of doubt. Why did the Cherbourgs have one of her father's stones? Where had they gotten it? Did they know it was stolen? What if there were more stolen stones waiting to be uncovered? She'd never know unless she stopped chatting and started working.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Müller," she said, "but I should get back to work. I won't make Sébastien's deadline if I don't start again right away."

"As you wish," Gertrude said, picking up the tray. "Good luck, Miss Wilcox."

"I need it," Ella mumbled to herself.

She sighed and reached for the next velvet box, but her mind couldn't focus. All she could think of was what her next move should be. Should she call the police? Take the brooch? Confront Sébastien? She shivered at the thought of that last option. "No way," she said out loud.

She decided to find a bathroom and splash some cold water on her face. Short of chasing after Gertrude and asking for some black coffee, she couldn't think of a better way to stay on task. She stepped out of the vault, making sure she left the door wide open. Then she wandered into the hallway, looking for a bathroom.

The vault was part of an underground annex, Yves had said. There was also a wine cellar, along with a large storage room. The annex wasn't insulated, and Ella rubbed her arms to ward off an explosion of goosebumps. As hot and stuffy as it had been in the vault, it felt freezing in the exterior passageway.

"Hello?" she called, making her way down the dark passageway. She braced her hands against one side of the wall and felt around for a light switch, but there wasn't one. She traveled a hundred feet down the dark corridor before she decided she'd better turn back. Coffee was no longer necessary. The dark, lonely passageway had crept her out enough to stay focused for at least a few more hours.

She turned around and retraced her steps, slowly making her way back toward the light of the vault. But something was wrong — the door wasn't flung wide open the way she'd left it.

It was cracked open just a few inches, as if someone had thrown it back on its hinges and it had rocked back into an almost-closed position.

Uh-oh, she thought. This isn't good.

"Hello?" she called again. "Is anyone there?"

She gulped and stepped forward slowly, wishing she had a weapon of some sort. What if there was an intruder in the

vault? Memories of that night in her father's shop flooded back to her until she felt like she couldn't breathe. Darkness, flashlights, shouting, shooting, blood, smoke...she felt her throat close up and she coughed, waving away the gossamer-thin dreamscape that clouded her vision.

With shaking hands, she reached for the door of the vault and stepped inside.

Then she screamed as loudly as she could.

Someone had been inside.

Empty jewelry boxes were strewn everywhere. Priceless necklaces and earrings lay scattered on the floor. Obviously, the intruder had been picky — she could see some of the most expensive pieces lying on the floor. Ella sank to her knees and scrambled to gather up as many of the jewels as she could.

She fought the flow of mental images that brought her back to that horrible night in her father's workshop. As her fingers flew over each discarded piece, checking for loose stones or unstable prongs, she choked back the urge to close her eyes and curl up in a ball on the floor. Her sobs flowed from the deep well of horror and sorrow she knew she still carried. She couldn't hold them back. Part of her didn't even want to.

"Help!" she cried, collecting a gleaming pile of rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. "Somebody help me!" She dropped the jewels she'd been able to recover on one of the stainless steel shelves. Then she crawled on the floor, searching for her purse. She found it, kicked far under one of the stainless steel shelves.

She grabbed her bag and retrieved her cell phone. But then she realized she had no idea who to dial. As she sat,

sobbing and clutching her phone, footsteps pounded their way toward her. She looked up into the doorway and saw Sébastien, clothed in loose khakis and a wrinkled, unbuttoned shirt. His hair, thickly gelled and sculpted by day, drooped over his forehead, just like a little boy's. "What the hell's going on?" he thundered.

"You've been robbed!"

His face turned white as an opal. "Are you sure?"

"Look at this mess... why else would someone have done it?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm sure as hell going to find out."

"How did you know I needed help down here? Did you hear me?"

Sébastien shook his head. "There's a silent alarm. It trips whenever someone moves these racks out of place." He looked down at her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, wiping away the tear tracks across her cheeks. "I'm just scared."

"What do you have to be scared of?"

What do I have to be scared of, indeed, she thought. *Only the moment that ruined my entire life, playing over and over in my head.* "Not a damn thing," she said through clenched teeth.

She got up from the floor and dusted herself off, then headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" he snapped.

"We have to call the police, don't we?"

"I'm not letting you out of my sight until I figure out what happened here."

"What good will that do? I didn't take anything!"

"Just help me find out what's missing. Then we'll see what happens."

Ella didn't feel right about waiting to call the police. Why would anyone who'd been robbed hesitate to make that call? What was he up to? She had a bad feeling about it, but she was in his house, working with his property. Basically, she had no choice and she knew it. "Fine," she grumbled. "Let's get to work."

They spent the next twenty minutes combing through the racks, making a basic comparison to the master list he'd provided her with when she started her appraisal. At the end of the hurried task, she held up her list. "We're missing eighteen pieces," she said.

When she looked more closely, she noticed the uncut ruby brooch was one of them.

Damn it, she thought. There goes my evidence.

But she wasn't the only one who'd lost something. She looked up at Sébastien and reached for his arm. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been a terrible night for both of us, right? But I'm glad no one got hurt, and I want you to know I didn't take anything from you. I promise."



