

Prologue

Dominic Trudeau stood in the sweltering forest and watched the burning plane as the emergency crew fought to dampen the blazing inferno. The pilot and copilot were dead. Fahid's terrorist minions had wired the hydraulics to malfunction during landing. The crash had destroyed most, if not all, of the evidence. The stench of melting metal and exploding fuel permeated the air.

Dominic didn't want the Americans involved. The situation was complicated enough without entering into charades with the FBI or, should the crisis escalate internationally, the CIA.

Dominic could see the death of his relationship with Gayle reflected in the wreckage. To return to Paris was out of the question. Too many of his suspicions had become reality. And he had his orders.

Dominic turned, and though his step was light and sure, his future weighed heavily upon him as he cut back to the road where he'd parked.

Chapter 1

Gayle Regan strode into Transway Airlines' Paris HQ, unable to keep from smiling at everyone she passed. In a few days, she and Dominic Trudeau would be married. She wore a two-piece silk suit and heels, the champagne color matching the promise of their future. Maybe the thought was silly but she was in love. Dom's tender gaze, his mouth barely turned up at the corners, letting her see how deeply he loved her was heady stuff.

She caught the elevator to the third floor, then walked down the hall and greeted her PA. "Good morning, Helen. How are you on this gorgeous day?"

"Someone's happy. I can't believe you're here with the wedding so close."

"I'll enjoy the honeymoon more knowing my work's caught up." Gayle entered the adjoining office, settled in at her desk and began slogging through the enormous pile of paperwork to be resolved. She was in the middle of it when Helen buzzed her on the intercom.

"*Madame* Trudeau is on the line."

"Thanks, Helen. I hope she isn't calling to add more guests to the reception but put her through." Gayle picked up the phone as it rang. "Madame, I don't think there's room for even one more guest."

"That's no longer a problem."

The woman's voice was tight and unfriendly, but Gayle knew Dom's parents had never warmed to her.

Madame continued, "Dominic has finally come to his senses and terminated the wedding. He's been called out of town and asked us to let you know how things stand."

Gayle was stunned. "There's some mistake. You must have misunderstood."

"I'm sorry, but to marry an American, especially one without any background . . . Well, enough said."

"No. Dom wouldn't leave without speaking with me, and he certainly wouldn't cancel our wedding."

"Perhaps it would be best for you to go home to Texas."

There was the click of the phone as his mother rang off.

Her heart in freefall, Gayle dialed Dom's mobile but got a recording in French. "We're sorry, but you have reached a number that is no longer in service."

She phoned Dom's home next and spoke with his butler Ives, who regretted to inform her that *Monsieur* Trudeau had left town indefinitely and could not be reached. "He asked me to give you his apologies for the inconvenience and said, 'The marriage would have been a mistake.' I'm so sorry, *mademoiselle*."

~

One month later

Gayle closed her laptop without bothering to save the unfinished letter. What was the point? Susan was in Houston, too far away to help.

If only Gayle could believe Dom had willingly disappeared. She rose and crossed to the window, gazing out at the Paris night. Spring had cast its spell on the city. Roses, honeysuckle and clematis twined about the wrought iron fence below, the fragrance wafting through the open window, testifying to renewal and new beginnings.

Yet she was mourning the surrender of a dream, even as she clung to its remnants. Why couldn't she accept that Dom had abandoned her before their wedding? The media and everyone Dom knew would assume he'd fled rather than marry an American nobody.

Gayle couldn't come to grips with his alleged desertion and doubted she ever would. Not while her heart warned her that he was in trouble and needed her.

In what seemed like another life, she recalled their first meeting two years earlier. As the new marketing general manager with Transway Airlines' Paris office, she'd attended a party for the company's premier accounts. Her assistant Clyde Mort had pointed Dom out as an important client. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

Gayle glanced at the elegant man across the room and followed in Clyde's wake. She winced as he halted next to Dom and interrupted his conversation mid-sentence.

"Dominic Trudeau. I'd like you to meet Gayle Regan."

"How do you do?" Dom murmured, the twinkle in his eyes setting her at ease. They shared a smile of amusement, in complete agreement over Clyde's crassness without ever having spoken a word.

