



Ruthless

Author: Christy Reece

Category: Romance, Thriller, Action

Description: A country in peril. Two broken hearts. One brutal lie.

Having been betrayed in the worst way possible, Eve Wells doesn't find trust easy to give. But if there's one person she can trust with everything, it's her OZ partner, Gideon Wright. He is her one true confidant and knows everything about her. They would never lie to each other. When disaster strikes, her body isn't the only thing broken. The truth is revealed, and she's devastated to learn everything she believed about him was a lie. For over a decade, Gideon has been living on borrowed time. He had known that once Eve discovered the truth, nothing would ever be the same. But he had made an oath, one he would die before he would betray. He never planned on falling in love with her. She was his to protect but not to love. They couldn't be together, not in the way he wanted. Now that everything's out in the open, they must forge a new path. Mending Eve's broken heart won't be easy, but he won't give up. He'll do whatever it takes to earn back her trust. Something wicked is headed their way. Something neither of them could have anticipated. If they fight separately, they will lose. If they join together, they'll win, but the aftermath could eviscerate all they had before.

Some things are worth fighting for, and some things are worth dying for. After all the heartbreak and deception, Eve and Gideon must find that one true thing that's worth living for before it's too late.

Total Pages (Source): 124

CHAPTER ONE

Twelve Years ago

US Embassy

Paris, France

“Come on, Lina. Tell me. Please? Please? Pretty please?”

Blushing like a schoolgirl, Lina Wellingsley flashed her friend a sassy grin. For the last half hour, Shelby had been trying to get her to spill her big secret. One that she had been keeping to herself for almost three weeks. Having any kind of secret was such a unique experience for her that she had wanted to keep it to herself just a little while longer. From the time she was born, her entire life had been under scrutiny. Secrets had been few and far between.

And this secret was just so special. She was having her very first grown-up romance. Okay, well, maybe not exactly a romance. They hadn't even had a real date. But in her twenty-one years, this was the first time she had been so attracted to anyone. Usually, her dates were chosen for her, and she appeared with him at a function and then rarely saw him again. It was the way of her world. Yes, it was old-fashioned to the point of being archaic, but it wasn't something she had ever given a lot of thought to. But now that she was out on her own, she realized how very confining her world really was. She wanted a private life, a life where she didn't have a litany of people who approved or disapproved of her choices. She wanted to be normal. This was a definite step in the right direction.

“Come on, Lina. You know I won’t tell anyone.”

That was true. She and Shelby Greene had become fast friends the instant they’d met last year. Other than her family, there was no one she trusted more. They were also roommates and co-workers, so there was very little that Shelby didn’t know about her already. With her strawberry-blond hair, beautiful smile, and spattering of freckles on her face, Shelby had endeared herself to Lina from the first hello. She had a calm but outgoing personality and was the perfect accompaniment to Lina’s shy awkwardness.

“I know you won’t tell. It’s just that this is the first time I’ve felt this way. I guess I just want to hang on to it a little longer.”

“Can you at least tell me where you met him?”

Since she never went anywhere alone, that was a loaded question. With the exception of when she was at work and had a little more privacy, her two bodyguards, Herbert and Francois, were with her at all times. At work, they stayed outside the embassy, parked close by in case they needed to get to her quickly. And while she appreciated their protection, she knew they reported everything to her father. If she were to start dating someone, he would be the first to know.

She glanced around the empty break room. They might be alone here, but anyone passing by would see them and might overhear. She leaned closer to Shelby and whispered, “He works here...at the embassy.”

Shelby’s pretty face scrunched up in confusion. “Seriously? I haven’t seen you talking to anyone in particular.”

Should she tell Shelby about the cellphone he’d given her? Since they couldn’t be seen together without speculation, he had gifted her with a phone so they could text each other. So far, their conversations had been about getting to know each other.

Favorite colors, movies, books, all the silly and fun things one might learn on a first or second date.

He was more than aware of what their appearance in public would mean. She wasn't the only one under scrutiny. His father was also a high-profile person. The paparazzi would have a field day if they knew they were seeing each other. At some point, they'd have to make it public, but for right now, keeping it a secret worked for them both.

"We haven't really had a chance to be alone like that. You know what would happen if we're seen together."

"Yeah." Shelby grimaced in sympathy.

The whole world knew Lina worked here. When she had first arrived in Paris and started working at the embassy, it had been all over the news. Thankfully, the media had eventually gone on to other, more important things, and she did her best to live a low-profile existence. She wanted to do good work, make a difference in the world. To be taken seriously. Too many people believed she'd gotten her aide position because of who she was. And though she knew it had given her an opening others might not have had, that didn't mean she didn't work hard or that she couldn't make a valuable contribution. She had degrees in both international relations and foreign policy, spoke four languages, and was a serious student of the geopolitical climate of today.

Despite who her family was, she had insisted on being treated just like any other employee. She believed she had proven herself, but there were still many who considered her a celebrity with no real value. Since she had a stubborn soul, those kinds of opinions just made her work all the harder.

"I've never seen you like this, Lina. You're blushing, and your eyes are sparkling like

blue diamonds. You're practically glowing."

There was a tinge of hurt in Shelby's face, and Lina quickly pulled herself out of her head. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt her friend. Shelby had been so supportive of her and had never once treated her differently than she did anyone else. Even though they came from tremendously different backgrounds, they had so much in common that their differences had never mattered. It was something Lina sincerely appreciated.

"Okay, I'll tell you. But you have to promise not to freak out."

Shelby's light green eyes went wide at the warning, but she nodded and said solemnly, "I promise."

"It's Dirk Bennett," she whispered.

Shelby jerked back, gasping. "The ambassador? Good heavens, Lina! He's an old man—at least forty-five!"

Lina swallowed a snort. "Not him, silly. Dirk Jr. His son."

"Oh." She blew out a relieved sigh. Then as it hit her, her eyes went wide. "Ohhhhh. He's cute!"

Lina grinned in delight. "I know! And he's so charming and sweet."

"So how did it start? Who made the first move? Have you kissed him yet? Where do you see him? What's he like?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:22 am

“We sat next to each other at the summit in Switzerland last month. It was just so dry and boring, and I couldn’t stop yawning. He noticed and sent me silly notes to keep me awake. Then we sat at the same table for dinner and got to talking.”

“How did Francois and Herbert not see you with him?”

“Because it was completely innocent. I mean, it’s not like we made out at the table or anything. We just chatted. And then he walked me to my hotel room.”

“With Francois and Herbert right behind you.”

Lina rolled her eyes. “Of course. Where else would they be?” It wasn’t like she disliked her bodyguards. They were sweet and more like family than just guards, since they’d been guarding her for much of her life, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t like some privacy to just be a normal girl who liked a normal guy.

“But if there’s a romance, surely you two have been alone together.”

Lina could feel her face heat up with a blush. “Only briefly. We’ve managed a few minutes here and there.”

“Annnnnd?”

“And we kissed for a bit.”

“Was it nice?”

“Very.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s funny and sweet. Super smart. I mean, like, brilliant.”

“And the fact that he’s incredibly handsome doesn’t hurt.”

“No, it does not. That’s not the reason I like him...but...” She smiled, remembering how she had gazed up at him and wondered how anyone so good-looking could be interested in a plain girl like her. Admittedly, she had some good qualities. Nice hair, good skin, pretty blue eyes, and a pleasant personality. She’d always been on the thin side but had gained a little weight over the last couple of years and had finally started filling out a bit.

But then there was her nose. She had inherited her father’s nose, and while it looked fine on him and her brothers, on her face, it was an eyesore. Long, narrow, pointed, with the slightest upward tilt at the end.

She had mentioned the possibility of plastic surgery to her father numerous times, but he was adamantly opposed to such a thing. He said her nose was the mark of the Wellingsley family, and she should be proud of it. While she was proud of her lineage, she couldn’t help but wish she’d inherited a more attractive feature.

Dirk didn’t seem to mind the size of her nose, but she had vaguely mentioned her desire for a different look, and he had been supportive of her having surgery. He’d told her that if she wasn’t happy with herself, it should be her choice to change and no one else’s. He had even sent her a few photos of different kinds of noses he thought would look good on her.

Her old insecurity had reared its ugly head, and she couldn’t help but ask if he didn’t

like the way she looked. He had assured her that wasn't the case, that he thought she was beautiful just the way she was. He'd told her he was only trying to be supportive.

Still, when she went home for a visit in a few weeks, she was going to discuss the possibility with her father again. Maybe she could get her brothers on board to change his mind. Though Nicolas and Alexandre were older than she was and often treated her more like a child than an adult, they held a lot of sway with their father. If it hadn't been for them, he likely wouldn't even have agreed to allow her to work at the embassy. So, if she could get at least one of them on board for a nose job, perhaps the outcome of her request would be different this time.

Her feelings for Dirk made her want to look prettier for him. He had even made a few suggestions regarding her clothes and makeup, too. Nothing major, but she had taken his suggestions to heart. The last few weeks, she had put extra effort into looking her best. With her background, it had always been important to appear well put together and poised on all occasions. But she had done that because it was expected. Now she did it because she wanted to please someone else. Dirk had told her more than once how attractive he thought she was, which made her tingle all over, pleased that she pleased him.

"So will you and he ever be able to date?" Shelby asked.

"We hope so. I mean, it's not like we're that different. Both of us have family expectations, and we're used to being in the public eye. But, for right now at least, having the press around is the last thing we want. If they get wind of it, we'll be followed everywhere, and they'll come up with all sorts of ridiculous stories about us. We just want to be able to be two people who find each other attractive and want to get to know each other better."

"Hence the not telling anyone yet."

“Exactly.”

“So how are you going to do that? Be alone together, I mean. Neither of you have regular, ordinary lives where you can just go and be alone.”

This was where it would get tricky. She was going to ask a huge favor of her friend, and she wasn’t sure how it would be received.

“I was wondering if you could—”

A loud, popping noise in the background halted her question. She frowned at Shelby. “What was that?”

An odd expression came over Shelby’s face as she went to her feet. “Get in the hall closet and stay there, Lina.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“What?” Lina jumped up, her heart hammering. “Why? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. I need you to get in the closet, and don’t come out until I come back for you.”

“No. If something bad is happening, you need to come with me. Security will protect us.”

Lina swallowed a gasp when, instead of agreeing, Shelby lifted one side of her dress, revealing a gun holster strapped to her leg that held a small pistol. Pulling the gun from the holster, she said sternly, “Do as I say, Lina. Go. Now.”

The knowledge that her friend wasn’t the woman she’d claimed to be was a secondary shock she would have to deal with later. With the sounds of shouts coming closer and closer and people running down the hallways screaming, it was obvious the embassy was under attack.

An explosion sounded, rocking the floor beneath their feet. Screams of pain and terror surrounded them.

“Go, Lina,” Shelby said. “I’ve got this.”

“But I don’t—”

The blast of a gun and the jerk of Shelby’s body told her it was too late. Shelby managed to turn and fire her weapon twice. Then, with a hoarse whisper, she said, “I’m so sorry, Lina,” before she dropped to the floor.

“No!” Lina knelt on the floor, her mind screaming in horror as she searched for Shelby’s pulse with a trembling hand. There wasn’t one.

This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t! Shelby’s pretty green eyes were empty, her face slack and expressionless. “Shelby, no! Please, no!”

“You!”

Lina jerked her head up. A masked man stood before her, pointing a rifle at her. “Come with me,” he snapped.

Her entire body trembling, Lina stood and shook her head. “No.” She had wanted to shout the word, but it had come out more of a whisper.

Instead of giving her the order again, the man strode to her and raised the rifle higher. Knowing this was it, that this was the moment she would die, she closed her eyes and thought of her family. She saw her papa’s and her brothers’ faces, felt their love surround her.

Pain pierced the side of her head, and she dropped to the floor. As her eyes fluttered closed, the last thing she saw was Shelby’s blank, lifeless face.

CHAPTER TWO

Icy, cold air woke her. Her body shuddering, Lina opened her eyes and blinked. She could see nothing and, for an instant, wondered if she had been struck blind. The darkness was total and complete. She tried to sit up and then groaned as agony ripped through her head. Her mind searched for answers, and in a flash, she remembered. Shelby was dead. Masked men had attacked the embassy. She remembered a man telling her to come with him, and she had refused. She remembered that same man had walked toward her, and then pain had exploded in her head. He must have hit her

with his gun. She touched the tender spot on the side of her head and winced at the knot that had formed.

Where was she? Gritting her teeth, she tried once again to sit up and finally made it. Nausea roiled in her stomach, and she swallowed hard to avoid vomiting. When she finally felt a little steadier, she swung her legs off the cot she was lying on and took a breath to get her bearings.

What could she tell about her surroundings? It was dark, but she could hear voices, garbled and far away, but they were there. And she heard people walking. The steps were heavy, which made her think the people were likely wearing boots. Who were these people? The man who'd shouted at her had spoken English and had had no accent. Which meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.

She pushed her hands down on the cot and tried to stand. It took three tries. Darkness and pain whirled inside her head, but she finally managed to stay on her feet. Once she stood, she knew an instant of relief as if she'd done something proactive. She raised her head and saw a small window across from her that she hadn't noticed before. Stars were shining, and she spotted a tiny sliver of the moon.

The attack had happened around ten in the morning, and it was now nighttime. Was she even still in Paris? She had been unconscious for hours, so she could be anywhere.

Her hands out in front of her, she blindly took a step forward and then another. She counted twenty steps before she got to a thick wall. It felt like a concrete structure. She walked along the wall, feeling for a door as she went. She swallowed a sob when her hands found what felt like a steel door. Even knowing it was hopeless, she found the knob and twisted. Of course it was locked.

Swallowing her panic, she continued around the room and found a small sink as well

as a toilet. She twisted the faucet and was relieved that water flowed easily. Only cold water came out, but a handful splashed onto her face did wonders in waking her up. She swallowed several mouthfuls, and considering her churning gut, she was relieved that the liquid stayed down. Turning from the sink, she continued around the room until she found herself back at the cot.

Who were these people, and what did they want? Attacking an embassy was considered an act of terrorism. How many had they killed? Where were Francois and Herbert? Had they been hurt? Had anyone else been captured? If so, were they close by?

What did the attackers plan? A ransom demand? Her father would, of course, pay, but what about the other people? And sweet heavens, Shelby, her friend... Her sweet, beautiful friend was dead. Of that, she was certain. The reason that Shelby had had a gun was fairly obvious. She had thought her papa had been a little too keen on having Shelby live with her. He had acted as if he didn't know her but had told her she'd been checked out, and he believed she would be a good friend.

Based on how Shelby had acted, Lina was sure that she had been paid to protect her. She tried not to resent that. Shelby might not have been who Lina believed she was, but she had always been kind and hadn't deserved what had happened to her.

What was going to happen now? Would that man, or one like him, come back and hurt her again? They wouldn't just leave her here, would they?

She sat back down on the bed and considered her options. Once it was daylight, maybe she could find a way to climb through the window or, at the very least, look out of it to see where she might be. The window was high, so she wasn't tall enough to see outside, but perhaps if she stood on the bed. Was the cot secured in place?

She stood and tugged on the cot, swallowing a sob when she realized the frame was

bolted to the wall. There was no way she could move it. She dropped back onto the cot, covered her face with her hands, and prayed for a miracle.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Kidnapping had always been a possibility. It was the reason she had bodyguards. The knowledge was something she'd lived with all her life, but deep down, she had never considered that something could really happen. Not once in her twenty-one years had anyone made the slightest threat against her.

A surge of helplessness washed over her, and Lina did her best to squash the feeling. She had always been an optimistic person, believing that something good could be found in every situation. For the life of her, she could not fathom anything good coming from this. People were dead, Shelby was dead, and she, and who knew how many others, was being held hostage for heaven only knew what reason.

Wrapping her arms around herself for comfort, Lina closed her eyes and continued to pray for a miracle.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there. Perhaps only an hour, maybe longer, when she heard a noise outside the room. She stood, straightening her shoulders. She could not seem weak. She had been taught from an early age that you didn't show emotion. One of her first tutors had told her that what was going on in her own mind was no one's business.

Instead of the door opening, something was shoved through a slot at the bottom. Seconds later, the footsteps retreated. She inhaled, detecting a faint fruity aroma. Maybe an apple? Apparently, she wasn't to be starved to death.

She couldn't feel less like eating, but more out of curiosity than hunger, she followed the fragrance to discover the meager offering. A bottle of water, a prepackaged sandwich, something round and cold that she assumed was the apple, and a bag of

chips. It appeared everything had likely come from a vending machine.

Taking the water and food, she felt her way back to her cot and sat down again. The same questions continued to swirl through her tired mind. What were their intentions? Could she be the only hostage? Was the embassy attacked just to get to her? No, that made no sense. If someone wanted her, they could have easily gotten to her at her apartment or when she was out and about with just Shelby and her bodyguards.

Multiple guards stood in front of the embassy, not counting the security measures taken within the building. And she wasn't even that valuable of a target. Yes, her family had money to pay a ransom, but this had to be about more than just money. Didn't it? Why would someone kill just to get money?

Scooting up on the cot, she leaned back against the wall and reviewed what she remembered about the attack. There had been an explosion and the sound of gunfire. People had screamed, and security sirens had blared throughout the hallways. People had scurried back and forth, looking for the safest passage out. She had heard men shouting commands. The language had been French, but that didn't mean they were French terrorists. The majority of the people at the embassy were American, but almost everyone spoke French, so it made sense that they were issuing commands in a language people could understand. What had they said? She rubbed her aching head, trying to remember any specific orders. Nothing came to mind. She had been so focused on the man who had shot Shelby and attacked her, she hadn't comprehended anything else.

She could only imagine what her family was going through. Had her father been contacted? Did he know she had been taken? She thought about the pleas she had made to be able to work here in Paris. Her papa had not approved. He had thought it had been a huge thing to allow her to attend university in the US. But it had been a private university, and she'd had both her bodyguards with her. The majority of the people who'd attended the university had a similar background, so security was tight

to the point of suffocation. But it had given her more freedom than she'd ever had, and she had relished it.

When she had graduated, she knew her papa had wanted her to come home to stay and take up the responsibilities of her position. But that wasn't anything she had ever wanted. He had known that, and being away for three years had only intensified that need for independence. It had taken constant badgering and the support of her brothers for her to be able to convince him that she could work at the embassy in Paris. He had finally relented when she had convinced him that her position as an aide would be beneficial. And it had looked good to the press.

Could her papa survive losing another loved one? She had been just a toddler when her mother had died, but she knew from her brothers that the loss had almost destroyed her father. Then, six years ago, Samuel, her middle brother, had died in a motorcycle crash. The pain had ripped through her like a sword. Her papa had stayed busy to counteract his grief, and her two other brothers had seemed to draw into themselves. They had only recently started acting the way they once had. What was this going to do to them?

Her eyes blinked slowly, and she realized she was falling asleep. She fought against the drowsiness. Sleeping would make her even more vulnerable than she already was. She needed to be ready to fight when the time came. The feeling of helplessness intensified. Fight? She had no clue how to do that. For all her life, people had done that for her. She had been protected to the nth degree. If she had even skinned a knee or stubbed her toe, someone was there to make it better. There had been no need to protect herself—others would do that for her.

Shame and embarrassment washed over her. She had claimed she wanted independence, but how had she really done that? By continuing to rely on others instead of herself? For all her talk, she had done nothing significant to ensure she could be independent. She had merely changed locations and had done nothing to

really gain the independence she claimed to want.

At that moment, she vowed to herself that if she survived this ordeal, that would change. She would never be dependent upon others for her safety. She would learn how to fight, how to defend herself against the monsters of the world. And not only that, she would also learn how to defend others. If she had known what to do when the embassy had been attacked, she might have been able to save Shelby's life. Instead, her beautiful and courageous friend had died trying to protect her.

A noise outside her door caught her attention. More footsteps sounded. These were different, though. They were heavy, but they didn't sound like before. These steps seemed softer, lighter. She went to her feet and straightened her shoulders. She would face this challenge the way she had always faced adversity, with grit and determination and a mountain of pride. She was her father's daughter, and he had taught her to stand up and be brave. These people would never see the terrified, vulnerable young woman behind the façade.

This time, the door opened, and an overhead light flickered on. Lina closed her eyes against the glare of bright light. Opening them again, she blinked several times to focus on the figure in front of her. The man standing before her was familiar—achingly familiar. The expression on his face was one of deep concern. Relief washed over her, followed by confusion.

“Dirk?” Lina gasped, hardly believing her eyes.

“Lina, darling? Are you all right?”

“Did they take you, too? I thought you were in the US. How did they get you?”

“I came back early. Are you hurt?”

“No. Not really. I was hit in the head, but other than that, I’m fine. Were you hurt?”

“No. They held guns on some of us but didn’t hurt us.”

“How many are here?”

“It’s hard to say. Maybe a half dozen or so. You’re sure you’re okay? Nothing bleeding or broken?”

“No, I’m fine. Really.” A part of her wanted to go to him and let him hold her, but something held her back. Why was he so calm—so unrattled? And why did he look so immaculate and fresh, as if he’d just showered and changed before he’d walked in the door? She had no mirror, but she knew she was disheveled and stank of fear and sweat. Dirk, on the other hand, was dressed in a dark bespoke suit with a startling white shirt and light blue tie, as though he was prepared for a power meeting.

In a flash, the answer hit her and had her taking a step back. “You weren’t really taken, were you?”

The expression on his face changed from concern to an arrogant smirk. “You’re actually smarter than you look, babe. Of course I wasn’t taken, silly goose. I planned this entire event.”

Horror washed over her. “You did what? But why?”

Dirk took a step toward her and then stopped, the obnoxious grin and evil glint in his eyes completely incongruent with what he’d shown her before. Where was the charming, witty man who had gently wooed her? The man who’d told her silly jokes and had seemed almost as shy and awkward as she was? The man before her was like an evil doppelgänger.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“How could you do this, Dirk? People died. Shelby died!”

“Yeah, well. War is hell and all that.”

“War?”

“Relax, Lina,” he said dryly. “It’s just an expression.”

She could not fathom how she had ever found this man attractive. The wickedness in his expression and the cruelty in his eyes had turned his once handsome face into a dark, ugly mask of evil.

“Now, let’s talk about you.”

“Me?” She took another step back. “What about me? Is this for ransom?”

“The others are for ransom. You, my dear, are for something else.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

“You’re my reward.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means I get to do what I want with you.”

She backed up until the backs of her legs hit the cot. “I’ll kill you before I let you

touch me.”

He laughed and then, in a mocking, obnoxious tone, said, “You really bought my act, didn’t you?”

She ground her teeth together, refusing to answer.

“I have to admit, you were amusing. Your naïve, idealistic view of the world was entertaining. When you talked about world peace and how you believed that if people would just sit down and talk to each other, find some common ground, peace was possible, I was torn between killing you to end my misery or just walking away. Nobody would find that innocence and idealism remotely attractive.”

She stiffened her shoulders, refusing to be insulted. This man’s opinion meant nothing to her. “Then why didn’t you?”

“Because, baby, no matter how stupid and naïve you are, you’re worth a lot of cash.”

She told herself that her situation was much more dire than having her feelings hurt or her heart broken, but she couldn’t prevent the crushing weight on her spirit. She had always tried to look for the good in others and had truly believed that there was kindness in all people. In just a matter of minutes, this man had proven her wrong. There was nothing good inside him. He was evil personified.

His grin grew cockier. “Aw, don’t worry. We’ll find you someone special. There are already three I have my eye on. Their initial offers are quite intriguing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re my payday.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, my dear, that you’ve been put on sale.”

“Sale?” she said faintly.

“Yeah. You’re on the auction block. Like I said, I already have three offers. All of them are excited to get their hands on a real-life princess. I still think I can do better, though. I just need you to do something for me.”

She couldn’t back up any farther, and she had no special skills to protect herself.

She did the only thing she knew she could fight him with and that was words. Surely he had a conscience somewhere. “Don’t do this, Dirk. You’re better than this. Your father wouldn’t want you to do this. What will he think?”

“Oh, that was my only other request. Daddy dearest is already burning in hell.”

“Your father is dead?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Yep. I get you and freedom from dear old dad in one easy step. Double the pleasure, double the fun.”

“You’re a monster,” she whispered.

Ignoring her insult, he tilted his head and then gave a command that sent an icy shiver down her spine.

“Strip.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take your clothes off.” He held up his phone. “I need more photos. Maybe even a video. They need to see what they’re paying for.”

“No,” she ground out between clenched teeth. “I will absolutely not do that.”

“Okay. No problem.”

With those words, the door behind him opened, and two men, dressed in fatigues, their faces covered with masks, marched inside.

“Gentlemen, our prisoner is being obstinate. Take care of that, will you?”

She barely managed a shrieking scream before hard, giant hands reached for her, and a new nightmare began.

CHAPTER THREE

She had fought, and she had lost.

If anyone walked in, they might think she was dead. She was barely breathing, but mostly because breathing caused pain. Her nose, the body part she hated most, was broken. Of that, there was no doubt. Her jaw was hurting, too. She could barely open her mouth, so she thought it was likely broken as well. Her ribs were bruised, maybe cracked. The bruises around her throat where she'd been choked didn't hurt that much anymore, only when she tried to swallow. The bruises between her thighs were now only dull throbs.

She had been sexually assaulted, but she hadn't been raped—she told herself she should be grateful for that. It could have been so much worse. And she was grateful, but the biggest part of her felt nothing but despair. She had never felt more hopeless or helpless in her entire life.

Her body would heal. But the inside of her—her heart, her mind, her spirit—were destroyed. The optimistic young woman who had arrived in Paris with the spirit to take on the world and conquer it with joy and verve had disappeared and would never be again.

Her whole world had been turned upside down. Everything she had believed about humanity and the goodness of the human spirit had been destroyed. Oh, she had known there were bad people in the world. She was twenty-one years old and had never been one to bury her head in the sand. However, she had always believed the good outweighed the bad. Had believed that good triumphed over evil. She had believed in justice, in redemption and forgiveness. All of that was demolished. With one horrific act, all her beliefs lay at her feet like ashes. They could be swept away, trod upon, or blown up into the air. They were no more.

She had no idea how long she'd been lying here. It could have been only hours, perhaps days. She had faded in and out of consciousness numerous times, but she had no clear idea how long she'd been out each time.

The attack had been brutal and vicious. She had screamed, kicked, bitten, and scratched to no avail. Eventually, she had simply lain on the bed and let them maul her like wild beasts, posing her as they pleased while that vermin Dirk had taken photo after photo. Fighting them had turned into a painful, useless endeavor. They had taken pleasure in hurting her as well as humiliating her.

But it had been Dirk who'd delivered the vicious punches. In the midst of the most humiliating and disgusting moments of her life, she had watched him record her misery and shame. In a flash, something had come over her. She couldn't say what it was, other than pure, blind fury. For one millisecond, her abusers had lifted their hands from her body, and in that instant, she had sprung onto Dirk. She had knocked him to the floor, the phone had dropped from his hand, and she had scratched and clawed his face like a feral, wild beast. Her fingernails weren't very long, but they had managed to gouge several bloody rivets in his face.

His retribution had been fierce. He had picked her up and slammed her against the wall, choked her, and then had brutally beaten her. But even in the midst of intense pain, she had known a fierce pride in causing him damage.

Eventually, she'd gone somewhere else in her mind—a place no one could follow. A place none of them could touch. He had tried to get her to talk...tried taunting her with threats. Even though she hadn't reacted to his words or even allowed herself to acknowledge his existence, she had heard him. His taunts, his disgusting comments.

His intent was to sell her. She'd almost come out of her hiding place for a moment to remind him that she might be a hard sell at this point. There wasn't a place on her body that wasn't bruised or bloodied. And while she didn't have a mirror, she knew

her nose was swollen twice its size, and her face was covered in blood. He apparently didn't understand that damaged goods were likely not the best products to sell.

At that thought, a small flicker of fury shot up within her. Damaged goods? No, she was not damaged goods. She might be broken, she might be bruised, but she would rise above this hellhole, and she would rain down holy terror on those who'd done this to her. She was not her father's daughter for nothing. She had watched her papa make grown men cry and quake with fear. She would do the same.

A noise outside the door obliterated her haughty musings as terror returned. No, not again. She would not survive another attack. She could barely move, barely breathe. Please, dear Lord, no more.

The sound went away, and relief swamped her. Despair followed. How was she going to exact revenge when she had no way out? No hope? Nothing to hang on to?

Lina closed her eyes, feeling the tears seep out and slide down her damaged face. Helpless to do anything else, she lulled herself into a restless sleep, allowing her unconscious mind to dream of white knights dressed as armed men who had good, honorable intentions and could bust through concrete walls and cages of steel to destroy evil and wreak vengeance on the wicked. Were there people out there who could do this? In her dreams, there were, and that was the only place she felt safe anymore.

A loud blast jerked her awake. The entire room shook as if the wrath of God had arrived and was destroying the very foundations of the world. Lina tried to sit up, but the pain in her chest was almost unbearable. She looked up at the tiny window above her and thought she saw flares of red. Was the world on fire?

Screams, shouts, squeals of pain echoed through the walls. Heavy, booted feet sounded like they were running as they passed her door. She wanted to cry out, but

she caught herself, fearful that it was a trick. Maybe there were more evil people coming inside. Maybe they would hurt her even more. A whimper of terror escaped her lips. She would be silent as a mouse, and they would forget about her.

But what if they were good men? What if an army had come to save her, and she was too cowardly to speak up? Would they pass her by? Anxiety overcame the fear. She didn't want to be left behind!

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Help! Please!” she shouted. Only, it wasn’t a shout. Her voice was so weak, she barely heard herself.

Forcing her battered body to move, she ground her teeth together and sat up. The agony in her ribs almost caused her to black out again. Whimpering in pain, she kept going until her feet were firmly on the floor. She sat there for several seconds, trying to will herself to have the strength to move. Shivering, she remembered she wore no clothes. He had taken those from her, and she had nothing to cover herself with. There was nothing she could do about that, but she was determined that if rescue was at hand, she was going to do everything she could do to help rescue herself. She was tired of lying back and taking abuse. She hadn’t been raised to be downtrodden, to feel sorry for herself. She’d been raised to be a queen!

With more determination than strength, she forced herself to stand. Yes, everything hurt, but she wouldn’t let that stop her. She took one step, then one more. The door was only ten steps away. She could do it. She had to do it. Three steps more, and she hit the floor, face first. Pain burst through her as her damaged nose gushed more blood.

She lay there for several seconds, moaning. She knew her legs wouldn’t hold her. Her body might feel broken, but her grit and determination could not be destroyed. Going to her hands and knees, she ground her teeth together and crawled toward the door. Halfway there, the door opened, and despite the courage she had assured herself she still had, she couldn’t prevent herself from covering her head with her arms and curling up in a ball. She couldn’t take any more...she just couldn’t.

A gruff, male curse sounded, and then she felt a warm hand touch her shoulder.

“Lina, you’re safe.”

The voice was deep, warm, mesmerizing. She raised her head and tried to see him, but her eyes were so swollen, she saw only a blurred, large shadow. But she knew immediately that she was safe.

“Can you walk?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” she mumbled.

“Anything broken?”

“I don’t know. My nose...my jaw. Maybe my ribs. Fingers.” She swallowed. The pain in her jaw was so agonizing she could barely speak. “Mostly bruises.”

“Okay if I carry you? I’ll be careful.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

She knew he stood and couldn’t figure out what he was doing until she felt a jacket cover her nakedness. It was warm, heated from his body, and smelled masculine with a slight peppermint overtone. The scents gave her unexpected comfort.

When he lifted her, she knew a moment of panic, and as if he recognized the reason, he said softly, “No one will ever hurt you again, Lina. I promise.”

The vow followed her into darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Present Day

Cartagena, Colombia

Lying on the hard, unforgiving ground, her eyes focused on her target, Eve Wells shifted her position slightly. A rock was digging into her stomach, her nose was itching something fierce, and a stray strand of hair had loosened from her braid and was tickling the side of her face, but she had been trained to ignore such discomforts. What she couldn't ignore was the ant bed a few inches from her elbow. This spot was the perfect vantage point to take out her targets, but being stung by a thousand fire ants would definitely get her off her game.

She, along with OZ operatives Gideon Wright and Liam Stryker, were here as backup support for Olivia and Hawke. The sleaze responsible for almost killing Olivia was supposed to meet Hawke here for an exchange. What the bastard didn't know was the tables were about to be turned, and he was going to get a very nasty surprise.

While Gideon and Liam were on standby, able to assist Hawke and Olivia at a moment's notice, she was on top of a hill, a quarter mile away. Her job was to take out the lookouts on the watchtower. As she was OZ's primary marksman, she had performed this job on numerous occasions. With any luck, she'd be able to join Gideon and Liam in a matter of minutes.

Normally, Gideon would be up here with her as her spotter, but since they were working with a skeleton crew on this op, she'd have to make do. Looking down the sight of her AR-50, she observed the man on the watchtower. The guy wasn't even trying to hide. Seconds later, another man joined him. Even though he was holding binoculars to his face, apparently looking for a threat, his stance wasn't one of preparedness. He looked restless and bored, his attitude was more of a I-hope-this-is-over-before-lunchtime guy than a lean, mean bad guy.

Whoever was responsible for this threat against Olivia and Hawke hadn't hired the brightest or stealthiest of manpower, that was for sure. These people were making it

way too easy for her.

She continued to scan the area, waiting for the go-ahead to shoot. Taking them out too soon would alert the man inside the warehouse that Hawke and Olivia had brought along a few friends. Shooting too soon could ruin everything.

She spotted one more lookout on the ground, just below the other two men. At least this guy was hiding a little better than his friends. Still would be easy enough to take the shot when the time came.

If Gideon were here beside her, he'd be giving her a blow-by-blow of every movement, along with some witty quips. The man could make staring at a blank wall fun and interesting. It was just one of his gifts.

Sometimes, she wondered what her life would have been like if they'd never met. He had become so important to her. Imagining her life without him didn't seem possible. One thing was certain—her life wouldn't be nearly as interesting and enjoyable without him in it.

That first day, she had walked into the training facility, still damaged and broken, feeling so far out of her element it had taken everything within her not to turn around and run back home. And then Gideon had appeared and introduced himself. They had clicked as if they'd known each other for years. Since then, the two of them had been through numerous trials together, and things had been far from easy, but having Gideon with her every step of the way had made even the hard things so much better.

Not that she would tell him that. The man already had a Texas-sized ego.

Gideon's deep voice interrupted her thoughts, giving Olivia and Hawke the intel they needed. "Okay, you're about to enter the warehouse. Godspeed, you two."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Her eye on her targets, Eve listened closely to the back-and-forth of what was happening inside the warehouse that Olivia and Hawke had just entered. Just because she was on the outside and could see her targets didn't mean things couldn't change in the blink of an eye.

