



Burned Risk (Aegis Group Task Force)

Author: Sidney Bristol

Category: Erotic, Romance, Action

Description: FBI Agent Samuel Jenkins is a man who believes in a good suit and a job well done. But now he's languishing at a recovery center under witness protection with the worst company he could ask for. Jessica freaking Chapin. She's a nosey lawyer who can't leave well enough alone, and he's been tasked with keeping her safe. But who will protect her from him? Every day tests his restraint and every night she stars in his fantasies.

Jessica doesn't regret taking a bullet for her best friend. But the two months in seclusion while recovering with only the crabbiest guy on the planet for company? That she could do without. Though she would miss watching him sweat during physical therapy. He has the body of a god and the demeanor of a raincloud. She knows her unrequited crush is a bad idea. Samuel colors inside the lines. Jessica believes in doing whatever it takes to protect those she loves. Even carrying on a technically illegal investigation of her own.

Their bubble is burst when their remote cabin is attacked and the men have one goal: kill Jessica Chapin. Samuel won't allow that to happen. No matter how far he has to travel, or who he has to burn. Jessica is his.

Total Pages (Source): 119

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

Prologue

11 months ago. FBI Offices, New York City, NY.

Was this a joke? Some bad crime movie? Was someone pranking him?

Samuel Jenkins closed the door to the office he shared with his partner, Baruti Wimbush. The big Black man was already seated at his desk, elbows perched on the armrests, and shaking his head.

“What are we supposed to make of that?” Samuel asked.

“I do not know,” Baruti said slowly, still shaking his head.

Samuel felt like he'd been at the epicenter of a stun grenade blast. His senses were dulled or numb to the point it felt like he was in a dream. But this was very much reality.

“Do you believe them?” he asked.

Baruti gestured to the phone. “They check out.”

“But do you believe them?”

He spread his hands and leaned back in the creaky chair. “It sounds too crazy to be real, so it has to be true.”

Samuel dragged his hand over his face and stared at the beige wall.

He and Baruti had been focused on a dead-end case. Missing women. Missing kids. And somehow that investigation had collided with five men in tactical gear who were after the same man they were.

Samuel picked up his phone and frowned when there was still no message from their undercover field agent, Kelsey. She'd been silent for far too long. Something wasn't right.

These people were just a distraction.

And yet, their investigation was at a stand-still.

The phone in Samuel's hand began to ring.

No sane person should be calling this late.

He tapped the green button.

"Agent Jenkins speaking."

"Agent Jenkins, my name is Zora Clark. I work for the NSA and I understand you've been communicating with one of my men, Logan Muller?"

"One moment." He tapped the screen again. "You're on speaker with myself and my partner."

"That would be Baruti Wimbush, correct?"

Baruti's dark brows rose.

Anyone could find out that information. This meant nothing.

“You are correct, ma’am,” Samuel replied.

She continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “It seems that our investigations are running parallel right now. Would you be interested in partnering with our task force?”

Samuel dug his imaginary heels in.

At first glance, the combined resources would offer more opportunities. But it could also mean losing control of the investigation. Their goals might not be the same as the NSA.

“I’m going to need some more information about what it is you’re investigating. Your men had very little to tell us.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“That is by design,” she said. “What is it you want to know? I will do my best to tell you what I can.”

Samuel paused and looked at Baruti, who gestured for Samuel to continue. “What is your objective?”

“Our joint task force is off-the-books. You understand I must be circumspect?”

“I do.”

“There is an insidious intelligence threat. Our aim is to root it out, stop it, and destroy it, if possible. We currently do not have a partnership with the FBI on this...”

Samuel and Baruti stared at each other.

They were two Black men in the FBI. They hadn't gotten here without having to fight for their spot. Things didn't just get handed to them. Not without reasons.

“We'll have to think about this,” Samuel said. “Can you send me any details you're free to share?”

“I can. And it's done. I hope you join us, Mr. Jenkins.”

“I'll be in contact.” He ended the call as Baruti whistled. “What is it?”

“She's Black.” Baruti waved his phone, showing off an employee picture of one Zora Clark.

“I might be more inclined to trust her, but we need to consider Kelsey first. She’s out there. She hasn’t made contact in days. I’m worried, man, and I don’t want her to get lost in whatever this is.”

Baruti set the phone aside. “I hear you. I hear you. I’m with you.”

“And will we still be invited to the party if they know more about us?” Samuel asked pointedly.

“You mean, would they still invite us if they knew I was gay and married?” Baruti snorted and shook his head. “Ask me if I care...”

“Think about your family.”

“I’m thinking about Kelsey and what’s best for us.” Baruti leaned forward. “There’s a good chance if we let this task force pass us by, we’ll simply get shuffled to another case that keeps us working the hamster wheel. This might be the chance to be part of something big.”

Samuel grimaced. He tended to stay the course, take the slow path. Baruti pushed him out of his comfort zone. He’d arguably made Samuel a better person from the day they were partnered up. Of course, back then, they hadn’t been so keen about working together. My how the years had changed things and them.

What were their priorities? If they said yes, would it compromise what they’d worked toward? Would it distract them? Or would this be like Baruti suggested? The chance to do something that made the world a little better?

The only way they’d know was if they took a gamble.

A very big gamble.

Chapter One

Present Day. Fishing Expedition, Undisclosed.

Samuel Jenkins hated the outdoors.

Or at least he did today.

For weeks now, he'd all but begged the staff at the recovery facility to let him outdoors. He wanted to take a walk, get fresh air and space from the only other patient. But the staff had deemed the weather too unpredictable or too cold or too something at every turn. Doing yoga in the physical therapy space just wasn't the same. He was about ready to stage an escape.

And then they'd suggested this.

A fishing trip.

Samuel had never understood the appeal of fishing. Plenty of other people who worked for the FBI went fishing all the time. To him, it seemed like far too much time spent doing nothing at all, with no guarantee of success. It felt too much like surveillance work, and he'd had enough of that to last him years. Especially after that last job.

He absently rubbed his shoulder, easing the soreness that was his biggest annoyance these days.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“You think you’ve got it?” the grizzled instructor asked.

“I think so. Like this?” Samuel whipped the rod back then forward, mimicking the man’s instructions for how to cast the line out.

The old man patted Samuel’s back gently. “See, you got it. Now try it with bait and let the line go.”

He eyed the plastic container with the wiggling worms.

Did he have to?

Then again, if he went back without actually fishing, he’d never hear the end of it.

Mind made up, he reached for the container and popped the top off. He’d seen gory, bloody crime scenes that would make the most stalwart agent vomit. But none of that compared to the way looking at those little wriggling worms made his skin crawl.

Why the hell was he doing this?

If his partner saw him out here, Baruti would lose his damn mind laughing so hard. Samuel had been raised in the heart of Atlanta. Sure, he’d had survival training as an FBI agent, but that didn’t mean he was an outdoorsy kind of person.

“Nice to see young people learning how to do this,” the old man said from his perch on the wooden dock’s railing where he’d retreated to watch and wait.

Samuel chuckled. “It’s been a while since anyone called me young.”

“Black might not crack, but I reckon I’m old enough to be your grandfather.”

The old man’s words surprised a laugh out of Samuel.

“You’re the spitting image of a guy I served with in Vietnam.” The old fisherman shook his head. “Good man. Real good.”

Samuel held his breath. How did this story end?

The fisherman winked at Samuel. “He broke his arm trying to get another buddy of ours out of the line of fire. He got to go home to his wife and kid. Strange to be happy someone gets hurt, but...”

The old man shuddered, crossed his arms over his chest, and turned his head to stare out into the distance. Was he even seeing the present anymore?

Samuel turned his attention back to the worms. He understood what it was like to live with terrors stuck in your head. He counted himself lucky that, until this year, those terrors had all belonged to other people.

He still woke up in a cold sweat, reliving the moments spent grappling with the gunman in the middle of Miami. His chest felt tight, but he ignored it in favor of fishing out a worm. He grimaced as it wiggled between his fingers while he did the necessary business of putting it on the hook. Then it was time to cast his line.

Samuel advanced to the end of the dock, and just like the old man had shown him, sent the hook sailing out into the water. The ker-plop sounded unusually loud out here.

The spring thaw had swelled all of the creeks and tributaries to their boundaries and, in doing so, created this tiny oasis. Here, nestled on the side of the Colorado mountains, was a little bit of paradise. The old man's home sat back in the trees, almost out of sight. From the way the recovery center staff had spoken, he ran regular fishing expeditions all through the year, mostly for experienced fishermen. This was something of a special case, or so he'd gathered.

Samuel glanced over his shoulder.

The dark SUV continued to idle in the background, an ever-present reminder this was not a vacation.

Where was she?

How long did it take to use the bathroom?

He drew in a deep calming breath and reminded himself, for probably the millionth time, that she was not his responsibility.

God save her if she was poking around where she didn't belong...

As though his thoughts had summoned her, the too-loud sound of feet churning up gravel reached his ears.

"Sorry about that!" a cheerful voice called out. "You guys get started without me?"

It felt as though invisible fingers trailed up Samuel's spine.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

This damn woman.

She'd better not be pushing herself too hard.

His injuries had been severe.

Hers should have been fatal.

“Oh, it's no bother,” the older gentleman said and lowered himself from the railing.

Samuel focused on the little red and white ball bobbing in the water while the fisherman went through the same quick lesson with Jessica. There were a lot more words of encouragement for her, then again, from the sound of it, she wasn't new to fishing either. Her throaty laugh mixed with the old man's sandpaper tone as they spoke in low tones.

Samuel darted a glance at the other two.

Jessica freaking Chapin.

His heart still did a painful twist in his chest when he looked at her. It was nothing but a miracle they were both breathing. By all accounts, they should have died.

Her pale blonde ponytail swung as she shook her head, then doubled over, hand pressed to her chest. Her shoulders shuddered and now she had both hands pressed just over the scar where the bullet had torn through her chest.

Not that anyone had asked Samuel, but he had to wonder if it was smart sending them out here?

They were exposed, for one.

The pair of security guards in the car weren't exactly keeping a sharp eye out. In fact, he was pretty unimpressed with their security overall, not just here and now.

Samuel shifted his weight from foot to foot and scanned the trees surrounding them.

If someone out there wanted them dead, this would be an awfully good place to do it. They were off in a remote part of the mountains, far from people, and few knew where they were.