She knew that Dominic often flew with Transway, and that several of his holding companies shipped with the airline as well. At first, her reserve had presented a challenge to Dom. Yet they soon discovered a similar taste in books, plays, and shared an absolute fetish for the ballet.

Then Gayle's best friend Susan had arrived in Paris to investigate a student's disappearance from an exclusive French school. For a period, Dom appeared to be the chief suspect. Gayle had worked with him to clear the school and his name. In the process they fell in love.

Now she feared Dominic had been kidnapped or was being prevented from contacting anyone. There was no one she could think to turn to except— She shook her head slowly.

Did she dare call Interpol Agent Francois Rodiet, Susan's friend and former fiancé?

Impulsively, she grabbed her mobile and dialed his exchange, but quickly hung up as she'd done on a dozen occasions. Why should he believe Dom was in trouble when no one else would?

Her phone rang, and with a start she picked it up.

On the other end of the line, Francois said, "Mademoiselle Regan, I am curious why it is you keep ringing me and hanging up? Your name and number are on my caller ID."

"Monsieur Rodiet, I'm Susan Pardue's friend. I've been trying to gather the courage to ask for your help. Dominic's in trouble."

"Mademoiselle, as much as I could wish it, there is nothing I can do to bring your fiancé back. One must face reality, no matter how difficult."

Gayle grimaced. She coped with Dom's seeming desertion daily with much of Paris looking on.

As if he had read her thoughts, he said, "Reporters are not known for their sensitivity. Better perhaps to return to your country and family."

"For Susan's sake, won't you meet with me and hear what I have to say?"

After a few moments of silence, he sighed. "Now it is you who have left me no choice. I will be there shortly. What is the address?"

She gave it to him and hung up. While she waited, Gayle struggled to order her suspicions about Dom's disappearance, which must be logically assembled and examined.

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Dominic had been three days from happiness, when his aspirations burned into hot ashes on a foreign field in East Texas. They had vanished like smoke, as he surely must.

Once again, he would cling to duty, burying his emotions in the cause. "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom men have committed

much, of him they will ask the more,” Dom murmured in his native French, quoting Luke 12:48, the scripture that had become the mantra of his life at an early age.

With a soundless groan for what he'd lost, he treaded onto the blacktop road where he'd parked the older model Camry caked with mud from the recent rains. Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled down his back from the Texas heat and humidity. It was only spring. What must summer be like?

He climbed into the car and drove toward Houston. If fantasies had wings, he would catch the afternoon flight to Paris, leaving this debacle for Guy, his Interpol colleague, to clean up. Instead, Dom would have to hunker down in East Texas and cover the mistakes of others before engaging in the important job ahead.

He exited I-45 onto the Hardy Toll Road. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of curious brown spots crawling on his trouser leg. A swift glance down as he crossed three lanes of traffic to angle into the right lane caused him to shudder. Ticks. He was surrounded and besieged in more ways than he had imagined possible.

Dom whipped onto the 610 Loop and set the car on cruise control to allow him to see how much damage the insects were doing. He was shocked to see he was covered with the bloodsuckers. Nothing to do but continue to his meeting and deal with the problem there.

To take his mind off the ticks, Dom looked at the tranquility of the blue sky, wishing a measure of its serenity could drop into his life. His existence of late had become an unrewarding exercise in patience and control.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled into the shaded garage behind Guy's home in the Heights and entered the servants' quarters in back where he often stayed. With a grimace, Dom stripped and tossed his clothes outside, then began removing the offensive pests before stepping into a hot shower.

If only his relationship with Gayle could be resolved as efficiently as the delicate removal of these parasites. Dispirited, he dressed and strode outside, crossing to the house and into the study.

Guy, as dark as Dom was blond, sat behind a massive walnut desk, hard at work on his laptop. Dom grabbed a soft drink from the small fridge in the corner and sank into a leather chair. “Everything went as you expected.”

Guy quirked an eyebrow. “I merely ran the analysis.”

“I wanted the pilot and copilot spared. We could have warned them.”

“Hassledorf's hands were in the till like the rest. He died because of his own greed.”

“Yes, he was criminally responsible for his actions. But was it wrong of him to want to give his dying wife the medical care she needed?”

“We don't make those calls, Dom. If you're going to feel sorry for someone, how about Hassledorf's copilot. He was entirely innocent.” Guy spread his hands in a gesture of frustration.