Her heart clutched at the sound of two shots being fired inside the warehouse. Seconds later, the noise of a hail of bullets raining down on Olivia and Hawke almost caused her to get up. She wanted nothing more than to go help her friends. That wasn't the plan, and she knew they could take care of themselves, but one bullet was all it would take to destroy them. They had been through so much already.

Her heart still pounding, she waited, not breathing. When she heard their voices again, she sent up a quick prayer of thanks. So far, so good.

Another voice sounded, less distinct this time since the man wasn't speaking into the mic. And then, a surprise twist. The man who'd tried to kill Olivia was her ex-fiancé? Things just got weirder.

"Eve, that's a go for you," Gideon said.

Adjusting the rifle's position for the slight change in wind variance, she peered through the sight, eased her finger on the trigger, and took the shot. The man fell from the tower onto the ground. Instead of hiding, the guard who'd been standing beside him looked toward the hill as if he could determine where the shot had come from, giving her the chance to take him out, too. These men really were amateurs.

She shifted her rifle slightly and took in the man on the ground. He was at the

warehouse door, looking like he was about to enter. She breathed through the tension and took the shot. The guy went down.

Sitting up, she used her binoculars to scan the entire area. Saw no one.

“Okay. All clear here,” she reported.

“Come join the party, Eve,” Gideon responded.

Out of habit, she quickly collected her hardware and then loaded the gun in the backpack, all the while listening to the happenings in the warehouse. The back-and-forth between Olivia, Hawke, and this Simon character was almost entertaining in its oddity.

She hopped onto the bike and headed the way she’d come. Shouldn’t take more than five minutes to get down there. Then she’d—

The bike shot up into the air as if pulled up by a whirlwind. She barely had the thought that the tire had hit a rock the wrong way before she went one way, and the bike went another. Her body soared through the air and landed with a resounding and agonizing thud. All breath left her lungs. Pain pierced her head.

“Eve? Eve, can you hear me?”

She opened her eyes and blinked at Gideon, surprised to see him hovering over her. Why was he here? Her thoughts were blurred, confused, as her mind whirled with questions. She tried to speak, to say his name, but she couldn’t make her mouth form a word.

“No, Eve, sweetheart. Keep your eyes open. Look at me... That’s it. Stay awake for me. Okay?”

She wanted to agree with him, wanted to do what he asked of her, but darkness was quickly taking over again, and she could no longer fight it. She had the thought that if this was it, if she was going to die right now, having Gideon's face as the last image she saw would be fitting. He meant the world to her.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to fade away.

A roaring noise woke her, and she felt as if she were floating. No, not floating. She was in the helicopter they'd arrived in for the op. And instead of backing up Olivia and Hawke, she had apparently done something monumentally stupid.

A cervical collar encompassed her neck, she was on a stretcher, and Liam was flying the helicopter. Gideon was sitting beside her, holding her hand, and looking as grim as she'd ever seen him.

Oh, this was not good.

"Gideon," she whispered. His focus was on the skyline, and the noise of the chopper's blades was so loud, he couldn't hear her.

She squeezed his hand to get his attention. His head jerked down, and he locked eyes with her. "Eve?"

A smile seemed a bit beyond her abilities, but she shifted her mouth a little, hoping it would give him some kind of comfort.

He leaned close so she could hear him. "You're going to be fine. Understand?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"We're almost at the hospital. Just a couple more minutes."

“How bad?”

“Not bad.”

She wanted to believe him, but when he raised his head, she saw the grimness of his face and the dark concern in his eyes. A wave of dizziness swept over her, and she closed her eyes again.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Her last thought before unconsciousness took her again was that as long as Gideon was beside her, everything would be all right.

* * *

St. Lucia Hospital

Cartagena, Colombia

Guilt clawing at his gut, Gideon looked down at the broken and bruised woman lying on the hospital bed. A broken leg and collarbone, fractured ribs, and a concussion were serious but thankfully not life threatening, especially for someone as healthy and fit as Eve. Still, to see her like this, helpless and hurt, shredded his insides.

He had failed at his responsibilities. Not only did seeing her like this crush his soul, what had to happen now because of her injuries would destroy them. He had no choice, though. This was what he'd signed up for...what he had agreed to. He'd just never thought it would end like this.

Knowing he had no choice, Gideon grabbed his phone and made the call. After a series of beeps, a voice said, "Report."

"I need an extraction."

"How many?"

"Two."

“Condition.”

“One serious but stable. Other is fine.”

Fine was a relative term, because when Eve learned the truth, there would be a reckoning between them. One he’d known would one day come, but damned if he was ready for it.

Gideon didn’t miss the slight gasp when he announced Eve’s condition to the man on the other end of the call. There would be hell to pay in more ways than one.

“Thirty minutes,” the man responded.

Pocketing his phone, he pressed a soft kiss to Eve’s forehead, well aware that this might be the last time he would be allowed to touch her. When she woke and learned the truth, she wouldn’t want to see him ever again, much less let him get near her.

Regret lying heavy on his heart, Gideon turned away to get ready for the day he’d dreaded for years.

Come what may, when Eve woke at her new location, nothing would ever be the same again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bien Espoir Hospital

Amelie

Ile de la Lune

Pain surrounded her, distant but there, hovering on the edge. A part of her mind told her she needed to wake up, get her ass in gear. Important things were going on, and she was missing them. Another part was just as satisfied to keep her eyes closed and delay the inevitable. Something was telling her that when she did open her eyes, everything would have changed. She wasn't a big fan of change. She liked things the way they were.

A shuffling noise at her side and a calloused hand tenderly caressing her hand told her she wasn't alone. She knew who was here with her. His presence was always bigger than life. From the moment she'd met Gideon Wright, he had been an integral part of her. Her best friend, her rock when everything else seemed to be falling apart. The man who had never let her down. What would she do without him?

She was glad she didn't have to answer that question.

As her thoughts coalesced and settled, she remembered what happened. She'd been on a dirt bike, headed down a hill. The front tire had bounced against a rock. The image in her head of her soaring through the air and slamming to the ground wasn't a pretty one. She barely remembered the intense pain. What happened after that was a blur. Though she did remember Gideon telling her to stay with him, to not close her eyes. She had absorbed his voice like a panacea to her pain, giving her the strength she'd needed.

There was a vague recollection of a stranger's voice discussing broken bones and the possibility of surgery. That hadn't sounded good.

She shifted her body slightly and then frowned at the low moan she gave at the flicker of pain. That wasn't like her at all. She'd taken ten times this amount of pain and hadn't faltered.

Her eyelids fluttered, weighing heavier than she could fathom.

“That’s it, beautiful. Come back to me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Gideon's voice again, this time sounding even more gruff and strained. Fighting against the need to let unconsciousness carry her away again, she blinked and finally managed to lift her heavy eyes to stare up at him blurrily.

"Please tell me all my body parts are functioning," she murmured groggily.

"That, my darling Eve, is something you'll have to figure out for yourself. But according to the doctors, all visible body parts are functional, although a few of them are slightly dented and are going to need some time to heal."

Managing to open her eyes all the way, she noted the exhaustion in his beautiful eyes and the worry tugging at his mouth. Her heart turned over at the sight. It was good to know that even gorgeous, self-possessed men like Gideon Wright could get frazzled.

She cleared her throat and said raspily, "You look like the back end of a southern donkey."

His mouth tilted in a crooked grin. "Now that is one of the worst insults you've ever dealt me."

"What? I heard it on a TV show last week."

"I think you mean the south end of a northbound horse."

"Oh. Guess that makes more sense."

"And besides, if anyone looks like the south end of anything, it's you."

She grimaced, fearing the worst. “My nose hasn’t been rearranged on top of my forehead, has it?”

“No, but now that you mention it, your left ear does appear to be several inches lower than your right one.”

“Liar. Besides, that would only make me more beautiful.”

“Impossible.”

She grinned, then winced when she realized that, along with the rest of her body, her face kind of hurt, too.

“Here, let me help you sit up.”

She heard a motorized sound, and her head and back moved slowly upward until she was sitting in a semi-upright position. Movement was painful but bearable. Before she could ask for it, a small glass of water with a straw was placed in her right hand.

“Slow sips.”

She swallowed several mouthfuls and felt more human with each one. Handing the glass back to him, she said, “Okay, so what’s the damage?”

He told her quickly, which she appreciated. Learning she had good reason for her pain didn’t really help.

“How’s my bike?”

“Dented but repairable.”

“Just like me.”

“Yes, but I’d say you got the worse end of the deal.”

She moved uncomfortably and then jerked to a stop as memory flooded her brain.

“The op! Olivia and Hawke. Are they okay?”

“They’re fine. I’ll tell you all about it soon.”

“Why not now?”

“Because there’s something else you need to know before we go any further.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re home. In Ile de la Lune. In Amelie.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Groaning, she glanced toward the window to her right and saw the familiar mountain range of her homeland. “Let me guess. My father probably knew about the accident five minutes before it happened.”

There was no point in bemoaning the news. She would get the best medical care here, and then she would leave again. Nothing had changed. She had made that choice long ago.

“Close to it,” Gideon said. “We were picked up a few hours after it happened.”

“Thank you for coming with me. I’m sure that was no fun.”

When he didn’t answer right away, she knew all was not right. “Uh-oh, Papa didn’t give you a hard time, did he?”

Her closest relatives knew that Gideon was her best friend and had every right to be wherever she was, but with a family as opinionated as hers was, there were always differing views of how things should be done.

“No, everyone has been very gracious.”

“Good.” Her father was likely a nervous wreck. Her brothers were probably just as bad. They would have so many questions she didn’t want to answer. Over the years, her father had come to terms with both her profession and her chosen way of life, but her brothers had been kept out of the details. They knew almost nothing about her real life.

But to all of them, seeing her like this would be a dark reminder of horrific things they'd all tried to forget.

"There's something else you need to know, Eve."

Frowning at the grave expression on his face, she whispered, "Something's happened. Tell me quick. Who's hurt?"

"No one. It's not that."

"Then what, Gideon? You're scaring me."

"I don't just work for Option Zero. I have another responsibility."

She struggled to comprehend what he was trying to tell her. Admittedly, her head was pounding, and her body felt as if she'd gone twelve bouts with a heavyweight fighter, but she shouldn't be this slow on the uptake.

"What are you talking about?"

"You, Eve. You're my responsibility."

Relief flooded her, along with a wave of adoration for this wonderful man. "Of course I'm your responsibility, Gideon. Just like you're mine. We take care of each other. That's who we are."

"No. Not like that."

"I don't understand. What are you trying to say?"

"I work for your father. I have for years. I was hired to protect you."

All air left the room. Everything within Eve froze. She thought perhaps her heart had stopped beating, too, and a small part of her said that was okay, because if it didn't stop beating, then it was going to shatter into infinitesimal fragments.

"How long?" Her voice sounded dry, unemotional, as though she didn't care. But his answer to this question might well be the most important one of all. Everything depended upon this answer.

When he blew out a ragged sigh, she could tell Gideon knew exactly how important the answer would be and that it was going to destroy them.

"A little over ten years."

And there went her heart, shattering into a billion little pieces. Before she allowed herself to acknowledge the pain, every muscle in her body clenched in fury. Blood pumped through her veins with a vicious surge of anger.

She could see the distress on his face, the tension around his eyes and mouth. He knew exactly what she was thinking and feeling. That was the problem with knowing each other so well. It was hard to hide feelings.

But apparently, it wasn't hard for him to hide other things.

Betrayal. There was no other word for it, but what a silly-sounding, innocuous term for such a painful event. She had been betrayed in the past, in a hideous, brutal way, but this? She knew in her heart she would never recover from this one.

"Talk to me, Eve," Gideon said. "Yell at me. Just say something."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

This was a man she'd thought she'd known better than even herself. There had never been secrets between them. They knew each other so well it was sometimes like they were one entity. She had never trusted anyone the way she had Gideon Wright. He had known how hard it was for her to give her trust. He knew what she had endured. She had told him everything. And now it was apparent she hadn't needed to, as he had likely already known.

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice was rough, her throat so dry she wasn't sure there was enough water in the world to wash away the pain.

"Scream. Curse. Call me names. Whatever you need to do."

"Would that be for my benefit or yours?"

He was silent, because they both knew what he wanted. He wanted her to snarl at him, give him a piece of her mind, and then get over it. Any other time they'd had a disagreement, they'd bluntly given their opinions, gotten everything out in the open, and then it had been done.

But this wasn't a disagreement. This was the absolute annihilation of a friendship that she had treasured above any others.

"I'm deeply sorry, Eve. I never meant to hurt you."

Pretty words could not fix this. Apologies were for things you hadn't meant to do. This had been deliberate. A deception of the worst kind. He knew she trusted almost no one, and he knew why. And yet, he had done this to her.

She wanted to scream at him. Shout out her fury and anger. She couldn't. Later maybe, but not right now. She glanced down at her body. For now, she was a prisoner of her injuries. A broken leg would mend. Her shoulder would heal. It would take a few weeks before she got past the dizziness caused by the concussion. The broken ribs were a painful reminder with every breath she took, but that, too, would eventually ease. In time, all of those things would go away.

This pain was here to stay.

"Is my family outside?" Her voice sounded empty and colorless, just the way she felt.

"Just your father. Your brothers are out of the country."

"Ask my father to come in."

"You might want to consider looking in the mirror first."

Ugh. He was right. When had she become so comfortable and blasé about her appearance? From an early age, she had been taught that no matter how you really felt, your appearance was of utmost importance. She had pushed aside many teachings of her past, but that was one she'd always tried to adhere to. It had saved her ass on numerous occasions.

Before she could ask, Gideon handed her a mirror, a hairbrush, and her cosmetic bag. This man who had betrayed her knew everything about her. It was all she could do not to sob at the loss.

Stiffening her spine, she held the mirror in her hand and groaned. This was not good. Even a skilled cosmetician couldn't hide the massive bruise on her cheek and two black eyes. Not to mention the tape running across her nose.

“What’s wrong with my nose?”

“You had a small gash across the bridge. Doctor sewed it up, but you might need plastic surgery to repair the scar.”

That would be a big no, thank you very much. Her first and only experience with plastic surgery had been an unmitigated disaster. Not because it hadn’t been successful, but because it had been too successful.

But that was the least of her worries right now. She raised the brush for a quick repair of her hair. Problem was, she was left-handed, and though she could shoot a gun with either hand, she couldn’t do squat with her hair with the wrong hand.

“Can I help?”

Any other time, he would have just taken the brush from her without asking and helped. His asking showed just how far apart they were now.

She shook her head and just made do with a few inept sweeps of the brush. Having him touch her right now might push her over the edge, and she had a long way to go before she allowed herself to drop that low. Only when she was completely alone would she allow herself to grieve.

She opened her makeup case, gave herself a few swipes of blush, because her light olive skin was seven shades lighter than it should be. When she saw how fake the color looked, she wiped it off with a cotton ball and closed the bag.

What did it matter how she looked? Nothing was going to make her appear less injured.

“Ask him to come in.”

“Eve, please,” Gideon said quietly. “I am deeply sorry. I was only trying to keep you safe. I never meant to hurt you.”

She allowed her eyes to roam his face, seeing his sincerity. This man—this gorgeous, handsome man who had been her confidant, her best friend, her partner, her everything for over ten years—was a fraud.

She believed he hadn’t meant to hurt her...she truly did. That changed nothing. He had lied to her, manipulated her, and made her need him. Forgiving him, no matter how he hadn’t meant to hurt her, was just not in her. He had knowingly done this all on his own.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She'd been a job to him. Maybe he did care for her, but how could that negate the betrayal? The absolute lies he'd told? Nothing would ever make this all right. And there wasn't a thing he could say to fix it. This—whatever they'd had—would remain broken, gone forever.

“Please tell my father I'm ready to see him.”

“Very well.”

He walked to the door. Before he could open it, she said, “Oh, and, Gideon.”

When he turned to look at her, she hardened her heart and said the words that would completely destroy what they'd once been.

“I'm no longer Eve to you. Please address me properly.”

The instant the words left her mouth, she wanted to call them back. Before she could apologize, a cold mask settled on his face, and ice coated his eyes. “Very well, Your Royal Highness, I'll inform the king you're ready to receive him.”

The instant the door closed, a lone tear rolled down the princess's face.

CHAPTER SIX

Gideon walked out of the hospital a different man than when he'd entered it. He had known nothing would ever be right between them again, but he had never considered the toll it would take on him physically. His gut roiled with the need to spew the

vileness inside him. She had put him in his place, and he felt like a slug. Knowing that she had every right to her indignation and anger did nothing to soothe the riotous emotions.

He felt like shit and didn't see that changing any time soon.

Standing in the parking lot of the small hospital, he drew in a deep breath of pure, fresh air. It had been years since he'd been back home. His brothers and sister were now spread across the globe. Other than memories, both good and bad, there had been nothing left for him here. His place had been with Eve.

Amelie, the capital city of Ile de la Lune, had been an ideal place to grow up. Ile de la Lune was one of the smallest countries in the world. Nestled at the tip end of France, the country was only a hundred and twenty years younger than Monaco, its neighboring country. Established in 1235 by the Wellingsley family, it had been ruled by them ever since. Though not actually an island, it wasn't as easily accessed as most other countries in Europe. As it had mountains on one side and the Mediterranean Sea on the other, most tourists opted for its much flashier neighbor, Monaco. With a population that rivaled some small US cities, it was easily overlooked or ignored by the world. That was the way most people who lived here preferred it.

Eve came back for Christmas each year and had always invited him to come with her. He had always declined, giving her the excuse of visiting his own family. He usually ended up going to the home of one of his siblings for the holidays. Coming here with her would have exposed him to all sorts of questions that he hadn't been prepared to answer.

Now the biggest of his secrets had been revealed, and everything had changed.

They would have to talk. He had to find a way to make her understand why he had

deceived her. It would take her some time to forgive him. He refused to believe that she wouldn't. Not only was Eve too levelheaded to not see his point of view, the bond they shared was too strong to be destroyed.

They were too solid, too good together not to get past this. Yes, it would be a monumental hurdle, but they'd faced difficulties in the past and had overcome them. He had to believe they would weather this storm as well.

He was more than aware that he was trying to convince himself of something that might not happen. Eve had major trust issues. For good reason. She wore the scars, both inside and out, daily.

This wasn't the same. Surely she would be able to see that.

"Monsieur Wright?"

Gideon turned and faced two men dressed as palace guards. "Oui?"

"Please come with us."

"Why?"

"You are to report to Chief Inspector Clement."

"And again, I'll ask why?"

"To discuss the situation with the princesse."

Chief Inspector Jeremy Clement was in charge of the palace guards. Gideon didn't work for the man, and he was most definitely not a palace guard. Still, out of curiosity, he followed the men to their vehicle. Any situation that involved Eve he

was definitely interested in hearing. She might hate him right now, but that would never keep him from his need to protect her.

Half an hour later, sitting in the inspector's office, he was wishing he hadn't bothered. Not only was the guy the same asshole he'd always been, but he was also on a fishing expedition. He'd spent the first half of their meeting trying to find out where Gideon and Eve worked. The second half was spent on his opinion of Gideon's poor job performance.

Nothing much had changed about Clement. Still skinny, still bald, still mean as a snake. The lines on his narrow face had deepened into furrows, and his brows might have gotten a little shaggier, but all in all, the man had changed little over the two decades since Gideon had last seen the creep.

What confounded him, though, was the knowledge that Clement had regarding Eve. When Gideon had made the contract with the king, they'd agreed to keep their agreement to themselves. Even though he was sure the king had shared the information with some of his closest advisors, the man in front of him should have no knowledge of it.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Since you seem to have a low opinion of my job performance, want to tell me what you know about it?”

“That’s confidential.”

“Since it’s my job,” Gideon said dryly, “I believe I’m in the loop.”

Clement pursed his mouth like a prune and said nothing.

Continuing to dig, Gideon asked, “What, in your opinion, are my duties?”

“That’s not for me to say. However, you have done poorly.”

Standing, he nodded toward Clement. “Good talk.” He turned and headed toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Gideon glanced over his shoulder. “I’d say that’s none of your business, but that seems like such an obvious answer, so I’ll just say sod off and leave it at that.”

“Guards!” Clement shouted.

Two guards pushed the door open. Each grabbing one of Gideon’s arms, they held him still.

Partly outraged and partly amused, Gideon turned back to Clement. The man had a

smug, self-satisfied smirk on his face that Gideon was dying to wipe off. He'd despised this man from their first meeting and hadn't believed it could get worse.

"You want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

"With pleasure," Clement snarled. "You're being held until further questioning."

"On what grounds?"

"Dereliction of duty."

"Since you have no idea what my duties are, you're in no position to arrest me. I do not work for you."

"It was not my order, though I am gladly obeying it."

"On whose orders?"

"The king's."

Other than a brief conversation regarding Eve's injuries, Gideon had yet to speak with Eve's father, but there was no way he would have ordered this arrest. Clement was taking it upon himself, and that wasn't something Gideon would allow. Until he heard the words directly from the king, his job was intact, and his priority was still Eve.

One of the guards tugged him forward. Gideon struck hard, whacking the man across the face. Not pausing, Gideon turned to the other guard and punched his nose. Blood spewed from both men, and they dropped their hands from him, grabbing their faces.

Since he hadn't anticipated any danger, he was without his gun. However, that didn't

mean he was weaponless. Gideon had learned the hard way to never go anywhere unprepared.

Keeping his eyes on the two bleeding men, he slid his knife from his boot. It might not stop a bullet, but he could throw with deadly accuracy.

“One of you will not be going home to your family tonight,” he said softly. “Which one is it going to be?”

Before either of them could answer, Clement shouted, “Attaquer! Attaquer!”

The door flew open. Four more guards, looking like clones of the first two, rushed in. All hell broke loose. Opting to hang on to the knife for now, Gideon picked up the chair in front of him and slammed it into the first guard who reached him. Whirling, he double-kicked another one who jerked on his arm, causing the man to fly across the room. Two more came at him, and he took hold of them both with the intention of knocking their heads together. A sharp pain slammed into the back of his head, ramping up the fury flooding his veins. Leaping across the desk, Gideon grabbed Clement, who’d been standing there, watching the fight with that obnoxious smirk still in full force.

Taking hold of the inspector, Gideon pressed his knife against his neck and snarled at the guards, “Back off, or you’re going to need a new boss.”

“You’ll never get away with this, Wright,” Clement rasped.

“Maybe not, but you won’t be around to see it.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Two armed men stood before him. Four others lay on the floor, either unconscious or faking it. Gideon couldn't tell. No way in hell had the king authorized this. Gideon and Clement had a darker past than most people knew about, but this had come out of left field. Did the man really think he could get away with this?

What Clement's true motivation was would have to be delved into at another time. Right now, he had to get out of here without any bullet holes.

"Move aside," Gideon growled at the guard standing at the door. "I'll release him once I'm clear."

"You think you're going to walk out of the castle with me as your prisoner?" Clement snarled. "You're delusional."

"I'm not going to leave the castle. I'm going straight to the king."

The increased tension in Clement's shoulders confirmed Gideon's suspicions. Clement had taken it upon himself to dole out this punishment. The arrogant, sadistic prick shouldn't even be allowed to have close proximity to the royal family, much less be in charge of protecting the castle.

"The king gave me authority to detain you."

"He may have given you authority to talk to me, but no way in hell would he approve this, and you know it."

"Fine." Clement nodded toward the guards. "Stand down."

Weapons were put away, but the hyperalertness in their eyes didn't diminish.

"Let's walk out together," Gideon said.

Keeping his eyes on the guards, he pushed Clement forward. Five feet from the door, agony struck his body. Knowing he had been tasered did nothing to stop the pain. With fury fueling his awkward movements, Gideon tried to will himself to turn. He managed one halfhearted punch to the closest guard, but when another one tased him again, he went down. The last thing he saw was a giant boot headed to his face and then nothing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eve barely had the chance to compose herself before the door opened. The instant her father entered the room, her heartbreak and pain were shoved to the back of her mind. It had been months since she'd seen him, but he appeared to have aged ten years since that time.

Oliver Wellingsley III, the King of Ile de la Lune, epitomized the very essence of royalty. At seventy-seven he had the build of a man twenty years younger. He was broad-shouldered with a head full of thick iron-gray hair, dark blue eyes, a sharp, aristocratic nose, and the cheekbones of his Slavic ancestors. But today, for the first time, she thought he looked his age.

"Papa, are you all right?"

"I believe those should be my words, my darling Lina."

Perhaps so. She knew some of the worry in his eyes was because of her. She had not been an easy child to raise, and as an adult, she knew he worried about her more than his other children.

Eve had been a midlife surprise for her parents. With three teenage boys, they had believed their baby-making days were over. And then Eve had happened. To say she had been a challenge would be a huge understatement. Her father claimed she came out of the womb independent and stubborn. She couldn't argue with him on either claim.

She remembered little of her mother. When Eve had been two years old, her mother had stumbled over a rug and fallen down the stairs, cracking her skull. She'd died instantly. Eve remembered gentle words and soft kisses, and that was about all.

Her father had raised three sons and an infant daughter, while ruling over a country. She loved and admired him more than words could say.

He took her hand and kissed it softly. "You have given me more nightmares than both your brothers combined."

Even after all these years, it still hurt for him to refer to only two brothers, instead of three. Losing Samuel had been devastating. Her father rarely mentioned him anymore, and that bothered her more than she wanted to admit. She knew it was his way of coping with the loss, but it still seemed wrong.

She couldn't, however, argue with his statement about causing him nightmares. Her brothers were the very definition of toeing the line and following tradition. Nicolas was fourteen years older than Eve. Samuel had been twelve when she was born, and Alexandre, her youngest brother, was ten years older. They had all been the epitome of perfect children.

"I know, Papa. I'm sorry to worry you, but I will heal. There's nothing to be concerned about. How are my brothers?"

"Doing well. They're both out of the country on business but will be back soon."

“And my sister-in-law and nephews?”

“Everyone is well and healthy. They wanted to come, but since we want to keep you as low profile as possible, you’ll see them at another time.”

She loved Nicolas’s wife, Camille, and their sons dearly, but it was a relief that they weren’t here. Andre was eighteen, Pierre was sixteen, and Leo had just turned twelve. They were all well-behaved children, but putting on an act for her father was hard enough. Pretending to a large group, no matter how much she adored them, would be more than she felt capable of right now. Besides that, there was always some member of the press looking for a story on the royal family. The last thing she wanted was to have them find out she had returned home.

“And Uncle Jacques? How is he?”

“As irascible as ever.”

Jacques was her father’s younger brother as well as his closest advisor.

“And his current wife? Monique?”

“No longer current. Ex.”

“Already? It’s only been a few months.”

“Eight, to be exact. As we both know, Jacques isn’t known for his best choices when it comes to spouses.”

Since Monique had been his fourth wife, Eve couldn’t argue with that claim.

“Is he brokenhearted?”

“Yes, but only because they didn’t sign a prenuptial agreement.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yes,” her father said dryly.

Hard to believe that a man who made such poor choices in his personal life could be such an excellent advisor to the king, but she knew there was no one her father trusted more.

“And you, Papa? You are well?”

“Of course I am, Lina. You are the one who is hurting.”

Recognizing she would get nothing from him now, she allowed him the subject change. However, there was something going on with him. Something that hadn't been there the last time she'd seen him. She would wait until she was more capable of sound thought before she would dig deeper.

Careful of her aching ribs, she took a long, shallow breath. This, however, couldn't wait. She could no longer put off the inevitable. Giving her father an accusing glare, she said, “So Gideon is your employee? Papa, how could you?”

“Lina.” The sigh he released was long, frustrated, and a familiar one. “I am not only the king, but I am also your father. I gave you the autonomy you needed and requested. However, it will never negate my need to take care of you and keep you safe.”

“I requested no bodyguards. You agreed.”

“Has Gideon impeded your life in any way? Stopped you from living the way you wanted?”

Of course he hadn't, but that wasn't the point.

“You both lied to me.”

“No, we didn't, Lina. Gideon is your partner and friend, but he was also charged with making sure you stayed safe. I was able to allow you the freedom you requested because of him.”

“He is your employee.”

“Not anymore.”

“He quit?”

“No, but he will be relieved of his duties.”

“You’re going to fire him?”

“He failed to do his job.”

“How so? The accident wasn’t his fault.”

“Doesn’t matter. His job was to keep you safe. He didn’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

That was a ridiculous assertion. Gideon had had nothing to do with her getting injured. Why this bothered her so much, she didn't know. It wasn't as if Gideon would have kept the job now that she knew the truth. But she didn't like her father's words. One would think she wouldn't care what was said about the man who'd lied to her for over ten years. Apparently, one would be wrong.

"Gideon did not fail at his job. I wrecked my bike. It was my stupid mistake and not his."

"He broke his vow."

"And what was the vow?"

"That's a business matter between the two of us. It doesn't concern you."

"I beg to differ. Since it's about me, it most certainly does concern me."

"Very well. He vowed that you would never be hurt on his watch."

She shook her head. Why on earth would Gideon make that kind of promise? "That's insane—a promise that no one could possibly keep. You knew that going in. He was set up to fail."

"He was the one who made the offer."

Why would Gideon do that? It made no sense. As hurt as she was at his deception, she regretted not talking this out with him. As soon as she felt remotely better, she

would ask him to come back and tell her his reasons. It didn't mean she would forgive him, but there had to be more to this than she was seeing right now.

"I'm a grown woman, Papa. I have black belts in several martial arts. I'm a trained sniper. I've rescued, I've killed, and I've taken down men three times my size. I can take care of myself. I don't need anyone's protection."

"This isn't a conversation I'm interested in pursuing at this time."

When she was a little girl, her brother Samuel had told her that one look from her father's eyes could incinerate a man. He'd been teasing her, but over the years, she'd seen that look make many people visibly tremble. Even now, as a fiercely independent woman, that penetrating glare could give her goose bumps.

There was no point in asking why he'd done this. She knew why. And arguing would do no good. What she most wanted to know now were Gideon's reasons.

As if the subject was completely closed, her father said gruffly, "The doctors said you can come home tomorrow. You'll use the private apartment on the south wing. It has a gym for your rehabilitation and is easily accessed through the private passageway."

Eve considered the statement. It was always a gamble coming back here. Even though she barely resembled the Princess Evangelina Wellingsley people remembered, the speculation that an unidentified female was staying at the castle might cause problems. Whenever she'd returned for the holidays, she'd always met her family at Nicolas's home, which was a giant fortress with as much security as the palace.

However, staying here might be her best option. Not only was her father looking completely freaked out by her accident, but she would also get the best care available. Besides, arguing that she would prefer to go elsewhere to heal and rehabilitate would

get her nowhere. It would be temporary, though. She had left this life behind years ago. There had been reasons, multiple reasons, but one thing she always wanted to hold on to was her family.

As if he thought she was looking to argue, her father added, “The private passageway will hide you from the public, Lina, and no one, other than your family and trusted staff, will know you’re there.”

“Very well, Papa. I’ll stay.”

Looking a little less stressed now that she had agreed, the king kissed her cheek. “I have an appointment across town and must leave. Is there anything you need before I go?”

Exhaustion suddenly hitting her hard, Eve shook her head. “No, I’m fine, Papa. Thank you.”

After her father left, Eve stared at the painting of one of her homeland’s lighthouses on the wall across from her but saw nothing but her own tortured thoughts.

Gideon.

Everything she’d ever believed about him, about their relationship, was changed forever. She could never look at him and see the man as she once had. The pain from that betrayal was far more hideous than any physical ache from her injuries. There could be no excuses, no good reason for him to do what he’d done. She had and always would hate liars. Gideon knew her history, knew of the betrayals she’d suffered, and yet, he had done this to her...to them.

For the past ten years, she’d done everything possible to be someone else. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of who she was, but she had never wanted to identify as a

member of a royal family. Did she love her family? Without question. Had she loved being a princess? Absolutely not.

And while what had happened to her wouldn't have occurred if she hadn't been Evangelina Wellingsley, Princesse d'Ile de la Lune, that wasn't the reason she had wanted to abdicate her royal duties. It had, however, been the tipping point. She had gone through hell and had come out on the other side a different person. Not only on the outside, but also inside. Her view of the world and almost every belief she possessed had been challenged and remolded. She had managed to hold on to the most solid ones, like family, loyalty, and integrity. But most of the others had either dissolved altogether or had been reformed into a different view.

Twelve people had been killed during the embassy attack. Three of those had been because of her. Her bodyguards, as well as Shelby, had died trying to save her life. The sorrow of that had weighed her down as much as the trauma of her attack.

Her father had hurt almost as much as she had, and when she'd finally come out of the depressive state she'd fallen into, he had been there, supporting her.

Was it naïveté or simply denial that had made her believe he had actually trusted her to take care of herself? Maybe a little of both. But what she had never once considered was that Gideon was the one he would use.

There was anger at her father's deception, but it was hard to stay that way. He had suffered tremendously, and she couldn't truly blame him for whatever he did to ensure his sanity. She had seen her father cry only twice. The first was when Samuel was killed. And then when he saw her after her rescue.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

But Gideon? The most significant relationship she'd ever had had been based upon a lie. Everything she had believed about him as her partner and her best friend was now in question. What was real, and what had he said or done because of his job?

Hey, Wells, you're with me.

Those words had been their beginning. When she had first started training, she had been so weak, so incredibly inept in how to defend herself. When Gideon had paired up with her, she had believed it was because she was not only inexperienced and new, but because he had seen her potential.

Then later, when she'd become proficient in her skills: Hey, Wells, let's do this together.

Would he have chosen her if he hadn't been paid to guard her?

And then, when she'd made the decision to leave her former life behind completely, he'd come to her with the idea. Want to partner up with me in something new?

Of course she had jumped at the chance. They had been good friends already and worked well together. He'd become so much more than just a partner in work—he had become...her everything.

What had been true and what had been done to keep her with him? What had he said because he was playing a part, and what had been real?

Had any of it been real?

She hadn't felt this lost since she'd been abducted and tortured all those years ago. At that thought, she drew herself up. Oh hell no. No way was she even going to entertain that thought. She was Eve Freaking Wells. When life gave her lemons, she didn't make lemonade. She pummeled the hell out of those lemons until they were pulverized. That's what she would do here.

Her relationship with Gideon did not define her. She'd had her heart broken before and had recovered. This would be no different.

But she wanted answers—she deserved answers. She wished she had asked for them when he'd first told her, but his confession had thrown her so far off-balance, she had barely been able to form a coherent thought.

She took a shallow breath and centered herself. Tomorrow, she would demand answers. He owed her that.

And if those answers broke her heart? Then she would deal with them, and Gideon would no longer be a part of her life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

House of Wellingsley

Royal Palace

Three days later, and Gideon still wasn't answering her calls or texts. That wasn't like him. Even when he was angry with her, he never backed away from confrontation. He'd get in her face, snarl or shout, and get his opinions out in the open. Admittedly, this was different from a slight disagreement, but still it made no sense that he hadn't responded.