“Are you even paying attention?” Jessica’s voice vibrated with laughter as she stepped out onto the dock next to him.

“Are you?”

She rolled her eyes and let go of her line, letting it sway gently on the end of the rod. “Just saying, I’m pretty sure you already lost your first bite...”

“What?”

He frowned at the red and white ball bobbing on the water.

Had he missed something?

Slowly, he began to pull the line in while Jessica sent her hook sailing into the water.

“You been fishing before?” he asked.

Her head whipped around and her brows rose. “Oh, are we speaking now?”

He clamped his lips together, refusing to rise to the bait.

Jessica chuckled. “What? What did I do now, Mr. Grumpy Pants?”

He would not respond.

Instead, he focused on his hook rising from the water.

His empty hook.

Son of a...

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“My parents always packed me off to summer camp. By the time I was born, they were over family trips and having kids at home. I wouldn’t say I can fish as much as I’d say, I’ve gone through the motions enough.” Her words were light and carefree, yet there was an undercurrent of sadness.

Why did she do this?

All the time.

It was starting to drive him up a damn wall.

No matter the situation or what had happened, Jessica always spun things into a positive light and diminished anything bad or negative. He knew from the extensive background work he’d had to pull on her as part of their undercover investigation that her parents had been downright negligent when it came to her. It sounded to him like her parents hadn’t wanted the responsibility of another child and had instead handed her off to a range of nannies, teachers, and camp counselors to raise instead of doing the work themselves.

Even when she spoke about taking a bullet at point-blank range for her friend, she simply brushed it off as something she’d do for her best friend.

What about Jessica?

What about her life?

She was nosey, and she inserted herself where she didn’t belong, but she also had the

biggest heart for others. He'd thought he'd known all there was to know about Jessica freaking Chapin before the investigation really got started. But now? After living under the same roof as her for two months?

Samuel didn't know shit about her, but he wanted to. He wanted to know what made her tick? What was the moment that had changed her life? Why didn't she ever get angry?

"Damn it," Jessica said and danced back as her fishing rod clattered to the dock.

"What? What is it?"

He set his rod aside and turned to face her.

Jessica cradled her left hand against her chest, lips pulled back into a grimace.

"It's nothing," she said. "I was stupid."

Stupid his ass.

She'd been third in her class at law school. To say she was brilliant was an understatement and an insult.

Infuriating woman.

"Let me see?" He reached for her wrist.

She rolled her eyes, "Ug, Samuel..."

Blood dripped from a small puncture wound on her thumb.

“It’s nothing,” she insisted.

He pressed the cuff of his black track jacket to the small wound. “You want to get an infection? You know what that’ll do to your recovery?”

“It’s a scratch. Nothing major.”

“It is not. What did you do?”

She huffed but didn’t pull her hand back, which was how he knew it wasn’t as minor as she claimed it was. “I was just going to put another worm on the hook...”

Fishing was a terrible idea.

Who’d thought to send them fishing?

“This needs to be cleaned right now,” he said and glanced up to where their fisherman instructor was watching them. “Do you have a first aid kit?”

He inclined his head and ambled off.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“It’s nothing,” Jessica insisted again.

Samuel locked eyes with her. The rich browns of her eyes glistened in the mid-morning light. “Given your track record? I don’t think you get to determine what’s nothing.”

Wednesday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

Jessica Chapin sat on the window seat with the thick Sherpa blanket wrapped around her. She hadn’t yet fully warmed up from their morning fishing excursion. Despite the bright, clear skies, it was really freaking cold out there. Talk about a bait and switch.

Her fingers swiped across the bandage still wrapped around her thumb. Her skin tingled, and she thought she could almost feel Samuel’s touch still on her.

He was so mercurial. Grouchy and chastising her one moment, tender and protective another. Honestly, he gave her whiplash, but she had no illusions. Samuel Jenkins hated her. Or very close to it. And she understood why he might.

She’d stuck her nose where it technically didn’t belong. And she hadn’t backed out.

But how could she?

Her best friend, the only person she could share all parts of herself with, had been in danger. Of course, Jessica had done everything in her power to help. That was what friends did. And as close as she and Robin were? Hell yeah, Jessica had taken that

bullet. She'd do it again, too.

She'd accepted early in their stay at the recovery center that Samuel was not going to warm to her. They were two completely different people. And while that was disappointing, seeing as they spent so much time together, she hadn't pushed the issue. Very much. But every so often, he seemed to forget his dislike. And moments like this morning happened. But she had no illusions about how things might change; just very naughty fantasies. Could anyone blame her?

There were people in this world so perfectly formed they couldn't be real.

When she looked at Samuel, that was what she saw. It was like some great creator of the universe had gathered only the finest of ebony material to personally craft this man and breathe life into him. It went beyond his outward appearance. Samuel was good to his very core. She doubted the man had ever so much as told a lie. And she respected the hell out of that. It took strength of character and more determination than most people had in their whole life to be as honorable as the good agent Samuel Jenkins. Which was honestly most of the reason why she hadn't tried to wipe that grumpy attitude off his face. It was his one human trait.

She sighed and settled deeper into her little nest. Though she didn't want to admit it, casting the fishing rod had made her ache in new places today and she wasn't keen on putting more strain on herself. She'd already had one setback early on when she'd tried to do too much too soon.

Slow and steady was the only way she'd get back to normal.

Speak of the damn devil.

Samuel strolled out into the courtyard formed by the U-shaped building. There were paved walkways leading from the three doors on each wing to a central water feature

that was currently turned off. The grass cultivated around the paths was springy and soft. The first time she'd been allowed outside, she'd lain in it and promptly got mud all over herself.

It had been worth it.

The graceful Native American nurse was with him. Jessica liked her. She had a very earthy, nurturing personality, and the best stories. It seemed like every week she had new earrings or a necklace made by some niece or nephew, all made out of the loveliest beads and other natural adornments. She was so patient, too, and Jessica had spent many long hours listening to stories about her family, her people, and her faith. Maybe when all this was over, Jessica would come back for a real visit and meet the people she'd heard so much about.

She watched the two as they rolled out yoga mats. Jealousy bit at her heels. She wanted to be allowed to do any sort of outdoor activity.

Damn ribs.

She watched as Samuel lifted his arms, then let them fall back down slowly with his breathing. Jessica grinned and reached for her mug of hot chocolate. Talk about a show worth watching.

Samuel was the whole package. He was good inside and so nice to watch. The way he moved implied ever-present control. As if he were always poised and ready to act. Given his usual, too-serious expression, he made her think of an always watchful warrior of some proud nation, adorned with honor and prestige, yet masquerading as a normal guy. He was just too regal to be real, which was why she liked needling him.

The way Samuel moved through the basic poses was fluid. It was clear he wasn't new

to yoga. Every now and then, he shifted only for the nurse supervising him to shake her head. Samuel would grimace and return either to a neutral standing or sitting position.

It was nice to see Jessica wasn't the only person chafing at the bonds of what they were and weren't cleared to do.

His long arms swept up over his head, elongating his body as he reached toward the sky. She sighed and sipped her drink.

He had to be almost ten years older than her.

Of course.

For as long as she'd been aware of the opposite gender, she'd had a thing for older guys. When Robin found out their third year, the guy she'd been dating was twelve years her senior, she'd freaked out. Not without reason, which Jessica could freely admit now. She didn't always pick great ones.

She'd tried dating guys her own age. Or at least closer to her age. But she never had anything to talk about with them.

Growing up as the youngest of five with a ten-year age gap between her and her siblings had created a sort of perfect storm. Her parents wanted to be done raising kids. Her siblings had left the house by the time she really needed them. And she'd had to weather her adolescence mostly alone. So long as she was home to say goodnight and showed up at school, her parents hadn't cared what she did.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

So, she'd done a lot of things she shouldn't have as a teen.

Looking back, Jessica could admit she'd been privileged and stupid. So very stupid.

Out of all the things she'd gotten away with, it was tagging that had tripped her up. She'd gotten a slap on the wrist and community service. To spite her parents, she'd chosen to do her time at a low-income hospice center. To say her grossly wealthy family was horrified was an understatement.

But that experience had changed her life.

She'd been sheltered and catered to, utterly unaware of the silver spoon in her mouth until she'd sat there with people who were in their final hours. Listening to their stories and hardships had been a wake-up call. Most of the patients she'd met had battled cancer until the very end. That was where she'd met her first Tri Delt.

Jessica had been aware of the sorority. Her sister had been a member, which was enough reason to avoid them. Until Dr. Song.

The rest was history.

Jessica didn't have it in her to go into medicine. She wasn't good with that stuff and the pressure of having people's lives rest on her was too much. It was only after careful consideration that she'd pursued law.

First, it was something her parents could get on board with.

Second, she could make a real difference. As an attorney, she could give people a real fighting chance. Of course, her parents hadn't liked that part, but they didn't have to. By the time she'd come clean on that front, her trust fund was in her control and with Robin's help, she'd figured out ways to invest that money so she wouldn't ever have to make a decision based on her own needs. If she stuck to a modest yearly budget, her income literally didn't matter. She could focus on the cases that needed her.

She had vague ideas about how far she could take this career and what kind of change she could enact. Between her pedigree and skills, she could open doors for people that would otherwise be bolted shut. And if she tore down a few walls while she was at it? So what?

There was no even playing field in this world. They were all playing with advantages and disadvantages they'd been born with. So what was wrong with her using her advantage to pull someone else up?

Her phone began to buzz against her thigh under the blankets. She fished it out. Her heart pulsed at the name on the display.

Robin.

The woman who was her soul-sister.

Jessica hit the answer button. "Two calls in one day? Do you miss me?"

Robin sighed. "So much."

They might be nothing alike at first glance, but Jessica had never felt closer to anyone in all her life. She was closer to Robin than her own sister.

"Harper wouldn't tell me much, but they just left."

“What?” Jessica set her hot chocolate down with a hard thump. “Seriously?”

“Yes. He said they’d probably be gone for two weeks...”

“Hm.” She chewed her bottom lip for a moment as her brain fired up. “I don’t understand why the task force isn’t more interested in that Maxwell Edward guy. Daar seemed pretty clear that Maxwell is a major player.”

“But he isn’t in charge, remember?”

“He is leading the faction that is unhappy.”