Dom knew Guy was right. If Interpol had intervened, Fahid would have been warned of their surveillance, inevitably leading to more deaths.

Dom was letting his emotions intrude on the job, and the situation with Gayle was distracting him. He'd have to quit thinking about how wounded she must be feeling, or he'd never be able to concentrate. He schooled his features to a practiced impassiveness. “Have we zeroed in on the cargo the plane was carrying?”

“Diamonds. Fahid had paid the pilot to smuggle them, while overtly contracting with Carey International to transport a shipment of semiprecious stones to make the transaction appear legit. The working theory is Fahid is using illegal profits to fund his brand of terrorism.”

“The trip to Tulsa must have been a diversionary tactic to get the stolen diamonds out of Houston, until they could safely take them to New York.”

“Yeah. Stealing jewels in Amsterdam and flying them directly to New York would be a red flag the thieves would want to avoid.”

“There is a remote possibility, the gems might be on the plane or in the remaining rubble.”

“If so, the investigation into the crash will uncover them.”

Dominic still questioned the aviator’s guilt. He didn’t fit the profile of a thief or a traitor. Dom mulled aloud, “Maybe we’re looking at this wrong. What if the pilot had planned all along to report the smugglers for the reward, using the diamonds as evidence, and Fahid got wind of his intentions?”

“Imagine anyone having the guts to betray Fahid?”

Dom frowned. “You’ve got a point. Would a man trying to save his wife turn his family into targets for terrorists?”

“Not likely. Unless they were going into witness protection.”

“Or he thought Fahid was running contraband. Smugglers are not nearly as scary as terrorists,” Dom said with satisfaction, his mind turning to the next question. “Any other leads on Fahid’s motive in engineering the pilot’s death?”

“Why else but to silence him? If there’s more, it’s up to you to pinpoint the connection.”

“All right. If there is nothing else, I’m leaving.”

Guy nodded. “Watch your back. Your game is off lately.”

Dom’s smile was mocking, “I didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t,” Guy quipped, “but remember we’re in this together.” His attention shifted to his laptop. “Get out of here so I can get back to work.”

With a wave, Dom slipped from the room.

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From her third-floor apartment window, Gayle watched Francois pause outside the weathered saffron building before entering. When the bell rang, she opened the door with an uncustomary hesitancy.

“Monsieur, won’t you come in?” She led him to the living room. “May I get you some coffee?”

He declined as she waved him to a chair and sat across from him.

His gaze moved from the autumn landscape with shimmering aspens above the fireplace to the antique furniture, and then to the gold tapestry rug on the marble floor. “The room makes a stunning backdrop for you as it would for any redhead,” he said, with a lift of his brow.

“Thank you, if that’s a compliment?”

“*Oui*. Despite the obvious awkwardness, I mean to be frank. Dominic and I have been friends for years.”

“Yes, he told me you’ve been close since childhood.”

Francois’s expression became grave. “Dom contacted me before departing Paris to explain he had changed his mind about marrying you. He believed it would be kinder to you both if he left for a period. He made it clear there’s no place for you in his life. It would be better if you accepted this.”

Her eyes prickled with tears and hurt clawed at the back of her throat. “Why, for heaven’s sake, didn’t you tell me this on the phone? You could’ve spared us both—” She rose, not waiting for an answer, and he accompanied her to the door.

“I am sorry,” he said, turning to face her with one hand on the handle. “I meant to be kind, and it seemed cruel to relate Dom’s regrets on the telephone. Go home, mademoiselle. Find

yourself a nice America and marry him. You will be much happier.” The door closed behind him with a snap.

Gayle grabbed a tissue, wiping the dampness from her face. How could she be sure he’d told her the truth? That he wasn’t another person trying to separate her from Dom. Had Francois spoken with Dom? Gayle knew how to find out.

She picked up her mobile and dialed the number of her friend and colleague Abby Verrater. “Abby, remember back on the Riviera when you said to call if I ever wanted help?”

“Yes. You saved my life that day. I meant every word.”

“I need a copy of Dom’s phone records ASAP.”

“I’ll move on it immediately.”

“Thanks for not asking any questions. Now, I owe you.”