Had she gone too far with her request that he address her formally? She closed her eyes. Of course she had. Because it hadn't been a request, it had been a command. She had heard her father and brothers use that tone a million times, but as far she knew, that time with Gideon had been her first. It was a tone to put someone in their place. The moment she'd said the words, she had regretted them. That wasn't who she was. No matter her anger against him, she shouldn't have spoken to him like that.

Had he decided to just leave? Was this the answer she'd been dreading? Had everything that had happened between them been because it was his job to protect her? And now that it was no longer his job, he had left her behind? Was what they'd had all been a lie?

No! She refused to accept that. There were real feelings between them. He couldn't fake his affection for over ten years. No way was it fake.

She leaned back against her pillow and blew out a sigh, wincing at the pull on her ribs. She had moved to the castle from her hospital room a couple days ago. Thanks to the secret passageways that only few outside the royal family knew about, her move here had been performed as covertly as an OZ mission. Other than their most trusted people, no one knew she was here.

To most of her country and the world, the Princess of Ile de la Lune was a recluse. The official announcement had been that due to the injuries sustained in the attack at the embassy, both physical and mental, she would no longer be able to perform any duties for the royal family. Eve had hated that she would always be seen as a victim, but the trade-off had been that she had been able to live her life without the trappings of royalty. At first, there had been a flurry of requests for interviews to talk about her trauma. She had, of course, declined all of them, and eventually the requests stopped. From time to time, someone would write an article, hoping to stir some interest. Fortunately, those were squelched quickly, and people went on to speculate about other things, leaving Eve to her obscurity, which was where she preferred to live.

It had been a hard transition for her family, especially for her father. He had lost so much already and had felt as if he were losing his daughter, too. With the help of her brothers and uncle, she'd been able to make him realize that she might be leaving the title, but she would never leave him or her family.

When he had finally accepted her decision, she had felt free for the first time ever. Which made her belief that he had accepted her decision to refuse protection even more ridiculous. She had believed she was long past naïveté, but that had been proven wrong.

How had he and Gideon come to know each other? It angered her that she hadn't asked such a basic question. There were so many things she didn't know, and no matter what her father said, this was most definitely her business.

She blew out a frustrated sigh. She hated to admit it, but she was bored. The necessity of keeping a low profile meant that visitors were few and far between. The apartment was slightly larger than the one she rented in Montana. With two bedrooms, a living room, office, sitting room, small gym, and an efficiency kitchen, it was a lovely, peaceful hideaway. But she wasn't used to hiding. At least not in this way. If she hadn't had the accident, she and Gideon would be up to their eyeballs in another OZ mission. Instead, she was trapped here, and she hated every part of it.

She'd had her first physical therapy on her shoulder today. Her leg would remain in a cast for another three weeks, then she'd have three more weeks of physical therapy. She was looking at a five-to six-week stay at a bare minimum. Keeping her sanity while she waited to heal might be the hardest part.

Her phone dinged, letting her know she had a text. Her heart dropped immediately when she saw it was from Ash. She had texted the OZ leader in the hopes that he'd heard from Gideon. Based on his response—Haven't heard from him in days—Ash had no idea where he was. That worried her even more. Gideon did not go off-grid.

That just wasn't him.

Ash's response was a reminder that she needed to give an explanation to her boss and her OZ teammates. She had great respect for Asher Drake, as well as the other OZ operatives. They deserved answers to the multitude of questions they'd sent her. Other than Gideon, no one knew her real identity. Not even Olivia, the person she'd always looked upon as a sister, knew the truth.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She had a lot of explaining to do. And she would do that soon. But for now, she needed to find Gideon. She reread the texts she had sent him. She had told him they needed to talk. She had described what he needed to do to be able to enter the castle and get to her apartment. She'd even used an emoji. It wasn't a smiley face, but she'd thought it softened what might look like another command. Still nothing.

She'd informed both the day and night butlers that when Gideon showed up, he was to be allowed entry and sent directly to her apartment.

The knock on her door had her heart picking up. Maybe instead of answering her text, he had decided to come directly here.

"Come in," she called.

She heard footsteps, and then her father peered inside the room. "How's my angel doing?"

She couldn't help but smile. Not many people would agree with his nickname for her.

"I'm much better, Papa."

She noted his deep blue suit and light blue tie made his eyes even more distinctive. She had inherited her mother's ink-black hair, heart-shaped face, and slender frame, but her eye color was from her father, as her nose had been. It was hard to believe she still felt a tug at her heart for the loss. Before the horror of her kidnapping from the embassy, her nose had been the bane of her existence. With all her heart, she had wanted to change it into a more attractive size and shape. Because of her injuries,

surgery had been necessary. What she hadn't anticipated was that her father, who'd only wanted to see her happy again, had arranged for her to have exactly what she had asked for—a perfect, beautiful nose. And she had discovered how wrong she had been to want to look different.

“I've come to talk with you about Gideon.”

Her heartbeat jumped. “Why? What's going on? He's not responding to my texts or calls. Do you know where he is?”

“He's been incarcerated.”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about?”

“Apparently, he attacked a couple of the castle guards and had to be detained.”

Gideon attacking anyone without provocation wasn't possible. He was the most principled and even-tempered person she knew.

“If Gideon was in some kind of altercation, it was because he was attacked and was defending himself.”

“According to Clement, Gideon provoked the attack. Two of the guards had to be hospitalized.”

Jeremy Clement was an incompetent idiot. When she'd heard he had been promoted to head of the castle guards, she'd been shocked. Eve did not trust his word or judgment. In her experience, he was both inept and evil, and that was a dangerous combination.

If she'd learned anything from Gideon, it was to hold on to her temper. He had talked

her down numerous times, and she could hear his voice in her head telling her to get all the details before she exploded. With that thought, she settled herself and held her temper. Making demands to her father was not the way to go. Her father was both loving and kind, but when it concerned his responsibilities as king, he would not tolerate disrespect.

“Where is Gideon being held?”

“He’s in the cells here.”

Rage began to bubble. “The dungeon?”

“That’s not what it’s called anymore, but yes, I believe so.”

“Why the dungeon?”

“I’m not sure. I have a luncheon, but as soon as I return, I’ll see that he’s moved to more comfortable quarters.”

She would handle this herself. There was no need to tell her father that, though.

She said calmly, “I’m sure he’ll appreciate your interest, Papa.”

Over the years, her father had stopped being able to read her. They’d had a relationship she had treasured. She still treasured it, but as she had matured, she had learned to keep her thoughts to herself. Which was why he was unable to read that she was quickly becoming a bubbling caldron of fury.

They talked for a few more moments, then he kissed her on her forehead and walked out the door. The instant he was gone, she was out of bed. As much as she’d like to do this on her feet, she had no choice but to use the wheelchair she’d been provided.

She couldn't even use a crutch because her shoulder was still too tender. Besides, a wheelchair would get her there faster.

She rolled out the door, heading to the door at the end of the hallway that led to the secret passageway. With each spin of her wheels, her ire rose. The dungeon? They had put him in the dungeon? When she reached the elevator, she slapped the down button so hard, the plastic cracked.

She remembered that hellhole all too well. When she was twelve years old, her brother had played a joke on her, locking her inside with the lights off. It had been only a couple of hours or so before he'd relented and let her out, but she'd never forgotten it. Dark, damp, smelling of earth and an undertone of evil, it was a place no living creature should be forced to stay. Especially not Gideon.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

To imagine that he had been left down there in the cold darkness was almost more than she could fathom. When this was over, heads would roll. She would start with Jeremy Clement.

The rage was now like a volcanic flow of lava. By the time the elevator landed, she was screaming Gideon's name.

* * *

“Your move, lad.”

The young guard frowned as he looked down at the chessboard. The kid was a twenty-one-year-old college student and a newlywed. He was still wet behind the ears and wasn't sure if being put in charge of Gideon's care was a reward or punishment.

Gideon didn't have the heart to tell him it was no reward.

He'd been down here for going on three days now. Eve didn't know. He knew that already. She never would have left him here. Clement had taken it upon himself to not only have his men beat the hell out of him, but to also incarcerate him.

He'd woken up inside this cell, and the only person he'd seen so far was his young guard. Mylan Dupont had no answers to his questions and, according to him, had been told nothing other than to keep Gideon locked inside his cell at any cost.

Gideon had had numerous opportunities to overtake the kid and get out. Unless they planned to keep him down here forever, he wouldn't do that. Wasn't Mylan's fault

that he worked for an ass.

The place wasn't as bad as he remembered. In one of his history lessons when he was grammar school, his entire class had been given a tour of the castle dungeons. He had remembered them as cold and creepy as hell. Over the years, someone had decided to upgrade. It still wasn't the Plaza, but the atmosphere was much better than he remembered. There was no dank odor, the temperature was pleasant, and the jail cells had been modernized.

Though he couldn't say he was enjoying himself, being locked up had given him plenty of thinking time. He'd gone over how he should've handled telling Eve the truth. So far, each scenario put him right back where he was right now—royally screwed. No pun intended.

From the time he'd made the agreement with her father, he had known this day would come. But he'd already been keeping a ton of secrets from her. One more had seemed like just another sin he would have to atone for someday. Now that the day had arrived, he realized he was still at a loss for how to explain everything where he didn't come off as the biggest bastard alive.

"Monsieur is sad?" Mylan asked.

Gideon looked up at the kid and grimaced. "Just have a lot on my mind."

"It is my understanding that tonight's dinner will be tartiflette."

Gideon couldn't help but smile at the kid. Mylan's duties of guarding Gideon 24-7 gave him the opportunity to eat his meals here at the castle. He'd forgotten how a growing young man could tuck away the food. Admittedly, the food had been good and plentiful.

It'd been years since he had eaten tartiflette, a delicious casserole of potatoes, reblochon cheese, and chopped bacon. The ultimate comfort food. His mother had made the best tartiflette he'd ever eaten. With three growing boys and a father who could pack the food away, too, it was a wonder his mother and sister had had any food left to eat. But they always had. Meals at the Wright house hadn't been fancy, and their clothes hadn't been expensive, but his parents had always made sure they'd had plenty. Before everything went to hell, he'd had the ideal childhood.

"You do not care for tartiflette?" Mylan asked.

"Actually love it. Was just thinking of my mother's."

"Aw, yes, mamans make the best. Oui?"

"Oui."

Gideon was enjoying the back-and-forth exchange between French and English. The native language for Ile de la Lune was French, but the country was progressive when it came to education. By the time he'd graduated, Gideon had spoken six languages fluently.

"You have family here in Amelie?"

"No. Not anymore."

His brother, Theo, was an orthopedic surgeon in Madrid. His sister, Rory, was a cardiologist in Germany, and her twin, Reed, was the CEO of an athletic apparel company in Texas. They were spread all across the world, and though he didn't see them nearly enough, he couldn't be prouder of the adults they'd become. He knew his parents would be proud of them, too.

His mind halfway occupied with the chess game in front of him and thoughts of his family, it took him a second to recognize the odd noise coming from down the hallway. There was the sound of the elevator landing, and then he heard what could only be described as shrieks of outrage.

A smile spread across his face. Eve had apparently discovered his whereabouts.

Mylan jumped to his feet, upending the chessboard. As the sound of Eve's wrath drew nearer, Gideon watched as Mylan's hand went to his holstered gun.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, lad. She's got a wicked temper."

"She?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

It occurred to him that he likely had no idea about Eve. Few people in the country even knew what she looked like anymore. After the very public abduction and rescue, all press about her had been shut down. Everyone had been told she had gone into seclusion. Mylan likely had heard stories about the damaged princess but would not have been privy to the truth.

The kid was about to get an education.

She traveled down the hallway in a wheelchair, screaming, “Gideon! Gideon!”

“Down here,” he answered.

His mouth agape, Mylan stood still and watched as she appeared.

Damn, she looked good. Of course, she had bruises and was still too pale, but compared to how she’d looked the last time he’d seen her, it was a definite improvement.

Lovely face full of color, blue eyes dancing like a crackling fire, she glared at Mylan and snapped, “Open the door and let him out.”

Doing what humans had done since the beginning of time, Mylan did something stupid—he pulled out his weapon. “This prisoner is under my charge and cannot be released until I’m notified by my superior.”

Gideon had to hand it to Mylan. There’d been only the slightest shake in his voice.

“You dare draw a weapon on me?” Eve growled.

Mylan glanced quickly at Gideon. “Do you know this femme folle?”

Gideon winced. Calling Eve a crazy lady was not going to earn him any points.

“She’s—”

“You dare call a member of the royal family crazy?”

Horror on his face, Mylan said, “Royal family?”

Eve Wells might have broken bones and be in a wheelchair, but she was still more dangerous than most people on two good legs. Taking advantage of Mylan’s distraction, she shot forward one hand and knocked his gun loose. She caught it quickly and pointed it at the astonished guard. “Open the door. Now!”

Mylan stood there, his indecision painful to watch as his gaze traveled back and forth between Gideon and Eve.

“Don’t make it worse on yourself, lad,” Gideon urged. “Open the door.”

“But I’ll be fired.”

“No, you won’t,” Eve said. “Not if you do what I say. If you don’t release him within the next five seconds, losing your job will be the least of your worries.”

Finally realizing he had no choice, Mylan pulled a keycard from his pocket and slipped it into a slot. The cell door swung open.

Gideon sauntered out. “About time you got here, Wells.”

“I just found out you were here. I’ve been calling you.”

“Is that right?”

“What the hell happened? Why are you here? And why do you have bruises?” The instant she said the last part, her eyes shot back to Mylan.

“Wasn’t the kid’s doing. Clement decided to get a little payback.”

“You know Clement?”

Inwardly wincing, Gideon nodded. Just one more thing he was going to have to explain.

“Looks like we need to talk.”

Gideon sighed. “Yeah, we do. I need a shower, though.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“You’ll stay with me. I’ll take you to my apartment.”

“But...but...” Mylan sputtered. “I am to guard him.”

“Don’t worry, lad,” Gideon assured him. “You won’t get into trouble.” He turned to Eve. “Isn’t that right?”

“Has he been good to you?”

“Yes, he has.”

“Then he has nothing to worry about. Thank you for taking good care of Monsieur Wright. You’re free to take the rest of the day off.”

She turned her wheelchair around and started down the hallway. They likely made an odd-looking trio. The furious, bruised woman in a wheelchair, the battered man in three-day-old clothing, and the terrified, pale young man.

One of the many things he loved about Eve Wells—she always made life more interesting.

CHAPTER NINE

Gideon stood under the hot spray of the shower for a good ten minutes. Wasn’t the first time he’d gone days without showering. Wouldn’t be the last. Didn’t mean he didn’t enjoy the hell out of finally getting clean when he got the chance.

Being in Eve's apartment inside the castle was a little surreal for him. As a kid, he'd passed by the palace numerous times. He'd seen tons of photos of the interior and had gone on short tours a couple of times in school. He remembered thinking that no one could really live in such a massive place. That was before he'd met Eve, before he'd realized that beneath the sparkle and the grandeur, real people did indeed live within the majesty. And one of them was the best, most beautiful person he'd ever known.

This was the day he'd been dreading and anticipating. She had been so stunned before that she hadn't wanted explanations. Today, she would. And he would tell her everything. He would bare his soul and leave it up to her to either accept and forgive him or shred his heart to pieces.

She wouldn't hurt him out of malice—his Eve wasn't a malicious person. But she had been hurt so many times in her life, and the betrayal she felt because of him would likely make her forgiveness seem like an impossibility.

He pressed the button to turn off the shower, grabbed a towel from the heated rack, and dried quickly. Stepping out of the bathroom, he looked around the bedroom. This was the guest room and, from the looks of it, hadn't been used in years. No dust or musty smell, but it just had a feeling of emptiness. He'd already checked the closets and drawers and had found nothing to wear. It was either put his dirty clothes back on or wrap the towel around his waist until he could get his bag delivered to him. He opted for the towel.

Feeling better than he had in days, Gideon walked out into the living area, not surprised to see Eve sitting in the living room, waiting for him. The expression on her face was a study in myriad emotions. The last hour had drained the color from her face, and he could see the pain in her eyes. She was only days out from shoulder surgery, along with the concussion and broken bones she was dealing with. He knew she was likely hurting.

But what stunned him was the heat that flashed in her eyes as her gaze roamed over his body. It had been a long time since he'd seen that look on her face. It was something he craved on a daily basis but had never been able to pursue. Unfortunately, now was not the right time either. Gideon had no choice but to turn away. He was usually good at hiding his reaction to her, but with only a towel around his waist, there was no way she wasn't going to see what she did to him.

"There's a robe in the hall closet. It should fit you. I called my butler. Armand indicated your bag had been brought over from the hospital a couple of days ago. They're bringing it up for you."

Relieved, he strode to the hall closet, noting that the robe she'd suggested he wear was made for a man. He refused to speculate if it belonged to anyone in particular. Pulling it on, he wrapped the robe around him and then belted it. The moment he did that, he dropped the towel to the floor.

"While we're waiting for your clothes, why don't you tell me how you ended up in a dungeon cell?"

"I'll do that as soon as you get back in bed."

"Why?"

"Because you look like you're about to fall out of that chair."

When she rolled her wheelchair toward her bedroom without arguing, he knew she was well passed ready to drop. He followed her into the bedroom.

"Need help?"

She shot him a quick look, and though there was stubbornness in her eyes, her mouth

was drooping with fatigue as she said, “If you don’t mind.”

“There’s nothing you could ask of me that I could mind.”

Without asking how he could help, he gently scooped her into his arms and laid her on the bed. He heard several hisses and gasps and knew she was in more pain than she was letting on.

“Where’re your pain meds?”

“On the nightstand.”

Checking the bottles quickly, he found her pain meds. Handing her one, along with the glass of water sitting beside it, he watched her swallow it down.

“Do they make you sleepy?”

“A little, but not so much that we can’t talk.”

“When’s the last time you ate?”

She scooted a little on the bed to get comfortable. “I can’t remember. I haven’t had much of an appetite.”

“Then I’m going to make us a meal. We’ll eat and talk. Okay?”

“That’s not necessary. Armand can bring us a meal.”

“Nonsense. It’ll give me something to do.”

“Kay,” she whispered, her eyes already closing.

Before he could do something insane, like kiss her, Gideon walked out of the room. He’d make them a meal, and while they ate, he’d explain to her how he’d messed up so supremely.

And then he’d take the wrath that was coming to him.

* * *

The most delicious fragrance wafting through the air, woke her. Glancing at the clock beside her bed, she noted her nap had lasted more than two hours. It had been exactly

what she needed. She took a deep breath and then regretted it immediately as her ribs protested the movement. She lay still for a few moments, allowing the quietness to seep into her. Gideon was close by, and sometimes that was all she needed. She rarely admitted those kinds of thoughts, but today she couldn't push them aside.

Everything had changed between them. Their relationship for so long had been forced simplicity. He'd been her partner, her best friend, her confidant. That was it. Any more would have caused problems they couldn't afford. Now they were no longer any of those things, or if they were, those things had been altered.

What did they have now? She wasn't sure. He owed her an explanation, and she could tell he wanted to talk. Question was, when it was all said and done, would there be anything left of them?

When she and Gideon first met, she had felt a deep connection. Her father had once told her that when you met "the one," your heart recognized that instantly. Having endured that awful betrayal years ago, she knew her heart was too scarred for her to even consider trusting it.

What had morphed from that initial attraction had been the most profound connection of her life. And she had believed it had been the same for him. But had that all been a lie, too? Had he put on an act—read her need for that connection—and become what he'd needed to become? Bottom line: Had their relationship been real, or had it all been a manipulation?

"I can hear you thinking, you know."

She smiled slightly. The man had the keenness of a dog sensing a storm. That sense of perception had saved her life more than once.

"Please tell me that that tantalizing fragrance wafting through the air is from what

we're about to eat."

He appeared at her bedroom door. His short blond hair was still slightly damp from his shower, and he was dressed in a pair of tan chinos and a charcoal Henley shirt, looking both relaxed and very male. Unless they were in the field on an op, she was used to seeing Gideon in bespoke suits, but when he wore casual clothes, he did something to her heart. At six-three and about two hundred thirty pounds, this man looked good in anything.

Her mind immediately went to earlier when he'd walked into the living room wearing only a towel. No...not going there.

His mouth quirked up in a half smile. "Mylan told me that today's meal was to be tartiflette. Instead of cooking something healthy, I asked Armand when he brought my bag if we could have a couple of slices. It was delivered a few minutes ago."

"I haven't had that in years."

"That's because you eat like a college kid on spring break."

"And you eat like a carnivorous rabbit."

The old, gentle teasing felt good, familiar. They constantly taunted each other about their eating habits. She had to admit hers could be appalling at times. Gideon's, on the other hand, was protein and vegetables always. They often shared from each other's plates. It had started early, when they'd first begun working together and had become their routine.

"You want to eat at the table, or should I bring you a tray?"

She gingerly swung her legs out of bed and settled into the wheelchair. "Give me five

minutes, and I'll meet you there.”

“You need help in the bathroom?”

She shot him an infuriated look, and he held up his hand in mock surrender. “Just trying to be helpful.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Rolling her eyes, she maneuvered her wheelchair into the bathroom. Quickly taking care of business, she washed her hands, glanced up at the mirror, and almost screamed. No wonder Gideon had asked if she needed help. She looked like a wraith. She almost laughed at how she'd been rolling through the hidden passageways of the castle, looking like a waif from *Les Misérables*. That was probably one of the reasons poor Mylan had been so terrified.

She opened the bathroom door and called out to Gideon, "It'll be just a few more minutes."

"Take your time," he answered.

Closing the door, Eve went to work. She and Gideon were about to have the most serious discussion they'd ever had. She needed all the armor she could gather.

Gideon went through his phone messages as he waited for Eve. From the look of it, each member of Option Zero had texted him at least a dozen times. He'd had both his and Eve's trackers removed before they'd arrived in Ile de la Lune. No one knew Eve's background, and it wasn't his story to tell. However, they cared for her deeply, and he needed to check in and let them know a little of what was going on.

He hit Asher Drake's speed-dial key, knowing he would be tap-dancing like a maniac with his answers.

"Where the hell are you?" Ash growled.

"Hello to you, too."

“Don’t give me that, Wright. You and Eve removed your trackers, and last time we heard from you was five days ago when you left that lame-assed note and you both disappeared. Eve texted me earlier, looking for you. What the hell’s going on?”

Removing the locator in each of their arms had been a direct violation of their contract with OZ. Ash could relieve both of them of their duties without any more discussion. Though Eve likely hadn’t noticed the small cut on her upper arm where the tracker had been removed, she would have approved the procedure.

Explaining that to Ash was a different story.

“Eve is good. Recovering on schedule. I couldn’t check in. Had an issue, but it’s been resolved.”

“Glad to know Eve is recovering, but the rest of your sentence is pure bullshit.”

Yeah, he couldn’t argue with that.

“Why did you remove your tracker?”

“It’s safer for everyone if no one knows where we are.”

“Are you out of OZ?”

“No. Not unless you want us out.”

“Removing the tracker wasn’t a good move. Not without talking to me.”

“Yeah, I know. It couldn’t be helped. I didn’t do it arbitrarily.”

“And Eve was okay with her tracker being removed?”

“I haven’t told her yet, but she’ll agree that it was the right thing to do.”

Ash sighed. “I’m taking a lot on faith here with you, Gideon.”

“I know that, Ash, I appreciate it. I’m going to stay here with Eve while she recovers. As soon as we can, if we’re allowed, we’ll be back. Until then, we’ll stay off-grid.”

“And if you need help, will you contact us?”

A wave of appreciation swept over him. Never had he believed he could find a group of people like his OZ brothers and sisters. They were as much family as his own blood kin were, and he’d lay down his life for any of them. Just as they would for him.

“I will, Ash. I promise.”

“Give Eve our love and stay in touch.”

“Will do.”

The call ended, but Gideon stared at the phone for a while longer. He owed more than one explanation. Knowing he had no choice, Gideon went through each text and answered the same way: Eve is recovering well. We hope to be back with you soon.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Shitty way to treat his friends, but it wasn't the shittiest thing he'd ever done to someone. That honor was all Eve's.

When he got to Olivia's text, he couldn't send the same innocuous bullshit. Not only was she the closet thing to a sister that Eve had ever had, but she had also been through hell lately. She and Eve had just recently mended their relationship, and he didn't want to damage the progress they'd made.

Making a slight concession, he answered her text with, Hey, Liv, Eve is still a bit under the weather, but she is getting better every day. As soon as she's able, she'll give you a call. I know she misses you. Hope you're feeling yourself again. Talk with you soon. ~G

Still vague, but a little less terse than the other texts he'd sent.

"Who are you texting?"

Gideon looked up, his heart stuttering in his chest. When Eve Wells wanted to look nice, all she had to do was exist. When Eve Wells wanted to stun, she spent ten minutes in front of a mirror and could rival any woman who'd ever existed for beauty.

Clearing his throat, he dropped his phone into his pocket and stood. "Basically everyone at OZ."

She grimaced. "What did you tell them about our whereabouts?"

“Nothing.” He nodded at her arm. “I had your tracker removed when we were still airborne, before we arrived here.”

“I hadn’t even noticed. My brain’s been so foggy.”

“You okay with that?”

“Yes. Having them know our location would cause more problems for everyone. What about our phones?”

“I disabled the GPS on both of them so they can’t be traced.”

“Good.”

“You ready to eat?”

“Yes, I’m starving.”

“Want to sit in a chair?”

“No. I’ll just roll up to the table. I think I overdid it with my little escapade this morning.”

“Sorry you had to do that.” Gideon cut a generous slice of tartiflette and placed it in front of Eve. “I knew you would eventually find me.”

“Want to tell me what happened with Clement?”

Gideon dug into his meal and almost groaned as the flavors hit his tongue. He’d missed this kind of food.

Aware that Eve was waiting for an explanation, Gideon shrugged. “He sent some men for me. Said he wanted to discuss your safety. I went. He spent about a half hour asking one question after the other, trying to find out where you’d been the last few years and what you were doing.”

“And when you gave him nothing, it pissed him off.”

“Something like that.”

“And the bruises?”

“Six against one isn’t the fairest of fights. When they wouldn’t let me go, I held my knife to Clement’s throat, to which he took exception. A couple of tases and some well-shod boots once I was on the ground was all it took. I woke up in the cell.”

“That man will not be able to get a job within a thousand miles of here by the time I’m through with him.”

“Good. He’s way too incompetent for that job.”

“You sound like you know him.”

And this was where it got real. This was where he was going to lose her completely, lose only part of her, or be able to explain in such a way that she forgave him. And though he could usually gauge how a conversation might go, in this instance he could honestly say he had no idea whatsoever. All he could do was give her the answers and hope and pray he could make her understand.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Her eyes narrowed. “I see by the look on your face that you have quite a bit to say.”

“Why don’t we finish eating, and then we’ll talk?”

“All right. It’s not like I haven’t been waiting for the truth for over a decade. What’s another few minutes more?”

They finished their meal in silence. Gideon knew that anything they said from here on out would be related to the elephant in the room. And since he wanted Eve to eat, he refrained from talking. There would be plenty of that soon enough.

Once they finished, he cleared up the few dishes they’d used. She had offered to help, but he’d given her a look that had her backing away with a curt nod. The tension was rising every second, and though he fully intended to give her the truth, a part of him felt anger at the accusation in her eyes. Yes, he’d kept things from her, but everything he’d done had been for her, not against her.

Throwing the dishtowel on the counter, Gideon pulled in a deep breath. He was well aware he was trying to rationalize and make excuses, and that was not going to work for either of them. If she had done the same thing to him, he’d be spitting mad.

“Gideon?” Eve said softly.

He turned, his heart melting at the tenderness in her eyes. He might have kept things from her, but this woman knew him—inside and out. She knew he was dreading the next few moments, and her generous heart was telling him it was okay. Was it any wonder he adored her?

She settled onto the sofa and, without asking, allowed him to place a pillow beneath her leg. He went to the chair across from her, and the instant he was seated, she said, “Tell me.”

Gideon pulled in a breath, searching for the right words. Hell, were there any words that were right when breaking a heart?

Maybe it was best to start from the beginning. If she could understand how it had all begun, maybe she would be more forgiving on the harder things.

“Remember Homer?” he asked quietly.

Obviously startled, her expression a mask of puzzlement, she said, “Of course I remember Homer. I told you about him a long time ago.”

“Yes, you did. The thing is... I already knew about him.”

“How could you know?” she whispered softly.

He would never forget the day he’d made one of the most monumental decisions of his life. If a person lived long enough, there were multiple defining moments that would alter and change them, for better or worse. He was almost thirty-eight years old, so he’d had his share. However, one of his most significant moments had come early.

At age twelve, he’d been serious and motivated—a kid with an old soul, his mother used to say. He’d had three siblings to watch over while both his mother and father worked their fingers to the bone to provide for the family. The responsibility had never felt onerous. That had come later. At that time, it had just been part of his life.

Of course he’d heard the stories of Princesse Evangelina. Even a kid from the poor

side of town had heard about her adventures. She was the youngest royal and the only daughter. With three much older brothers who had sown their wild oats for all the world to see, Princesse Evangelina could have been just as wild. She had been, but not in the traditional sense.

And from the moment he'd seen her that day, his life had changed.

Twenty-five years ago

His strides long and determined, Gideon ran the numbers through his head as he made his way home. The hot sun blazed above him and sweat trickled down his back. He didn't mind the heat and had no problem walking home from his after-school job, but soon he'd be able to make the trip in less than half the time. If his numbers were right, he would soon have enough money for his bike.

The job at the market was finally paying off. He'd worried giving up his weekends as an usher at the movie theater to work more hours at the market would be a mistake, but he was glad he'd made the decision. With the tips he'd made today, he'd have his bike before the end of the year. He wished he could ride his bike to school, too, but since he walked his three younger siblings to school each day, he knew that would never happen. He would always be watching over them. That's just what an older brother did.

As he strode down the sidewalk, he waved at the people he recognized. It was surprising the number of people he knew. Of course, most of that was because this area of town had been his paper route when he was younger.

As he drew nearer the midtown section, he glanced over at the castle on the hill. He rarely paid attention to the gargantuan structure. It was simply a part of the city of Amelie, as much as the bridge that passed over the river or the opera house on the next street over. Living in the city where the royal family resided was normal to him.

Not that he knew them, of course, but he knew all about them. They had spent a whole semester studying the royal family and its lineage in his fifth-grade history class. The current royals consisted of a king, three princes, and a princess. He'd never seen them up close, though. He and his family didn't exactly run in the same circles.

When he was about six or so, he had stood on the side of the road with his parents as they had watched the funeral procession for the queen go by. The king and his family had passed by in a limousine, and he'd caught a glimpse of their sad, ravaged faces.

He remembered how his mother had cried at the loss. Queen Noemi had been much beloved, and the fact that she had left behind not only a grieving husband and three sons, but also a two-year-old daughter named Evangelina, only added to the tragedy. The entire country had mourned her.

Spotting something peculiar, Gideon stopped midstride. A large crowd was gathered on the south lawn of the castle. Without even thinking about it, he headed toward the people. It looked like something was going on with the giant oak tree that had recently been in the news. The closer he got, the more curious he became. The stories of the princess and her climbing tree were well known. She had fallen out of it twice already and, according to the gossip mill, had been forbidden to climb the tree again. Two days previously, she had ignored that order and had fallen again, this time breaking her arm.

The local news had reported that the king had demanded that the tree be cut down.

The princess and her tree was one of the current topics that Gideon and his family discussed at dinnertime. News events were always discussed at the dinner table, with each member expected to have a current event in mind to discuss. It was his parents' belief that children should know what was happening in the world. The discussion about the princess was one of the few times he could remember his parents disagreeing. Though both believed cutting down the tree was a travesty and should

not happen, his father claimed the princess needed more discipline, while his mother said she was merely high-spirited and needed a creative outlet.

Perhaps the four-hundred-year-old oak tree—the oldest one in the city—was about to be chopped down right now to prevent the princess from injuring herself again. He didn't know what should be done about the princess, but he agreed with his parents—cutting down the tree should not be the solution.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

The closer he drew to the crowd, the more curious he became. He heard whispers of “disrespectful brat” and “poor little girl” as he made his way toward a tight clump of people who were looking down at something.

At twelve years old, Gideon was already six feet tall, so he had no problem looking over everyone’s heads. The scene in front of him caused him to stop short. His heart twisted, and he knew he’d never forget the sight before him. Evangelina Wellingsley, Princesse of Ile de la Lune, had wrapped a chain around the giant tree trunk and had handcuffed herself to the chain.

At only eight years old, the princesse probably didn’t weigh more than forty-five pounds. Yet she stood fierce and defiant, bravely daring the three large men in front of her holding saws and hatchets to touch her beloved tree. Though there were unshed tears in her eyes and her little chin trembled, she refused to move.

He could only imagine how terrified she must be, standing up to men who likely looked like giants to her. Even to him, they looked threatening and evil with their grim faces. But the mutinous look in the princess’s brilliant blue eyes and the defiant expression on her face said she didn’t care how terrifying they looked, she was not moving.

His body tense, Gideon watched the faces of the men. Surely there was no way they would risk the king’s wrath by touching her or even speaking harshly. But they were so large, so menacing, he imagined even the bravest of men might back down from them. But not the princess.

One of them, the tallest and biggest, took a step toward the little girl and shouted,

“Move!”

“No!” she shouted back.

The man who’d yelled glanced back at his co-workers, as if looking for support. One of the palace guards stepped in front of him and growled, “Move back.”

The man stepped back, and Gideon felt a wave of relief. Finally, someone was coming to her defense. The guard then turned back to the princess and stood in front of her, so close that he towered over her. Gideon couldn’t see the man’s face, but instead of looking protective, he appeared just as intimidating. Perhaps even more so than the men with saws and axes.

Gideon’s gaze went to the faces of the people in the crowd. Some looked worried, a few looked angry, but it appeared that no one was going to do anything to help the princess.

With three younger siblings, Gideon had always taken his responsibility of protecting them seriously. His parents had instilled in him the need to shield the vulnerable. Just because he was a skinny kid without a weapon would not stop him from doing the right thing.

Maneuvering through the crowd was easy. Nobody paid attention to a tall, scrawny kid worming his way to the front. They were too focused on the drama before them.

The closer he got, the angrier he became. Why was no one sticking up for her? Though he doubted anyone would be foolish enough to actually hurt her, he knew that mobs could act in irrational ways. He had no real idea what he was going to do, but she was an eight-year-old child. If this were his sister or brothers, nothing would stop him from defending them.

He was only a few feet away from her when a giant hand grabbed him and swung him around. “Stay out of this, garçon.”

Gideon stared up at the meanest-eyed man he’d ever seen. Bald, with a long, narrow nose and thin lips, the guard reeked of arrogance and evil. Though he was likely fifty pounds lighter, Gideon knew what to do. Both his mother and father had told him that if anyone ever touched him in a threatening or inappropriate way, he had the right to defend himself. He knocked the man’s hand off his shoulder and then, using his fist, punched the man in the groin.