“I’m guessing the end goal is to damage the central structure of the organization. From what Uncle Daar said, Maxwell Edward has effectively removed himself from that by opposing their chancellor guy.”

Jessica blew out a breath and shook her head. It still didn’t make sense.

Maxwell Edward would be low-hanging fruit, but he was still a massive player in this game. Even better? He mostly operated out of the United Kingdom. With the US-UK relationship, deporting him would be a piece of cake. Well, once they’d cleared out anyone who took bribes from the piece of shit. Okay, it wasn’t that easy, but easier than the alternative.

Robin must be beside herself with worry. This would be her first extended time with Harper in the field.

“How are you doing?” Jessica asked.

“What?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“How are you doing? With Harper gone, you have to be worried.”

“Don’t you think I should be the one asking how you’re doing?”

“You already did that earlier. We’ve talked about me until I’m tired of hearing about myself. How are you?” She let her gaze stray back to the window and nearly swallowed her tongue.

Holy...

Samuel had stripped off his shirt and was holding a modified warrior pose. The sun glinted off his strong shoulders and all the lean muscles of his back. She almost couldn’t tell where the bullet had gone straight through his shoulder.

“I mean, good. I guess. I’m less overwhelmed,” Robin said.

“That’s great!” Jessica swallowed as Samuel slowly raised his arms. “Are you still thinking you will move into a more active role at work?”

“Yeah. I think... I think it’s what Mom would have wanted for me. It’s been really nice to hear how the programs Mom started have made such a huge difference in people’s lives. It’s change I can see. How could I not want to continue that legacy?”

Jessica grinned just listening to Robin and forced herself to turn away from the window and the distraction of Samuel.

As heartbreaking as the last few months had been for Robin, there was no one better

to step into her mother's shoes. Robin was going to do amazing things and make a difference in the lives of people. She was going to make her mother so very proud. And Jessica could not wait to see how it all happened.

Before Robin's mother had fallen in love with her father, she'd been a one-woman powerhouse. A real self-made woman. She'd owned a small chain of hotels and motels, mostly on the east coast. That alone wasn't remarkable. It was her hiring practices and scholarships for employees' children that had set her apart. While many Americans were letting fear get the better of them, Robin's mother had chosen to hire immigrants. She'd treated them well and ensured higher education opportunities for their children. Almost the entire upper ranks of the company were now people who had started as janitors and maids in one hotel or another or the children of those maids and janitors. Her legacy was proof that a company could put their employees first and still be successful. It was a small blessing that Robin's father had never taken a direct hand in things or he might have destroyed everything. Instead, Robin had her mother's hand-picked stewards to lean on and learn the ropes.

The fact that Robin had found someone who loved her was just icing on the cake. Jessica didn't want to over-sell the romance, but she got strong wedding vibes when those two were together.

She pestered Robin with questions, keeping the conversation focused on her for as long as possible, all while Jessica did her best not to peek over her shoulder at Samuel.

"I'm done talking about myself," Robin announced.

"Now you know how I feel!"

They both chuckled.

It was a universal truth. They were both much more comfortable focused on the problems of others. It was one of those things that had bonded them. They were the two in college who showed up early, stayed late, did cleaning. And it was so much more fun if they did it together. That was how it had begun.

“How’s Samuel doing?” Robin asked.

Jessica swiped her fingers over the bandage. “He’s getting outside privileges I don’t, so I’m not his biggest fan right now.”

Robin snickered. “Liar.”

“I’m serious.” Shit. Jessica knew her little crush on Samuel was a bad idea. Especially given how closely Robin’s boyfriend worked with the guy.

“What’s got you two so crossways with each other? Harper talks to him pretty much every day. He has nothing but good things to say about him.”

“Then maybe Harper should date Samuel instead?”

“Haa. Haa.”

Jessica sighed. How much could she say without outing her feelings? “It’s the same thing it’s always been. He wants me to sit down, say nothing, and let the men handle it. I can’t pretend to listen to someone who has that attitude.” No matter how gorgeous or good he was.

Robin sighed. “Yeah. Harper won’t explain why they made this action plan. I just don’t understand why they’d go after a small fish.”

Jessica peered around, but like always she was alone. To be safe, she pulled the

blanket up and cupped her hand over her mouth before speaking. “I did hear back from my UK contact.”

“And?”

“He’s said all he’s willing to say on the phone. If I want to know more, he says it's stuff he can only say face-to-face.”

“Damn,” Robin muttered.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“How much trouble do you think I’d get in if I just went to London without telling anyone? For one night?”

“Don’t you dare.”

Jessica sighed. She’d considered doing exactly that. It wouldn’t be horribly difficult to escape the protection of the FBI currently watching them, but in the end, it had seemed like an ill-advised plan. Because of her involvement with Robin, it was believed that her name was now on the radar of these very dangerous people. In terms of being useful to the investigation, she was practically burned. Her and Samuel, which was why there was so much security around them at all times. Though it had gotten more relaxed as of late.

She’d pursued lines of investigation as far as she could from a hospital bed. Money could only get her so far. For the things they really needed to know, she’d have to meet with people face-to-face and take that risk. She got the distinct impression the guy wasn’t keen on talking to her in the first place either, but couldn’t say no. She had called in a number of favors to get to this point.

“It’s a shame,” Jessica muttered.

“It really is.” Robin huffed into the receiver. “Someone’s at the door. Who could it be? Oh. It’s Kelsey.”

“Tell her hi for me.”

“She hasn’t forgiven you for that pocket comment.”

“What? I was coming off anesthesia and hopped up on pain pills. Besides, she is pocket-sized.”

Robin laughed.

“Go. Have fun. Love you,” Jessica said then hung up before things dragged out.

She was so damn happy Robin had found a place to belong. Jessica recalled seeing Robin around campus those first few weeks before they’d connected through their sorority. She’d always looked sad and hadn’t been terribly open to conversation. The fact that amidst the chaos of the last few months she’d found someone who loved her, a place to belong, and a purpose? It couldn’t happen to a more deserving person. And Jessica wanted to preserve that. She wanted to protect Robin and people like her.

The only way to do that was to remove people like Maxwell Edward from the board. They were a cancer on society, but this cancer could be cured. It would have to be cut out. Jessica feared it might already be too late, though.

Wednesday. London, UK.

Maxwell stared at the board he’d set up last year. He’d never imagined his subterfuge campaign would have led him here. If Skilton hadn’t gone and mucked it all up, they’d be in a completely different power dynamic now.

Truth was, Skilton had been a much more crucial part of the overall machine than anyone had wanted to admit. It was difficult for those with seats on the council to admit that, but it was a fact that Maxwell had long since accepted. Just as he’d also acknowledged that Skilton would never break loyalty with the chancellor.

Losing Skilton had set a number of unexpected events in motion. First of all, the decline in profits was expected. Not just anyone could step into the vacant position.

Skilton had decades of fostering relationships with sources and building a network. That wasn't something that could be passed on without a lot of work ahead of the transition.

Most of the council believed Skilton had vanished into obscurity and retirement. But Maxwell knew better.

Skilton was rotting away in a CIA black site somewhere in the USA. The fact that a small army hadn't descended on them was proof that Skilton wasn't talking. And wouldn't. The man was too loyal for his own good.

Which left the power vacuum.

Daar Suleiman's arrest had been a messy affair that couldn't escape notice. The rest of the council was aware, and many suspected the chancellor had a hand in it. Maxwell wasn't certain about that. Daar was another blindly loyal fellow. Maxwell had tried. He'd warned Daar that the chancellor was spinning out of control, and here they were.

It would be Daar who spelled the downfall of the council.

Already Maxwell's sources had alerted him to CIA movement. The list of people the chancellor could trust had shrunk. Top of that list was one, Mohammed. No last name. He was simply known as The Armsman.

It was smart to take him out before making a move on the chancellor. If the Armsman was removed from the board...

Maxwell reached out and plucked the alabaster statuette off the map and rolled it between his fingers.

This would do.

He could work with this.

That would leave him facing a weak chancellor and the old guard. It was merely a matter of time until the chancellor spun out of control and was either killed or captured. The old guard relied too heavily on the way things had been done. They operated in a time since past. They were dinosaurs. They would pose no real barrier to assuming control of the crumbling empire.

Maxwell grinned and pocketed the small statue.

“Sir?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

He turned from the table and his observations to the man lingering in the doorway.

“Ryan.” He beckoned the man into the room. “Tell me you’ve made progress?”

“Better than.” Ryan held out a thumb drive. “I know who it is and where.”

“Oh?”

“Her name is Jessica Chapin. She went to uni with Daar Suleiman’s niece. And you want to know what’s better? We already have a man talking to her. Remember when that bloke, Oliver, confessed to talking you up to someone? It’s her.”

Maxwell didn’t recall anyone named Oliver. Then again, he had a lot of plates spinning. “Handle it. Squash this. I don’t have time for petty games children play.”

“How exactly—”

“Handle it,” Maxwell snapped. “Wipe her and anyone helping her off the face of the planet. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

He’d been patient and bided his time until now.

It would be his day.

Chapter Two

Wednesday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

Samuel stared up at the ceiling as the bedside clock continued to taunt him out of the corner of his eye.

Mother fucker.

He'd hoped that incorporating more yoga into his day meant he'd tire himself out and be able to sleep. Instead, here he was, wide-eyed with no desire to fall asleep. From the time he was young, he'd always struggled to put his mind at ease to the point he could find rest. It came from the near-constant drive to succeed he'd learned from his father and was in large part what made him an excellent agent.

Being left out here in the mountains with little to no work had him ready to climb the walls.

There were no mental problems for him to untangle. No leads for him to roll over. The paperwork he'd been allowed to do was all busywork. Hell, he'd only been given the very minimum amount of information about the current op that had been sent out today. Not enough to even begin to speculate about how it might go.

Damn it all to hell.

He threw back the blankets and pushed himself upright with his good arm.

It wouldn't be the first night he'd haunted the hallways.

No doubt the nurse left on-duty would offer him some sleep aid that was bound to make him fuzzy-headed. He refused them every time, but the offer was always there.

He shoved his feet into the fleece lined slippers Logan had given everyone at

Christmas. They were handmade by one of his family members.

Samuel wiggled his toes.

What tribe was Logan part of?

Samuel grimaced. He'd have to ask. That seemed like an important detail he should know by now. Had he ever sent a thank you?