~

It was raining when Gayle turned onto the long sweeping drive leading to the Trudeaus’ residence. A sense of desperation impelled her to make one more attempt to discover if Dominic’s parents had learned anything since his disappearance. The rain came down in long sheets, obscuring the formidable estate. She shivered, dread of confronting the Trudeaus’ snobbish contempt congealing her stomach to *blancmange*.

She forced herself from the Porsche, nearly oblivious to the water beating against her hat and trench coat, sloshing its way down her black fashion boots.

Gayle rang the doorbell. The butler answered promptly, sympathy and exasperation in his stern gaze. “Mademoiselle, the Trudeaus are not home to you.”

“Please, Yves, is there any news?”

He shook his head and started to close the door.

“Wait. I know you care for Dominic. He told me how special you were to him. How growing up he spent more time with you than his father.” Yves face softened, and she pressed on. “You saw him the day he left. Was he troubled? Did any visitors drop in who might have disturbed him?”

Yves hesitated. “He seemed happy, but he did receive a call, which had him frowning. He left shortly after.”

“I knew it. Dominic’s in trouble and needs us.”

The butler swallowed and said gruffly, “Mademoiselle, there is nothing more I can tell you, but should pertinent information surface, the proper authorities will be notified.”

“Will you phone me?” She reached out to give him one of her cards, but he shook his head regretfully and closed the door.

Gayle let the card drop to the ground and walked away disheartened. She climbed back into the emerald-green Porsche that Dom had given her as an engagement present and drew a deep breath. She swiped at her tears. Though she tried to overlook it, his parents’ treatment of her wounded Gayle.

It was time she returned to Transway, but the thought of facing everyone tempted her to delay the inevitable. At Dom’s suggestion, she had arranged a month off for their honeymoon and some space for adjustment. When the wedding was canceled, she agreed to deal with departmental emergencies from her apartment in the interim, but her leave was almost up. A part of her wanted to pack her bags and fly home to America. Yet she needed to work and focus on the successes in her life.

She could endure smirks and innuendoes more than the pity of the kindest of her colleagues, and Gayle knew it might get worse. Still, it was fortunate she’d insisted on keeping her job for the first year of their marriage despite Dom’s protest.

The discussion had marked their first serious disagreement and it was one she had been determined to win. With a final glance at the Trudeaus' unyielding mansion, she dug her keys from her purse and started the car. It was yet another reminder of Dominic's kindness and care for her, which made it difficult to move on and cut the past.

When she had told Dom that she didn't want a new automobile, that her Citroën was fine, he had quietly taken her hand. "*Chéri*, let me do this for you. It gives me such pleasure."

He had kissed her then, telling her how much he loved her. "You won't refuse my gift, will you?"

Her independence at that moment had seemed unimportant and she'd agreed. Gayle stared at the engagement ring on her finger. There was so little of Dominic left to her, a few letters, a message on her answering machine that she played every night, dried orchids, this car and all the memories that sent her grief spiraling out of control.

Angry, she shook off the self-pity and absorption that characterized her lately, determined to get through the rest of the day without breaking down and making a further spectacle of herself. She backed the car out of the driveway and exited onto rue Chanoinesse glad the ordeal was done.

It was not quite dark when Gayle arrived home. She let herself in quietly and stood wondering what she was going to do. "If you love him, you'll follow him." She heard the words so clearly in her mind, they could have been spoken. She loved him enough to follow him, but how to begin? It was time she quit acting like a fool and became the investigator she'd been trained to be.

Gayle had sources, though she'd never considered using them for personal reasons. She could call in some favors. She sensed whatever had taken Dom from her went much deeper than their personal relationship. An innate purpose in his life, she'd perceived—a life separate from her. Strange, she'd never realized it until now. What other signs had she tuned out?

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Abby Verrater was perplexed about how to proceed, which was unlike her. She was nearing forty and had been at manipulative spy games for two decades. She tried to remember when the turning point had occurred, but there were too many twists and too many cases.

Her friendships through the years were as predictable as volcanic meltdowns. Chiseled out of cold, hard lava, they incinerated into ashes. The eruptions of these relationships were wrenching but necessary to do the job.

She ran a trace on Dominic's phone records per Gayle's request, although Abby already knew what she'd find. During operations, she made a point of keeping all the players on the board in view.