Gideon didn’t wait around to see his reaction. He ran forward and stood beside the trembling princess. He didn’t speak to her, didn’t touch her, but she knew he was there. And if anyone tried to harm her, he would make sure they paid for it.

She spared him a glance, and he noticed that up close, she looked even younger. Though she didn’t say anything to him, he saw a flare of appreciation in her blue eyes before she turned back to the threatening crowd and resumed her mutinous expression.

Whispers swept through the crowd, and several seconds passed before he understood their meaning. The king had arrived.

As if on cue, the cruel-looking guard who’d grabbed Gideon earlier took several steps in front of the group and yelled, “Get back! Get back!”

Even at twelve years old, Gideon recognized a phony when he saw one. The brute had done nothing to protect the princess, but now that the king had arrived, he would try to look the hero.

Gideon glanced at the princess to see if she was relieved that her father had arrived or was even more scared. When he heard her whisper, “Papa,” in a hopeful tone, he

knew she would be all right.

“Gideon?”

Jerked out of the past, it took him a few seconds to realize Eve had spoken his name more than once.

“What?”

“That was you? You were the boy who came to stand beside me?”

“You remember?”

“Of course I remember. You were the only one who stood up for me.”

Once the king had arrived, things had happened quickly. The entire crowd had been dispersed in a matter of seconds, which had included him. He’d been pushed away and managed only one last glimpse of the princess. She’d been looking up at her father and nodding as he’d touched her shoulder. From the tender expression on the king’s face, Gideon had known the princess would be fine.

“I told my father about you,” she whispered. “That a tall, skinny boy stood beside me and tried to protect me. He said he asked around, but no one claimed to have seen you. I think he decided I was so traumatized by the event, I made you up.”

“Were you traumatized?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Not really. Once he agreed to spare Homer, I pushed what happened out of my mind.”

The king had been in a difficult position since the entire country had known about his decision to have the tree chopped down. Acquiescing to an eight-year-old child, even if it was his daughter, hadn't necessarily been a good look for the monarchy. It had, however, become an amusing human interest story that Gideon knew was still discussed in history classes today.

To settle the matter, the king had christened Homer the official tree of Ile de la Lune. A small brick wall had been built around the circumference of the tree, and a plaque had been placed at the site, decreeing that anyone caught desecrating or climbing the tree would be imprisoned.

Princesse Evangelina had never climbed the tree again, and the tree was still standing. It likely would stand for several centuries more.

Eve shook her head slowly, clearly having trouble coming to terms with what he'd just shared. The more he had talked, the paler she had become. While myriad emotions played across her face, her most telling reaction was the tremor of her chin.

“I don't understand. Why the secrecy? Why would you keep this from me?”

“If I'd told you I was there, I would have had to tell you so much more. I couldn't take the risk. The day you saved Homer was the day I went home and told my parents I was going to be a royal guard.”

He still remembered the look of horror on both their faces. Not because it wasn't a noble profession. Protecting lives was perhaps the noblest of all professions, but it had been decided long before he could walk that he would be a doctor. That had been his parents' goal for him, and Gideon had fully embraced it. He'd excelled in his studies, and biology had been his favorite subject in school. Though his parents had been relying on him getting scholarships, any extra money had been set aside for their children's college funds.

Most parents might have nodded at such a proclamation and assumed their child would change his mind as he matured. But they knew their son. Even as a child, if Gideon said he was going to do something, he did it.

He'd had no problems in planning to fulfill his parents' dream for him, until he'd had a dream of his own.

"Why would you want to become a royal guard?"

Though he could tell by her tone she already knew the answer, he shrugged and said, "You wanted to protect the defenseless, Eve. I wanted to be the one to protect the defender."

"You could have done that in another capacity. Why a royal guard?"

Explaining how he'd felt that day would be impossible. Even after all the years, he couldn't define the impact she'd had on him. "My life, up until that day, had been a series of tasks to get through. I had a plan, knew where I was going and how to get there. Seeing you—seeing what you did—it changed me. Before that, I thought I knew what courage was, but seeing someone so young, so vulnerable, unable to defend herself, but still standing up for what she believed was right." He shook his head. "I had never seen anyone braver than you were that day."

Despite the hurt gleaming in her eyes from his confession, a wry smile lifted her mouth. “It wasn’t as if they were going to chop my head off. I was the princesse. I knew they wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Eve, you were eight years old and terrified, but you stood up against what likely looked like giants to you. You believed in something bigger than yourself. A lot of people go through life never standing up for anything, and there you were, this tiny child doing it for all the world to see.” He shrugged again. “You altered my view of life that day.”

“Gideon, this is just...I don’t know what to say.”

“My parents, as you might guess, were less than thrilled with my announcement.”

“Didn’t they want you to be a doctor?”

“Yeah. Needless to say, my new career choice did not go over well.”

“But you didn’t become a royal guard. I would have known.”

Royal guards protected the royal family, while palace guards protected the castle. It had been his goal to protect the princess.

His smile was both wry and sad. “The saying ‘life happens when you’re busy making other plans’ isn’t just a cheesy T-shirt slogan.”

“Your mother’s death?”

“Yeah.” Even though he had kept many things from Eve, she knew almost everything about his family.

When his mother had died, their family had almost died, too. Gideon's father had been inconsolable. Charlotte, Gideon's mother, had been his father's soul mate. They had married five weeks after meeting and were together for just over seventeen years.

His maman had been his favorite person in the world, and while he had grieved like any fifteen-year-old who'd lost the mother he adored, he'd had no choice but to take up the slack for his father. Elliott Wright had gone into the deepest, darkest depression, leaving Gideon to take charge of his three younger siblings.

He did his best to not blame his father for abdicating his role. Watching the man fade away had been both painful and infuriating. They had gone from a picture-perfect family to a dysfunctional nightmare in a matter of days. Gideon had always known his maman was the heart of their family, but he had never anticipated that her death would create a hole that could not be filled.

When Gideon was eighteen, Elliott Wright had stopped trying altogether. Two weeks after Gideon's birthday, he'd found his father on the floor of their bathroom. There was no obvious cause of death, and the coroner ruled it a heart attack. Gideon had known a different truth. Elliott Wright had willed himself to die.

Having no choice, Gideon became the legal guardian of his siblings. Reed and Rory had been thirteen, and Theo had been almost sixteen. Taking charge of three teenagers when he'd still been one himself had been no picnic. There'd been days when he'd wanted to just leave everything behind, but he'd refused to give up. There wasn't a day that went by now that he wasn't glad he had stuck with it. His brothers and sister were some of the finest people he knew, and he was proud of who they'd become.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Gideon?”

He shook himself from the memories. “By the time I was free to do what I wanted, I was too old for royal guard training. So I finished up my degree.”

“They probably would have made an exception.”

“Maybe so, but there were other ways I could make a difference. So I did.”

“Yes, you have...but, Gideon... I just... I’m torn between wanting to hug you and wanting to slug you.”

He grinned. “So nothing’s really changed.”

Anger sparked in her eyes. “Don’t joke. I’m still infuriated with you.”

“I know. Eve, what I did... None of it was intended to hurt you.”

“I know that. Even though I still don’t know the full story, I know there was no malice or ill intent behind it. It doesn’t negate the fact that you’ve been lying to me for years.”

No, it didn’t. And there was still so much more to tell her. That first confession had been the easy one. The rest would be harder.

A bell chimed, and she gave a quick glance to her phone. “My physical therapists are on their way up.”

“You want to wait until you get done with them to finish this?”

“No. Continue. What did you do after college?”

It was going to take a whole lot more time to explain everything, but he didn't argue.

“In my senior year at university, I was recruited by the DGSE.”

“The Directorate-General for External Security,” she murmured. “French equivalent of the CIA. Right?”

“Yeah. I worked with them for almost two years.”

“Why didn't you stay with them?”

“I clashed with a couple of senior officers. We didn't see eye to eye on how I handled some things, and it was suggested I could use my talents elsewhere.”

“You got fired?”

“In a manner of speaking.” It had been a contentious ending. He couldn't say he hadn't been the biggest cause of it. Back then, diplomacy hadn't been one of his strengths. He'd been a hothead, filled with high ideas and no patience for bullshitters. That had been a bad combination when dealing with career intelligence officers who'd forgotten what it was like to serve on the frontlines, or never had.

“It was for the best. I had made some contacts and started working with a small group of high-impact mercenaries. Did that for almost a year, and then...” He trailed off, hesitant to bring up what was the most horrific experience of her life and another defining moment for him.

“And then?”

“I was just coming off an op when the news hit that the US Embassy in Paris had been attacked, and several hostages had been taken, including Princesse Evangelina Wellingsley.”

“Gideon,” she whispered. “You were there?”

He took a breath, cleared his throat, and said, “I was the one who found you.”

Any color that had remained in her face was now gone. “How did you... Why did you...”

“I knew I wouldn’t have any authority to get involved, so I went directly to your father.”

“You got in to see the king just like that?”

He glossed over the difficulty, as it wasn’t pertinent. “A friend of mine was a royal guard at the time. I contacted him and asked if he could get me in for five minutes. It took some doing, but your father was, needless to say, beside himself and, I think, willing to try anything at that point. I told him who I was and that if he would make the call to get me into the action, I would save his daughter. You were my only priority.”

“But why, Gideon? You didn’t even know me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

He leaned forward in his chair, locking his gaze with hers. If there was anything in his ramblings that he wanted her to understand, it was this. “You changed the trajectory of my life, Eve. Not only did I feel as though I’d let you down, but it was also my way of saying thank you.”

“How did you let me down?”

“If things had worked out the way I’d planned, I would have been the one protecting you that day.”

“You might have been killed, like Herbert and Francois were.”

“Possibly.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you were able to infiltrate an ongoing operation like that.”

“Your father has quite a bit of clout. And he was getting desperate. He was willing to try anything. He got me in to see the head of the rescue operation. My credentials and his influence paved my way.”

She looked away from him and murmured, “I barely remember anything.”

He was glad of that, but he knew a lot of her memory lapse had to do with her refusal to dwell on the event after the fact. Some would call it denial, but he was of the opinion that if denial helped you cope, then that’s what you should do. He knew she still suffered from the occasional nightmare, so those horrific memories were still

hovering somewhere. For him, he'd never get the image of how he'd found her out of his mind. Bloodied, broken, abused, and so damn strong.

"That's why your voice sounded so familiar."

"What do you mean?"

"That first day when I showed up at the Carmichael training camp, I was nervous, questioning why I was there...questioning everything, really. You came into the foyer to greet me, and something about your voice made me calm down. I kept telling myself that you just had one of those hypnotic-type voices, but that wasn't it. You were the one to calm my darkest fears when I was so damaged. It only made sense that you would have the same effect on me that day, too."

"I'm glad," he said. "I—"

"I'm not paying you a compliment, Gideon."

He shrugged. At this point, he'd take what he could get.

"So, how did—" She broke off when a knock sounded on her door. Huffing out a frustrated breath, she called, "Just a moment." She turned her gaze back to Gideon. "We are not through here."

"I know. I've got some things I need to do." He headed toward the door. "I'll be back in a while."

"Before you leave, I need to know one thing."

He turned to look at her. "What's that?"

“How much has my father paid you over the years?”

Any good feelings he had about their conversation dissolved in an instant. Though she had every right to her anger and suspicion, to have her question his commitment to her this way pissed him off.

“When I get back, I’ll give you your damn answer, Princesse.”

Her eyes flared at his snarl of anger. Yeah, he didn’t often show his temper, especially not with her, but if she wanted to throw shit at him, he would throw it right back.

He jerked the door open, startling the two women who stood on the other side. “The princesse will see you now.”

CHAPTER TEN

Eve sat in the corner of her bedroom, looking out the window that faced the south lawn. It was her favorite view for many reasons, but the largest was because of the giant oak tree about a hundred yards away. She had wonderful memories of climbing it and existing in seclusion for hours on end.

An unusual feeling of melancholy settled over her. Maybe it was being back home. Perhaps it was learning that Gideon had been lying to her for years. Some of it was likely because of her injuries. Recovering from a concussion, as well as broken bones, took a definite toll on the psyche.

She adored her homeland, and she fiercely loved her family, but returning home also came with a load of memories she could do without. Most people would think that a princess would want for nothing, and she hadn’t, not really. She had a father who loved her, brothers who doted on her, and anything she asked for, within reason,

would have been given to her. Other than losing her mother, though she had never really known her, and her beloved brother Samuel, it truly should have been a fairy-tale life—for someone else.

As a socially awkward child who'd never felt comfortable in the public eye, it had been a nightmare. She'd had no real friends and almost zero confidence. She'd been the ugly duckling of the family, and though she was long past those feelings, the memory of that time could still sting.

Yes, she had been loved and adored, but she'd been a lonely little girl whose best friend in the whole wide world had been a four-hundred-year-old tree she had named Homer. He had listened to her secrets and held her in his sheltering arms when she was sad. He had been such a good listener. No judgments, no instructions, no advice. He'd just been there for her. When her father had threatened to have him cut down, she'd been incensed. Saving Homer had been her first real rebellion. She had been adamant that Homer would not suffer for her folly. Thankfully, her father had changed his mind.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

What Gideon had revealed to her today was not only mind-boggling but also filled with so many land mines, she could barely see straight. He had been there that day. At the site of her greatest embarrassment and biggest triumph.

As a shy, awkward child, she had hated bringing attention to herself. But it wasn't until that day that she had learned she had a rebel's heart beating beneath her cloak of meekness. She had learned that there were things bigger than herself that were worth fighting for.

Breaking into the dungeon and stealing the chains and handcuffs from a historical display had been both scary and exhilarating. The fun had stopped when she'd had to face down the men with chain saws and axes. She had been terrified but determined.

In the end, she had done more than save Homer's life, she had found something inside her she hadn't known existed. She had discovered a purpose and a knowledge of who and what she could become.

And Gideon had been there for it. He had, in fact, been with her during some of the most significant events in her life. He had been the one who'd rescued her. She hadn't known his name. She had asked but had been told his name had to remain unknown for security reasons. She hadn't pushed it.

There was more. She knew there was more for him to tell her. He had stormed out of her apartment more than three hours ago and had still not returned. He'd been angry at the question she'd thrown at him. That much was obvious. But she had a right to question him, question his motives. So why did she feel guilty?

Because even as much as she knew she had a right to her anger, this wasn't who she and Gideon were. They didn't deliberately hurt each other. And that's exactly what she'd done when she'd questioned him about her father paying him. No matter what he'd done, she had questioned his integrity, and if there was one thing she was sure of, it was that Gideon Wright was a man of great integrity.

That didn't mean she wasn't hurt or that she forgave him. He had deceived her all these years. They lied for a living—that's just what spies did. But they didn't lie to each other. Or at least that's what she had believed.

She glanced at the clock above the mantel. They still had a lot to talk about. Where was he?

* * *

Standing on the cobblestone walking bridge that separated one part of the town from the other and overlooked the city, Gideon worked to control his riotous emotions. He had known this would be difficult. Spilling truths that he'd kept to himself for so long should have felt cathartic and freeing. Instead, it was having the opposite effect. He didn't question why. He knew. Because his truth gave Eve pain. And if there was one thing he never wanted to do, it was to hurt her.

She had been an important part of his life long before she'd even known he existed. Not because of any kind of shallow childhood crush or even a respect for her as a member of the royal family. She, by doing something terrifying and behaving in complete antithesis to what people expected of her, had changed his entire outlook on life. That kind of impact you didn't just shrug away and forget.

He should have known he wouldn't be able to explain in such a way that she would completely understand why he'd kept these things to himself. No one liked having pertinent information kept from them, especially when it was so deeply personal. And

to Eve, who trusted so few, it would feel like the ultimate betrayal.

Understanding her questions didn't diminish his pain, though. He couldn't deny that he had wanted her to get angry and then get over it. When they'd had disagreements in the past, that's what they had done. And even though he knew this was so much more monumental than a disagreement, the desire for her to treat it the same was still there.

She still didn't know everything. The timing of the physical therapists' visit had been unfortunate. Now that she knew some of the truth, he wanted to get it all out in the open. Once everything was said, then perhaps they could find a way forward.

His cellphone vibrated. He didn't have to look at the display to know Eve was texting him. She was probably finished with her PT and ready for round two. That would have to wait. He had a few errands he needed to finish up, including finding another place to stay. He wasn't naïve enough to believe their issues would clear up after a few more conversations. It was going to take some time for her to trust him again. And as much as he wanted to be with her, he needed his own space.

Her questions about his salary had been a blow he hadn't seen coming. Stupid, he knew, but it had been such a negligible item over the years, he rarely considered it anymore. Having her ask that question had blown up his defenses, and he'd let his anger seep through.

Turning away from the view, Gideon headed to finish up his tasks, and then he would return and give her all the answers she needed. Question was, what would be left of their relationship when he finished?

He had to admit a part of him wanted to find Jeremy Clement and have a fist-to-face meeting. Even knowing that the man would lose his job didn't dim Gideon's anger at the man for what he'd done. The only reason he hadn't sought him out and gotten his

pound of flesh was because that wasn't who he was. No, he didn't mind getting his fists bloodied or pummeling an asshole into the ground. But neither was he one to lower himself to Clement's level. When he was less furious, he'd look the man up and give him a few home truths. Until then, he'd just be happy that the imbecile wouldn't be coming back to the palace to work.

When word got out that he'd been fired after angering the royal family, the guy would have a hard time getting another job. He liked the idea of Clement having to leave the city, maybe even the country.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

His heart thudding like he'd just run a four-minute mile, Jeremy Clement stuffed clothes into a large duffel bag. Since he wouldn't be coming back here, he would take what he could and replace what he needed later. He knew he had only a limited amount of time before Wright came looking for him. After seeing what he'd done to the guards, Jeremy was certain he wouldn't survive the confrontation.

Did it infuriate him that he was having to run? Absolutely! He had an important job here. It had taken him a long time to build up to his position at the castle, and now, because of that low-class slug Gideon Wright, he was having to throw it all away. But he would be monitoring things from his safe house, and when the time was right, he would come back and wreak havoc on everyone who had screwed him over.

At least he'd got in one last bit of fun before he'd had to leave. Putting Wright behind bars had brought more joy than he'd had in a long time. Having his men beat the hell out of him beforehand had been a delight, too.

Taking one last look around his bedroom, he walked into his living room. A couple more items, and he would be gone. Five steps into the room, he jerked to a halt. A man he'd never thought to see again was sitting on his sofa, a smug smile on his face.

Swallowing hard, Jeremy asked shakily, “What are you doing here?”

“Really? That’s the best you can do? After all this time? After failing so spectacularly?”

“I did my job. No one can say otherwise.”

“Really?” He nodded to the chair across from him. “Why don’t you have a seat and describe to me what your job entailed?”

Straightening to his full height, he gathered as much arrogance as he could and asked, “Why should I?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Because that way, I’ll be able to determine how long you’ll suffer before I kill you.”

Jerking back at the threat, he shook his head. “Why would you kill me? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I think that’s a matter of opinion. And since I have this”—he lifted his hand, revealing the gun—“my opinion trumps yours.”

His legs suddenly weak, Jeremy had no problem sitting down. “Now look...” His voice came out shakier than he’d like. “I was hired to do a job, and I did it. It isn’t my fault things didn’t turn out the way you planned.”

“Is that right? So the fact that your main job was to be an informant—and you failed to inform us—isn’t your fault?”

He swallowed harder. In an effort to promote himself, he had exaggerated his claim of having knowledge of the king’s inner circle. The past few years, he had slunk back into obscurity in hopes no one would retaliate. Now he had to do some fast dancing, or he was in trouble.

“Look, my part wasn’t even that big. I could only get so much information. I couldn’t get to the intel fast enough to let you know.”

“You know the two words I hate more than any others in the whole wide world?”

Jeremy’s eyes darted to the door. Could he make it? Outrunning a bullet never worked out, but how trained could this guy be? Maybe he was just a wimp in a big

man's body.

“Oh, if you're looking to escape, I have three men outside your door hoping you'll try.”

He swallowed, realizing his mouth was so dry he had nothing but air. A gulping sound emerged from his mouth, and the man across from him smiled.

“Now, answer my question. What are my most hated words?”

“I don't know.”

“Ack!” The man released a nasally, obnoxious noise. “Wrong answer. My most hated words are ‘I can't.’ They piss me off. And believe me, you don't want to piss me off.”

Searching for something useful to give him, Jeremy said hurriedly, “The princess is back.”

“And you think that's news to me?”

Of course it wasn't. The man seemed to know everything. It was obvious he had more than one informant in the castle.

“I thought you were locked up. Were you released early?”

“No.” His mouth tilted in a mocking smile at the abrupt change of subject. “Not released. Someone is locked up. Just not me.”

That wasn't a surprise—it happened more times than most people knew. People got lost in prisons, forgotten. Others could slip in and take their place. Why someone

would agree to do such a thing was beyond his comprehension.

“I can get you access to her.”

Jeremy had spit out the words before he'd considered just how foolish they were. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? Even when he was in good standing at the palace, he didn't have any access to the royal family. Making that kind of claim to this particular man was a sure way to get himself killed.

“How do you plan to do that when you no longer have a job?”

The man knew that, too? Jeremy hadn't even been officially let go, although one of his snitches had called to tell him that the princess had sprung Wright out of his jail cell. So yes, he was sure he no longer had a job. However, only a handful of people should be aware of that. And somehow this man was one of them.

Who was his informant? Someone high up? Or could it be a low-level employee who knew how to snoop? Either way, it put Jeremy on shaky ground and significantly undermined what he could offer this man. In his world, if he had nothing of value to offer, then his life had no value. He had to come up with something!

“Her friend...partner... I have intel on him.”

“Mr. Wright?”

So he knew about him, too. “I detained him. I interviewed him. He was abusive and belligerent. My men taught him a lesson he'll never forget. I locked him up and—”

“I heard it took six men and tasers to take him down. Two of the men were sent to the hospital. Is that correct?”

All strength left his body. If the man knew this, he knew everything. There was no intel he could offer him that he didn't already have.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Don’t look so sad, Clement. Everybody makes mistakes. And you’re right. You’re job wasn’t even that big back then. However, in the future, I’ll expect better results.”

Hope rose inside him as he nodded hesitantly. Did that mean the man wasn’t going to kill him?

Reminding himself that he was a professional, Jeremy leaned forward and stared the other man in the eye. “How can I be of service?”

The man smiled.

CHAPTER TWELVE

More than seven hours later, just when she was sure Gideon wouldn’t return tonight, she received a text message from Holmes, the night butler, informing her that Gideon was on his way up.

When he walked in the door, she was surprised to see the hollowness in his eyes. If she’d thought the hours apart would give them both time to recover, she’d been wrong.

Her physical therapy session had been long and painful. Both her mind and body were screaming for rest, and Gideon looked like he’d had enough as well. That was too bad, because she wasn’t going to bed until this thing between them was settled. If she still had enough fire left inside her, then so did he.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming back.”

“That’s not who I am. I don’t run.”

“No, it’s not. And this isn’t who we are either. We don’t lie to each other, Gideon. Or at least that’s what I thought.”

As if weary to the bone, he dropped onto the sofa. “I had a choice to make, Eve. Your father wasn’t going to let you go without protection. After what happened to you... He just wasn’t going to allow that to happen again. By then, I knew you well enough to know that you wanted to work dark ops. Not only were you a natural, you had come alive again. Having any kind of bodyguard or protection would have prevented you from being able to do that.”

“So you weren’t working for my father while I was in training?”

“No. We stayed in touch because he was so worried about you, but I had made no agreement with him about your protection. My only promise to him was that you would receive the training you needed so you would never feel helpless again.”

Before she could continue, he added, “I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to make it seem like my relationship with you, all the things we’ve shared, was just part of the job. That our connection is based on lies and nothing else. That couldn’t be further from the truth.”

She wanted to believe that more than she could express. Yet that doubt still lingered.

“Your father saw the difference in you. He saw the confidence you had in your abilities and how life and spirit had returned to your eyes. But he wouldn’t relent. He could not bear to let you go without protection. He confided in me that he regretted ever letting you go away to college, allowing you to have a job, a life of your own.”

That was no surprise. She knew he blamed himself for what happened. If he hadn’t

given in to her pleas for independence, he believed she would have been safe. She didn't know if that was true or not. She now believed that everything happened for a reason. In hindsight, she could see that the most painful experience of her life had become her greatest blessing. Getting her father to believe that, even now, would be a huge stretch.

“How did you get my father to agree to allow you to be the only one to guard me?”

“I took full responsibility for you. Made a vow...if you will. If he would let you go and allow you to have the life you wanted, I would keep you safe no matter what.”

“You're the one who convinced him to let me train with the Carmichael Group, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

She had thought she had been so persuasive, explaining how she wanted to learn to defend herself, how she wanted to feel strong and powerful. Her father had listened to her and acted as though she had convinced him. But she hadn't convinced him at all. Gideon had.

“I feel like my entire life has been manipulated.”

“Dammit, Eve. It hasn't. I have done nothing to manipulate you. You needed the freedom to fly. I made a deal with your father to allow you that freedom.”

“Can you hear yourself, Gideon? Do you understand what you just said? You made a deal. I needed the freedom to fly, so you arranged it so I could. How do you not see the manipulation in your actions?”

“Being given an opportunity is a far cry from being made to do something. I have

never coerced you, Eve. Every decision you've made, whether I agreed with it or not, has been yours. You own your triumphs just as much as you own your mistakes. I had nothing to do with them."

Maybe so. Maybe she was making a big deal about something that wasn't. But she couldn't help but see betrayal in every aspect of their relationship. Everything had become coated in a film of his lies.

"All right," she said calmly. "Tell me one last thing."

"What?" The weariness in his voice bothered her. It shouldn't. He owed her an explanation. He knew that, but still, the sadness she saw in his eyes, the grim set of his mouth, did something to her heart. Instead of blaming him, she wanted to comfort him.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Why, Gideon? Why would you do this? Why would you put your life on hold for me like—”

His head jerked up, the weariness replaced by anger. “Wait just a damn minute. What are you talking about? How did I put my life on hold?”

“You’ve been watching over me all these years instead of—”

“Instead of what? Just what the hell are you trying to say, Eve? You think my life has been a waste? You think I haven’t done exactly what I wanted to do?”

“Well, have you?”

“You know what...” He shook his head, not finishing what she knew would’ve been more profanity than he would normally use. She’d rarely seen Gideon furious, but she was seeing it now.

He stood and strode toward the guest bedroom. Stopping at the door, he swung around and pierced her with a steely look. “I’m through for the night. When you’re ready to get out of your poor-pitiful-me victimhood, let me know, and we’ll talk again.”

The door shut quietly on those incinerating words.

Poor, pitiful me? Victimhood?

The accusations whirled in her brain as she glared at the closed door. Victimhood?

No way in hell was she letting him get away with that!

Thankful she could now use her new crutches for short jaunts, she hobbled toward the door, fury fueling every step. Twisting the knob, she shoved the door open, relishing the bang as it slammed against the wall. When she didn't spot him right away, she charged into the bedroom. Still not seeing him, she kept going. She didn't care if he was shaving, in the shower, or even on the toilet. They were having this out right now.

Swinging her crutches around, she made her way to the bathroom and stopped at the doorway. She opened her mouth to yell, but only a little squeak emerged. In the back of her mind, a little voice told her she should be glad he wasn't completely nude. This was bad enough. Standing in the middle of the bathroom, wearing only a pair of tight black boxer briefs, Gideon Wright was a sight to behold. Six foot three inches of sculpted male perfection. All muscle and hard angles, with a light smattering of dark hair on his chest, he was every fantasy come to life. The only flaw was the small scar on his side where she'd almost lost him to a bullet a couple years ago.

This wasn't the first time she'd seen him this way. They'd been partners for years and had frequently seen each other in various stages of undress. But for some reason, this was different, felt more intimate... Except for that one time that neither of them ever spoke about.

"Do you mind, Eve?" His voice only slightly less annoyed than before, he sent her a scowl. "I'd like to shower in peace."

Pulling herself out of heated memories, she scrambled to remember why she'd come in here. Then the fury returned. "Victimhood? Just because my best friend has been lying to me for more than ten years, I'm acting like a victim? Is that your last gasp of manipulation, Gideon? Or do you have more up your sleeve?"

His eyes spitting fire, he stalked toward her. Her heart went into overdrive, and she told herself to retreat. But backing down was not in her DNA. She held herself still and waited for his response.

Gideon stopped within inches of Eve. This woman had challenged him, filled his waking hours with laughter and intrigue, occupied his dreams with unending heat, and his heart with an aching tenderness. In the ten years he'd known her, she had become his everything. And he'd had to hide all these emotions because of his obligations.

But now she knew the truth. There was nothing more to hide. No need to keep those feelings to himself. Except for one reason—she didn't feel the same way. At least not yet.

She glared up at him, challenging him to say or do something so she could give it right back to him. She would not back down. That was just not in her, and hell if that didn't turn him on more than anything. He also knew that if she didn't leave within the next five seconds, his mouth would be on hers, and she'd have no doubt of how he felt. This was neither the time nor the place.

Matching her glare, he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her. Thankfully, she held on to her crutches. He walked several steps back to the entrance to the bathroom and set her down. Before she could castigate him for his high-handedness, he turned and shut the door in her face.

"How dare you?" she shouted through the door.

"Go to bed, Eve. We'll talk in the morning."

He knew she stood at the door for several seconds. He could almost feel her fiery gaze coming through the wood. Finally, with an exaggerated huff of indignation, she

hobbled away.

Blowing out a weary sigh, Gideon finished stripping and then stood under the hot, gushing water of the shower. He had spent the last few hours taking care of some much-needed business. He now had a car to drive, a few more clothes to wear, and a place to stay.

After he'd taken care of those needs, he'd taken a run through the city, remembering the good and not-so-good times of his youth. He'd even driven to the house where he'd grown up and stopped in front of it for several moments. Someone had updated the house with paint and new shutters. The lawn was neat, and his mother's azaleas were still lined up under the windows. Come spring, they'd be bursting with vibrant colors of pink, red, and white. She had loved those plants, and multiple photos had been taken of her children and husband in front of them. One of his favorites was on his mantel at his home in Montana.

The house had looked much smaller than he remembered, but before his mother's death, it had felt like the safest, most perfect place in the world.

He wasn't usually one for melancholy or revisiting the past. It never helped in his opinion. His point had been proven by how he'd felt after he'd driven away. Memories, both good and bad, could be helpful, but staying there too long was a sure way to get lost. He preferred the present—always had.

Eve preferred the present, too. One of the many things they had in common. To her, looking back meant pain. Even though she was the strongest person he'd ever known, he knew she chose every day to push those memories away.

Now he wondered if he'd hurt her so badly she would push him away, too. They had been through so much together, and while not all of it had been fun, they'd done it together, and it had worked for them.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

But who were they now? Now that she knew the truth.

He used to wonder how they fit so well together until he'd realized something. They had nothing in common, and they had everything in common.

Their childhoods couldn't have been more different. He'd grown up in a large family with a mother and father who'd loved their children unconditionally but also had expected a lot from them. He'd gotten his first job when he was seven years old. His siblings had been his responsibility when his parents hadn't been around. His education had been of utmost importance to his parents, and he'd worked each day to make them proud.

Eve had lost her mother early, and her father had doted on her. Not unusual, unless your father happened to be the king of a country. She had wanted for nothing materially, but the nurturing and discipline hadn't always been there for her.

But somehow, once they'd partnered, those differences had no longer mattered. Their life experiences might have made them each their own individual, but together, it somehow made them a whole entity.

He'd never forget the day she'd walked into the lobby of the Carmichael Group to begin her training. If he hadn't known she was arriving, he wouldn't have recognized her. The king had told him that she was having problems accepting her new appearance. With a broken nose and a shattered jaw, plastic surgery had been a necessity. Apparently, the princess had frequently asked her father for a nose job, and he had refused to allow it. Instead of asking her if she still wanted a different nose, he'd given her what she'd originally asked for. Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out

the way he'd thought it would. Instead of being pleased about her new nose, the changes had only been a reminder of why she no longer looked like herself.

Gideon had never thought much about her nose. It was part of her, and there wasn't a time he hadn't considered her attractive. He couldn't, however, deny that while Princesse Evangelina had been pretty before, the surgery had made her beyond stunning.

But she'd also been hurting. Blue eyes that had gleamed with life had been dull. Her face had been ghostly pale, and the dark shadows beneath her eyes had indicated sleeping was difficult. She had lost weight she couldn't afford to lose and had looked like a small puff of wind could knock her off her feet.

Even though Gideon had introduced himself to her that first day, he hadn't been involved in her training those first couple of months. Others had taken over, ensuring she was given a schedule and a review of what she could expect. Discipline was a must for specialized training, and every single moment was planned out.

By the end of the first month, due to a healthy diet and regular exercise, not only had color returned to her cheeks and she had gained a few pounds, the way she'd walked and talked had been different, too. There had been confidence and life within her again, and Gideon had relished seeing the rebirth of a strong woman who would not be defeated.

When he had taken over her training, everything had changed. Eve had been amazing, soaking up every ounce of knowledge like a sponge and taking to every new skill as if she'd been born to do it. She had excelled at everything thrown at her, and it hadn't taken him long to realize that Eve Wells, survivor, fighter, and warrior, was the other half of his heart.

Gideon shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. Fatigue tugged at him, and

he knew both he and Eve would be better equipped to discuss things rationally in the morning. When he opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom, he saw that Eve had had a different idea. Unfortunately for her, her body hadn't been as cooperative.

As large as Eve's personality was and as much as she loved to challenge herself and everyone around her, she often forgot that she was also human. She was only a week out from an accident that could easily have taken her life, still recovering from a concussion and broken bones. And thanks to him, she was also dealing with his lies and what she saw as a huge betrayal.

She was curled up on a chaise lounge in front of the window, her face, though still bruised, one of serene beauty. Tenderness washed through him, and he wanted nothing more than to put her in his bed and hold her close all night long.

Nope, not going to happen. She'd wake up and want to know just what the hell was going on. Neither of them was ready for that particular conversation.

Lifting her gently, he carried her to her bedroom and placed her on her bed. As a testament to her weariness, she never flickered an eyelash. He removed her shoes and then covered her with the blanket folded at the bottom of the bed.

He stood over her for several long moments, staring at the woman who was both his past and his present. And if he had anything to say about it at all, she was also his future.

Whether she agreed with that was another thing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She woke to the mouthwatering fragrances of croissants and freshly ground French

roast coffee. Her mind muddled and groggy from sleeping so deeply, she smiled at the familiar scents from her childhood. On Saturday mornings, when her brothers were off playing polo or soccer, she and her papa would spend an hour together, eating breakfast and chatting. It had been her favorite time of the week.

She stretched, anticipating the delightful treat that awaited her. At the first stitch of pain, all grogginess left her, and awareness set in. She was no longer a child, and those innocent days were long gone. Gideon had apparently ordered breakfast, and now she needed to get up and face the day.