The slippers at first glance were a fairly standard leather moccasin. But there was no mistaking these glorious things with some store-bought crap. The way they fit the foot, the plush insides, all thanks to the wonders of bespoke clothing. When Samuel had reached the point in his life where he had money to live comfortably, he'd stopped buying his suits off the rack. He got a lot of shit from people about his professional style. Some called it Black gospel chic, and so what if it was? A man could take pride in his appearance. So yeah, he wore bespoke suits that weren't just black, navy, or khaki. And he appreciated the attention to detail that came from making a truly great pair of shoes. He'd have to make sure to stay on Logan's good side from now until eternity so he could keep buying these.

Maybe Samuel could buy a few pair? Dad would love these. His step-mom, too. She was always complaining about the cold since they'd moved to Chicago on account of his step-sister's heart condition. She was part of a study while going through treatment. Hell, he should get everyone a pair. Chicago was far too cold for Georgia people, that was for damn sure.

He grabbed his hoodie off the foot of the bed then headed for the door.

This late, security wouldn't turn a blind eye if he tried to go outside for a walk. Not to mention once the sun went down it was downright freezing out there.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

Instead, he began pacing the familiar halls of the recovery center.

This boutique medical facility had serviced the smaller, surrounding communities before protective services had booked it solid for their stay. Staff had assured both Samuel and Jessica that this time of year there usually wasn't much use for it. It was too late for those injured from winter sports. And too early to serve those spring and summer adventurers.

If he looked at it another way, their stay was providing low-effort, secured employment for the staff and security.

Samuel still didn't like it.

For himself, he could easily return to DC on desk duty, whether or not his identity was burned. It didn't matter.

Jessica was another matter. He suspected Zora had chosen not to recall him so he could keep an eye on Jessica. They all knew that Robin openly discussed the information she received from Daar Suleiman with Jessica, and there was no stopping her.

That infuriating woman.

He hoped she was resting and not pushing herself too hard.

Samuel passed through the central receiving room of the center. The night staff would have retired to the small apartment, so he wasn't bothering them with his nighttime

wandering.

He peered down the L-shaped hall that mirrored his own wing of the center.

Back when he and Jessica had been admitted, the staff had kept them together. At least until the arguments started.

He and Jessica did not see eye to eye on much, and as a result, they'd been separated. Her in one wing. Him in the other.

Truth be told, he liked the distance. Jessica was as distracting as she was infuriating. If she hadn't stuck her nose into Robin's business, to begin with, she wouldn't have gotten hurt. And yet, Samuel understood and respected Jessica's reasons. Even if he couldn't support them.

They had rules and regulations for a reason.

Gentle light glowed from the other wing of the center.

Was Jessica awake?

Her skin had been so soft this morning. He stroked his fingertips together as the phantom sensation surfaced.

If she was awake at this hour, she was probably sticking her nose into something she shouldn't.

Samuel padded quietly down the hall.

Sure enough, the light from Jessica's room was on and he heard the soft murmurs of the television. He sighed and shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie before

venturing into her doorway.

While he was still shrouded in shadow, he paused to take in the sight.

Her hair was up in one of those folded over ponytails, creating a mound of messy, pale hair. She clutched what looked like a stick of beef jerky in one hand and a tablet with the other as she scowled at the screen. The blankets pooled at her waist, leaving her swimming in a sweatshirt so big he doubted it had been hers to begin with.

She was objectively beautiful. Most men would find her attractive. But it was her dedication that inspired him.

Anyone could be born with a pretty face, but not everyone chose to give up on a life where anything she wanted could be handed to her in order to do what she thought was right. He might not agree with her. He might want to shake some sense into her. But he would always respect her.

Jessica glanced up and their gazes locked. She blinked several times as if she wasn't sure what she was seeing. He stepped forward into the light and her expression smoothed into the pleasant face she showed the world.

“Can't sleep?” she asked.

He lifted his shoulders.

She gestured at the TV. “I was thinking about watching a movie.”

He arched a brow. “Is that what you were doing?”

One side of her mouth screwed up, and she rolled her eyes. “Of course not.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“Figured,” he muttered and stepped into the room.

On their bad days, they clashed.

On the good days, one could say they got along.

She gestured to the small love seat on the other side of the large nightstand. “Have a seat?”

“What angle were you working on?”

“I wasn’t. Honest. I’m guessing you know everyone else was sent off to do something?”

He caught himself before nodding. He could not stop Robin from telling her anything, and Zora hadn’t insisted on a gag order between the two women, so there wasn’t anything he could do. But he didn’t have to add fuel to the fire, so to speak.

“Anyway, I’ll take your silence as a yes. I was just looking at maps and news from the area. If Harper’s going to keep dating Robin, I want to make sure he stays alive and keeps her happy.”

It took all of Samuel’s self-control to not laugh.

Those Aegis Group bastards were cockroaches. They couldn’t be killed. He hadn’t approved of them in the beginning, but there was no denying they got the damn job done. He’d seen them come out of situations that should have been deadly with

nothing more than superficial scratches.

He finally settled on, "I'm sure the team is safe."

"You'd know better than I." She set the tablet down and bit off the end of the beef jerky while studying him openly.

What did she see when she looked at people? How did her mind work?

She baffled him. At no point had she been the person he'd expected her to be.

"Can you answer me one thing?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"Why isn't Zora looking into this Maxwell Edward guy? Why?" she asked as she threw her hands up into the air.

Samuel had wondered that same thing himself but didn't have an answer. Even if he did, he knew he couldn't share it with Jessica. If Robin didn't know, then Harper must have been given explicit instructions not to share details, which meant keeping Jessica in the dark was on purpose.

Jessica groaned then flopped back on the mound of pillows behind her. "There's more beef jerky if you'd like some."

"No, thank you."

"Ug, I knew you wouldn't tell me anything either but I was hoping for some reaction at the very least. You suck, you know that?"

He chuckled. How could he not?

Not for the first time he selfishly wished she'd gone into the FBI. Give her a badge and she'd be a pit bull with a bone. That tenacity of hers would make her a force to be reckoned with when it came to tracking down the real bad guys. But she'd gone into law instead, and he couldn't find it in him to be mad about that.

He'd reviewed some of her cases as part of his background work for the undercover gig with Robin. A lot of district attorneys went for cases that would make their careers. With Jessica's family ties, he'd assumed she would have been offered the high-profile cases. Even if she was sitting second, third, or fourth chair. Instead, he'd found a history of her focusing on child welfare cases or representing the victims of domestic violence. Cases that would get swept under the rug in terms of notoriety and weren't going to get her anywhere. And yet, that was all Jessica had done. After being around her, he knew it had to be intentional.

He admired her.

But he couldn't encourage her.

"Have you ever considered you're doing more harm than good by getting involved?" he asked.

She groaned. "This again?"

"Have you stopped investigating Maxwell Edward on your own?"

She was silent for a moment. "No."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“Then there’s still a need for me to say something.”

“I’ll stop when there’s no longer a threat.”

“Could that threat be handled more efficiently without outside involvement?”

She pushed up, scowling at him. “That’s rich coming from the guy who organized putting my best friend in danger. What if I hadn’t been involved, okay? What if Daar had found out about you and Harper? Hm? At what point did Robin’s safety matter in your investigation? She might have forgiven the two of you for your deception, but I haven’t forgotten that you told a man to seduce and fuck his way into my best friend’s life just to get closer to her uncle.”

“At no point did I tell him to do anything of the kind.”

“But did you tell him not to?” She shook her head. “The ends don’t always justify the means, Samuel. The fact that Robin and Harper are happy together is wonderful. But what if they weren’t? Do you pause to consider the damage you could have done to Robin? No. And that’s why I can’t trust you or your team. Because to you, it’s all about the big picture. You lose sight of the individuals. Maxwell Edward is a cancer. It didn’t take much digging to prove how awful he is, and no one is doing anything to stop him.”

Samuel swallowed and glanced away. He had been wrong when it came to that undercover investigation. But he couldn’t tell her that. It would just fuel this righteous fire of hers and there would be no stopping her.

“It’s rich that you as a lawyer can’t let the law do its job.”

“If the law could do its job in this instance, it would have. But when those laws have been perverted and circumvented, sometimes you have to be willing to take alternative steps to solve a problem.” She shook her head. “You’re a good agent, but it’s not always so... So clear-cut.”

“You do the job or you don’t.”

“That mentality takes the human element out of it, though. How can you not see it?”

“I do see it.”

She held up her hand. “I’m going to say something I can’t take back, so we need to just agree we’re never going to see eye to eye on this.”

He disagreed, but he couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t break down the nuance of it all without sounding like he supported her independent investigation.

“I think I’m going to try to sleep,” she announced.

“Oh...” Samuel doubted that, but he couldn’t say that. “Well, I hope you have a good night.”

“You, too.”

She didn’t look at him, and that bothered him.

This wasn’t a clear-cut situation, but he also couldn’t talk about that with her. She’d read it as support of her views, and for her safety, he couldn’t go that route. He’d play the villain if that’s what it took to keep her safe.

Thursday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

Jessica stomped down the gravel path. She'd slept poorly. Then this morning she'd gotten scolded because her vitamin D levels were still low. And Samuel was clearly avoiding her. He hadn't made an appearance for breakfast or lunch. They were given the choice of eating in the main common room or in private. Even when they were on each other's bad side, they'd still shown up for meals. But not today.

She didn't know why it had her so grumpy.

Nothing Samuel had said last night was a surprise, but it had rubbed her the wrong way. Granted, when it came to Robin, Jessica could be accused of being overprotective. Still, it was ethically wrong to use people the way they had regardless of the law allowed for it or not.

She stomped down the gravel path on her early afternoon walk. It had warmed up, so her teeth weren't chattering away.

The mountains were beautiful, but she was not made for the cold.

She rounded the bend that took the center out of sight, closed her eyes, and breathed in deep. The scent of pine and damp earth hung in the air. The lingering chill gave the air a bite that was rather pleasant.

It was only recently that the staff and security allowed her to take unchaperoned walks. While she understood how severe her injuries had been, this much hovering was going to send her over the proverbial edge. Not to mention it made her investigation harder to carry out.

She paused on the path, straining to listen for the faintest sound of footsteps.

The breeze rustled the limbs overhead and birds called to one another.