Sébastien glanced at her hand on his arm, absorbing the warmth of her touch through his thin linen shirt. *I believe you,* he wanted to say.

But he knew that wasn't what an investigator would say.

She'd been alone, in the vault, with no witnesses. She'd had the perfect opportunity to ransack the vault, and claim an unknown intruder had done it. There was absolutely no reason he could give for believing her, other than the deep

sense of sadness he saw in her eyes. Wide and liquid and mournful, they weren't the eyes of a thief. But then again, what did he know? He'd believed Amanda every time she'd said she loved him, too.

His eyes traveled from her face to her tight jeans.

It was obvious she didn't have any of the jewels on her. Pretending he didn't know that, however, was the only way he could quash the growing feeling of sympathy he had for her.

He was the victim here. He had every right to demand she prove her innocence. After all, maybe she had an accomplice whose job it was to steal the jewels, while she sat here and batted her eyelashes at him.

"Turn out your pockets," he said.

Ella gasped and he could see the hurt in her face. But she did as he asked, and turned out the pockets of her jeans, revealing nothing. "I didn't take anything," she said again.

There was so much conviction in her voice. Something as hard as steel rested beneath her words. Maybe it wasn't a coincidence that her eyes were the color of cold metal, or the sea at its most unforgiving. He shook his head to clear away the fog brought on by her hypnotizing gaze. "If you didn't take the jewels, who did? Did you let anyone in? Did you see anyone?"

"No." Ella shook her head. "I only saw Mrs. Müller. Does your silent alarm alert the police?"

"Just the guard staff."

"You have a guard staff?" she asked, wide eyes blinking rapidly.

"All Cherbourgs have enemies, and I'm no exception. There are four armed guards on the premises at all times."

“Then where are they?”

“I sent them to patrol the perimeter and the rest of the house. I didn’t want an intruder escaping while we all converged on the vault.”

“What do we do now?”

Sébastien looked at her face and noticed a bit of color had come back into her cheeks. She still looked incredibly vulnerable and maddeningly attractive. What she *didn’t* look like was a thief.

“Wait here,” he said. “I need to make a call.”

He stepped outside the vault to see what she would do when left to her own devices. Through the crack between the door and the frame, he watched her sink to her knees and put her head in her hands. That didn’t make him feel any better about what he was going to do, but he couldn’t hesitate. He was a Cherbourg, and Cherbourgs never hesitated.

Sébastien pulled his phone out of his pocket. He dialed the number of his on-call private investigator, Jake Grodin. Despite the late hour, Jake answered on the first ring. “Yello.”

“Jake, the word is ‘hello.’”

“I charge by the hour, big guy. Lecture me on pronunciation all you want.”

Usually, Sébastien appreciated Jake’s easy sense of humor. Tonight, the PI’s cheap jokes grated on his nerves. “I need a background check.”

He could hear Jake shift in his seat, as if he were looking up at a clock. “At this hour?”

“Yes, at this hour. As deep as you can go, and as quick as you can get it done.”

“Are we still talking about detective work?”

“No jokes, Jake. Not tonight. I’ll text you the name.”

“Am I looking for anything in particular?”

“A criminal background. Anything involving theft, a heist, or a forgery.”

“I’m on it,” Grodin said. “How do you want me to contact you with the results?”

“Email me, including any documents you find. I’ll have my phone on me.”

“You got it. I don’t suppose the — er — inconvenient hour would entitle me to a bonus?”

There it was: the Cherbourg curse. Everyone thought that because he had money, he should be willing to give it to them, whether they earned it or not. “Do what I hired you to do, you greedy bastard, before you start asking for more. If you find what I’m looking for, we can talk about a bonus.”

He disconnected the phone and glanced inside the vault to catch a glimpse of Ella. She was wiping her face with the tails of her untucked shirt.

He couldn’t help but hope her background check would come out clean, but he knew better than to trust someone who hadn’t grown up in the same world he had. Jake had just proved that people like him represented one thing and one thing only: money. That was what made it so hard to trust anyone outside his own family, even when they came with gorgeous eyes and amazing breasts and tempting thighs.

He had to learn the hard way, just like his ancestors had. They hadn’t gotten where they did by being kind and loving and trusting. The Cherbourgs who’d come before him had been hard men, slow to love and quick to anger. It had served them well in a world rocked by wars, revolutions, and

depressions. *I have to be more like them*, he chided himself. *It's what my father would have expected of me.*

He strode back into the vault and pointed at Ella. "Get your coat," he said. "We're going for a ride."

The Cherbourg Jewels

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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real, she'd lied to him from the
moment she met him.*

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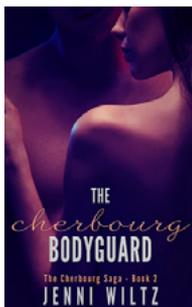
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BOOK 3

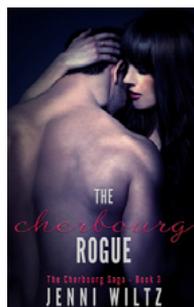
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The Cherbourg Jewels

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*Readers like you are an inspiration –
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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.