Glancing around the room, she vaguely remembered she hadn't fallen asleep in bed. She had been waiting for Gideon to finish his shower so they could continue their argument. He'd taken so long to come out, she'd curled up on the chaise, and that's all she remembered. Her eyes went to the crutches leaning against the bedpost.

Not only had he carried her into her room and tucked her in, but he'd also brought her crutches back, too. And she'd slept through it all. Even though Gideon could move with the stealthlike quietness of a jungle cat, she had trained herself to be a light sleeper. So much for being ready for danger of any kind. Once she was healed, she was going to have to put herself through refresher training. Not being at the top of her game could never happen.

If she hadn't gotten injured, she and Gideon would have been headed to Barcelona for a deep-cover op. She had been looking forward to the mission. It had been a couple of years since just the two of them had worked deep cover. There was no one she enjoyed spending that much time with more than Gideon. Despite the confident image she projected, she was still an introvert at heart. With Gideon, she could be exactly who she was.

That was one of the reasons Gideon's deception hurt so deeply. The rest of the world, even her closest friends, never saw all of her. But Gideon had—and she'd thought

she'd seen all of him, too. Instead, she had seen only what he'd wanted her to see.

The knock on her bedroom door didn't surprise her. She figured he was getting tired of waiting for her to come out.

"I can hear you thinking all the way in here. I have breakfast ready. Do you want me to serve you in bed?"

She glared at the closed door. He knew exactly what those words would do to her. Without answering, she sat up and put her feet on the floor. She was surprised at the lack of pain. Her shoulder was much better, her ribs not nearly as sore as they had been, and her head wasn't pounding. Maybe the deep sleep had been what she'd needed.

Grabbing her crutches, she hobbled to the bathroom. The instant she was inside, she dropped her clothes and headed to the shower, grabbing the protective wrap for her leg and shoulder on the way. A hot shower and a good breakfast would give her the clarity to face the rest of what Gideon had to tell her. They hadn't yet touched on the reasons. She knew what he'd done. Now she was ready to know why.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Scratching the stubble on his jaw, Gideon stifled a giant yawn. He had barely slept a wink. After an hour of trying, he'd gotten up and taken advantage of Eve's gym. After an hour on the punching bag and a half hour going full speed on the treadmill, his body had been so pumped with adrenaline, he'd spent the rest of the night going over what he planned to tell her today. Despite hours of going back and forth in his mind, he was no closer to knowing what would come next for them. He'd finally decided he would tell her everything and let her figure it out. It was the only way.

The hard questions were coming. She knew the facts—the how and the when. She still didn't know the why—at least not all of it. Today was sink or swim for him, and he already knew the water was filled with sharks.

He'd heard her stirring around earlier and knew she was likely preparing for battle as well. When she appeared in the kitchen, wearing loose knit pants and an icy-blue cashmere sweater, her long hair in a braid, he was pleased to see that she looked almost normal. If not for the slight bruise on her cheek, the small healing cut on the bridge of her nose, and the crutches she was leaning on, he could almost imagine nothing had happened to her.

As usual, he was torn between kissing her luscious lips and treating her like a good friend and nothing more. He'd been doing the friend thing for years. And now, he wasn't even sure she'd allow that anymore.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Like a log. Thanks for taking me to bed.”

The words were said innocently, but the image in his mind went somewhere completely different. His mouth quirked up, and he noted a slight blush blooming on her face. For some reason, that made him feel better. At least she knew that was a possibility even if that wasn't what she'd meant.

Letting her off the hook, he turned to plate their breakfast, saying, "You were pretty out of it."

"I think it was the deep sleep I'd been needing. I feel much better today."

"Good. Have a seat. Breakfast is ready."

She seated herself, and the instant he put her plate in front of her, she dug in. It was good to see her eat. She'd lost weight, and though she wasn't thin, she was naturally slender and needed to keep her strength up to heal.

They sat comfortably for several moments and ate. Having shared thousands of meals with her, it felt good to feel like they were back in some kind of normal routine. He knew this was the calm before the storm, but he would take what he could get.

When she was almost finished, she said, "You were gone a long time yesterday. Did you visit family?"

"No. I don't have any family left here."

"So that wasn't a lie."

She said it as a statement, not an accusation, but it still stung. He didn't take the bait. He actually didn't think she'd meant it as a slap. Usually, when Eve slapped you, you knew it.

“I needed some clothes. All I had were the change I had in my go bag.”

“Did you walk around the city?”

“Some. After I finished shopping, I took a run through town. Not much has changed.”

“See anyone you know?”

“No.”

She took a sip of her coffee and said, “What else did you do?”

He looked away for a moment, knowing once he answered, more questions would come, along with the inevitable argument. He took a breath and answered, “I rented an apartment.”

She jerked at the news. “Why?”

“Because staying here could get awkward. You’re trying to keep a low profile, and a stranger seen coming and going from the castle will eventually raise questions. Besides, I think we both need some space.”

“I see. So how long are you planning to stay in Amelie?”

And here they went.

“Till you’re well.”

“No.”

He arched a brow. “Excuse me?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“You need to return to the States. I’m sure OZ needs you.”

“Perhaps, but I’m staying here until you’re ready to go back with me.”

“I don’t want you here.”

“Well, gee, that’s just too bad, Eve. As far as I know, your father hasn’t changed his politics. This country isn’t under a communist regime. I have free will and the ability to come and go as I please.”

“There’s no reason for you to stay.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

She set her coffee cup on the table and pushed her chair back. He didn’t offer to help her because he knew she’d resent his asking. Grabbing her crutches, she said, “Let’s get this over with.”

Standing, he followed her into the living room and watched her settle into a chair. He didn’t ask why she’d moved in here to talk. He already knew she’d done it for him. He’d told her about how his parents had refused to argue at the table during a meal. Their meals had been family time, and any difficult discussions to be had were conducted away from the place where being together as family was of utmost importance.

She had liked this concept, and they had adapted it when they’d started working together. The heated discussion they’d just had was the closest either of them had

come to having an argument during a meal.

“Before we get started, I have something for you.” He grabbed the papers he’d set out on a side table. “Yesterday, you asked me how much your father paid me.”

Regret darkening her eyes, she held up her hand. “I’m sorry. That was—”

“No. It was a legitimate question and deserves an answer. Hopefully, this will clear up any misunderstanding.” He handed her the pages he’d printed out yesterday and then settled into a chair across from her. “The information should be clear cut. Each quarter, I received a payment of \$250,000 from your father. You’ll see the corresponding transfer of funds.”

Her mouth dry, her heart pounding, she could only shake her head as she shuffled through the pages. She couldn’t believe her eyes and was torn between thanking him profusely for his willingness to share the information and begging his forgiveness for what she’d accused him of yesterday. Yes, Gideon had been paid well. And yes, he had accepted the money. He had received a million dollars each year from her father. But what he had done with those funds was another shock, although she couldn’t say why. Gideon was the least materialistic person she’d ever known. This paperwork showing where he had put the money he’d earned was definitive proof.

Every time he’d received a payment from her father, the funds had then been transferred to a charity. But not just any charity. He had donated the money to the charities she admired and donated to herself. She remembered a discussion with him years ago of what her favorites were and hadn’t thought anything about his asking. But now it was clear that he’d asked the question for a very specific reason. Bottom line: Gideon had not benefited financially from being her protector.

Her heart turned over when she noted an additional charity had been added a few months ago. The Kacie Dane Foundation was an organization that aided young girls

and women who had been trafficked or sexually assaulted. Olivia had told her about the organization because her Last Chance Rescue partner, Brennan Sinclair, was married to the founder, Kacie Dane. Eve remembered mentioning it in passing to Gideon, and that's all it had taken.

Tears blurring the pages before her, Eve sniffed and looked up at the amazing man in front of her. "Gideon, why?"

"You mean the money?"

"Yes, among other things."

"Because I wasn't doing it for the money, Eve. Our relationship could never be about money."

Like a pin stuck into an overinflated balloon, all her self-righteous anger deflated. Yes, he had lied to her. Yes, he had kept things from her, and yes, the hurt was still there, but the anger no longer existed. How could it?

"Okay. Then let's talk about the why."

"Let's get the rest of the what out of the way."

Her heart skipped. "There's more?"

"You know I told you that I was in on the raid at the house where you were held when you were kidnapped. And I was the one who found you."

"Yes."

"What I didn't tell you was that I was the one who shot Dirk Bennett Jr."

A small, wry smile lifted her mouth. “And you couldn’t have been just a little more accurate?”

His eyes gleamed with appreciation at her quip. “I didn’t know who he was at the time. I only knew he was in front of your cell, trying to keep me out. If I had known who he was, I promise he would have been in a whole lot more pain than just a little bullet to his leg. But I was glad to hear that he was left with a permanent limp.”

She was honestly glad that Dirk hadn’t been killed in the raid. It pleased her to think of him spending the rest of his days in a federal prison in Indiana. He had been tried and convicted of terrorism and would spend the rest of his natural days incarcerated in a six-by-eight cell. And once his time was up there, hell would be waiting for him.

“What else?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“I was the one who sent you the information on the Carmichael Group.”

Of course he was. How silly to not have figured that one out already.

In many ways, the Carmichael Group had saved her life. She had recovered from her injuries, but her mental state had been all over the place. Six months after the attack, she had still been a mess. Nothing had made sense anymore. All her idealism had disappeared. All the joy and love of life had been gone. She'd rarely left her bedroom suite. Had never appeared in public. She had seen counselors and therapists, but nothing had helped. Then she had opened what she'd thought was a get-well card, but inside had been a website address on an otherwise blank card. Curious, she had gone to the website and had found a new purpose in life.

Once again, Gideon had been responsible for helping her.

“Don't look at me like that, Eve.”

“Like what?”

“Like you don't know me.”

“Do I, Gideon? You've had this whole other life I knew nothing about that somehow revolved around me. I don't understand it.”

“It's not that complicated.”

“Maybe not to you, but for someone who was left completely in the dark, it's quite

complicated and confusing.”

“Then here’s your chance to uncomplicate it. Tell me what else you want to know.”

“All right. If you’ve told me the what of everything, now tell me the why.”

“That’s not complicated either. I was a twelve-year-old boy who thought he knew exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there. An eight-year-old little warrior named Evangelina changed the trajectory of my life.”

Was it that simple? Could something that small and insignificant change someone’s entire world? Especially at such a young age?

“Okay, but I still don’t understand why you felt so obligated to me. We didn’t even know each other.”

“Contrary to what it may seem, not all of this was planned. When I heard about the attack and that you’d been taken, I felt an obligation to help. I was fortunate to be allowed to do that. Then afterward, when I learned you were having difficulty adjusting after your trauma, I sent you the Carmichael website. I was already doing some work for them, and I believed they could help you. Then I met you—officially for the first time—and it went from there.

“When your father told me he planned to continue to have you guarded, no matter what training you had gone through or what your skills and capabilities were, I made the offer to him.” He raised his hand to stop her from interrupting. “And before you ask me again why I would put my life on hold to protect you, let me remind you one more time that everything I have done over the last ten years has been my choice. It’s been an honor and a privilege to have you as not only my partner but also my best friend.”

Eve released a slow, measured breath. Everything he'd told her had gone a long way in soothing her crushed feelings. He had put all of it on the line for her, and though the ache was still there, she no longer felt the hurt and betrayal like before.

"So where do we go from here?"

"I'd say that's up to you, Eve."

"I love my life as an OZ operative." She spoke carefully. "After my recovery, it's what I want to go back to, if Ash is okay with that."

"You didn't break protocol. I was the one who removed your tracking chip. I'm sure Ash wants you back."

That was her hope, but what she said next might change everything once again. "I need you to understand something, Gideon. I sincerely appreciate everything you've done for me. There's no one I would have wanted to be partnered with than you. We've had each other's backs for so many years, and I've treasured it all."

He gave her a knowing, sad smile. "I hear a gigantic 'however' coming my way."

"I need some time, Gideon. You've thrown a lot at me."

"All right," he said gravely. "I can give you that."

He needed to know something else. There was no easy way to say this, and she wasn't one to hold back her words, so she just said them. "I forgive you, Gideon. I know your intent was never to hurt me. But I don't know if I'll ever trust you again. Not like before."

There was no surprise in his expression, but the sadness in his eyes deepened. "I

knew when I finally told you that I would likely lose your trust.”

“Let me ask you this. If the accident hadn’t happened, would you have told me?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. I’ve wanted to tell you for years, but I knew once I did, everything would change. And I was right.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She wished it didn't make a difference, but it, in fact, made all the difference. When you put your life in someone's hands, as she and Gideon did on a daily basis, you had to have total trust in that individual. What she and Gideon had was as rare as a snowfall in the desert, and she had treasured it above all else. But now that she knew it had all been based on a thousand lies, how could she give her total trust to him again?

As if there was nothing else to say, Gideon stood.

"Will you be going back to OZ now?"

"No," he said calmly as he walked toward her. "I've already told you my plans. They haven't changed."

Yes, he'd told her he wouldn't return until she did. She knew him well enough to know that arguing would do no good. When Gideon decided something, that was it for him.

As he approached her, she saw something in his eyes she hadn't seen in a very long time. Before she could wonder at it, he leaned over her and cupped her face in his big hands. Beautiful blue eyes locked with hers, he said softly, "I'm very sorry I hurt you, Eve. It's the last thing I wanted to do, and I sincerely appreciate your forgiveness."

He leaned closer, so near that she could feel his breath on her lips. "I will earn your trust back. That's a promise."

Before she could respond, he touched his mouth to hers. His lips were warm and firm

as they gently caressed hers.

It was a kiss of tenderness.

Passion.

Promise.

He then strode to the door and walked out, leaving Eve stunned, breathless, and wanting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gideon entered his apartment and shut the door behind him. This would be his home for the next few weeks, but it felt as empty as his heart did. Had he gone too far? Not far enough? When she'd said she'd forgiven him, his heart had leaped, and the relief had been enormous. Seconds later, he'd crashed and burned when she'd told him she wasn't sure she could ever trust him again.

He had made a statement with that kiss. Had staked a claim. It was up to Eve to make the next move. She'd had plenty of opportunity to avoid his kiss, and though he'd felt her surprise, he'd also felt her response. There had been passion, need, and attraction. He could work with all of those.

He drew in a breath and gazed around the furnished but colorless apartment. It would be a place to sleep and nothing more. She wanted space, and he would give it to her. He would check back in with her in a few days. She wouldn't be going anywhere, and he agreed with her that she needed time to process all that she'd learned. But no way would he give up on her or them. He'd regain her trust if it was the last thing he did.

The knock on his door had him reaching for his gun, and then he swore softly as he

remembered he didn't have his weapon on him. Perhaps it was just paranoia on his part, but ever since he'd returned to Ile de la Lune, he felt as if he were being watched. It didn't help that Clement had thrown him in a prison cell for three days. It was more than that, though. He just didn't know what.

Looking through the peephole, he noted a box had been set on the floor in front of his door. Recognizing the packaging, he nodded his approval. As usual, Ash had come through.

Grabbing the box, he returned to the living room. Placing the package on the coffee table, he tore into it, revealing the satellite phone he'd asked Ash to send. As soon as he'd signed the lease for his apartment, he'd texted Ash his address. Even though they'd been in touch with a few encrypted texts and a couple of brief conversations, they hadn't had the kind of discussion that needed to take place. He owed his friend an explanation, but he needed the conversation to be as secure possible.

Pleased to see the phone was charged, he dropped into a chair and punched in Ash's number.

"About time you called," Ash answered.

"Sorry. Just got the phone. Thanks for sending it."

"You're welcome. How's Eve?"

The hard tone in Ash's voice told him the man was still pissed.

"She's recovering well. Already doing some PT. She should be good to go in about six weeks. Maybe less."

"She's coming back?"

“We both are.”

He wouldn't ordinarily speak for Eve, but in this, he was certain. Whether she would agree to continue being his partner was up in the air.

“That's good to hear. You ready to tell me why you're in Ile de la Lune?”

He could reveal their location without giving up Eve's secrets. They were hers to share when she was ready.

“You know where it is?”

“Of course. Small country close to Monaco. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“It’s where I grew up.”

Even from thousands of miles away, Gideon heard the condemnation in Ash’s silence. He had known revealing his secrets wouldn’t be easy. He, Ash, and the other men of OZ had been through so much together, and keeping secrets from each other, especially something that seemed so basic, would not be received well. He’d had his reasons, but if Ash or any of the others had done the same thing, he would’ve had some hard questions for them.

“All right. Not going to ask you to explain right now, but you know we’ll want some answers.”

He owed the team an explanation, but more than that, he specifically owed his OZ brothers some answers.

“You’ll get them. I promise. What’s happening with the team? Everyone still off-grid?”

“Yeah. We’ll be that way for a few more weeks.”

“And the family?”

“Good.”

Gideon didn't take offense at Ash's short answer. This line was secure, but unless they were face-to-face, Ash wouldn't talk about his wife, Jules, or their newborn, Joshua. They were too precious to him to discuss over any airwaves. Gideon totally understood.

“Sean? Any news on him?”

“No change there. Not sure there will be one.”

“Do you know where that's coming from? I know he's pissed about not being told that Hawke was alive, but a lot of us were in the dark about it and we got over it. His reaction is kind of bizarre.”

“I agree. There's something there. Of course, secrets seem to have become our MO these days.”

Gideon heard the criticism, but he also heard the guilt behind it. Ash had kept a huge secret about Hawke from all of them except Serena, who'd discovered the truth accidentally. And that seemed to be Sean's sticking point. His wife knew and hadn't told him, but still, something seemed off about this whole damn thing.

“When we all get back together, maybe we can clear the air.”

“My thoughts exactly. Is Eve around? I'd like to talk with her.”

“She's at another location. I'm in my apartment.”

“You’re not staying together?”

“Let’s just say another secret was revealed, and she needs space to deal with some things.”

Ash gave a half laugh, half grunt. “Hell, we’re a messed-up bunch of shithheads.”

“Can’t argue with you there.”

“So what are you going to do while she’s healing?”

“I have time on my hands. I can do some digging.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

They’d been on the hunt for over two years now for a shadow organization they now believed was called the Wren Project. On paper, it was an actual organization, but it had a dark shadow of evil beneath its façade of goodness.

They’d recently learned the organization was responsible for some of the most corrupt and dangerous events of the twenty-first century. The people who ran it were so powerful that they had some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the world at their beck and call. They had killed innocents and manipulated world events. The reasons were still up in the air.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Only a few weeks ago, infamous spy Iris Gates had given them a treasure trove of information. Names, businesses, organizations all supposedly tied to the Wren Project. As Iris was on the edge of evil herself, trusting her intel was by no means a sure thing, but it was the biggest lead they'd had so far. They had no choice but to take what she'd given them and run with it.

"I sent a smaller box with the satellite phone," Ash said. "You see it?"

Gideon hadn't thought of looking for anything else. He grabbed the box and turned it upside down. A long, slender box slid out. Curious, he ripped off the tape and wasn't surprised to see a leather pouch. He already knew what it contained.

As if he could see Gideon's movements, Ash said, "You know what to do."

"Yeah."

When they'd created OZ, they had all made a vow to stay connected. The one way to do that was via the chip each of them had implanted in their arms. Before he and Eve had arrived in Ile de la Lune, Gideon had removed theirs. It had been for Eve's benefit more than his. No one knew Eve's real identity, and when she was ready, she would tell her story. The last thing he wanted was for her to be forced into it. He'd already betrayed her trust too much already.

"No problem," Gideon said. "I'll get it done."

"Soon as you're up and running, send me your Internet info. Serena can set up your security, and you'll be good to go."

What would they do without Serena Donovan? She was one of the most gifted and intelligent people he knew. She had created impenetrable firewalls, uncovered intel that would take most intelligence agencies years to discover, and designed software exclusively for Option Zero's use. Not only that, but she was also a kickass OZ operative.

"Serena's back at work?"

"No. She's still visiting her folks, but you know Serena. She's like a one-woman intelligence agency all on her own. Besides, I think it helps with what's going on with Sean."

Gideon still couldn't get over Sean's attitude. Yes, Hawke and Ash had lied, but there had been valid reasons. And Serena hadn't lied—she just hadn't shared the intel she'd uncovered. Somehow Sean was seeing it all as a personal betrayal.

"You think it'd help if I talked to Donovan in person?" Gideon asked. He and Sean had always had a good relationship, and he thought of Sean as family, like he did all his OZ brothers and sisters.

"Yeah, maybe. If you can find him."

Which meant Sean had removed his chip as well. Gideon sighed. That was not good.

"Serena doesn't know his location?"

"Has no idea. Said he grabbed some stuff from their house and disappeared."

Now that just pissed him off. Going off-grid was one thing, but leaving his wife without any way to contact him? That was beyond shitty.

“If I find him, I might kick his ass,” Gideon growled.

“Get in line,” Ash said.

“What’s going on with Olivia and Hawke? I know they went away together. Are they—”

“No,” Ash said abruptly. “Olivia’s back with LCR, and Hawke’s looking like a lost puppy.”

How did people in love mess up so badly? He’d never seen two people more perfect together than Hawke and Olivia, but for some reason, they couldn’t make a go of it. How on earth did he expect that he and Eve ever could?

“Since the news so far has been shitty all around, might as well hit me with what’s going on with Jazz and Xavier. Any news on her brother?”

“Nothing more than we already knew. He is alive and living somewhere in South America.”

“That narrows things down.”

“Yeah.”

“On that cheerful note, I’ll get on with the more pleasant task of shooting this thing into my arm.”

“Happy shooting. I’ll send you the intel as soon as you’re set.”

“I’ll let you know what I find.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

The call went dead, and without hesitation, Gideon pulled an alcohol-soaked cotton pad from the pouch, rubbed it on his arm, and then pressed the injector into his upper arm. He gave a small grunt at the deep sting.

Seconds later, his phone pinged, and he read the message from Ash with a wry grin. Welcome back, asshole.

When his phone pinged again, he figured it was another smart-ass remark. Instead, the message was from Eve. What the hell was that?

His spirits lifting even further, he quickly replied, Took you long enough.

* * *

“Ugh!”

Eve wasn't sure how long she had been sitting here, reliving that kiss. For something that had lasted less than fifteen seconds, it was taking her an extraordinarily long time to come to grips with it.

How dare he do that and just walk out? Why had he kissed her? What had he meant by it?

It had taken a while before she could come up with a coherent text, but instead of getting answers, he'd answered in typical Gideon style. Infuriating man!

She didn't know where to go from here. Did the kiss mean anything? Did she want it

to mean something? For years, she and Gideon had skirted around the heat between them. Early on in their friendship, she had made some subtle advances, and he'd gently shut her down.

Since she'd had zero confidence in her sexuality at that time, and her self-confidence had been hovering somewhere below zero, she had been grateful he hadn't made a big deal out of it, and she had pushed it aside. Later, when they'd become full-fledged partners, and she had developed a stronger sense of herself, she had thought about it again but had refused to be the one to make the first move.

Until that night.

Closing her eyes, Eve remembered those moments as if they'd happened yesterday. They had been on assignment in Prague. Even though they'd been partners for over two years by then, both of them had concentrated on maintaining a close friendship and nothing more. She'd known that Gideon dated various women, and she had gone out with a couple of guys herself. Though neither of them talked about their love lives, she somehow had known that Gideon felt nothing for these women. Just as she'd felt little for the men she'd dated. It had been companionship and nothing more.

The job in Prague had changed a lot of things for them. It was one of their first undercover assignments for the CIA. They had joined the agency together and had been surprised but pleased that they'd been hired in as partners. It had helped that Gideon had some contacts, and since he could talk a camel into walking backward across the desert, their entry into American covert ops had been streamlined.

Their target had been an arms dealer who'd lived in Prague but had ties to a bombing in Kiev. Gideon had gotten a job as a short-order cook at a diner where the guy had purportedly eaten frequently. She had gone in as a waitress. Coming back to their apartment every night smelling like onions and grease hadn't been fun. Their hideout had been a dumpy one-bedroom flat with a minuscule shower and a temperamental

water heater. It hadn't helped that it had been wintertime, and the heater had malfunctioned like a defective motor. When it had sputtered to its end late one night, they'd had no choice but to cuddle together to stay warm. The result had been what had to be the most cliché of hookups. And it had been life-changing for her.

Eve remembered every second of those delicious hours in his arms. The heat, the intensity. His gruff voice filled with emotion and need, his large hands both tender and rough. Every single moment had been filled with passion, culminating in the most wondrous, beautiful, most momentous experience of her life.

Waking the next morning with a smile and a peace she'd never felt before, she had been sure that Gideon was feeling the same. She had been wrong. His eyes had been filled with remorse and so much regret that even now she felt the pain of rejection in her gut.

As letdowns went, it had to have been the kindest and loveliest one in history. He hadn't known she was a virgin. With her past experience, being a virgin at twenty-four hadn't felt that unusual to her. She had known that when she did finally trust a man enough to give herself to him that he would have to be extraordinary. And that man had been Gideon. He had seen things differently.

Now that she knew the truth of who he really was, his gentle letdown made so much more sense. His guilt had likely been overwhelming, because that's just who Gideon was.

She hadn't been sure they would recover from that. Even as kind as he'd been, his rejection had stung. Eventually, they had returned to their former relationship and perhaps had even grown closer because of it.

That didn't mean she'd forgotten or didn't often yearn for more from him. But not since that night had he indicated that he felt anything remotely romantic toward her.

Until that kiss.

What had it meant? Now that she knew the truth, did he want to pursue something? Did he think it would be that easy? Maybe she was even angrier with herself, because even as hurt as she was at his deceit, all she could think about was how much she wished he'd come back and kiss her longer and deeper.

“Ugh!” she growled again. Instead of responding to his infuriating text, she dropped her phone in her pocket. Grabbing her crutches leaning against her chair, she stood. No matter what response she texted back, she wasn't sure she was ready to deal with his answer.

The chime of her intercom and the announcement that her brothers were on their way up had her moving quicker than was likely healthy. Silly, but she didn't want them to see the evidence on the table that she'd had a guest for breakfast. No matter how old she was, Nicolas and Alexandre had a tendency to get all big brotherly sometimes.

They had met Gideon a couple of times, and she had assured them they were just friends. However, with that kiss foremost on her mind, she didn't trust herself to not show something she didn't want revealed. They'd never let it go if they suspected there was more than friendship between them.

Thankful there was nothing to clean up in the kitchen, she quickly loaded his dish and coffee cup into the dishwasher. She had just enough time to give herself a quick glance in the mirror, and though she noted her color was a little high, she hoped they would attribute that to the excitement of seeing them.

The instant she opened the door, she was enveloped in a bear hug, but when she yelped, Nicolas dropped his hands quickly and stepped back. “Je suis désolé!”

“No, no, it's okay,” she quickly assured him. “I'm just a little sore.”

“If I promise to be gentler, can your other brother get a hug?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She turned to Alexandre with a big grin. “If you promise not to pick me up like you did last time.”

Laughing, he pulled her gently into his arms and kissed her cheek. “Welcome home, petite soeur.”

She backed away from both of them and felt a rush of love. Even though they were both at least a decade older than her, she adored them. It hadn’t always been that way. Because they were so much older, especially Nicolas, she’d rarely seen them as a child. When they’d lost Samuel, they had somehow become closer.

“Come on in.” She hobbled toward the living room and gratefully settled into a chair.

Alexandre chose the sofa and promptly propped his feet on the table in front of him. Nicolas, always the more proper one, sat in a chair across from her.

She didn’t see her family nearly enough. Nicolas would occasionally text and let her know he was headed to one place or the other in case she was close enough to come visit. They’d met twice like that, and it was always a treat. On one of those occasions, she’d taken Gideon with her and then had regretted it after Nicolas had grilled him like he suspected Gideon was a serial killer. Gideon had gotten a kick out of it, but she’d learned her lesson. Her brothers, no matter how old she got, would always be overprotective of her. Just like her father was.

The fact they both looked like younger versions of their father was no surprise. Samuel had had the same looks. The brothers might have been staggered two years apart, but they could have passed as identical triplets. They’d inherited their father’s

thick hair. And though Alex's hair was still dark brown, Nicolas's was now iron gray intermixed with brown, much the way their father's hair had been when he was younger. The famous Wellingsley nose looked natural on their masculine faces, while on her, with her delicate features, it had looked out of proportion.

"Now tell us what you've been up to that you almost got yourself killed," Alexandre said.

Her brothers had no idea what she did in her real life. She and her father had agreed to keep it between the two of them. Her job was hard enough for her father to fathom. Having her brothers involved would cause immeasurable problems. However, since lying to her family wasn't something she was comfortable with, she stuck to the truth as much as possible.

"The dirt bike I was riding hit a rock. I went one way. The bike went the other."

"You, Lina? On a dirt bike?" Nicolas shook his head. "That doesn't sound like you at all."

His words proved once again that, as much as they loved her, her brothers had no clue who she really was and what she was capable of doing.

She shrugged and smiled. "It was fun until it wasn't."

"Well, I certainly hope you learned your lesson. You are far too delicate to put yourself at risk like that."

Nicolas hadn't meant to be unkind, but his ideas about what women should and shouldn't do were close to archaic. It was fortunate that he had married a woman who shared his same old-fashioned beliefs.

Since both Nicolas and Alexandre were looking at her with disapproval, a subject change was definitely in order. Asking about their families was always a safe bet.

“Where are Camille and my nephews? I hoped they would come by for a visit by now.”

Her brothers exchanged a look that sent her hackles up. There was something going on that they weren’t sure they should share.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“We thought Papa might have already mentioned it to you, Lina,” Alexandre said gently. “Apparently, he was afraid it would upset you too much.”

“Mentioned what?”

“We believe an attack on the royal family is imminent,” Nicolas said. “I’ve sent Camille and the children away until it’s safe.”

“Why have I not heard anything of this?”

“Not to be too blunt, Lina, but you’re not exactly a member of this family anymore,” Nicolas said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Now, now,” Alexandre said. “What Nicolas meant to say was that since you’re not here often, you’re not in danger like the rest of the family.”

More hurt than offended, Eve looked at her brother. “Nicolas, is that what you believe? That I’m not part of this family?”

“You left us, Lina. We barely see you anymore.”

“You know why.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry you suffered. But you—”

“Did what you had to do.”

At the sound of their father’s voice, all three of them went to their feet. Standing at the door, the king had obviously heard Nicolas’s words, and the fire in his eyes told of his displeasure.

“Bonjour, Papa,” Alexandre said. “Come join the party.”

“From where I’m standing, it didn’t sound like a party. More like a trial.”

“That’s not what it was at all, Papa,” Nicolas said. “Lina is my sister, and I love her. However, that doesn’t mean—”

“As I am still the head of this family, I believe I am the one who decides who is and isn’t a part of it.”

His expression now one of regret, Nicolas turned back to Eve. “My apologies, Lina. I spoke out of turn. I love you, and of course you are a member of this family.”

Eve squelched her hurt feelings to watch the play-by-play between her oldest brother and her father. They were so much alike that they had often butted heads. With Nicolas being the heir to the crown, her father was always the hardest on him. She’d always thought Nicolas handled his position with grace and maturity, but the tension between them indicated the relationship might have deteriorated.

“Papa, why didn’t you tell me about the possible threats?” she asked.

Her father came farther into the room, and for the first time, she noticed that her uncle Jacques was behind him. Jacques was two years younger than his brother but actually looked slightly older.

Going to him, she gave him a big hug. He had always been her champion when it came to her family. Though he had been married four times, he had no children of his own and had always been heavily involved in his brother's family.

"It's good to see you, Lina," Jacques said. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better." She drew back, gave her father a quick kiss on his cheek, and then nodded toward the living room. "Have a seat and let's talk about what's going on."

Once they were all seated, she took in her immediate family. They meant the world to her, and for Nicolas to imply that she was no longer a part of them hurt more than she could describe. She had thought they all understood why she'd had to leave.

She had never embraced being a member of a royal family, not like her brothers had. After what happened in Paris, she had wanted to be separated from it even more. But that most definitely didn't mean she wanted to leave her family. With the exception of Gideon, these people in this room were the most important people in the world to her. She would do anything for them.

"All right," her father said. "Since we're all here, let's discuss this." He sent a hard look at Nicolas, adding, "And let's leave the rhetoric for another day. Shall we?"

His mouth tight, Nicolas gave a small nod and said, "Of course."

"Several months ago, our intelligence department picked up some chatter that made them believe a faction within the country is looking to destroy the royal family, thereby overthrowing our government."

“Any idea who this faction might be or who leads them?” Eve asked.

“Not at this time. We didn’t take it seriously at first.”

“Some of us didn’t. Some did,” Nicolas said.

“Very well,” her father said. “I didn’t take it seriously. I’ve been the ruler of our country for almost fifty years. If I took seriously every threat against the monarchy I’ve ever heard, I would get nothing done. However, Jacques and your brothers encouraged me to see this one differently. They felt this one was too on point to ignore.”

“On point in what way?”

“The threat includes the entire royal family, including Nicolas’s family and even Alexandre’s ex-wife, Chloe.”

That name was rarely mentioned within the family anymore. The marriage had lasted three years, and during that time, both Alexandre and Chloe had looked miserable. It had been a poor match, and Eve had breathed a sigh of relief when they had announced the end of their marriage.

“What about me?” she asked. “Any threats or references?”

The looks of discomfort on her uncle’s and brothers’ faces were fascinating. The only one who didn’t appear uneasy was her father.

“Tell me,” she said quietly.

“They indicated that you were too broken to be considered any kind of a threat,” her father said. She detected the subtle amusement in his eyes and smiled to herself. No

one who really knew her and what she was capable of would call her broken.

Aware that her family was waiting for her response to the insult, she shrugged and said, “It’s better if they do think I’m broken. What’s the plan to draw out the culprits?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Belying what she'd read in his expression earlier, her father shook his head. "That's not something you need to be concerned with, Lina. You just concentrate on getting better."

It had been a long time since she'd been made to feel like a second-class citizen, and her father had never been one to treat her as such. Yes, when she was younger, he'd had to protect her, but never had he acted as if she were any less than her brothers. Something else was going on, but she couldn't say anything without drawing attention to the matter. So she did something she rarely did. She kept her opinion to herself and said, "Very well. Whatever you think best, Papa."

She was grateful that no one called her out on her unusual obedience as they continued to discuss who could want the entire royal family gone. The why was easy enough. No matter how good something seemed to a majority of people, there would always be those who thought the complete opposite.

After various enemies had been discussed, both old and new, her father went to his feet. "I have some things I need to see to, and I'm sure Lina needs to rest."

Her brothers and uncle stood, and after each of them had hugged her with a promise to return for a less formal visit, everyone left. Eve had barely had the time to take her coffee cup into the kitchen when the door opened again, and her father stood at the door.

"Papa, did you forget something?"