It was just her.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

She picked up the pace, heading down to the first bench on the path. Once there, she unzipped her coat and shrugged off the drawstring backpack that barely fit her slim laptop. She knelt on the gravel and turned her portable wireless hotspot on.

Jessica used the center's internet for all of her usual online activity. But when it came to conversing with her sources in the UK, she had zero trust she wasn't being watched. Which was why at least once a day she came out to make use of her hotspot and check her private accounts in a secure browser. She wasn't expecting any news today, so she wasn't disappointed when there were no messages awaiting her.

Since she had some time still, she brought up a few message boards to skim then shot off another request to her contact to reconsider his stance.

There was no way she was going to get to the UK any time soon. She had no illusions about her freedom. They could say all they wanted that the security was here for her benefit. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt if she tried to leave the facility, someone would stop her.

“What are you doing out here?”

Jessica's head snapped up.

Samuel stood a dozen yards away at the bend in the path carrying a water bottle.

That infuriating man.

She snapped the laptop shut and pocketed the hot spot while Samuel closed the

distance between them.

“Jess?”

“I’m still irritated with you,” she said.

He had the nerve to sigh. He sounded like her father when he did that so much that she fully expected him to say she was being foolish in his next breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead.

Her head snapped up again, and she froze in the process of sliding her laptop into the drawstring bag.

“What?” she asked.

He perched on the end of the bench. “I’m sorry.”

“For?” She cinched the bag shut a little too hard.

“You’re right. The end goal blinded us.”

She sat back and stared up at Samuel.

“The lead on Daar was too good to not make that move. You know he makes a trip to the US once a year. Made a trip. I don’t think he’ll be traveling anytime soon.” He scratched the back of his neck. “And Robin? Our whole approach? That’s on me. I didn’t do enough research. I looked at the stats, a wealthy sorority girl who wasn’t employed and just did fundraising. I sent Harper in there thinking he was going to sweet talk a socialite and be another in a long line of men.”

“How are you going to do better?”

“You made a good point about the way we approached Robin. It was sketchy. And from now on, if it’s my call, I’ll focus on same-gender undercover agents.”

She nodded and stood. “Good. Because you could have done serious and lasting emotional damage. Women are preyed on enough by men for you to do it in the name of justice. The ends don’t always justify the means.”

“You’re right.”

“Tell Robin that. She’s the one who would need to hear that. Not me.”

Samuel nodded and damn it, she felt like she’d kicked a puppy.

She clutched the light backpack. “Not all men would admit that. Thank you for hearing me.”

“I know we won’t always agree or see eye to eye, but I don’t like fighting with you, regardless of what you might think.”

“I’m not the one avoiding you.”

“Ouch. You ever pull a punch?”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

She chuckled. “If you want to be coddled, I’m the wrong girl.”

He smiled at her. A real smile that crinkled the skin around his eyes and stopped her breath.

“Don’t ever change,” he said.

She never wanted to move from this spot.

God, did he know how devastating that smile was?

Samuel on any day was swoon-worthy. But that smile? It felt as though her heart stopped.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“No, sorry.” She shook her head. “My brain’s just all over the place.”

“Yeah? I interrupt you doing something?”

“I plead the fifth.”

He sighed. “Something I wouldn’t approve of?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fine. Fine. Keep your secrets.” He leaned back. “Don’t suppose you’d share the hot

spot?”

“What? Center wireless not good enough for you?”

He blinked at her a few times. “You didn’t know the internet and phones went down this morning?”

“What? No.”

“Yeah.”

She groaned. And here the comedy special she’d been looking forward to was supposed to drop this afternoon.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered. “What happened?”

“Someone said a construction crew accidentally cut the lines or something.” Samuel tipped his head back as a cold gust of wind sliced through the trees. “And a storm’s coming.”

“Great,” she muttered and eyed the clouds that had seemingly rolled in out of nowhere.

“I think we should head in,” Samuel said.

“Yeah, I am inclined to agree with you.”

“We good?” he asked.

She turned and stared at him for a moment.

Samuel frustrated her for the same reasons she liked him. He was, as her gamer brother would say, lawful good. And when a person adhered to a strict moral code like Samuel did, there wasn't room to budge or operate in a gray area.

Maybe she was the one with the moral failing here? Could she be the problem?

Her gut said there was no, one right answer, only options.

“We can't let the law blind us from seeing the people we're trying to help,” she said.

Fat raindrops splattered her cheeks.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

She yelped and hugged the backpack to her chest. Samuel moved faster, snatching up her coat and holding it for her to shove her arms into as the sky opened up. She wrapped the coat around her bag then jumped as a band of iron pressed against her back.

Jessica glanced up, which was when she realized it wasn't iron pressed against her. It was Samuel's arm wrapped around her.

Had he ever touched her before?

"Come on," he said, snapping her out of her stupor.

If only he understood all she wanted to do was savor the moment.

God, she had it bad.

Chapter Three

Thursday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

Samuel barreled through the east entry with Jessica pressed close to his side. He was drenched right down to his shoes.

"Careful!" he snapped as Jessica kept going almost right off the entry mat where her soaking shoes would no doubt slip. A fall could twist or tear still delicate tissue that was healing.

He tightened his hold around her, spinning them to face the doors.

Jessica's hand and cheek pressed to his chest. "Jesus, I am being careful!"

"You could have slipped."

"But I didn't." She pushed at him and he reluctantly let her go. "Why do you have to ruin perfectly fine moments being an asshole? You know I can walk on my own? I'm perfectly capable of putting one foot in front of the other."

He clamped his mouth shut.

Maybe he did go overboard, but Jessica had no concern for her own safety. She did too much. She took too many chances. Someone needed to look out for her, and since it was just them that fell to him.

Jessica shook the water off her puffy coat then opened it to peer at the laptop.

"Did it get wet?" he asked.

She peered up at him, her glare ready to peel his skin off. "I'm sure you want to toss it out into the rain."

"That's not what I meant."

"Whatever, Samuel. Just, leave me alone. We aren't going to see eye to eye, so why don't we just stop doing this?"

Jessica stomped away from him every step squelching with water.

He shivered and stood there, watching her go down the hall and turn into her room.

Shit.

He'd wanted to smooth things over with her today, not cause more strife.

Deep down, Samuel admired Jessica's work ethic. There was a lot about her he respected. But had he gone too far?

It might be better if their paths deviated from each other and they went their separate ways. So why were his feet carrying him toward her door? It was like he couldn't stop himself. He was drawn to her, she just didn't know it.

The door was partially closed. He flattened his hand against it and swung it open enough to peer inside.

Jessica had her suitcase thrown open on her bed and stood at the drawers.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

She scowled over her shoulder at him. “Well first, I’m going to change. Do you mind?”

“What are you doing, Jess?” Did she mean to leave? Didn’t she know it was dangerous?

“I told you, I’m going to change,” she snapped.

He bit the inside of his mouth.

There were so many times he’d wanted to agree with her, but had held himself back. Agreeing with her would only make things worse. She’d get it into her head she could do whatever she wanted. But he could also see how his censure had created the conflict between them.

“I’m changing,” she announced.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Let’s talk.”

“Didn’t you hear me in the hall? What’s the point?”

“I’m tired of clashing with you.”

“Then figure out how to agree to disagree.”

Samuel was not going to take that bait. He couldn’t agree with her taking risks with herself. Not to mention he highly doubted everything she was doing was legal.

Therein lay a massive problem. It was one thing for the FBI or CIA to skirt the bounds of the law. There were procedures in place that kept them from going too far. But what about her? And if things went wrong, who paid the consequences?

“Whatever.” She held up her hands and her dark lashes lowered. “I think it’s time I went home.”

“Zora hasn’t cleared that.”

“Zora isn’t the boss of me. I appreciate the security. I appreciate how concerned everyone’s been. But, I just can’t stay holed up here anymore fighting with you every day, while doing nothing.”

“Then let’s stop fighting.”

“Fighting is like, who you are.”

He shook his head. “It’s not who I want to be. I’m not usually this person.”

“Then why do we clash so much? Why can’t you ever see my side?”

“Because if I agree with you once, you’re going to go risk your neck and maybe get yourself killed. And I can’t live with that.”

Jessica blinked at him. Her lips parted, and she kept staring.

Water dripped off her soaked hair. A puddle had begun to form at her feet.

His clothes stuck to his skin, and he shivered. “I can’t support you leaving. The security team out there isn’t going to let you go, either. It’s for your own safety. I’m prepared to do whatever I need to in order to convince you to stay.”

“Will you let me read your email?” she asked.

“That’s classified.”

She grimaced then nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t think that through.”

Was there a peace offering he could give her? Something that was meaningful, but would not compromise the mission already underway? Something she wouldn’t be able to hang herself with if she pursued it?

Jessica shuddered and wrapped her arms around her. “I’m freezing. Turn around, will you?”

He glanced up from the puddle at her feet to her face. “What?”

She had the hem of her T-shirt in her hands. “Turn. Around.”

“Oh.” He spun in place then reached out and closed the hall door.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

The wet fabric plopped on the tile floor.

The mental image of Jessica in a bra and leggings sprang to mind before he could divert his thoughts.

Did the wounds bother her? Was that why her first move was to change?

He lifted a hand to press just below his scar. The cold made his chest ache.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out.

Fabric rustled softly. “For what?”

“I don’t actually think you’re always wrong, by the way. I often agree with you, but not your methods. And you have zero regard for your own safety. Just look at how you got hurt.”

“I took a bullet for my best friend. You want me to regret that?”

“No! No, that’s not what I’m saying.” He closed his eyes and willed her to understand him. “It’s not you or her, it’s just you. You have no regard for your own safety. If you can’t prioritize that, someone else has to. And right now I’m the only one here.”

Her shoes squelched closer, and she stepped around him, gaping up at his face. Her eyes were wide and her mouth gaped open. He could already hear her outrage. He should have kept his mouth shut.

“I thought you pretty much hated me...”

“What?” He frowned. “No. No, that’s not it at all. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

That was a relief.

Maybe she’d keep listening?

“You take too many risks,” he said with a gentler tone. “There’s only one of you. What happens if you take one risk too many and die? What then? What about your charity? The people you work with? All of your cases? What then?”

Her brown eyes were so wide as she blinked at him.

It was one thing to fight for what you believed in. He got that. But if she died, who else picked up the fight? Where did it go from there?