"No. I need to say this to you in private. I believe the people responsible for these

threats have a spy within my inner circle. And, Lina, I need your help to find them.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gideon stood at Jeremy Clement’s apartment door. More than three weeks had passed since their encounter, and it had taken this long to ensure his temper was firmly in check. He was not one to go off half-cocked. Caring for three siblings had forced him to learn patience, and that control had come in handy many times over the years. He didn’t plan on physical violence today, but he would make sure the man knew exactly what would happen if he ever crossed him again.

He hadn’t mentioned anything to Eve about coming to see him. She had ensured the man no longer had a job, but this was between him and Clement. Not telling her had been made easier by the fact that, other than a couple of texts, he hadn’t heard from her. She’d asked for time and space, and as hard as it was, he was giving it to her.

The door swung open, and Clement stood before him, an arrogant smirk firmly affixed to his thin, sour face. For a man who’d lost his job and knew what Gideon was physically capable of doing to him, he looked way too confident and arrogant.

“Surprised it took you this long, Wright. Figured you’d come knocking as soon as the little bitch let you out of your cage.” The smirk grew broader. “You have to work up your courage?”

Gideon took a step forward. He was at least five inches taller than the older man and had about fifty pounds on him. Either the idiot actually had a death wish, or he believed he was untouchable.

“That’s big talk for an unemployed loser who won’t even be able to get a job scraping up roadkill in this city. Not wise pissing off your employers.”

“You think you’re such a big shot because you and the princess are fu—”

He broke off when Gideon took another step. Stopping within an inch of his face, Gideon said softly, “Finish that sentence, and I guarantee that you will not be able to speak again for a very long time.”

“Lay one finger on me, and I’ll have your ass back in jail. I’ve got friends, too, and they’ll make sure you’re buried so deep, even the princess won’t be able to dig you out.”

It was petty of him, but Gideon couldn’t resist. Placing his finger on Clement’s shoulder, he poked him none too gently. “Go for it, connard.”

Huffing out a foul-smelling breath, Clement backed up and snarled, “I should’ve killed you when you were a punk kid.”

Gideon grinned. “You still mad about that little punch I gave you?”

“I was unable to function as a man for over a month because of you.”

“I’m sure the women of this city wished I’d punched you harder.”

Looking as though he could eat nails, Clement’s face flushed a beet red. Gideon had delivered the hit when the man, who’d been one of the palace guards, had refused to defend the princess while she’d been defending her tree.

“Just wait. You will get your just deserts soon enough.”

“And what does that mean?”

The smirk was back, and evil glinted in his eyes. “You’ll see.”

“Know this, Clement. You come against me or try to harm the princess in any way, you’re a dead man. That’s a promise.”

Not giving the man a chance to spew more vitriol, Gideon turned and strode away. He’d done what he’d come to do, but the arrogance of the man bothered him. Could be bravado, but he’d seemed way too confident for a man who’d been fired and would likely never find another job without moving out of the country.

The bastard was definitely up to something.

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Grinning about his conversation with Wright, Jeremy settled into his favorite chair with a cold one and dreamed about what he was going to do with all the money he was going to get. Only a few weeks ago, he'd been about to pack up and leave the country, sure that his life in Amelie was over. And then fortune had stepped in, and he was back in the game. He was, in fact, better off than he'd ever been before.

He hadn't been filled in on everything. That wasn't the way these things worked. There were lots of different parts to this kind of operation, and he was just a cog in the wheel. He didn't mind being a cog. As long as he got to be involved and got paid for it, he had no problem letting others take the bigger risks. He didn't yet know what part they'd want him to play, but he was up for anything. About time he got what he deserved.

Figuring his new friend would want to know what had just happened, he grabbed the burner phone he'd been given and pressed the key for the only number on it.

"Yes?" a harsh, male voice said.

Slightly startled at the unfriendly tone, Jeremy said, "Guess who just paid me a visit."

"I'm not in the habit of guessing games, Clement. You got something to say, then say it."

The grin erased from his face, Clement said, "Gideon Wright was just at my door, threatening to kill me."

"Is that right?"

The smile returned to Jeremy's face. The man now sounded much more friendly. He guessed he should allow the man some slack. He was in the middle of a major operation and had a lot on his mind.

"Yes. He was furious, in fact. Didn't lay a hand on me, though. He knew better."

"Perhaps we should talk about this in person."

"Really? You want me to meet you somewhere?"

"No, that's not necessary. I have to be in the city for some other business. I can drop by and see you. Will you be home tomorrow evening?"

"I'll make sure of it."

"Excellent. It may be quite late, but I'll be there."

"I'll look forward to it."

The call ended abruptly, but Jeremy shrugged. That's the way it was with high-powered, driven people. They didn't have time for chitchat and niceties. They had more important things on their minds.

Twisting off the top of his beer, Jeremy took a long swallow and blew out a gusty sigh. He'd always had more ambition than talent, which had landed him a job he'd hated. It'd paid well, but other than bossing people around and having some inside information on palace business, he'd never liked it. Lately, his ambition had dwindled, and now he was ready for a new phase of his life. With the money he was going to be paid, he was looking at moving out of the country. Maybe he'd head to warmer climates and even warmer women.

Swallowing another gulp of beer, Jeremy closed his eyes and daydreamed for the rest of the day. His ship had finally come in.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

San Juan, Puerto Rico

Gideon took a swallow of his rapidly cooling coffee, trying not to grimace at its bitter taste. His eyes casually scanned the area of the sidewalk café. He wasn't expecting any problems, but he liked to be aware at all times. Trouble often came when one least expected it.

He felt Eve's absence like a missing limb. If she were here, she would be sitting beside him, sipping coffee, and people-watching as they waited for their mark to appear. They'd be sharing witty quips and discussing the latest show they'd binged on Prime or Netflix.

Other than the few times one of them had been on a deep-cover assignment alone, they'd seen each other every day for over a decade. Even during those deep-cover assignments, they'd kept in touch through encrypted emails and texts.

Things had definitely changed. In the past three weeks, he'd heard from her only a few times. All of her texts had been infuriatingly brief. The first time had been an hour or so after his last visit to her, the one where he'd laid it all on the line and kissed her. She had sent him a short, not-so-sweet, What the hell was that?

Maybe it was unfair of him, but he'd thrown it right back in her court with, Took you long enough.

When she hadn't responded, he'd waited a few hours and sent her another challenge: You didn't like it?

It had taken her an entire day to come back with a response. He was sure there had been more than a few deleted drafts before she'd come back with, I've had better.

His answer—Liar—had received no response.

There had been nothing related to that since then. Everything was now up to her. He'd given her all he could. She had said she had forgiven him, which was more than he could have hoped for. But he still hoped for more. If she couldn't give her trust to him again? Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it...if he came to it.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

He'd received a message from her yesterday in response to his text that he was going on an OZ op. She hadn't asked where or why. She'd just said, Stay safe.

He supposed he'd take that as a good sign that she wanted him to stay alive, and yes, he was scraping the bottom for anything positive.

"Gideon, you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Ash."

"Lopez just left his hotel room. Should be arriving within the next five minutes."

"Copy that. I'll let you know when I see him."

"So what's going on with you and Eve?"

He'd been expecting that question. Was surprised it had taken Ash this long to ask. Unfortunately, he still didn't have a good answer.

"She asked for space. I'm giving it to her."

"All right," Ash said slowly. "What does that mean?"

"Not sure she's going to be able to get past the lie I told her."

A harsh huff of exasperation came through the earbud. "What Eve finally found out is that you're as human as anyone else."

“What’s that mean?”

“It means she’s put you so far up on a pedestal that you had no choice but to fall at some point.”

Was that really how Eve had seen him? Had he been so careful to be the best partner and friend he could be that she didn’t know the real him? He was definitely no saint. Had she not known that he was just as flawed and screwed up as the rest of the world’s population? If not, she sure knew that now.

Gideon grunted his disgust. “If that’s the case, I made a gigantic splash when I fell.”

“You’ll work it out. Never seen two people more in tune with each other.”

He’d felt that way, too. From the moment they’d started working with each other, they’d clicked like they’d been together for years.

But now they needed to learn to work together without all the secrets. He refused to believe that wasn’t possible.

“Okay, guys,” Ash said. “Here we go.”

Gideon spotted the Bugatti rolling up in front of the restaurant. A gargantuan bodyguard emerged from the front seat, glanced around, and then opened the back door. Alfredo Lopez slowly emerged from the vehicle. Standing about five eight on a good day, the elderly arms dealer looked as though he would barely be able to walk up the five steps to the restaurant. Something had to be mighty important for the sickly old criminal to come out for a meeting.

Xavier and Jazz were inside. Since the restaurant was closed to any other customers, they’d had no choice but to improvise. Xavier was posing as a newly hired busboy,

and Jazz was working as a bartender. OZ had known about this upcoming meeting for a little over a week and had scrambled to get everyone in place.

It was good to see Jazz McAlister and Xavier Quinn back and working regular OZ ops. Jazz was still searching for her brother, but the trail had gone cold. Until another lead popped up, they were back with the team.

“Lopez just walked in,” Jazz said softly. “Poor guy looks like he’s on his last leg.”

That was a good description. Word was that Lopez was not long for this world. So what would make a dying man show up to a meeting? Or rather, who would make a dying man show up? They had yet to confirm the identity of the person he was meeting. Right now, their assignment was to observe.

Ash was posted on a park bench across the street from the restaurant. He had the best vantage point of seeing who else arrived. Their intel had said the meeting would be at one o’clock, but it was now five after, and no one else had appeared. Both Xavier and Jazz had checked the building thoroughly when they’d arrived, and other than the kitchen and waitstaff, no others were there.

Was the other person late, or was something else afoot?

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this, Ash,” Gideon growled.

“Yeah, me, too,” Ash said. “Jazz, what’s Lopez doing?”

“He’s checking his watch and looking around the restaurant. I think he’s thinking the same thing we are.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“I want you both out of there,” Ash said.

“On our way,” Xavier answered.

“Wait,” Jazz said. “Looks like he’s getting a call on his cellphone. I can walk by and see if I can pick anything up.”

“No,” Gideon said. “Ash is right. You both need to get out. This stinks of a setup.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when the bomb exploded. On his feet in a flash, Gideon ran toward the restaurant. Ash was already running up the steps. Smoke and ashes whirled around them. Gideon ripped his coat off and covered his face as much as possible as he ran into what was left of the entrance.

His heart pounding with dread, he shouted, “Jazz! Xavier!”

“Over here!”

Recognizing Ash’s voice, he went toward the voice. Debris covered the floor, along with overturned tables, dinnerware, and shards of glass. If Jazz and Xavier were each still in one piece, it would be a miracle.

He almost stumbled over them. Jazz and Xavier were sitting beside a prone figure on the floor. Ash stood over them, talking on a cellphone.

“You guys okay?”

“More or less,” Xavier said.

“Yeah,” Jazz added. “We were far away enough from the blast to avoid the explosion.”

Gideon knelt next to the body. Behind the ash and soot, he recognized the face of Alfredo Lopez.

“He still alive?”

“For now,” Xavier said. “Everyone else got out the back. The bomb was situated close to his table.”

Gideon coughed and said, “Let me take a look at him. If we can move him, we need to get out of this building.”

Xavier backed away, and Gideon scooted closer to Lopez. The man was unconscious but had a surprisingly strong pulse. Leaning over him, he heard wheezing breaths but wasn’t sure if it was from his injury or his age. Quickly moving his hands up and down his body, Gideon found several puncture wounds from projectiles, but he could find no major injury.

Knowing if they didn’t get out of here fast, they were asking for trouble, Gideon said, “Let’s move him out to the street.”

With Gideon holding his upper body, Ash at the man’s feet, and Jazz and Xavier on each side of him, they carefully moved the old man through the rubble and got him outside and into fresh air.

Laying him on the sidewalk a few yards from the destroyed restaurant, Gideon did a more thorough examination, noting the man had a significant knot on the back of his

head. As old and feeble as Lopez was, Gideon was surprised he'd actually survived the blast.

Sirens sounded, and they all looked at one another. "Go on and get out of here," Gideon said. "I have connections here and can handle this."

No one argued. OZ operated under a veil of anonymity. Being associated with the attempted murder of an arms dealer was not desirable for any of them. However, Gideon would use his contacts to explain why he was here. It would be harder to explain the presence of Ash, Xavier, and Jazz.

"We'll see you at the safe house," Ash said. "Call if you get in a bind." With that, he and the other two operatives disappeared, leaving Gideon with the unconscious Lopez.

Blowing out a long breath, Gideon checked Lopez's vitals again, glad to feel his pulse was still strong. Curious, he looked up at the damaged restaurant, wondering at the events. It was obvious that Lopez had been targeted, but it had been a half-assed attempt at best. Instead of blowing up the entire building, the bomb had been localized to one part of the restaurant. Most bombers didn't care about collateral damage. The bomb could easily have been set to take out everyone in the restaurant and decimate the building. So why hadn't it?

Who would care enough to target just the one man? Who had Lopez planned to meet? And why take out an elderly, sickly man in the first place? Lopez was barely even active anymore.

What were they missing?

* * *

The man strode rapidly down the street, making sure that nothing in his demeanor indicated knowledge of what had just happened two streets over. He figured he had maybe a half hour before he was spotted and taken out. He'd messed up the job and would pay for it. The price would be either the loss of a limb or his life. With these people, you never knew. One thing was for certain: If he didn't get out of San Juan within the next hour, he was toast.

When he'd made the decision to blow only one of the charges, he had known the consequences. What else could he have done, though? People in his line of work didn't have a long life expectancy. They either got blown up by their own devices, or someone became unhappy with their work. At thirty-two and with only a dozen jobs under his belt, he'd hoped to last a lot longer. His reputation hadn't been established enough that he would be forgiven for this kind of screw-up.

Good thing he had some dough stowed away. He'd have to come out of hiding at some point, even start all over again. That couldn't be helped.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

It was what it was, and he refused to regret making the decision to spare a life. Especially the one he'd spared.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Amelie

Ile de la Lune

Gideon threw his duffel bag on the sofa. Going to the kitchen, he grabbed a beer from the fridge, took a long swallow, and allowed his muscles to relax. He'd been tense since he'd left San Juan. Wasn't sure why. It wasn't as if Eve was in danger. She was as well protected as any princess in any castle would be. Especially since only a handful of people knew she was even there. So why had his brain been telling him to get back ASAP?

Shaking his head at his obvious obsession with his beautiful partner, he strode over to his floor-to-ceiling window and looked out at the town square. Should he call to let her know he was back?

Their three-week separation had been difficult. He had figured she needed time to process all that had happened but hadn't anticipated it would take this long. Just because he had agreed to give her space didn't mean he had to like it.

Was her silence in some part because of that kiss? He hadn't planned it. He rarely did anything on impulse, but just the knowledge that she now knew everything had made him realize that nothing was holding him back from showing her exactly how he felt.

So when she'd turned her beautiful face up to him, he couldn't have resisted if a pack of mules had been pulling him away. The temptation had been too great.

Her reaction had been interesting. She could have easily stopped him...even slugged him. His Eve wasn't shy about protecting herself. Instead, she'd allowed him a taste of heaven.

How could she taste better now than she had years ago when they'd first kissed? He'd often told himself that no one could taste that good, and he had misremembered how delicious she was. But then, at the first touch of his mouth to hers, those memories and feelings had all come flooding back.

That night in Prague had been one of the best and worst of his life. The best because they'd finally given in to the insane attraction that had been sizzling between them for so long. The worst because he had known that it could never happen again. It shouldn't have happened at all, but damn if he would ever regret the best night of his life.

Telling her that nothing could happen between them again had been the hardest words he'd ever said. Every word he'd uttered, he had wanted to do the exact opposite. And seeing her hurt? Oh hell, he'd almost spilled his guts then and there. But he had known what that would cost him. If he'd told her how he felt, he wouldn't have been able to keep his agreement with her father a secret. Because, yeah, he was an ass, but he wasn't that big of an ass.

It had taken a while, but they had eventually returned to their original relationship. And since then, he'd squelched, strangled, and slaughtered all those needs and desires he had for her. Until that kiss.

Frustrated at his mangled thoughts, he shoved his fingers through his hair and gazed out at the city that he both hated and loved. It had changed little since he'd lived here.

Though small in population and seeming to embrace old-world traditions, Amelie boasted a variety of cultural and civic events that larger cities might envy.

Being back home had brought its own troubles. It was one of the reasons he didn't visit. With no family here, all he had left were the memories. Some were the best of his life. Up until he was fifteen years old, life had been as perfect as humanly possible. He'd had two parents who'd loved him, his brothers, and his sister unconditionally. Money had been tight, but he had never felt deprived. His father had been a master carpenter and on weekends had worked as a security guard at a manufacturing plant. His mother had been a schoolteacher and had supplemented the family income by giving piano lessons. They'd both had demanding and hectic lives, but neither of them had ever been too busy for their children. Family had been priority number one.

And then one day, it had all changed. If Gideon had ever wondered who the heart and soul of his family was, he'd received his answer on that awful, fateful day. Charlotte Wright had been driving home from work and had swerved to avoid a deer in the road. The deer had made it across the road safely. His mother had not. She'd lost control of her car and hit a tree. Two drivers behind her, who'd witnessed what had happened, had stopped to help, but there had been nothing they could do. Her neck had broken on impact. She was gone in an instant.

Seeing his father fall apart had been scary. At fifteen, Gideon had always thought of himself as a mature young man who could handle anything life threw at him. He'd been proven wrong. Losing his mother to death and his father to grief had almost brought him to his knees. The only thing that had kept him going was the knowledge that his brothers and sister needed him.

Elliott Wright had never recovered from his wife's death. Actually, the entire family had never recovered. They had simply kept going. In many ways, Gideon had become a father at fifteen because his siblings had depended on him just as they once had

depended on their parents.

The dreams he'd had of becoming a royal guard had disappeared beneath the burden of simply surviving. After his father's death, his only focus had been on caring for his siblings. Those were some of the worst years of his life, but looking back, they'd been some of the most rewarding, too. His brothers, Theo and Reed, and his sister, Rory, were some of the finest people he'd ever known. Any sacrifices he'd made had been worthwhile.

With a clearer hindsight view, he could understand his father better. Elliott had been so in love with his wife that when she'd ceased to exist, a large part of him had died with her. He might've kept breathing for three years, but the essence of the man had been gone. Gideon and his siblings had lost both his mother and father that day.

He'd made a vow early on that something like that would never happen to him. Never would he be so immersed in another person that his life depended upon her existence. The thought of that kind of all-consuming love turned his blood ice cold. That didn't mean he didn't love, though.

And, oh, how he loved one particular woman.

The sound of a text message drew his attention back to the here and now. Refusing to be optimistic that Eve had reached out to him, he glanced at his phone. The text was from Ash with the intel he'd requested.

Ash was back home in Montana with his family. Jazz and Xavier were still in Puerto Rico to run down intel on what exactly had gone down with Lopez. The man was a tough old bird and was expected to make a complete recovery. They still had no idea who he'd been planning to meet or why the bomber hadn't done the job as planned. Seven different charges had been found in the restaurant, but only one had been activated. Whoever had planned the explosions had obviously not executed them in

the way they were originally intended. No one knew why. Xavier and Jazz would hopefully come up with an answer.

Even though the op hadn't turned out quite as they'd planned, Gideon and Ash had been able to reconnect both personally and professionally. He still couldn't reveal Eve's secrets, but he'd been happy to reestablish his commitment to OZ and his team. He didn't want any of them to doubt his loyalty and allegiance to their cause.

If there was one good thing about this time alone, away from the regular ops he and Eve would normally be running, it was the amount of data he'd been able to uncover regarding the Wren Project. He'd started his research on three separate organizations from the list Iris Gates had provided. The one that was sending up the most red flags was simply called Bass. Founded by Franco Bass, the company manufactured and exported an eclectic variety of products, including electronics, clothing, organic foods, and farming equipment. What caught Gideon's attention was the company's meteoric rise to success in a relatively short time frame. In three years, Bass had gone from a fifty-employee company with a net worth of just over a million dollars, to having over five thousand employees and a net worth of fifty million. Maybe it wasn't impossible to do so without nefarious means, but the speed of that rise was still questionable. Especially when several other companies they'd already identified as being associated with the Wren Project had had similar rapid success.

Another red flag was the difficulty in digging up information on the owner of Bass. Even as well known as his company was, Franco Bass lived in relative obscurity. Gideon had found only two news media interviews, both in print. Both had been uninformative and based on obviously preplanned questions. There were no photos online of Franco Bass, no television interviews. Nothing that showed Bass's face. Gideon was, in fact, beginning to wonder if the man actually existed.

A squeaky-clean company with almost no negative press, it seemed improbable that Bass, the corporation, would be mixed up with the Wren Project, and that was exactly

why Gideon was suspicious. He'd asked Ash to check on any political donations the company had made. The information Ash had just sent confirmed Gideon's suspicions. Bass had been a major contributor to Senator Nora Turner's campaign. And before Turner's death, OZ had proven beyond a shadow of doubt that she had been funded and deeply influenced by the Wren Project.

Guilt by association was not irrefutable proof by any means, but with all the other signs, he was going with his gut that said this company and its owner were involved up to their eyeballs.

Now to dig even deeper.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Another text came through, and Gideon felt his heart skip a beat. Not Ash this time but Eve.

I need to see you.

He responded immediately. Be there in an hour.

He didn't expect her to reply, and she didn't.

Since he hadn't showered since yesterday, he stripped on his way to the bathroom, all the while his mind rifling through the reasons she finally wanted to see him. Unless she'd had a setback, her rehab was likely ending in a couple of weeks. Did it bother him that he didn't know if she'd had any problems with her recovery? Yes. It bothered him a lot, but he'd given her the space she'd asked for. Was that time finally up, or was there another reason she wanted to see him?

He refused to even consider that she didn't want to go back to OZ. No matter her heritage or genealogy, Eve belonged at Option Zero. She was made for a covert lifestyle. Not only did she excel at her skills, Eve practically glowed when she was on an op, inspired by the challenge, the adrenaline rush, all of it. Eve Wells thrived while living on the edge, and Gideon would do everything he could to remind her of that.

Question was, did she also still see him as her partner, or had he destroyed the best thing that had ever happened to him?

* * *

The instant Eve answered the door, Gideon knew immediately that a discussion about their relationship was the last thing on her mind. He had seen Eve in many modes over the years, and based upon her expression, as well as her clothing of cargo pants and a fitted button-down shirt, she was in full operative mode.

“What’s going on?”

“Follow me.” With that, she turned and headed toward her office. He was pleased to see that not only had her cast been removed, she was no longer using crutches. Though she limped slightly, her rehabilitation was definitely headed in the right direction.

Her demeanor, however, did concern him. It wasn’t exactly frosty, but it was far from friendly.

He followed her, coming up with all kinds of scenarios of what might be going on. He stopped at her office door and raised his brow at what he saw.

A few weeks ago, the office had been unnaturally neat, which had made sense, as she was never here to use it. That had changed. Pages and pages of text covered four large bulletin boards.

“What the hell, Eve? What’s all this?”

“There’s a mole within my father’s inner circle. He believes someone wants to destroy the family. I’m going to find out who it is and stop them.”

“That was a lot of information in three sentences. Let’s start at the beginning.”

Gideon was torn between relief and sadness. Relief because she was sharing this with him—he had feared he had destroyed her trust for good. Sadness because it was

obvious she'd been working on this without him for weeks.

While she filled him in, he walked around the room, getting a sense for the intel she'd been given. Stopping at one board, he read a few emails that claimed the monarchy was an archaic form of government and needed to be demolished. That wasn't much of a threat. Many people felt that way.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Aren't there threats against the monarchy all the time? As threats go, most of these seem fairly innocuous, like disgruntled grumbling."

"Threats are nothing unusual, though not as often as some might think. And I agree that by OZ standards, these aren't serious."

"Why does your father see these differently?"

"There's recent intel that makes it seem there's a leak within his inner circle." She pointed to another board. "Those texts mention a secret meeting the king had with France's president, Emile Bernard, last month. No one, other than the family and his closest advisors, knew about it."

"Why the secrecy?"

"They were discussing the possibility of decreasing the taxes on certain products. It wasn't even that big of a deal, other than they're good friends and just wanted to have a friendly visit without press."

Gideon nodded, aware that the friendship between the king and the president had always caused speculation that France would some day regain the land it had given up over five hundred years ago. It would never happen, but that didn't prevent splinter groups from wanting to make it happen.

“Couldn’t it have been a leak on the other end? Maybe Bernard’s people?”

“Yes, except there are two other instances where intel was leaked from here. We’re fairly sure it’s on our end.”

“Where are the most recent messages?”

“Over here.” She went over to a board filled with what looked like dozens of messages.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Gideon quickly scanned them, alarms ringing with every sentence. While it was true that there were no direct threats, the nuances were there. Any other time, he might suggest that they were too subtle to indicate danger, except for one very terrifying thread. It was recent and chilling in its simplicity.

“The princess is back.”

Gideon didn't know what bothered him more. The fact that among the fifteen people who knew of Eve's presence in the castle, someone had leaked the information. Or the response to the statement that the princess was back: a smiling devil emoji.

He recognized a threat when he saw it.

“What about Clement?” Gideon said. “He may no longer work here, but he knows you're in residence since you got him fired.”

“He got himself fired, but that's beside the point. I want you to go talk to him. See if you can get a read on him.”

So now he knew why she'd called him. She needed him to interview Clement. He told himself to be happy that she trusted him to help her and let it go. But damn, it was hard.

“I talked to Clement a few days ago.”

She frowned at the news. “Why?”

“Thought we needed to clear the air.” The conversation and the man’s smug attitude took on a different meaning now. “The way he was acting, I’d say he’s definitely involved.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“Mostly, it was his attitude. He’s always been cocky, but there was some smugness tagging along for the ride. I’ll take another go at him and see what I can find.”

He read through the messages again, then turned and gave her a grim look. What he was about to say would not go over well. “You need to leave.”

“What?” Her eyes went wide with shock. She shook her head emphatically. “No. I’m not leaving. My family is in danger.”

“The only person with any specific threat against them is you. There’s nothing to indicate anyone else is at risk.”

“The threat is implied to everyone in my family. There’s a spy within my father’s closest circle. That means someone knows the intimate details of where each member of my family is at all times. We’ve got to find out who it is before something happens.”

“Not arguing about that, but it doesn’t mean you need to stay here to do that. We can work on this from somewhere else.”

“You mean someplace safe.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Eve—”

“I’m not your job anymore, Gideon. Remember, my father fired you.”

“You think that’s the only reason I want to keep you safe? You think that’s the only reason I’ve watched your back for a decade? Because it was my job?”

She raised a challenging brow. “You tell me.”

Gideon shook his head. Even after he’d spilled his guts, she still doubted his motives.

“You want to play it that way? Then fine. But my number one priority is you, Eve. It always has been. It always will be.”

She had the grace to look slightly ashamed, but she wasn’t backing down from her position. “I’m still not leaving. This is my family, Gideon. If they’re in danger, I’m the best one to handle the threat.”

“I’m not denying your capability. Working from a safe location would not minimize your effectiveness, but it would lessen the threat to you.”

“Do you think my safety is my primary concern?”

“No, but it’s mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She blew out a long sigh, and her eyes turned haunted. “I can’t lose anyone in my family, Gideon. I’ve lost too much already. I can’t lose them, too.”

In two long strides, he was at her side and pulling her into his arms. When she didn’t resist, he sent up a prayer of thanksgiving that she was allowing him this. “I promise you, Eve. I will do everything in my power to prevent anything from happening to you or anyone in your family.”

Her face against his chest, her words were muffled when she said, “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve been right here all along. I’ll always be here for you.”

“I know,” she said softly. She raised her head, and as he looked down on her beautiful face, with eyes so deep blue he felt as if he could dive into them and stay forever, his heart flipped over. She was no longer looking at him with anger or distrust.

“How was the op in Puerto Rico?”

“A little more dangerous than we’d planned.” He described what they’d been there for and what had actually happened.

“That is weird. It’s a good thing you have a relationship with the chief of police there.”

“We went through DGSE training together. He stayed a couple years longer than I did.”

“So he’s French?”

“Has dual citizenship. His mother’s French. His father is from Puerto Rico. He lived in San Juan until he was sixteen, then went to live with his mother in Paris.”

“You’ve never mentioned him.”

“What? You think I’m going to introduce you to a young Antonio Banderas look-alike with a French accent? I’m not that masochistic.”

“Ha! This coming from the guy that all the female OZ employees refers to as a young Brad Pitt with muscles?”

He cocked his head. “Brad Pitt? And all this time, I’ve been going for a Chris Hemsworth vibe. Even been practicing my Australian accent.”

Her response was an inelegant snort. “Your Australian accent is second to none, but if you’re going for a Hemsworth, I’m voting for Liam.”

Winking at her, he said, “If that’s what you like, then that’s what I’ll go for.”

Speaking the absolute truth, Eve shook her head and said softly, “I like you just the way you are. Don’t change a thing.”

At his smile, her heart tripped over itself. Oh, how she had missed that smile. There was no one who could make her feel joy in the midst of a crisis more than Gideon Wright. The tension in her body eased considerably at their teasing. She had been so worried that they’d lost that altogether.

Gideon hugged her close and whispered, “Whatever you want.”

Like a slow-moving fire, heat weaved sensually throughout her body. He had opened the door with that kiss three weeks ago, and she'd been dreaming of kissing him again ever since. Only, this time, longer and harder. How was it that she had put these feelings on hold for years, but now that they'd returned, they wouldn't leave her alone?

When his arms loosened and she thought he was letting her go, she resisted. Rising up on her toes, she pressed her mouth to his. The indrawn breath she heard almost made her smile, but then she lost all coherent thought when Gideon took over.

Her kiss had been a soft, tentative exploration. Gideon took it to a different level, feeding the spark within her, causing a massive wildfire to spread, consuming everything in its path.

As his mouth moved over hers in a slow, devouring caress, she melted into his arms with a low groan of surrender. How had she forgotten how glorious his taste was? And how could she not have remembered how he could take control of a kiss and turn it into something so much more than lips meeting and tongues tangling? This was an immersion in sensuality she hadn't felt in years. Feelings she'd worked for years to bury resurfaced like an exploding rocket.

She molded herself against him, letting him know in no uncertain terms that she wanted more. That she wanted everything. All the feelings she'd squelched for so long were coming back to life, and they were bringing along a whole host of new ones.

Swamped by pleasure and heat, Eve savored the delicious feelings, all her worries put on hold for the moment. Gideon's strong arms holding her, his mouth eating at hers—those were the only things she wanted to think about...to feel.

A shudder ran through his big body, and he pulled away from her and growled,

“What’s going on here?”

Sanity returned with a crash. Breathing as if she’d just run a sprint, Eve pulled partially away and stared up at him. What had she been thinking? She’d been the one to initiate the kiss. She had, in fact, practically thrown herself at him.

“No, don’t look like that, sweetheart.”

A deep blush heated her face. Embarrassment wasn’t a comfortable emotion for anyone, and she was no exception.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Sorry.” She took several steps back from him. “Guess I missed you more than I thought.”

“Don’t make light of this, Eve.”

The tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, the stillness of his body told her this was as serious as it got. Her next words could either put them in a different kind of relationship, or they would go back to what they had been.

Come on, Eve. You don’t back down from anything. Don’t back down from this. Tell him what you want. What you’ve wanted for years.

Showing her that he was much more courageous than she was, he said quietly, “Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

The smile on his face would rival the sun. Eve could barely hear herself think, her heart was pounding so hard. She had just made herself vulnerable and open. Something she tried very hard not to do. But this was Gideon.

Pulling her back into his arms, he breathed into her ear, “That’s very good news.”

“I’m still angry with you.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“Where do you want to go?”

Shaking her head, she grinned at him. “Nope. I’m not going to be the only one hanging out on a limb here. Tell me what you want.”

“You,” he said simply.

“For how long?”

“Forever.”

She’d meant how long had he felt this way, but the way he was looking at her, she knew he meant something else.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I couldn’t. If I had, I would’ve had to tell you about my agreement with your father. And if I’d done that, you might’ve sent me away. I couldn’t take the chance.”

“After that night in Prague, I thought...”

“Saying those things to you that morning was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. That night...” He shook his head. “That night was the greatest night of my life.”

Emotions bubbled within her. To know he had felt the same way meant so much.

“We’ve wasted a lot of time.”

“No moment spent with you has ever been wasted.”

When he said stuff like that, he made it almost impossible for her to stay mad at him. And she knew Gideon never said things he didn't mean.

“It feels like we've taken a long journey to get here.”

“But what a journey we've had. Wouldn't trade it for anything.”

“You think we can make this work? Best friends. Partners. Lovers?”

“I think if anyone can, it's us.”

“Where do we go from here?”

His smile was both tender and sexy. “You've already asked that question. You need me to give you directions?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Maybe.” She blew out a ragged sigh. “I’m nervous. We haven’t... I mean, I haven’t...” One more sigh, then she added, “It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything with anyone who mattered.”

That was the most she would say about what she’d occasionally had to do on a deep-cover op. It wasn’t something either of them ever discussed. She knew he’d had to do the same thing, and while it might seem disgusting to some, saving lives had always come before anything else.

More than once, she had wanted to ask how far he’d had to go to protect his cover. She hadn’t for two reasons. One, she feared her reaction if he’d told her he’d gone very far. And two, she didn’t want him to ask her the same thing.

They had skirted uncomfortable things like this for years. But now that they were at a point she hadn’t thought they’d ever reach, she was exquisitely aware of the difference between what she’d had to do for the job and what she wanted with Gideon. She hadn’t been this anxious in decades.

Apparently seeing her anxiety, he pressed his forehead to hers. “Hey, it’s us. You and me. This doesn’t have to be hard.”

“Well, actually...” She grinned as she pressed against him. “It does.”

“Now there’s an opening I can’t resist.”

The double entendre was so very Gideon. Eve laughed, the tension easing out of her. He kissed her again, and all amusement vanished as a new exciting emotion took

hold. Hot need rose up within her, and Eve opened her mouth and her heart to the desire spiraling through her. A desire that had been living within her for years was about to be set free in the best way possible.

Taking her lips again, a small part of Gideon was shouting hallelujah, while another part—the sane part—was asking what the hell he was doing. That part reminded him that Eve might have forgiven him for his deception but he had yet to earn back her trust. It was telling him to back off and wait until all harsh feelings had been set aside forever. Having denied himself for so long, he easily ignored the warning. This moment was surreal. A dream he'd never believed could come true. Any doubts that he had disappeared like air beneath the heat of longing.

Clothes disappeared, and when he broke his kiss to look down at her, every dream culminated into this magnificent reality.

Slender and fine-boned, her smooth, silky skin a honey-golden tone, Eve Wells was so elegant and feminine it was hard to believe she was as deadly as she was beautiful. But she had proved that more than once.

“You’re gorgeous. You know that?”

He smiled as he watched a slight pink blush cover her whole body. Lowering his head, he touched his mouth to the tiny dimple in her chin. She moaned softly, and with a smile now curving his mouth, he kept going, tasting, skimming, reveling in her softness, her scent.

Unable to wait any longer, he growled, “Hang on.” With that, he lifted her into his arms, allowing her to wrap her legs around his waist. Walking swiftly to her bedroom, he laid her on the bed and followed her down.

Seeing only passion gleaming in her eyes, Gideon explored every inch of her body,

delighting in her moans and the occasional soft growls telling him to stop torturing her.

“I’ve waited a long time for this, my love,” he said.

For the next several hours, Gideon showed her exactly what he’d been dreaming about doing to her for over a decade. This was Eve, the love of his life, and he finally had her in his arms, where she belonged. Where he wanted her to stay forever.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The moment she woke, she knew her life had changed forever. Gideon’s scent was all around her, all over her, and she loved it. Last night, they had made up for all the years of longing, of deprivation and desolation. They had ravished each other, feasting as if this was their last night together. Instead, it was just the beginning.

“I hear you smiling.”

The gruff, sleepy tone of the man beside her did indeed make her smile. She was sated and satisfied to the nth degree, but that sexy, growly voice sent zings of arousal throughout her body.

“I know your hearing is better than most, but actually being able to hear someone smile is like a superhero power.”

“And that surprises you?”

“Not at all.” She rolled over and faced him, the smile he’d heard firmly in place. “After experiencing your amazing stamina last night, I’m ready to put you in that category.”

Pulling her closer, he buried his face in her hair. “That was years of self-denial.”

“Let’s not wait that long again. Okay?”

Peppering soft kisses along her jawline, he rasped, “Agreed.”

His rough hands roamed over her body, creating the pulsing need he’d satisfied only a few hours ago. She was both exhausted and exhilarated. Moaning her approval, her hand glided down his stomach, and she wrapped her fingers around him, loving his hardness, relishing the pleasure it could give.

“I wish you—” He cut off when the chime at her door sounded.

“Damn,” she growled. “That’s the problem with not being able to leave this apartment. Everyone who comes to that door is family, and they know I’m here.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

Giving her one last, luscious caress right where she needed him most, he pulled away from her. “I’ll go shower.”

“I don’t mind if they know you’re here.”

“I know that, but if it’s your father, I’d rather not have that conversation yet.”

“And what conversation would that be?”

The chime sounded again, letting her know that whoever was at the door was getting impatient.

Not answering her question, Gideon rolled away from her and rose from the bed. She took half a second to appreciate his sublimely naked body as he strode to the bathroom. With a frustrated sigh, Eve stood, shrugged into her robe, and went to the door.

Checking the camera quickly, she was surprised to see her uncle Jacques. Though she loved him dearly, he rarely came to see her without her father at his side.

She opened the door, a smile of greeting on her face. “Bonjour, Uncle. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

His wrinkled face set to grim, he asked, “Is your friend Gideon Wright with you?”

Backing up so he could walk inside, she frowned and said, “Why?”

“Because I just received word that the former palace commander, Jeremy Clement, has been found dead. Monsieur Wright is a person of interest in his murder.”

* * *

Standing beneath the hot blast of the shower, Gideon reviewed the night before with Eve, barely believing it had actually happened. When he'd come to her apartment, his only hope had been that she was willing to put his deception behind them, and they could try to move forward. Instead, they'd gone warp speed into the hottest night of his life. Every fantasy he'd had over the past few years had played out, along with a few he'd never imagined. What made it even better was the knowledge that it wouldn't end as a one-night stand, as it had years ago. He and Eve were on the same page now. They could finally move forward, all lies, all deception in the past. The future was theirs.

A sound caught his attention. He turned to see Eve headed his way. Even through the steam, he could see something in her expression that wasn't quite right.

Pressing the button to turn off the water flow, he stuck his head out and said, “What's wrong?”

“When's the last time you saw Jeremy Clement?”

“Couple days ago. Why? Did he complain to someone that I was harassing him?”

“No. He's been murdered.”

“Can't say I'm surprised. Guy likely had plenty of people who'd like to see him dead.”

“Yes, well... According to the police, you're one of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“That was my uncle at the door. He said the police are looking for you as a person of interest in Clement’s murder.”

A bad feeling tightened his gut. “Do you think I killed him?”

Her eyes flashing blue fire, she snapped, “Of course not.”

Grabbing a towel, Gideon quickly dried off. “Then I guess I’d better head to the station and see why the police might think that.”

“Anything weird happen while you were there? He give you any kind of an odd vibe?”

“Yeah. Like I mentioned yesterday, he seemed too damn smug. Acted like he had a secret.”

“Anything else?”

“No, not really.” He tilted his head toward the living room. “Your uncle still here?”

She shook her head. “I told him we’d head down to the police station in a few minutes and find out what’s going on.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“I’ll go. There is no reason for you to go.”

“Of course I’m going. You’re not doing this alone.”

He strode into the living room and grabbed the clothes from where he’d dropped them on the floor yesterday. Eve’s uncle had likely gotten a good idea of what had happened last night. He was adult enough to not be embarrassed, but he didn’t like putting Eve in an embarrassing situation with her family.

Tugging on his pants, he sent her a hard look. “You’re supposed to be hidden here. You go to the station with me, hundreds of people will know about it before lunchtime.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. You’ve stayed out of sight for over a month. Being seen is only going to cause you problems.” Sliding on his shoes, he went to her and held her shoulders. “I didn’t kill the guy. I’ll answer their questions and be back by lunchtime.”

Unable to help himself, he kissed her with all the longing he’d held back for so long. Savoring how she melted into his arms, Gideon sent up a prayer of thanks. He hadn’t believed this would ever happen. And now that it had, he would fight with everything within him to make sure nothing went wrong for them.

But first, he had to figure out why he was a murder suspect.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“What do you mean they’re holding him?”

Her father had arrived a few moments ago with that astounding news. The instant she’d seen him, she’d been sure he had come to reassure her that Gideon was fine and on his way back to her apartment.

“Just that,” he said. “I’ve talked to the police chief, and he feels, based on the evidence, he has no choice.”

“What evidence?”

“Apparently, a neighbor heard Gideon threaten Clement’s life. When questioned, Gideon admitted that he did, in a manner of speaking, threaten to kill him.”

That didn’t sound like Gideon. Even when furious, he didn’t lose control. Between the two of them, he was the even-tempered one. She had a tendency to be volatile and lose herself to anger. Gideon had pulled her back from the edge multiple times.

“Is the witness reliable?”

“Now that I don’t know.”

“You need to get him out, Papa. Gideon didn’t do this.”

“I’ve already arranged for his release. I’ve agreed to allow him to stay at the castle, under guard.”

Eve turned away before her emotions got the best of her. The bubbling panic inside her had been close to explosion. Not being able to leave the castle and demand Gideon’s release herself had been infuriating. Anyone who knew Gideon would have no doubt that he was innocent. She might not be an active royal, but she still had

influence. She could make them see there was no way he could have murdered anyone—even someone as repulsive as Jeremy Clement.

“Lina,” her father said hesitantly, “are you and Gideon in a romantic relationship? Jacques said something...”

Feeling ridiculous that she was fighting a blush, she faced her father. She was almost thirty-four years old, had done things that would not only shock her entire family, but would also horrify them. She was a highly trained covert operative with skills that would rival the deadliest assassin. So the fact that she was blushing like a teenager who been caught sneaking out to see her boyfriend should be laughable. But this was her father, and she knew he still saw her as his innocent little girl.

However, she was no shrinking violet, so despite her high color, she said, “Yes.”

The disapproving expression on his face surprised her. He might be the king, but he wasn’t usually a snob.

“For how long?”

Temper rising, she said, “Just recently.”

“Since you found out the truth of my agreement with him?”

“Yes.”

The furrow on his brow eased. “That’s better.”

“What? Why does the timing matter?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

“Because if he’d had a romantic relationship with you before then, he would have been honor-bound to tell you about his agreement with me. You would have then insisted he break said agreement, and then you would have been extremely unhappy.”

“How so?”

“Because I would have sent someone else to protect you.”

“Papa, I know you love me, but I am a highly skilled, trained individual who can take care of herself.”

“You’re still my daughter.”

“But I—”

“Lina, you know as well as I do that you are more important than just being my daughter. You belong to this country and her people. I’ve given you leeway—more than I ever believed I could—simply because I knew Gideon would watch out for you.”

Gideon had told her this, and while she’d known what he’d said was true, the hurt of his betrayal had been too great. Now she could see that he had been in an untenable position. If he’d told her the truth, she would have demanded he get out of her life. Keeping the secret allowed her the ability to be free.

“You put him in a difficult position, Papa.”

“Yes, I did. But he felt it was worth it.”

Her heart fell to her feet. Those words were the epitome of Gideon Wright. He sacrificed for others. For her. He’d said he hadn’t given anything up, but she knew that wasn’t true. But she knew he also felt it had been worthwhile.

She drew in a shaky breath. “We need to help him, Papa. You need to help him.”

“I’m going to do everything I can, Lina. But I can’t appear to influence our judicial system, even for a family member.”

Even through her worry, her heart smiled to hear him describe Gideon that way.

“There’s got to be something we can do. Don’t Nicolas or Alex have some friends in the police department?”

“Of course, but again, there is a process, and we must trust it to work. Gideon did not murder Clement and will be proven innocent.”

Her father was right. The police in Amelie were ethical and fair.

“While we’re waiting for Gideon to return, perhaps we could look at what you’ve found out so far about the possible leak in the castle.”

Pushing aside her worry about Gideon, she led her father into her office. They talked daily about the investigation, but it had been over a week since he’d been here to see her progress. She was going to suggest something that she wasn’t sure he would go for, but it was the only way she could see to get the intel they needed.

Since he’d seen most everything already, she took him to a board she’d created a few days ago.

“We know of two recent incidents where secrets were leaked. I put together a list of the people who were aware of both of them.”

She watched his face, knowing that he wouldn't like what he was seeing.

“These are your suspects?”

“Yes.”

“Lina...no. None of them would have leaked the information, especially not about you. I would wager my life on the honesty of each one of these people.”

“Papa, I don't want it to be any of them either. I know you trust them. I trust them, too. But one of these people, intentionally or inadvertently, revealed at least two closely guarded secrets. Fortunately, nothing detrimental happened, but if we don't find out who it is, who knows what else might be revealed?”

“It couldn't be two different people?”

“The language in each text is too similar. It's just one person. I'm sure of it.”

They stood together and looked over the suspect list, which included her brothers, her uncle, her father's personal aide, his secretary, and his bodyguards.

“Then we need to determine what their motive is.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:23 am

She'd been hoping he would get to that point before she had to reveal her plan.

"Exactly. That's why I'd like to involve a couple of my Option Zero teammates."

"How so?"

"Serena Donovan is one of the most gifted hackers in the world. She would be able to determine if any of these people have any financial gains outside the norm. She might also be able to track the texts to a phone number associated to someone."

"I don't like the idea of outsiders delving into our lives."

"Papa, I know you don't, but I trust these people like you trust your people. Maybe even more so."

Not responding to her statement, the king walked around the office again, assessing. She gave him the quiet he needed, knowing any decision he made would not be easy for him. These people were family, friends, and dedicated employees. His aide and secretary had been with him for decades. She knew this was hard for him.

When he stopped at the most recent messages, a change came over him. He was studying the response to the message that she was back at the palace. The smiling devil emoji was creepy, and she couldn't deny the threat. Subtle and perhaps even childish, but it was there all the same. Gideon had definitely concurred.

"Very well, Lina." He turned to her. "I'd like to meet your teammates, if possible. Would they come here?"

“Yes.” She drew in a breath. She would have a lot of explaining to do. “I’ll call them now.”

“I’ll send a plane for them.”

“Not necessary. They have their own.”

“All right. I look forward to meeting them.”

A chime sounded at her door. Her heart in her throat, Eve raced to the door and opened it. Relief flooded her to see Gideon standing there, not a mark on him.

Eve pulled him inside the apartment and then threw her arms around him. If he hadn’t realized things had changed between them because of last night, he knew it now. She had never shown this much emotion in greeting him or allowed him to see her worry.

Holding her close, Gideon breathed in her hair. “I’m fine, sweetheart.”

“Gideon, good to see you back, young man.”

He raised his head to see the king a few feet away. If he was surprised to see his daughter’s arms wrapped around his former employee, he didn’t let on.

“Thank you, sir. And I appreciate you vouching for me.”

“I wish I could have done more.”

“There was no need. I called the friend I was with in San Juan. He verified my alibi that I was with him when the murder took place.”

“That was quick,” the king said. “He must have some clout.”

“He does. He’s the police chief there and very well respected.”

“That’s a relief. Do they have any other suspects?”

“If they do, they didn’t tell me.”

“You left before breakfast,” Eve said. “Are you hungry?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a couple of sandwiches.”

“I’ll order up some dinner while you and Papa visit.” She turned to her father. “Papa, can you stay for dinner?”

“Yes. My evening is free.”

Glad to have the chance to speak with the king in private, Gideon pressed a kiss to Eve’s forehead. While her head was turned away, he caught her father’s eye and nodded toward her office.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

As Eve was calling in their dinner request, Gideon and the king walked silently into her office. Gideon knew they had only a few moments before she joined them.

“Eve told me you asked her to look into a leak within your inner circle,” Gideon said.

“Yes. She’s compiled a list of suspects.”

“Did she show you the latest message regarding her presence here?”

“You mean the one with the smiling devil’s face?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think she’s in danger here?”

“I don’t know. It felt like a threat to me. I wanted to get your take.”

“Her rehabilitation is almost complete. Perhaps she should leave Amelie and—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Eve stood at the door, her eyes shooting sparks at both of them.

“Lina,” her father said, “perhaps it would be best if you—”

“No, Papa. Don’t finish that sentence. I’ve forgiven you both for manipulating certain aspects of my life, but that has to stop now. If I stay or if I go is my decision only. I

make those calls myself. Understand?”

“Of course you do, Lina, but just because you go somewhere safer doesn’t mean you can’t continue to work to uncover the leak.”

“I’m staying here.” She sent a look to Gideon that should have chilled him, but instead it made his blood heat with desire. The confident, fiercely independent Eve Wells turned him on like no one else.

“I agree.” He glanced at her father. “Eve and I can work from here.”

“I’ve already talked to Papa about including Ash and Serena in our investigation.”

“That’s a good idea. Have you talked to Ash yet?”

“No.”

“I have a satphone at my apartment. I’ll go grab it after dinner.”

Giving him a grateful smile, she said, “Good. I’ve been needing to talk to Ash about everything. I’ve talked to him briefly but nothing like I need to. If he agrees to help, I’ll ask him if he and Serena can come for a few days.”

“He’ll agree. Remember, that was our agreement when we joined Option Zero. We have a problem, OZ will be there to assist.”

The chiming of the door, indicating their dinner had arrived, halted the conversation. Gideon was glad of it. He was putting words in Ash’s mouth and shouldn’t. But he would make sure he was on board to help Eve. Whether she wanted to acknowledge it or not, her safety was at risk. The entire OZ team would bend over backward to help her. She was one of their own.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Montana

Asher Drake kissed his son's forehead, breathing in the scent of baby powder and sweetness. If anyone had told him a couple years ago that he would have a woman he adored and a son who turned his heart to mush with his first breath, he would've laughed at their stupidity. He hadn't been in the best state of mind back then. But now, with his child in his arms, and his wife, Jules, standing at the door, smiling at him, he knew without a doubt that he was among the most blessed people in the world.

"How'd you finally get him to sleep?" Jules asked.

"I sang to him."

Rolling her eyes, she laughed softly. "Darling, I love you more than life, but no way would that foghorn you call a voice put our son to sleep."

"Hey, I sang to you last night, and you didn't seem to mind."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

She came toward him, her gray-green eyes twinkling with humor. “It was the other thing you were doing while you were singing that pleased me so well.”

“I’ll have you know that it takes a lot of skill to sing and—”

Her fingers pressed against his lips. “Shh. That’s our secret.”

“I’ll make sure you—” He cut off when the phone in his pocket chimed a familiar tune.

“We’ll take this up later tonight.”

“I’ll look forward to it. And tell her I said hi.”

Giving Jules a quick kiss on her soft cheek, he grabbed his phone and walked out of the room. “Hey, Kate, what’s up?”

Kate Walker was a friend, confidante, business associate, and the woman who’d brought Jules into his life.

“Just had an interesting call from a mutual acquaintance.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

“Iris Gates.”

Now that was a surprise. They had yet to determine whether the notorious spy was

friend or foe. She had assisted them a few months ago by providing intel on the Wren Project, the mysterious organization they'd been chasing for years. Iris was also known for her deceit and duplicity. Her daughter, Olivia Gates, was a former OZ operative and a beloved friend. To say mother and daughter had a complicated relationship would be an understatement. Even Olivia couldn't say for sure whether her mother was their enemy or not.

"What was she calling you about?"

Instead of answering, she asked, "Have you talked to Eve or Gideon lately?"

"Not Eve, but I saw Gideon a few days ago."

"He tell you what's going on with Eve?"

"Not really. Said it was her story to tell. Want to tell me why all the cryptic questions?"

"Not sure I have anything to tell you. I'll send you the messages Iris gave me and let you see if you can make any sense out of them. She basically told me that both Eve and Gideon are wrapped up in some kind of political intrigue, and it's about to blow up on them. She told me I needed to let you know so you can warn them."

"Warn them about what?"

"Exactly."

Ash blew out an exasperated sigh. Heaven save him from obscure and vague clues. Spies were the world's worst at not giving straightforward intel.

"That's about as clear as mud."

“My thoughts exactly, but I thought it might be worth your while to give them a call.”

“Yeah, I agree. Still not sure about that woman.”

“I’m not either, but I do know she has access to intel it could take us years to uncover. Whether it’s to our advantage or detriment is another matter.”

“Agreed. I’ll give Gideon a call and see if I can suss out what’s going on.”

“Let me know if I can assist. Now, tell me how my godson is doing.”

As Ash described the latest amazing feats his three-month-old son had achieved and Kate obligingly praised his brilliance, another part of his mind went to Eve and Gideon. What were they involved in, and why did he have the feeling that Iris Gates’s warning was an omen of a coming evil?

* * *

Ile de la Lune

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

The instant her father was out the door, she was in Gideon's arms. She didn't know who moved first. It didn't matter. She was where she wanted to be. Ever since the news this morning of Clement's murder and Gideon's possible arrest, she had been on edge. They had waited so long to be together, and the thought that it all might come tumbling down around them was too much to bear.

"Having you in my arms like this is a dream come true," he said.

Her face buried against his neck, Eve smiled. One of the many things she appreciated about Gideon was his ability to say things that would sound cheesy from anyone else. The man's gruff, golden voice could make the reading of a dictionary sound sexy.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Why don't—"

The chime on her cellphone startled them both. It was an alert from OZ. Frowning, she grabbed it, and they read the text together. Get satphone from G. Call me."

"That can't be good." She glanced up at Gideon. "Is Ash really pissed at me?"

"Not at all. Not sure what this is about."

"Guess I'd better call him."

"I'll go get the phone."

Tired of her self-imposed lock-in, she released a frustrated breath and said, “I’ll go with you.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes. I’m barely recognizable anymore. I’ll wear a hoodie. No one’s going to be expecting to see me. Besides, the sooner I can call Ash, the sooner we can get back to other things.”

He grabbed her and planted a hard kiss on her lips. “Then grab your jacket, woman, and let’s go.”

Laughing at his eagerness, she did just that. It had been so long since she’d felt this lighthearted and at peace. The lies that had separated them were out in the open. She had not only forgiven Gideon, they were now free to be with each other the way she’d always wanted. Some might say she had forgiven him too quickly, but she didn’t care. She refused to waste another moment on her anger. Bottom line, she trusted this man with her life and her heart.

Gideon would never betray her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gideon had remained watchful and vigilant on the trip to his apartment. Even though Eve no longer looked like the princess the people of Ile de la Lune remembered, and she likely wouldn’t be recognized, he was taking no chances. The stupid-assed emoji of a smiling devil might be as lame and subtle as they came, but he was treating it as a threat.

He breathed easier the moment they walked into his apartment. Giving little thought to how the place looked, he helped Eve remove her jacket and hung it in the coat

closet. When he turned to face her, he was surprised to see an amused smile on her face.

“What?”

“How long were you planning to stay here?”

“Just until you’re ready to go back to OZ. Why?”

“Because it’s a home.”

He looked around, trying to see the apartment through her eyes. It had taken him about half an hour to order additional furniture online, along with some throw pillows and draperies. He’d spent a couple hours putting things in place, and that had been that.

Since this was a temporary residence, some people might’ve left it the way it was and called it good enough. Having become responsible for three siblings at fifteen, he’d learned that making a house a home contributed to good mental health. Making sure his brothers and sister had what they’d needed had been priority number one. That had included ensuring a comfortable home environment. He’d done the research and implemented what he’d learned. It had carried over into adulthood.

He shrugged. “I like my creature comforts.”

“It’s actually lovely.”

For some reason, he felt ridiculously vulnerable at her unexpected compliment.

“Thanks. Have a seat. I’ll get the phone.”

Going to his bedroom, he unlocked the safe he’d purchased for his weapons. He

returned to see she'd picked up the latest book he'd been reading. "I heard they're making this into a movie."

"Hope it's better than the book. So far, the main character has killed off everyone he knows."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

She grimaced. “I’ll wait for the movie, then.” Taking the phone he held out to her, she said softly, “Silly, I know, but I’m nervous.”

“There’s no reason to be. He’ll understand.”

“You’re sure he doesn’t know I’m a princess?”

“Has no idea.”

“Okay. Here goes.”

Pressing the keys, she put the call on speaker, and they waited for Ash to answer.

“Eve?” Ash said.

The moment she heard her friend’s voice, all the tension left her body. This was Ash, the man she’d walk into hell for if he asked.

“Hey, yeah. It’s me.”

“How are you doing?”

“Much better. My rehab has gone well. I’m almost one hundred percent again.”

“That’s good to know. We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed all of you. Everyone doing okay?”

“Yeah. Pretty much the same. I can update you on that later. I wanted to alert you about something. Gideon there with you?”

“I’m here,” Gideon answered.

“Good. You both need to hear this.”

“What’s up?” Eve asked.

“Iris Gates contacted Kate and gave her a message to give to you.”

Eve shot a surprised look at Gideon. “What kind of message?”

“Cryptic to the point of ridiculous, but I’m passing it along in hopes you can make more sense out of it.”

“Okaaaay. Tell me.”

“I’ll read you the lines and let you make what you will of them. ‘The kingdom is in peril. Old enemies have new friends. Trust is nebulous.’”

“That’s it?”

“Only other thing was that you and Gideon were involved in some kind of political intrigue that’s about to blow up.”

The leak within her father’s inner circle just became even more troubling.

“Any of that make sense to you?” Ash asked.

“Yes. Maybe.”

“Care to share?”

“Yes. Actually, I was going to ask if you and Serena would mind coming here. I’ve been doing my own research, but I could really use some help.”

“I’ll check and make sure Serena’s available. Shouldn’t be a problem. Where are we going?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“Ile de la Lune.”

“I see,” Ash said dryly.

She sent a puzzled glance at Gideon, who explained, “I told Ash that’s where I am. I haven’t told him anything else.”

“I’ll explain more when you arrive, but this is where both of us grew up.”

“So you were childhood friends?”

“Not exactly. I’m...uh...” She cleared her throat and said, “My father is the king.”

There was just the briefest moment of silence before Ash said, “Okay, I won’t ask any more.”

Thankful for his acceptance, she said, “I’ll send you details so you’ll know what to do when you arrive.”

“Sounds good. And, Eve?”

“Yes?”

“It’ll be good to see you again.”

“Thanks, Ash. It’ll be good to see you and Serena both. Give Jules and Joshua my love.”

“Will do.”

When the call ended, she pulled in a shaky breath and said, “I guess it’s time everyone learns the truth.”

“You think they’ll look at you differently?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.”

Holding out his hand to her, he pulled her into his arms and just held her. Gideon knew better than anyone how hard she’d fought to be seen as someone other than a princess or a victim. Though she knew neither Ash nor Serena would see her as either one, she couldn’t help but be a little apprehensive.

“What do you think those cryptic messages from Iris Gates mean?” she asked.

Releasing her, he backed away and shook his head. “I’d say if she knows what’s happening, this thing is a whole lot bigger than we thought.”

“Those are my thoughts, too.” She went to the closet and pulled out her coat. “I need to speak with my father. He and my brothers need to be on the highest alert.”

“As do you,” Gideon said.

Shaking her head, she shrugged on her jacket with his help. “I’m nothing to these people. They’re the ones in danger.”

Gideon remained ominously silent as they walked out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gideon woke with a start, reaching for Eve. When he felt only empty space, he shot to his feet. “Eve?”

“In here.”

Grabbing his pants, he slid them on and followed her voice. He wasn’t surprised to find her in her office, reviewing the boards she’d set up.

Their return to her apartment last night had been somber and introspective. Even though neither of them trusted Iris Gates, and her message had been ridiculously vague, they also knew she would not have sent them this message without a good reason. Something was afoot, and they needed to uncover what the hell was going on.

They’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms, but he should have known she wouldn’t be able to rest. When Eve was on an op, she rarely slept well. Since this involved her family, she likely hadn’t slept at all.

She turned when he stood at the doorway. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“No.” He gestured to the boards. “Anything?”

“Nothing more than I had before. I thought with Iris’s message, I might see something in a new light. No such luck.”

He went to her and drew her into his arms. He didn’t like seeing the worry in her eyes. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I know. I just hope it’s soon enough.”

He steered her to the board where she’d listed everyone who knew about her father’s visit with the French president as well as her return to the castle. As suspects went, it wasn’t a long list, but he knew each person was either a beloved family member or a valued and trusted employee. No matter who had leaked the information, it would cause the family pain.

“Let’s talk about your list. How are you going to narrow it down?”

“I’m hoping Serena can help me with that. I thought if someone was selling the intel, digging into their financials might help.”

“I agree. But money isn’t always the motivator.”

“Yeah. Nonfinancial motives worry me the most.”

He squeezed her shoulders in comfort. “We’ll dig until we find the connection.”

“How do you think Ash took the news?”

Considering the five seconds of silence after Eve’s confession that she was a member of the royal family here, he knew the news had been a shock.

Gideon shrugged. “About as well as could be expected.”

“At least he still called me Eve and not princess.”

“Ash isn’t going to treat you any differently than he has before.”

“Yeah.” Setting her shoulders straighter, she turned her attention to the list before her and began to talk about each one.

“Marc Lambert is my father’s bodyguard. He’s been with him for over twenty years. Has three beautiful children, a lovely wife, and a new granddaughter. He’s highly paid, and if he needed money, no matter how much, Papa would give him whatever he asked for. I just don’t see it being him.”

“Okay, let’s move on.”

With each person on the list, she explained why it couldn’t be them. Gideon had a feeling the king would likely agree. Each person, blood-related or not, meant a lot to the family, and seeing them as something other than loyal and devoted wasn’t something they could easily do.

“Let’s talk about the emoji.”

“That’s really bugging you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Quite a lot, actually.”

“It’s a cartoon face, Gideon. An easy, throwaway insult. It’s nothing.”

“It represents evil, Eve. Against you.”

“Then I’m at a loss, because none of these people I’ve listed could have anything against me. I haven’t even seen some of them in over a decade.”

“It might not be against you personally, but you’re the beloved, only daughter of the king. Hurting you would hurt your father.”

“Yes, but hurting one of my brothers would hurt him just as much.”

“You might look like an easier target.”

She smiled at that, her blue eyes gleaming like sapphires. “Looks can be deceiving.”

Laughing, he pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “Yes, they can.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

She glanced at the clock on her desk. “Serena and Ash should be here in a couple of hours.”

They’d received a text from Ash last night confirming that Serena was available, and they would both be headed to Amelie soon.

“Ash will have no problem with the logistics of arriving in the city, but what’s the plan to get them into the castle without causing questions?”

“Remember Mylan?”

“Ha. Yeah. One of the only pleasant memories of my incarceration.”

She grimaced in sympathy and said, “He’s going to meet them at the airport and escort them here. And on that note: Things went a little sideways yesterday, and we didn’t discuss this, but any ideas on who might’ve taken out Clement?”

“No, but I imagine the man had more than a few enemies.”

“Agreed. Just wondering if it had anything to do with this other stuff that’s happening.” She shrugged and added, “I could easily see Clement selling information, but he wasn’t privy to my father’s schedule.”

“No, but he knew you were here.”

“He never mentioned that he’d told anyone?”

“No. The bastard was tight-lipped but smug as hell.”

“If he told anyone, whoever he told might’ve been the one who killed him.”

“If so, then my incarceration might’ve been more than just bad blood between the two of us.”

“Which, by the way, you never told me why he had it out for you.”

He hesitated to bring this up again, since it was the beginning of their complicated connected past, but he had promised full disclosure. “The incident with Homer. You might not remember that Clement was there.”

“Yes, I remember. He was one of the guards who tried to intimidate me, and then when my father came, he pretended to be all protective.”

“You were likely occupied with other things, so you probably didn’t see the groin-punch I delivered.”

“No, but I wish I had. Still can’t believe my uncle promoted him to be commander of the palace guards.”

“That was your uncle’s doing?”

“I assume so. He took over that responsibility after Samuel was killed. Samuel originally oversaw those activities. Neither Nicolas nor Alex wanted the responsibility, so he agreed to take over.”

Gideon’s eyes went back to the board where Eve had listed possible suspects. “Perhaps it would be helpful to know what each person’s responsibility entails. Maybe we’ll find a thread somewhere.”

“Okay, but first coffee.” With a quick kiss on his cheek, she walked out of the room.

Gideon continued to stare at the board, a heavy feeling developing in his gut. Perhaps the culprit was even closer than any of them could ever imagine.

* * *

Ash and Serena arrived as covertly as if they were on an OZ mission. Eve received a text from Mylan when the OZ plane landed. Twenty minutes later, the text came that they were inside the inner hallway, headed to her apartment. And then the door chime sounded.

Feeling unaccountably nervous, Eve stood at the door and took a bracing breath. She didn’t know what to expect from her friends. Finding out someone you thought you knew everything about was actually someone else would be a shock for anyone. Finding out that that same someone was a royal princess might be a little too much.

The instant she opened the door, all worries disappeared. Serena ran into her arms with a little squeal of delight. “You look wonderful. How are you feeling?”

Tears of gratitude welling in her eyes, Eve held her friend close. This right here was one of the reasons she loved her OZ family as much as she loved her blood family. The incredible acceptance and unconditional love were both life-affirming and validating. Her bloodline had nothing to do with how they felt about her.

“I’m great,” Eve answered. She pulled away to look at her friend and felt her heart clutch.

Though still lovely, with her honey-blond hair and magnolia complexion, Serena had lost weight, and the dark shadows beneath her light-green eyes told of sleepless nights. Eve made a vow that the two of them would carve out some alone time so she

could find out what was going on with Serena and Sean. It was insane what he was putting her through.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“Hey, don’t I get a hug?” Ash had already greeted Gideon with the usual back slap and handshake.

Grinning her delight, Eve wrapped her arms around Ash for a hard hug. The moment she’d met Ash, she’d felt like he was her brother from another life. She’d felt a connection similar to how she’d felt about Samuel, who’d she’d always felt a special closeness to.

“It’s good to see you both. Come on in and join the madness.” She led them into the living room and asked, “Do either of you need something to eat or drink?”

Glancing at Serena, who shook her head, Ash said, “We’re good. Let’s talk about what’s going on.”

The instant they were seated on a sofa, she settled down across from them beside Gideon. When he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, a knowing smile spread across Ash’s face. “Well, it’s about damn time.”

Silly, but she felt a blush heat her cheeks. She shot Gideon a look out of the corner of her eye and laughed at the goofy grin on his face.

Turning back to her friends, she shook her head. “I think we were on the ten-year plan.”

“You owe me fifty bucks, boss,” Serena said.

“What was the bet?” Gideon asked.

Ash shrugged. “She said you guys would be together. Since you told me there was still some friction between you two, I thought it was a safe bet.”

“We got the friction ironed out.”

“I’m glad,” Ash said. “Now tell us what’s going on.”

Appreciating the fact that they didn’t ask questions related to her title or background, Eve quickly explained the situation and how she hoped they could help.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Serena said. “I brought my laptop, and barring any complications, I should be able to give you a preliminary report in a few hours.”

“Let me show you what I’ve got.” Rising, she led them into her office. “If you want to stroll around and get an idea of what we’re dealing with, that’s fine.”

Serena shook her head. “Show me what you’ve got first, and I’ll go from there.”

She pointed to the board with the compiled list. “Here’s where we are.”

While Ash and Serena studied the list, it took every bit of Eve’s willpower not to explain who each person was to her and how they couldn’t be guilty of betraying her family. It helped that Gideon took her hand and pulled her away from them. She knew they would work better without her interference, but the need was strong to defend each person.

“You’re doing good,” Gideon whispered.

“You know me too well.”

“If it were my family, you’d be having to hold me back with a gun. No one wants to

be betrayed by someone they love and trust.”

She saw the regret in his eyes. “We’re past that,” Eve assured him. “I trust you to never lie to me again.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” He kissed her gently on the forehead. “You have my word.”

Suddenly wishing they were alone so she could show him exactly how she felt, she forced herself to concentrate. Once this threat was behind them, she wanted to go somewhere alone with him where they could be exactly who they were. No questions, no speculations, no intrusions.

“Okay.” Serena turned and said, “Show me what you’ve uncovered, and then I’ll start digging deeper.”

Glad to have a task, she released Gideon’s hand and grabbed the pages she’d printed out. Having Serena here with her eagle-eyed intelligence and unbiased opinion was such a relief. Even though Gideon wasn’t close to most of the people on her list, he still saw them in a different light than someone who’d never met them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ash and Gideon walk out the door. She knew Ash had more questions, but for right now, she wanted to take the chance to speak to Serena alone.

“Okay, babe. Before we move on, tell me what’s going on,” Eve said quietly.

Not even pretending to not know what she was asking, Serena shrugged. “I haven’t heard from him in weeks.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“No. He left his phone behind and had the tracking chip removed.”

“What about his family? Have they heard from him?”

“His stepmother was the only one he ever kept in touch with, and since we get along like fire and gasoline, she’s not telling me anything.” Her voice grew thick, and she stopped to clear her throat before adding, “I’ve stopped trying to find him. When he’s ready—if he is ever ready—he’ll come back.”

“You’ve done all you can, sweetie. I cannot imagine why he’s being so bullheaded about this. It wasn’t even your secret. You happened upon the information.”

“I think that discovering that Hawke was alive and not telling him was just the last straw for him.”

“What do you mean?”

Her mouth twisted with emotion. “I never mentioned it because I hoped it would get better, but he’d been struggling for a few months.”