Thursday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

It felt as though Jessica’s entire world were shifting on its axis just enough to give her a new perspective.

Samuel had always chastised her. It seemed she could do nothing right in his eyes. But listening to him now she had to wonder if they’d ever really tried to talk? To get to know one another?

He had a point. If something happened to her, there was a lot of stuff that would probably slip through the cracks. It wasn’t like she was unaware, but when pursuing a line of investigation it wasn’t like she stopped herself to wonder about the ripple

effect.

Her cheeks warmed and she let her gaze slid away from him.

If he knew this much about her, he'd clearly paid attention. This whole time she'd thought he was talking out of his ass, that he didn't know the first thing. Instead, he'd known.

And he was right.

She had always been reckless.

Probably because she hadn't heard no enough as a kid.

Samuel turned to face her.

Though she'd changed her shirt, her bra was still soaked and her nipples were rock hard.

“Jessica?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

“Hm?” She couldn’t exactly ignore his pointed gaze so she looked up at him.

“I think we’ve been out of synch and I’d like to propose a refresh.”

“Oh?” Her heart was doing funny things in her chest. He knew so much about her.

“It’s not that I don’t approve of what you’re doing. I think the best way to resolve all of this is by following the law. My issue is that you take too many risks with yourself. I just want you to have a little more care for yourself. You’re irreplaceable.” One side of his mouth lifted. “If you got hurt, what would I tell Robin?”

She chuckled and part of her relented. If she wasn’t so cold, she’d even think she might be warming to him. After all, he had gotten hurt trying to protect her best friend. What wasn’t to like about that?

“I imagine Robin would be mad at me, not you,” she said ruefully.

It was his turn to chuckle. “Robin is perceptive.”

Jessica stared up into his deep brown eyes and knew she was fucked. The one thing that had helped maintain the status quo was that despite her crush on Samuel, he didn’t like her. Now he’d listed out what might be considered her most admirable qualities.

He held out his hand. “What do you say? Can we try again?”

She held her breath and placed her hand in his. His fingers wrapped around her palm

and despite the chill, his skin was warm to the point she wanted to feel his hands on other parts of her body.

“Okay. I will consider taking fewer risks, but I don’t make any other promises,” she said.

He squeezed her hand and his thumb swiped over her knuckles. “Good.”

They stared at each other and for a moment she felt as though a string were pulling her forward, toward him. But that was silly. Just because Samuel admitted she wasn’t all that bad didn’t mean he had the same kind of crush on her she was harboring for him.

A distant popping sound made Samuel whirl away from her.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She frowned. “What was that?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he prowled toward the door and peered out. The way he moved was... Predatory. She didn’t know how else to describe the way he moved, but she knew one thing for certain. She was glad Samuel was on her side.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “Stay here.”

“Oh, no I’m not.”

He glanced back at her with a frown. “What did we just agree on?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. What is this, a test? It’s probably just the storm.”

The wind and rain were beating on the windows something fierce.

“Jessica, I’m not playing around.”

Something about his tone made her pause.

A loud bang resounded through the building. Jessica yelled and staggered back.

“We need to go,” Samuel said.

“W-what?”

“Something’s wrong. We need to go. Get your jacket. Do you have anything warmer to put on? We need to go right now, Jess.”

For a precious moment, she froze while Samuel grabbed her puffy jacket and the backpack with her laptop. He snagged the plastic bag from her snack delivery and wrapped the backpack in it before shoving it at her. That snapped her out of her daze.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:33 am

Jessica rammed the bag under her shirt and jammed her hem into her leggings while Samuel ducked out of the room to peer through the building.

Were those voices?

“We need to go, now,” Samuel said in a low voice. “I think whoever Daar worked with just found us.”

Those words froze Jessica’s mind, but her hands worked on autopilot, zipping up her coat. She and Robin had discussed this. It had always been a risk. But before, Jessica had a plan. There was a panic room in her condo. She had a gun. There was a security system. She could call people.

The medical facility was supposed to be safer in part because there were guards there all the time. What happened to those men? Were they still alive? What about them?

Samuel grabbed her by the front of the jacket, hauling her close to him and whispered, “I will keep you safe. Stay close to me.”

A female shriek ripped through the air.

Jessica whipped her head around and took a step toward the door, but Samuel’s hold was too tight.

“Jess?” he shook her slightly.

She glanced back at him.

Whatever had happened, she couldn't stop it.

She nodded as her heart began to pound. Samuel took her by the hand and pulled her out into the hall, back to the exit. Water still pooled on the floor where they'd banded words about.

The rain was coming down so hard she couldn't see more than a few feet.

"Come on," Samuel said before they plunged through the wall of water.

Jessica pressed her free hand to her stomach, ensuring the laptop remained in place. Her feet slid and slipped over the slick grass as they headed not toward the path, but for the closest trees.

A rat-a-tat-tat sound tore through the pouring rain.

She'd only heard that sound once in real life. Back when Daar kidnapped her and Robin. There'd been so many bullets.

Fear gave her strength to keep going.

Samuel plunged past the first low branches. Pine needles and limbs pulled at her clothes. A branch whipped her across the face, leaving a long, stinging stripe that merely drove home the fact that this was all so very real.

The ground fell away in a gentle slope for close to thirty feet before becoming rocky and treacherous. Trees jutted out at odd angles creating the canopy overhead.

Samuel pulled her behind a cluster of rocks and a sapling struggling to establish itself. He crouched in a growing puddle and turned to peer at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“What’s going on, Samuel?”

He rose slowly, peering back the way they’d come. “I don’t know. It doesn’t look like anyone saw us.”

“What about the staff?”

“Maureen was the only one here, remember? Everyone else was going to be in late because of the...”

“Right. The kid’s pageant this morning...”

Jessica said a silent plea for Maureen’s safety. She was an older white woman who’d grown up on the mountain. “What about security?”

Samuel met her gaze. “We need to worry about ourselves right now.”

She cringed. “We didn’t see anything. Can we be sure...?”

“Jess—”

She held up her hand. “I know. I know I’m wrong. I can’t help it. I have to hope that we’re wrong, okay?”

He squeezed her hand. “I hope you’re right and I’m wrong, too. Until then, can you follow my lead?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to cut down the mountain to the road. When they don’t find us at the center, they’ll start searching. We need to get as far from here as we can.”

“Okay.”

The chill was beginning to seep into her bones. Her chest and thighs ached.

Samuel braced his hand on the stones again then peered back up the way they’d come. “Ready to move?”

“Yes.”

“Is the laptop okay?”

“What does that matter?”

He stared at her. “I’m guessing you got too close to the truth, and that’s why they are

here.”

Her mouth dried up as she processed that reality.

There was a chance this was all her damn fault.

Fuck.

“Let’s go,” Samuel said and pulled on her hand.

Physically and mentally numb, Jessica followed along behind him. The ground was treacherous, becoming rocky and steep the farther they went. Though they tried to cut straight down, they were forced to wind their way awfully close to the driveway leading to the facility.

Every now and then she caught the sound of yelling in the distance and she had to wonder, what would happen if they were discovered? Would they be killed on sight? Or slowly over time?

Chapter Four

Thursday. Recovery Facility, Undisclosed.

Samuel could feel their lead time slipping away. By now, whoever these people were, they must be looking for him and Jessica. Chances were they only cared about her. Yes, his identity was burned. But so what? It wasn’t like he was the only FBI criminals might know by name. It was different for Jessica. She’d kicked rocks and uncovered secrets the rats would have preferred left alone. There was no going back. They had to push forward.

They weren’t going to get far enough away.

The ground was too difficult and slippery in this weather. Not to mention neither he nor Jessica were in any shape to make such a mad dash through the forest.

He also couldn't keep her by his side if he was going to take a chance.

Samuel hesitated under the low boughs of a tree and peered around.

If they were going to get away, he needed to get them some wheels. The employee vehicles were out of question. The lane to the recovery center would be blocked. Their best chance was to flag down a passing vehicle.

As best he could tell, the mountain road was below them a short ways.

He turned to Jessica. "I need you to stay here."

"What?" Her brown eyes went wide. "No!"

He gripped her by the shoulders. "I need to scout ahead and you need a break. Stay here and catch your breath."

“But—”

“Jess.”

She clamped her mouth shut then jerked her head in a nod. “Okay. Go. But if you get hurt, you’re in trouble and I’m coming after you.”

He inclined his head.

Even under extreme duress, Jessica’s thoughts were for others.

Samuel gave her hand one last squeeze then let go. “Stay low, okay? And if you see anyone, hide. You won’t be able to outrun them.”

“I got it. I got it. Go.”

She put her back to the tree then slid down to crouch in the mud with the water dripping down the branches onto her.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised and forced himself to turn around.

Everything in him wanted to stay glued to her side, but this wasn’t an environment they could easily escape from. Separating was the right plan. He’d just have to get back to her as fast as possible.

It stood to reason that whoever these people were, they were also professionals. And that told Samuel a few important things. First, they’d had a plan. They were likely

behind the construction mishap with the phone lines. Waiting until the storm blew in was also intentional; they'd simply jumped the gun on that one. If they'd begun their attack after the rain set in, Samuel probably wouldn't have heard anything apart from the thunder and lightning until it was too damn late.

But the last thing that was vitally important was that teams like this often didn't send everyone in. Keeping a small force in reserve to answer any need arising in the field was a basic move.

The road had to be on the other side of the rocks just ahead.

Samuel didn't have a weapon. Not even a knife. He'd have to change that.

Staying low to the ground, he slid and slithered over the rocks to the best of his ability. The rain was still pouring down, making it difficult to see more than ten feet in front of him.

He smelled the exhaust fumes first. It was probably because after two months of being out here in the mountains the fumes were more noticeable.

Two male voices reached him next, their words lost amidst the downpour.

Samuel ignored the rocks cutting into his skin and peered past the low-hanging branches at the figures beyond.

A Jeep sat across the lane. Two men wearing rain ponchos stood leaning against the front of the vehicle. Was there a third inside?

Samuel pulled back, beyond the last stand of trees, and pushed down the hill some toward the main road.

The men's attention was focused up the mountain.

He said a silent prayer as he circled around behind the Jeep.

If there was more than one person in the vehicle, Samuel was fucked.

He kept his eyes on the vehicle, ensuring it was between him and the two men as he made his way toward the road. His shoes squeaked and squelched with every step. If he thought it was wise, he'd have kicked them off. But that was a risk he wasn't going to take. A city boy out in the woods with no shoes was a recipe for disaster.

Keeping low, he crept toward the back of the Jeep Wrangler. It had a soft top, and the back had been left partially open and flapping in the wind. Samuel didn't breathe until he put his back to the bumper and sucked down exhaust perfumed air. Water dripped down his brow. He blinked it away and dropped to his hands and knees to get eyes on his target's feet.

They were both at the front of the Jeep. Hadn't moved so much as a step.

Samuel grasped the bumper and rose. The softcover hadn't been secured all the way around. He slid his hand past the canvas and plastic to feel around the bed for anything he could use as a weapon.

His fingers trailed along something cold, metal, long, and cylindrical. While his hand was busy, he peered into the idling Jeep.

It was empty.

There were only two men.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Slowly, he pulled the tire iron out from the back of the Jeep.

This would do.

He wrapped his hands around the cold metal and tested his grip.

Going up against two men wasn't great odds, but if he got the drop on them this might just work out okay.

Since the two figures were situated to the right side of the Jeep, Samuel circled around on the left.

He would only get one shot at using surprise to his benefit.

This had to work.

He paused at the front fender and took a deep breath.

One shot.

Their lives depended on this right now.

“Heard anything?” one of the two men asked.

“Nah, but you know how it goes.”

The rest of the man's words were washed away by the storm.

Samuel moved with the peel of thunder. He stepped out and used the momentum as he swung the tire iron with both hands like a bat. The knobby end cracked against the side of the closest man's jaw sending his head whipping to the side before he crashed down, face-first, onto the Jeep then the ground.

“What the—?”

The other man jumped back, but his feet slid on gravel. He went down hard, but at the same time brought up a gun. But Samuel was already swinging. He put everything into his downward blow because these people did not deserve mercy. They would have killed him and Jessica had they been given the chance. At the last moment, he closed his eyes. But nothing would ever make him forget the sick crunch of flesh and bone as the tire iron connected with the man.

The first man stirred from where he'd fallen onto the pavement while the second was stunned.

Samuel grabbed the sidearm off the first man and clicked the safety.

In his entire law enforcement career, he'd only had to discharge his sidearm a handful of times. He could look back and know without a doubt that he'd shot as a matter of last resort. But not this time. The clear and present danger was already there. This was about survival. He'd deal with the guilt later.

“No. Please, no,” the second man said, his words slurred no doubt as a result of the blow.

Samuel dropped to a knee next to the man and stared him in the eyes. “Don't follow us.”

“Okay. Okay,” the blubbering man said.

“Keys?”

“In the ignition.”

“Gun.” The man gestured at his side. Samuel took the weapon off him then rose.
“Don’t get up or move. If you do, I will shoot to kill. Understood?”

The man’s hands remained up. “Yeah. Yes.”

There were no hysterics. This guy had seen combat before and knew he was the lucky one.

Samuel kept the firearm aimed at the ground as he backed up and around the vehicle.

Now he had to get Jessica. Damn it. That shot would no doubt bring people straight here.

A bit of movement in the trees caught his eye.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Damn it.

This woman would be the death of him.

“Jess? Get your ass over here. Now,” he barked.

Her blonde hair was what he saw first as she scrambled over the rocks and onto the road.

“Sorry!” he heard her say, though the storm did its best to wash away her words.

“Get in. Now,” he snapped and opened the driver’s side.

Jessica circled around the back of the Jeep and jumped in, shoving a bag of stuff down into the floorboard.

Samuel was shifting into reverse before he even had his door shut.

“Are you okay?” Jessica asked.

“What did I tell you?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry.”

He rammed his foot on the accelerator and the Jeep shot backward, down the lane leading to the recovery center.

“What did I tell you?” he demanded again.

“I know. I’m sorry. I was waiting, then I got scared, okay? What if something happened to you? What if you needed help?”

“What if something happened to you? What if a stray bullet hit you? What then?” His anger was fizzling. No part of him could hold on to his irritation with her headstrong ways when all she was worried about was him. The damn woman needed to concern herself with her safety first, not his.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

He twisted around as they came to the bottom of the hill. He cranked the wheel. The tires skidded slightly, sending them almost into the ditch before the tread found purchase. He shifted into drive and though he wanted to push the Jeep hard, he held back. Mountain roads were twisty, winding things. It would be easy for them to finish the job themselves if he drove recklessly.

“We’ll need new wheels,” he said.

“What’s wrong with this?”

“GPS.”

“I can fix that.”

Samuel couldn’t find it in him to be surprised. Instead, he calmly turned his head and looked at Jessica. She never failed to surprise him.

“How?” he asked.

“The OBD port. Jeeps like this, that’s where any tracking equipment is going to be.”

“How do you know this?”

She rolled her eyes. “I might have disabled all GPS on our family vehicles at one point or another.”

He shook his head. Samuel was familiar with a few variety of devices, but his experience with them began and ended with issuing requests for details for investigation purposes. He’d never had to install or disable an onboard GPS device.

“Are you okay?” Jessica asked as he pointed them east.

“Fine.” Though now that the adrenaline was mostly burned through, he was beginning to feel shaky. He’d keep that to himself. “You okay? Laptop dry?”

She had long red marks that went across her face, probably from getting slapped in the face by a branch. She was so pale any mark would stand out.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“I’m okay.” She opened her coat and peered inside the backpack. “Laptop looks okay.”

“Good.”

“What are we going to do? Can we call the police?”

He shook his head. “Local cops would just get slaughtered. The best thing we can do for the people who might still be alive is to get as far from the center as possible. If those people really want us, they’ll start chasing us.”

“Seriously? Shit. Okay.” She put the laptop down by her feet. “Should I start going through what’s in here?”

“How easy is it to get to the, what did you call it?”

“OBD port? It’s over there by your left leg on the dash. We’ll have to kill the Jeep and unplug things.”

He grimaced. “Let’s wait to do that.”

“Want me to start going through what’s in here? What if, I don’t know, they have stuff in here?”

“Good idea. How are you holding up?”

“I’m freaking the fuck out, but that doesn’t help us. I just need something to do.” She

pulled the displaced bag up onto her lap and started riffling through it. “Good grief, hungry?”

He glanced over as she pulled packages of beef jerky, granola bars, and candy from the bag.

They wouldn’t need to stop for snacks anytime soon.

“We need weapons.” The two guns resting on his lap felt like they weighed a hundred pounds each. “Check around, see what you can find? Bullets if nothing else.”

“I’m on it. Just, keep telling me what to do, okay? I’m going to stay calm so long as I have something to do.”

Her voice was beginning to waver.

Samuel reached over and gripped her knee for a moment. “We’re okay. We’re alive. We’re safe.”

“I know, but what about Maureen?” she whispered. “And the others?”

Samuel wasn’t going to lie to her. Chances weren’t good anyone had survived besides them. He was also glad the security team had been decidedly unfriendly. He didn’t know any of their names.

“Should we call someone?” Jessica asked.

“No.” He wrestled for a moment with how much to tell her before deciding she deserved the truth. “We’ve already had one issue with someone informing Daar’s peers about our movements. On the off chance someone in the office is a mole, I don’t want to say a word to anyone until I am certain we are safe.”

“Then... What are we doing, Samuel? Where are we going?”

“DC. We’ll go straight to the offices there. We’ll be safe.”

“How will we be safe if you also suspect there might be a mole?”

“I don’t know that there is one. All I know is that our chances are only going to get better if we have the team at our back on this.”

“Okay.” Her voice was high and brittle.

“Hey, that’s pretty smart about the OBD thing. When did you learn that trick?”

“High school. I might have been avoiding my parents trying to control what I was doing and where I was going.”

“Isn’t that their job?”

“Well, yeah, but I had other ideas at the time. There were some guys at my school who were really into cars and they showed me how to bypass the different GPS options.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Really? And where did you go once no one was keeping tabs on you?”

She shrugged and smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. “Mostly? Nowhere. We just drove around being free.”

“Well, that's going to work in our favor. I want to pull over by that lot outside town where the trucks stop and check for GPS. Then we'll hit the road and keep going.”

“Do we have a plan beyond that? What are we going to do?”

He turned his hand over and she put her hand in his then wrapped her other palm around their joined hands. “We're going to take names and kick some ass.”

Chapter Five

Thursday. I-70 Eastbound.

By mid-afternoon, Jessica had settled into a kind of existence that balanced on a tight-rope of anxiety. She watched the rearview mirror for any sign they were being followed, but apart from the typical lead foot driver, few vehicles stuck with them for long.

They were on I-70 in Kansas. The landscape had long since begun to blur together as time crept past. She did well enough to navigate a city. Out here? Everything looked the same to her. Foreign and unfamiliar. If they broke down, she wouldn't know what to do.

“Should we try to change vehicles?” she asked as a sign for another town started counting down the miles.

“With what money?” Samuel asked.

She grimaced but nodded. “Point taken. How much do we have after we filled up?”

“One twenty.”

That would not get them far.

She chewed the inside of her cheek and rolled some ideas around, examining them for possible pitfalls. When she couldn't think of more than a few downsides, she decided to speak up.

“Here's an idea.” She twisted to face him. “Could I buy gift cards online for in-store pickup? We could use that for gas, food, whatever.”

Samuel shook his head. He was constantly punching holes in her theories. “The moment we make a transaction, someone might track us.”

She was inclined to agree with him, but there was one very important fact she wanted to clear up before backing down. “Can we stretch a hundred and twenty dollars seventeen hundred miles?”

It was his turn to grimace. “I... I don't know.”

“I think somewhere around Topeka we find a library with open Wi-Fi. I use that to get gift cards and then we drive straight through to the east side of Kansas City before finding a place to stay for the night. I know what you're saying, but Samuel, we need money to get to DC.”

His brow furrowed, and he looked across the Jeep at her. “I don’t want to take unnecessary risks...”

“Does it help to know that I have a VPN?”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s been standard in our family but we also use the same service for work.”

“Hm...”

A virtual private network wasn’t a foolproof solution, but it would at the very least mask her computer and make it more difficult for anyone tracking them. Hard enough they’d have a head start if they didn’t drag their feet.