“Do you know why?”

“Some of it. We’d been trying to get pregnant, but we hadn’t had any success. We were scheduled to see a fertility specialist the week everyone found out about Hawke. We canceled the appointment, and when I asked him when he wanted to reschedule, he told me we should wait until we were sure.”

“Sure about what?”

“I don’t know. Sure about us, maybe.”

“That’s insane, Serena. You two were made for each other.”

“I used to think so, too. Now I’m not sure of anything.”

“I’m so sorry about this. Is there anything I can do? Maybe Gideon could find him and talk with him.”

“No. It’s going to have to be Sean making that decision on his own. If something like this can destroy us, then we weren’t very strong to begin with. Besides, it’s not like I was a royal princess of an exotic country and forgot to tell anyone.” The teasing twinkle in her eyes told Eve there were no hard feelings.

Throwing her arms around her friend, she gave her a grateful hug. “I’m sorry about that. It’s complicated. And there never seemed to be a good time to tell you guys that you should be curtsying to me.”

Serena sputtered out a laugh. “Can you see us doing that every time you came into an OZ meeting?”

“Yeah, that would’ve been awkward.” She gave her friend a teary-eyed smile. “Thanks for understanding.”

“That’s what friends do. Even when we keep things from each other, it’s not out of malice or with an intent to hurt.”

Hearing those words healed a fracture she’d still felt between her and Gideon. Their relationship might not be completely fixed, but Serena’s words helped her see beyond

Gideon's betrayal to his real intent.

She couldn't help but compare hers and Gideon's issues with Sean and Serena's. The lies Gideon had told were much more involved, but she'd chosen to forgive him. Serena had simply withheld information that Hawke was still alive. There had to be more to Sean's issues than just that. She just hoped he got his act together before he lost the best thing to ever happen to him.

* * *

Gideon poured Ash another cup of coffee and handed it over.

"So who's your prime suspect?"

Ash knew him well enough to know that he'd already formed some preliminary assumptions.

"I haven't said anything to Eve, because any of them being guilty is something that's going to be hard for her to handle."

"But...?"

"I've got my eye on her uncle."

"Why's that?"

"There's just something about a man who stands quietly in the wings, doing his job, but never getting the credit. He's the king's brother, and if things were different, he'd be the king."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“What’s the succession plan?”

“It’s not been formally announced, but it’s understood that Nicolas, the oldest son, is the crown prince. He already handles many of the daily duties.”

“What about the other brother? If Nicolas isn’t around, isn’t he the next in line?”

“Possibly. It depends upon the age of Nicolas’s children. He has three, who would be in line before Alexandre. Her middle brother would’ve been before Alexandre as well, but he died in a motorcycle crash almost twenty years ago.”

“Accident?”

“That’s always been the story. I never heard differently.”

“So everyone moved up in succession, including the uncle.”

“Yes.”

“So if it is the uncle, and he wants to be king, he’d have to take out, at the very least, the king, his oldest son, and Alexandre.”

“Yes.”

“Is the king aware of the danger?”

“Yes, after you told us about Iris Gates’s warning, Eve warned her father to be on

alert. He assured her he would, but I think he's in denial. He's got one main bodyguard and two additional for more public events. They're all on the suspect list, so he's not necessarily out of danger even when it looks like he's protected."

"Is there anyone here who you trust completely? Other than Eve and her father?"

Gideon thought about it for a moment and then shook his head. "No. Not really. Even Nicolas is suspect. Who knows? Maybe he wants the king out of the way sooner so he can go ahead and take over."

"But why the threat against Eve?"

"That's the conundrum I'm dealing with. Why her and her father? Why those two?"

"Eve's not in line for the crown?"

"Not officially, no. She requested to leave her royal duties and expectations several years ago. Even if she hadn't, there are several in line before Eve would likely even be considered."

"Then there's a correlation we need to concentrate on. Who benefits from eliminating just the king and his daughter, who's not even an active member of the royal family anymore?"

Gideon blew out a frustrated sigh. Ash was right. The motivation to get rid of two people, one of whom had no influence politically, upended what should have been a clear-cut path to a specific suspect.

"Our best bet to get the intel we need is Serena," Ash said.

"Yeah," Gideon said. Serena was the most gifted hacker he'd ever come across. Sean,

her husband, had once claimed she could find a specific grain of sand on a thousand-mile beach. An exaggeration perhaps, but not by much.

“So what’s going on with Sean? Have you talked to him?” Gideon asked.

“Hell if I know. Every time I tried to talk to him, he shut me down.”

“We need an intervention?”

“Yeah, once he resurfaces, might not be a bad idea. We’re still running on a skeleton crew. Hopefully, in a few weeks, when we’re all back stateside, we can come up with a way to find him and make him listen.”

Rubbing the scruff on his face, Gideon shook his head in doubt. He had a feeling it was going to take something more than just a few words to make the man listen to reason. There was something big going on with their friend, and as much as he’d like to find him and confront him, his first priority was finding whoever was threatening Eve and her father.

“So let’s talk about why Iris Gates would have any knowledge of what’s going on in Ile de la Lune.”

“I can’t decide if that woman is one of the devil’s minions or actually an answer to our prayers,” Ash said. “Every time she gives us some intel, it’s cloaked in so much mystery, half our time is used up trying to decipher exactly what it means.”

“I agree. Have you talked to Olivia lately? Think she might be able to give you some insight?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“I talked with her about a week ago. She’s bought a house in Florida. Looks like she’s moving on without Hawke.”

Hell, how did smart people get so stupid? Hawke and Olivia loved each other with a fierceness he’d rarely seen in real life. If they couldn’t get it right, what chance did the rest of the world have?

“And Hawke’s just going to let her go?”

“Not sure about that. From what I can tell, he’s in Florida, too.”

“Good. He’s a stubborn ass, but maybe he’s finally seeing the light.”

“We can only hope.” Ash nodded toward Eve’s office. “And you guys are going to make a go of it?”

“I’ve loved her forever.”

Spilling his guts wasn’t Gideon’s thing, but Ash knew him better than just about anyone. Besides, when it came to his feelings for Eve, he was an open book. She was the only one who’d never seen his devotion to her for what it was.

“She know that yet?”

“We haven’t exactly gotten to that part, but I’m more hopeful than I’ve ever been.”

“Guess she got over her mad?”

“Not sure ‘mad’ is the correct word, but she’s forgiven me, and that’s more than I thought possible a few weeks ago.”

“Care to share what happened?”

“I don’t mind, but most of the story belongs to Eve. It’s up to her to tell it, when and how she wants. Just know it’s not pretty.”

Ash nodded his understanding, and Gideon knew he did indeed understand. He’d been there and done that. Knew all about past trauma and what it could do to a soul.

“Understood.”

Eve emerged from her office. Sometimes, like now, it struck Gideon how incredibly lovely she really was. It wasn’t necessarily her outward appearance, though she was stunningly attractive. It was more her presence and grace. She walked with an elegant ease that defied description, her fluidity of movement like a slow, supple dance. Her black hair, so lustrous and silky, flowed like a dark waterfall over her shoulders. She had delicate, feminine features, and someone who didn’t know her might think she was fragile and easily broken. He could attest to the fact that she was just the opposite. He had never met a more fiercely independent or stronger individual.

She had fascinated him from the moment he’d watched her face down men with chain saws without flinching. In the decades that followed, his feelings had changed, but the fascination hadn’t. He knew it never would.

“Serena told me you guys can’t stay the night,” Eve said. “I was hoping you could meet my father. He’s not available until tomorrow morning.”

“Wish we could, but I need to get back to Jules and Joshua,” Ash said.

“Understood. Speaking of, I can’t believe I haven’t seen even one photo of that kid since you arrived.”

“Let me take care of that now.” Grinning with pride, Ash pulled out his phone. “I only have a couple thousand.”

* * *

Hours later, after a good meal, two glasses of wine, and lots of laughter, Eve sat with Gideon on the sofa. She knew her friends had questions. They hadn’t pressed her to tell them why she had hidden her identity, which was one of the reasons she loved them so much. She knew that even if she didn’t explain things, it wouldn’t change how they felt about her one iota, nor would it affect their willingness to help her. But it was time. Not only were her life and heritage front and center to her request for help, but she also didn’t want to hide anymore. At least not from her OZ family.

She started from the beginning—a beginning she hadn’t known existed until recently. “Gideon and I grew up here, in Amelie.”

“So you knew each other as children?” Serena said. “That’s so cool.”

“Not exactly.” She exchanged a smile with Gideon, who sat beside her. “It might be easier if you start.”

Taking her hand in his, he squeezed gently, as if once more offering an apology. “We didn’t meet officially until years later, but I was twelve and Eve was eight when it all started.”

As he went on to describe how he’d been walking home from work when he’d noticed the crowd on the palace grounds, Eve listened as if hearing the story for the first time. In a way, she was. The first time he’d told her, she’d been too absorbed in

her own hurt to really consider all the nuances of their first encounter. But listening to him now, she was swamped with emotion. Gideon had been by her side for over a decade, but in truth, he'd been with her for much longer.

While he described his reasons for not becoming a royal guard, Eve's heart hurt for him. Not because he hadn't been able to become her guard, but for what he'd gone through. No fifteen-year-old who had already lost one of the most important people in his life should have to take over the care of his siblings. She had never met his brothers or sister, but she had no doubt they were phenomenal human beings in large part because of their big brother.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

Gideon came to the end of his story, briefly describing his work at DGSE and then how he left the organization to join a private security team. And then he'd gotten a call that had changed his life.

He sent her an encouraging look, leaving it up to her to tell them about what had happened at the US Embassy in Paris.

She made her account as brief and unemotional as she could. Both Ash and Serena had seen brutality up close and personal. She didn't need to embellish the facts. They could read between the lines.

Tears streamed down Serena's face at the telling, then she smiled brilliantly. "And Gideon's the one who rescued you?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the lowlife responsible for all that?" Ash asked.

"He's in a maximum-security prison in Terre Haute, Indiana."

"With no chance of parole, I assume," Ash said.

"None," Eve answered with a slight smile.

"So how did you two finally end up as partners?" Serena asked. "I mean, you guys were together long before you came to OZ."

“I was in a bad place after everything that happened. I received a get-well card that included the website for the Carmichael Group.”

“I remember you did some work for them, Gideon,” Ash said.

“Yeah. Eve came on board, and she was a natural. I was her trainer.” He shrugged, adding, “We clicked.”

“But you never knew your connection until the dirt bike accident?” Ash asked Eve.

“No,” Eve said.

“And you were working for her father?” Serena asked Gideon, a gleam of accusation in her pretty eyes.

Before Eve could jump in to defend Gideon, he shook his head. “It’s more complicated than that, but in a way, yes, I was employed by the king.”

“It’s okay, Serena,” Eve said. “We’re past that now. Gideon has promised full disclosure from now on, and I believe him.”

Gideon pulled her closer and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “For which I’m eternally grateful.”

Ash glanced at his watch and stood. “Hate to break this up, but our plane leaves in forty-five minutes.”

Eve and Gideon went to their feet, too. Eve couldn’t believe how much lighter her heart felt. She hadn’t realized how worried she’d been about how her teammates would feel about the secrets she’d been keeping from them. It was such a relief to know they didn’t plan to treat her any differently than they had before.

“Thank you both for coming,” she said. “I wish you could stay longer, but I understand.”

Serena hugged her. “You’ll hear from me soon. I’ll dig hard and fast until I find out who’s threatening you and your family.”

“Thank you.”

While Serena hugged Gideon, Eve said goodbye to Ash and gave him a promise. “As soon as I can, I’ll be back at OZ, if you’ll still have me.”

“There was never any question of that. And we’ll do everything we can to make sure you and your family stay safe.”

Gideon went with them to the door and then stopped to look back at her. “I’ll walk them to their car. Be back in a few minutes.”

The instant the door closed, Eve dropped onto the sofa with a sigh. Not only had a huge hurdle been cleared, but she also knew Serena’s words were true. She would uncover the people threatening her family, and they would be dealt with severely. Ile de la Lune was a peace-loving country, but when it came to traitors the government could be ruthless.

Her cellphone buzzed, and she grabbed it, checking quickly to see that her uncle was calling.

“Jacques, how are you?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“Lina, can you come to your father’s quarters?”

“Yes...of course. What’s—”

“Your father has collapsed, Lina. You need to come right away.”

Her heart in her throat, Eve rushed from her apartment. She reminded herself in the nick of time that she needed to use the hidden hallway. What had Jacques meant that her father had collapsed? Had he had a heart attack? A stroke? Had someone hurt him?

Her mind racing with worry, she was halfway through the passageway when the lights went out. Startled, she skidded to a stop in total darkness, and then pain exploded as a massive fist slammed into her face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Roaring with outrage, Eve went on the defensive. Fists swiped at her. She dodged, returned the hits with maximum force. Without light, things were made a little more difficult, but she was trained to fight in total darkness. There were different skills to employ, different senses to engage. Listening for harsh breathing, grunts, and curses was a great way to locate your opponent.

Her hearing acute, she knew another massive fist was headed her way an instant before she ducked, whirled, and kicked. Her foot connected with a hard, muscled abdomen. Kicking with her recently healed broken leg had been risky, but she’d had no choice. She had to take this bastard down.

She barely felt the disturbance of air, alerting her that another man had joined the party, when large hands wrapped around her neck from the back. Massive fingers closed around her windpipe, and she struggled to breathe as she continued to fight the attacker in front of her. Using her elbow, she punched the guy choking her, pleased to hear an “oof” of air. The hands loosened slightly, allowing her to inhale much-needed oxygen.

She kicked the man in front of her, whirled, and then punched the man behind her, kicked, then punched again.

The man who’d choked her barked, “You bitch!”

The voice set off all sorts of alarms inside her, but she couldn’t let herself get distracted. She had to take these two bastards down, or she was a dead woman. Determining the guy who’d first attacked her was the strongest, and therefore bigger, threat, she went all out for him.

Punch, double kick, punch, punch.

She heard shouts of outrage, and the man behind her tried to grab her arms. She took a half second, turned, and gave him a one-two kick, then turned back to the other man. Except he was no longer there. She whirled, ready to face the second man, and realized he was gone, too.

An urgent voice inside her head told her to get out of the passageway, that they might come back. That voice unfortunately did not control her body. With a low groan of pain, Eve slid down the wall and dropped to her butt on the floor. Panting slightly, she assessed her injuries as best she could. Ache in her cheekbone, bruised but not broken. Sore neck from being choked, but she could breathe, and swallowing was only slightly painful. Possible bruised ribs, pounding headache, and a throbbing hand. All in all, she knew she had fared better than her attackers had. Not only had she

given them some major pain, but they'd also run away. She didn't know if their intent had been to kill or capture her, but they had failed at both, so she was calling that a win for Team Eve.

Anxiety spiked when she remembered why she'd been in the hallway in the first place. Her father had collapsed. She had to get to him.

Using the wall as a brace, she pushed herself to her feet. Even though every instinct was telling her to hurry, she knew her body well. If she rushed, she'd fall back down, and she wasn't sure if she'd be able to get back up on her own.

She took a couple of steps forward and then stopped at the sound of approaching footsteps. Since it was still midnight dark in the passageway, she had no idea if the person was friend or foe. Gideon should be headed back this way, but it could just as easily be her attackers returning, possibly with reinforcements. She held herself still, preparing.

Light appeared above her head, illuminating the hallway. Gideon stepped around the corner. When he spotted her, he raced toward her, his eyes filled with concern.

"Eve? What the hell happened?"

More grateful to see him than she could ever express, she fell into his arms. "You missed quite the show."

"Who hurt you?"

"I'm not sure. I'll tell you on the way."

"On the way where? Where are you going?"

“My uncle called. He said my father has collapsed and wanted me to come to his apartment.”

“Like a heart attack or stroke?”

“I don’t know. I ran out of my apartment, and within a minute of entering the passageway, the lights went out, and two men attacked me.”

“Okay. Let’s get you to your father, and then we’ll see what we’re dealing with. You need me to carry you?”

“No. I’m fine. Just a little shaky.”

Concern darkening his face, Gideon wrapped his arm around her, giving her support.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

As they continued down the hallway, Eve's mind grappled with a thousand different questions. How had her attackers entered the passageway? How had they known she would be using it at that exact time? What had been their goal—to kill or abduct, or maybe even just to scare? But why?

And the number one question that made the other questions minuscule by comparison: How had the one man she believed she would never see again been able to come inside the castle and attack her?

How the hell had Dirk Bennett escaped prison?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Fury bubbled within Gideon, and he ground his teeth to keep from letting it spew out of him. Eve had been lured out of her apartment and attacked in her own home. If she wasn't so well trained and savvy, she might have been abducted or killed. Whoever attacked her had underestimated her. Only a select few knew of Eve's martial arts abilities. She wasn't even one hundred percent recovered, and she had defended herself against two attackers.

He glanced at her pale, bruised face. Even though he knew she was in pain, the worry in her eyes told him her mind was focused elsewhere. Had her father actually collapsed, or had that news been merely to get her out of her apartment? If so, her uncle was going to have a very hard time explaining himself.

Gideon opened the door to the main hallway and stopped. To the left led to her father's apartment. He had never been inside the king's private dwelling, but he had

studied the castle extensively and knew it as well as he knew his own home. To the right were rooms that had once belonged to the queen but were now used infrequently for Nicolas and his family.

Gideon glanced right and left, ensuring no one was waiting to attack again. “Okay, let’s go.”

With a shaky breath, Eve stepped out into the hallway. The door to her father’s apartment opened, and her uncle stood there, waiting for them. “What took you so long? And what happened to you?”

Ignoring his questions, Eve said, “What happened? How’s Papa?”

“You need to come inside.” Jacques backed up, leaving the door open for them to enter. “We need to talk.”

Keeping one arm around Eve, Gideon put his other hand on the only weapon he carried within the castle, his knife. If this was a setup, he needed to be ready.

The instant they entered the king’s quarters, Gideon noted three things. Every light in the large apartment seemed to be blazing. Voices were coming from another room, some of them sounding agitated. Most notable was the frazzled-looking Jacques. The man known for his calm, even temper looked as if he were on the brink of a major meltdown. Was that because his plan hadn’t worked? Had he believed Eve would be either dead or missing at this point?

“What’s happened, Jacques? How is Papa?”

“Your father had some kind of an attack after dinner. The doctors are with him now.”

“But how is he? Is he conscious?”

“On and off. He’s not making much sense.”

She took a step forward. “I need to see him.”

“You might want to clean up first, Lina. You look as though you’ve been in a brawl, and there’s blood on your face. What on earth happened?”

Gideon squeezed Eve’s shoulders. Now might not be the best time to confront her uncle.

“Why don’t you go freshen up?” Gideon said to Eve. “I’ll stay here and talk with your uncle.”

Gideon waited for her to disappear around the corner before he spoke. If he hadn’t, she would’ve turned and come back, demanding answers. She needed a few minutes to herself, and he wanted some alone time with her uncle. They’d never had a lot of interaction, but he’d always gotten the impression that Jacques disapproved of him. Not that it mattered. Being liked had never been one of his life’s goals.

“Eve was attacked on her way here.”

Eyes wide with horror, her uncle looked convincingly shocked. “Within the castle? What happened? Who was it?”

“Yes, within the castle. She fought off two men, but I don’t know who they were. I’m just wondering how anyone would know that Eve would be coming down the passageway at that exact time. They were waiting for her.”

“I don’t know. There were a few people around when I called her. But I also called Nicolas and Alexandre.”

“Have they arrived yet?”

“No. I didn’t realize that Nicolas was moving his family to another location today. And Alexandre is appearing in his brother’s place at a charity event. I left voice messages for both of them, but I don’t anticipate either of them will be available for a while.”

This ambush had to have been orchestrated. Eve had told him that the instant she’d talked to her uncle, she’d hurried out the door. Her attackers had been waiting for her.

“Who else knows about the king’s collapse?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“Unfortunately, more than we would like. He was at a dinner with several members of Parliament, along with their families. We tried to keep it as low-key as possible, but we had no choice but to have him carried away on a stretcher.”

“Why wasn’t he taken to the hospital?”

“The dinner was here at the palace. We thought it best to bring him up to his rooms and allow him to be treated by the palace doctor.”

That information might’ve opened up a much wider suspect pool, except the person, or people, who had set up the attack knew Eve was here. Only a select few within the palace knew this information. Whoever it was likely knew that Eve would be informed right away that her father had fallen ill. That didn’t lessen his suspicion of Eve’s uncle, but Jacques’s guilt wasn’t assured either.

“How ill is the king?”

“He was vomiting, so we’re hoping whatever made him ill is no longer in his system.”

“Do you think he was poisoned?”

Jacques’s face turned grimmer. “We all ate the same thing, but as far as I know, the king is the only one who became sick. So my guess is yes, he was poisoned.”

“The kitchen and waitstaff are being questioned?”

“Yes.”

“I’d—” Gideon cut off when Eve walked toward them. She had a deep red mark on her face and smaller ones on her neck where she’d been choked. In a few hours, those red marks would darken into bruises. But she’d cleaned the blood off her face and neatened her hair and clothing. There was no hiding that she had been injured, but she looked less vulnerable than she had a few minutes ago.

“Come in with me.” She held out her hand, and he took it, letting her lead him toward her father’s bedroom.

“Perhaps it would be best if you went in by yourself, Eve,” Jacques said. “After all, Gideon isn’t family.”

Her brows arched, she said crisply, “Gideon is my family.”

If she didn’t already own his heart, those words would have sealed the deal.

Taking a long, shallow breath, Eve steadied her nerves to face whatever was going on with her father. She had so many questions that needed to be answered, but first and foremost was making sure her papa was going to be okay. Right now, that was all that mattered.

Her father lay on the bed, his eyes closed, his face as pale as death, and an expression of extreme pain etched in his features. He looked ten years older than he had yesterday.

Rushing to him, she sat gingerly on the bed and took his hand. “Papa?”

Her heart skipped several beats when he opened his eyes and stared up at her almost as if he didn’t recognize her.

“Papa?” she whispered softly. “It’s Lina.”

“I’ve given him something for the pain, so he’s likely confused.” The voice came from her left. She turned to see Claude Duval coming toward her. Duval had been the royal physician for almost twenty years.

“What happened? Do you know yet?”

“We’re analyzing blood samples, but my best guess is he was poisoned. With what, we don’t yet know. I’ve given him something to ease the cramps in his stomach, which has made him drowsy.”

“Will he be okay?”

“His pulse is elevated, and his respiration is faster than I would like. His blood pressure plunged very low, but we’ve stabilized him. He’s much improved but not out of the woods yet.”

She turned back to her father, the first man she’d ever admired and loved. If she lost him, she wasn’t sure how life would ever be the same. He was bigger than life to her.

“Lina,” her father whispered.

“Yes, Papa?”

“Trust no one.”

She leaned closer, sensing he didn’t want anyone else to hear what he was saying.

“Papa, do you know who did this to you?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“I—” Intense agony twisted his face, and his body jerked.

“Papa!” Eve shouted.

The doctor and nurse zoomed to the bed. A hand pulled on Eve’s arm, drawing her away. She didn’t want to leave.

“Eve,” Gideon said. “Let them work on him.”

Feeling helpless, she took several steps back and mutely watched as medical professionals surrounded her father, doing their best to save his life. The machine monitoring his heart rate was beeping rapidly and an order to clear his airway was snapped out like a drill sergeant.

Who had done this to him?

She sent Gideon a silent, agonized plea, and he answered immediately. Wrapping his arms around her, he whispered softly, “We’ll find them, Eve. I promise. We’ll find out who’s doing this, and we’ll make them pay.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

His mind on the thousand and one other things he needed to do, Alexandre prepared himself to greet the members and supporters of the Coalition to Prevent Childhood Hunger. He wasn’t especially good at these kinds of events, but Nicolas hadn’t been available, and the king had had another engagement. He didn’t resent having to make these appearances, but it didn’t make the event any more enjoyable.

The woman beside him shifted slightly, reminding him to focus on the matter at hand. He was here to assure the people of his country that the monarchy continued to be deeply committed to ensuring the welfare of Ile de la Lune's children.

Despite their differences, he was glad Chloe, his former wife, had agreed to appear with him today. Their divorce had been final for years, but they still occasionally appeared in public, if only to show that there were no hard feelings, that their failed marriage had been caused only by a lack of compatibility and not because of animosity.

Chloe Blanchet was not the woman for him. Even on their wedding day, he'd had doubts, but marriage had been expected of him, and she was a beautiful, charming woman with the proper pedigree and family. He had thought love might grow. He had been wrong.

When she had suggested a divorce a few years into their marriage, he hadn't been surprised. Their divorce had caused some complications, but not as many as it would have if he were higher in the line of succession to be king. That honor went to his brother and then to his eldest nephew, Andre. So while a divorce wasn't the most scandalous of events for a third son, it had still caused a few ripples. Thankfully, his papa had the ability to smooth out those kinds of issues. By the time all was said and done, the divorce had been looked upon as two young people who had tried to make it work but had finally had no choice but to admit they'd made a mistake.

The country had moved on, and so had he and Chloe. Fortunately, they'd had no children. Chloe hadn't remarried, but she was in a long-term relationship. He, on the other hand, had not found anyone he wanted to share his life with. The next time he married, he would make sure their goals were in alignment and that she understood their marriage was forever. One failed marriage was barely a newsworthy note with the press. A second failed marriage could indicate a pattern. He didn't mind publicity, but not when it pointed out his failures. Not a good look for a royal, no matter how

far down the line he was. His uncle Jacques was a prime example of how multiple failed marriages could adversely affect a royal's reputation.

So far, Alex didn't have anyone in mind to share his life with, but he had hopes that someone was out there for him.

“And now, I'm so pleased to introduce our distinguished speaker. A man who loves this country as much as we do and has strived tirelessly to give back to her people, ensuring our well-being. I present to you, His Royal Highness Prince Alexandre Wellingsley of Ile de la Lune.”

Taking a bracing breath, Alex went to his feet. He'd barely straightened when the first bullet hit. The impact was so great, he was thrown back against the wall, slamming his head against the hard surface. His comprehension dulled by the agony in his chest and a piercing ringing in his ear, Alex barely heard the second shot. He saw a spray of blood, and then Chloe, her expression one of panicked disbelief, slumped forward in her chair.

Alex's eyes closed, his mind blanked, and he felt nothing more.

* * *

The drone of the plane was a low, pleasant hum as Nicolas sat beside his wife, Camille, holding her hand. Their sons—Andre, Pierre, and Leo—sat across from them. They were his world, his life. Everything he did, every move he made, was done with them in mind.

The threat against his family was real. He had no doubt about that. Threats against the monarchy weren't that rare, but they were usually said in anger, and nothing ever came of it. This time was different.

His father believed only himself and Lina were being threatened. Nicolas didn't believe that for a moment. The king and princess were just the two who had been mentioned. But as he was the crown prince, it only made sense that Nicolas and his family be targeted just as much, or more, than anyone else.

Alexandre was in danger, too, though to a lesser extent. When Nicolas had tried to convey his concerns to his brother before he'd left, Alex had dismissed his concerns as ridiculous.

In Nicolas's opinion, threats to his family were as far from ridiculous as one could get. If any of them were safe, it was perhaps Uncle Jacques. But that wasn't a given either.

Weeks ago, Nicolas had put his family in a safe place. But that no longer felt like enough. If anyone hurt any of his family, he wasn't sure he would be able to carry on. That's why he was moving them to a new location now. The only people who knew where they were going were here on this plane with them. He hadn't even told his father. Not that he didn't trust him, but the fewer people who knew his plan, the less chance there would be of a leak.

When the truth of his actions came out, it would not be well received. He knew that and was willing to accept the consequences.

The fiery glare from his eldest son reminded him that no one was happy about this new development. Andre was eighteen years old and, by all accounts, had found the girl for whom he was willing to stop his philandering ways. She was lovely and from a well-known, wealthy family. The girl would likely be heartbroken that she was left behind, but that could not be helped. If he'd brought everyone on board who meant something to each family member, they would've had to have an additional plane to carry them all.

He hoped, in time, his family and his country would understand his decisions. If they didn't, then that was just the way it had to be. He loved his family and his country, and he was protecting them both by keeping his loved ones safe from harm.

A text alarm on his phone had him standing in an instant. "I'll be right back."

"Nic." Camille reached out to stop him. "Is everything all right?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

Taking her hand, he pressed a kiss to her palm. “Let me go check.”

The seat belt sign came on, and he turned back to his family and barked, “Get your seat belts on.”

He didn’t wait to see if they obeyed. He knew his wife would ensure their children complied.

As he stepped into the cockpit, his heart thumped hard against his chest when he heard the tension of the pilot’s voice.

“Mayday. Mayday. This is the captain of La Liberte of Ile de la Lune. We have an engine malfunction. We are requesting the closest location to land.”

“Sir, the speaker is on. It would be helpful if you identified yourself.”

As if in a dream, he heard his voice say, “This is Crown Prince Nicolas Wellingsley of Ile de la Lune. Please alert the authorities of our emergency.”

Seconds later, he heard the most terrifying words of all. “Mayday! Mayday!” the pilot shouted. “We have lost both engines. Prepare for crash landing!”

Nerves and adrenaline spiraling through him, Nicolas dropped into the seat behind him, buckled his seat belt, closed his eyes, and prayed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Eve hissed and grimaced as Gideon pressed his fingers against her sore ribs. As soon as her father was stabilized, Gideon had persuaded her to return to her apartment for a few minutes so he could see to her injuries. She had refused to allow the doctor to take his attention away from her father, so as a compromise, she had agreed to come back to her apartment. He knew it was more to get him to shut up than anything else, but he didn't care. Whatever it took to take care of her, he would do.

"They're not broken, so that's a plus," he said.

"Told you they weren't. It's just a few bruises and a busted lip. I've suffered worse during a training session." Sliding off the bathroom counter, she dropped her feet to the floor. "Before we go, though, there's something you need to know."

"What?"

"Dirk Bennett was one of my attackers."

"What? How? Are you sure?"

"I know his voice. I've heard him in my nightmares often enough to remember it."

His thoughts sprouted reasons, scenarios, suppositions—none of which was rooted in anything other than his wild imaginings. How could Dirk Bennett even be out of prison, much less here in Amelie and invading a secure, well-guarded palace? But he believed Eve. She was not one for hyperbole. If she believed Bennett had attacked her in that passageway, then it was him.

"That gives us one more thread to pull."

"It makes no sense, though. He told me the reasons he aided in the attack on the embassy were twofold. Get rid of his father and sell me. His father is dead. So, if he

managed to escape, why come here and, after all these years, attack me? Why not go somewhere and hide? What's in it for him?"

"Revenge?"

"Maybe. But a man's got to have a strong hatred to take that kind of chance. He could've disappeared and likely never would have been found. Instead, he comes in, attacks me, and allows himself to be identified. I never thought he was terribly bright, but this seems stupid even by his standards."

Gideon shook his head. "You're right. I'll check with my sources and find out when and how he escaped from prison. Then I'll get Serena to start digging on him."

"I need to get back to my father."

"They're not going to stop coming for you, you know. Especially if Bennett is involved and seeking revenge. There's a bigger plot afoot—considering your father was poisoned right before you were attacked—and you're a major target."

"They won't succeed. We'll find out who's behind all this, and we'll stop them."

"How, Eve?"

"The way we always do. We keep digging until we find the answers."

"And in the meantime, you and your family are in danger."

"What are you getting at?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:24 am

“You don’t need to be here to investigate. I can take you—”

“Stop right there. I’m not leaving my family. They need me.”

“I know they do, but they need you alive. Eve, darling, you escaped today, but the next time, you might not be as lucky.”

“That wasn’t luck, Gideon. That was training.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe you think I’d just run out on them.”

“You wouldn’t be running. You would be safe and able to concentrate on finding out who’s behind this.”

“My brothers have already accused me of leaving my family and abdicating my responsibilities. I’m not about to run like a chicken at the first sign of trouble.” She gave him a narrow-eyed, pointed look. “I need your support on this, Gideon.”

“You have it, Eve. Always.”

“Thank you.” She walked out of the bathroom, saying, “I’m going to change clothes and get back to my father.”

Blowing out a ragged sigh, Gideon followed her. She was too stubborn for her own good. Nothing was going to convince her to leave, but whether she stayed or left, he would be right beside her. He just hoped that would be enough.

* * *

Eve slipped into her father's bedroom, certain that he would be asleep after such a dreadful ordeal. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Five people milled around the room, all on their phones, all talking rapidly. Her father was lying in bed, looking worse than he had before. Fearing another setback in his condition, she ran to him. "Papa? What—"

He held out a shaking hand for her, and she grabbed it, almost breaking down without knowing what had happened. Tears rolled down the king's grief-ravaged face as his mouth contorted with anguish.

"Papa, please," she whispered. "What's happened?"

"Your brothers, Lina. They...they..." He shook his head, unable to finish.

"Lina." Her uncle emerged from her father's office, his voice quivering and grave. "I have some bad news."

"What? Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

She was vaguely aware that Gideon had come to stand beside her, his arm firmly around her shoulders. Appreciating the support, she straightened her spine and braced herself for what she could already tell would be horrific news.

"Your brother Nicolas's plane has gone off radar. The pilot called in a Mayday, saying their engines had malfunctioned. Then they disappeared. Rescue planes have been dispatched to search for them."

Horror filled her as she said softly, "Who was on the plane with him?"

"Camille and all three of their children."

She closed her eyes, grief rolling through her like a tsunami. Before she could begin

to process the tremendous loss, her uncle said, “That’s not all, I’m afraid. Alexandre and Chloe were attending a charity event. They were both shot.”

Stumbling at the news, she was grateful for Gideon’s support as he tightened his arm around her shoulders to keep her upright.

“They’re dead?” she whispered.

“Chloe was pronounced dead at the scene. Your brother is in surgery. I don’t have any details yet.”

No. No. No. She could not believe this was happening. Her entire family was being destroyed, and she had no clue who was responsible or why. Wrapping her arms around herself, she absorbed the blows. She had already lost one brother, and now she might have lost her other two, as well as her sister-in-law and her precious nephews. Her father was still not out of the woods.

For the first time ever, Eve questioned her reasons for leaving her family behind. There had been reasons, good reasons, but right at this minute, she couldn’t justify any of them. She had missed out on so much by not being with them. What kind of a daughter and sister did that? If she had been here, maybe she could have prevented what was happening.

“Eve.” Gideon’s calm, quiet voice broke into her ravaged thoughts. “Until we get solid word, don’t accept defeat. Understand?”

“Yes, yes. Of course.” She nodded, letting Gideon’s words bolster her. She knew better than anyone that even when things looked darkest, there was always a chance for a shimmer of light. She had to believe they would all be all right. She had no choice.

“Lina,” her uncle said. “Could I talk with you privately for a few moments?”

She took a step and then hesitated, looking at her papa. She didn't want to leave him.