“We could pick up the gift cards from somewhere we can also get new clothes. Because we both look a mess to the point that people are going to remember us,” she said.

“Fine. Fine.” Samuel sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Truth be told, I think we could both use a hot shower, clean clothes, and something to eat.”

They’d found a hundred and fifty in cash in the bag she’d dug through first. She didn’t see a way for them to eat and have enough gas to get to DC. Not with current prices. And besides, as much as Samuel had done to protect and care for her today, he was recovering just as much as she was.

She spent the rest of the drive to Topeka sorting through her thoughts and trying to figure out where she’d gone wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

This had to have happened because of her.

She'd dug too deep and woken the beast, so to speak.

That was the thought driving her through their pause to make the online purchase, then again when they picked up their gift cards and supplies. She sat in silence for almost a full hour and a half, thinking herself in circles as they closed in on their destination for tonight. She didn't even have much of an opinion when it came to picking out something to eat. Not to mention the simple act of eating was that much more difficult because she couldn't get past her guilt. Everything tasted like cardboard and sadness.

By the time they checked into a cheap, roadside motel that looked like it was straight off the set of a serial killer drama, she was willing herself numb.

Samuel checked out the room then waved for her to join him. He'd already carried in everything from the Jeep they'd salvaged while she had their purchases from earlier.

Jessica's vision narrowed to just what was in front of her. She put one foot in front of the other and made it all the way to the foot of the bed where she set the bags down. They felt so much heavier than before.

"Jess? Hey?" A strong hand grasped her arm and tugged her around. "What's wrong?"

She let him move her to face him, but it was too hard to meet his gaze.

“Nothing,” she muttered.

Samuel’s fingers pressed to the underside of her chin, giving her no choice but to look him in the eye. A furrow marred his smooth features and his lips twisted up on one side.

“What’s wrong? Does something hurt?”

She rubbed at her chest, but it wasn’t the scars or wounds that ached.

“No. I’m fine.”

“Jess...”

She closed her eyes and did her best to strangle her emotions. “It’s all my fault, okay?”

“What’s your fault? Today? No.”

“Yes. But it is.” Her eyes popped open. “You practically admitted it yourself. These people came after us because I wouldn’t stop digging.”

He shook his head. “No, Jess. This is not on you.”

“But—”

Long, graceful fingers pressed to her lips. “From the moment Daar’s people identified you, you were a target. You didn’t make these people come after you. You didn’t tell them to hurt people. You are not at fault here.”

She didn’t believe his words, but she needed to hear his pronouncement.

“You are a one-woman army. You set out to find the bad guys, they just happened to find you first. You are not responsible for bad guys killing good people. You can’t think that way or you’ll stop fighting. And the world needs fighters like you, Jess. Hear me?”

She nodded and swayed toward him, mostly because she was so damn tired.

His arm wrapped around her waist and he pulled her against his side in a perfectly platonic embrace. She closed her eyes and leaned into it, so damn grateful that Samuel had been by her side through this. She had no illusions about what might have happened to her without him there.

She’d be dead by now if it weren’t for him.

Jessica hugged him around the waist and held on when he might have pulled away.

Just a few more moments.

She needed to soak up the comfort then focus on getting her shit together. Their respite from the world and responsibility was over. He was right. The bad guys had come for them. There was no longer time to recover and take it easy. From here on out, it was going to be tough.

Samuel’s fingers stroked her side, right where she was most ticklish.

Jessica let go of him and quickly side-stepped away from him.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Thanks,” she muttered.

She turned toward him, pivoting on her right foot. A twinge of pain shot up her leg so suddenly she winced.

“What’s wrong?” Samuel asked.

“Nothing.”

“Jess...”

The warning in his voice had her rolling her eyes. What was with him?

“I don’t know, okay? I guess I strained or twisted my ankle. I didn’t even notice it until we’d been on the road for a while.”

He pointed at the bed. “Sit.”

“It’s fine,” she insisted.

His stony face was clear. He would hear no argument against his order.

She could push back. There was nothing to be done about her ankle. But she didn’t want to clash with him. Not after their talk this morning. She sighed and plopped down on the mattress. It was so firm her tail bone ached a little. That did not bode well for a restful night.

Samuel went to a knee in front of her.

She held up her hands. “Please, don’t.”

“Jess, right now your feet and legs are the most important defensive parts of your body. If you’re hurt, we need to know. If something happens, you have to be able to run. That is the most important thing right now, okay?”

That logic was hard to argue with. Still, she was perfectly able to assess herself, but she doubted Samuel would be satisfied. It was just her foot, anyway.

“I can take off my own shoe, you know?”

“Stop being difficult.” He frowned as he picked apart the laces. “Your shoes are still soaked.”

“Yeah, my feet feel like raisins. That’s probably most of what’s wrong. My feet just need to dry out and I’ll be fine.”

He glanced up at her with a flat stare that said plainly he wasn’t buying that story.

She managed to maintain her smile, and he went back to focusing on her foot.

Infuriating man.

He got the laces undone then carefully pried her sneaker off. She wiggled her toes within the damp sock that was partially stuck to her skin.

Yeah, she wanted to get her feet dry as soon as possible. But maybe after a nice, scalding hot shower.

Jessica reached down to peel off the sock, but Samuel already had his hand wrapped around her ankle and was stripping it off her.

She did not need this visual.

Her unwise crush on Samuel had enough fuel already. The last thing she wanted to add to her mental library was real-life footage of him taking an article of clothing off her. Even if it was a dirty, soaking wet sock. It was all too easy to imagine those fingers on other parts of her body removing very different garments.

She needed to stop.

Jessica bit her lip as he dropped the sock on the ground and began running his fingers over her ankle. His touch was warm and his strong hands were surprisingly gentle.

“Samuel?”

“Hm?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Why were you so set on not liking me when we first met?” It was the question she’d wanted to ask for ages.

He’d known all about her, but he was a mystery. The only thing she’d been told before transferring to the recovery center was that he’d been injured trying to stop Robin from getting kidnapped along with her. Jessica had been ready to throw herself at his feet in gratitude. But he’d been so cold and dismissive. It had set the tone for how they interacted until now.

He looked up at her and his fingers stilled. “I liked you just fine.”

She snorted before she could stop herself. “You did not. I understand clashing over the investigation. I know I’ve stepped on your toes. But I couldn’t get a halfway pleasant word out of you when we first met.”

He leaned toward her, bracing his other hand on the edge of the bed, putting him squarely between her thighs. “Maybe I wasn’t on my best behavior? That wasn’t the impression I was trying to make. You’re just so frustrating sometimes.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You have no regard for your own safety. None whatsoever. You’re probably the biggest danger to yourself.”

Her jaw dropped, and she stared at him.

Of all the things he could have said, that was why he’d been so grumpy in the

beginning? Okay, he was still a rain cloud personified most of the time, but even storms made rainbows. It wasn't all bad. In a way, that sentiment was kind of sweet. In a backhanded way.

“You talk about me like I have no brain at all,” she muttered.

“You're brilliant. But sometimes smart people can be really...” He sighed and shook his head. “You're the last person I'd trust with your safety. You take too many risks, Jess.”

How many times had he expressed that one sentiment to her?

Why did he care, anyway?

She couldn't bring herself to ask that question. She only wanted one answer, and she highly doubted it was what she'd get. It was better to not ask and instead focus on the warmth seeping into her ankle from his hand and the way his hip pressed against her leg, how he smelled so damn good despite being doused by rain and mud, the way her body felt alive when he looked at her. When she looked at him, she forgot about everything that had happened.

Men had always been a past-time for her. They were good for some fun, but once they started expecting her to dress for occasions and make them look good, she was gone. Because all too soon she'd get the request to talk less, to not bring up her work or charity, to simply look pretty on his arm. She would never diminish her light for the sake of propping up a man's ego. Because once his ego got to be big enough, that type of guy began doing whatever necessary to tear her down. It was never a man supporting her supporting him. Never a partnership.

Samuel didn't need or want her to support him. He wanted her to run alongside him. Literally. And he wanted to protect her.

That came as a shock.

It probably shouldn't after all this time and their arguments. She'd been stuck on those individual issues. What he thought she shouldn't do. But in all this time she'd never comprehended the real meaning behind his complaints against her.

Her safety.

Had anyone besides Robin ever cared about her this much? How was she supposed to know all this time that's what he meant when he'd barely say anything to her?

"Are you okay?" Samuel asked. "No witty come back? Where's the sarcasm?"

She swallowed. "It seems rude to be sarcastic to someone who just confessed to caring about me."

His gaze seemed to shutter and though his expression didn't change, he seemed closed off now. "When did I say I gave a fuck?"

She chuckled and wagged a finger at him. "You can't walk that back. You'd only get this grumpy about me taking risks if you cared. Does this make us friends?"

And damn if she didn't want that to be right. This whole time she'd thought they were too dissimilar. There was no way he'd be interested in her. She could accept that. This crush of hers would be squashed in time.

Then again, the conflict could also come down to his job. While they both ultimately wanted the same thing, they had different goals. His was safety. Hers was justice. Those two things didn't always align.

He blew out a breath and shook his head before dropping his gaze back to her foot.

“Looks like you probably just strained it. Let’s get you some painkillers and try to elevate it tonight, okay?”

Her insides wobbled. Was he really going to ignore her like this? It was just like him.

She gripped the comforter on either side of her hips as the silence stretched on with neither of them moving.

“I don’t know if we can be friends,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

She froze, her being hanging on his every word as she held her breath.

Samuel lifted his head and stared back at her. “At the very least, I don’t want to see you dead. You’re important to a lot of people, Jess.”

But not to him.

That stung.

It was better than outright enemies, so she could live with it. Didn’t mean her eyes weren’t stinging or her heartbreaking. But, she was a big girl. This was just a crush. She’d get over it.

He lifted a shoulder. “Both our jobs...”

“What do our jobs mean about being friends?” She smiled at him, determined to brazen her way through this so she could nurse her breaking heart in the shower, later. “It sounds to me like we should have a great, symbiotic relationship. You catch the bad guys and I make sure they pay for their crimes.”

His gaze narrowed. “When it comes to you, is it ever that simple? I reviewed your case history in preparation for our investigation. You really put your all into these cases.”

“That’s what my clients deserve.”

“Do they deserve all of you? Do they deserve you risking your life?”

“You know, I could ask you the same questions? You seek out danger. When this case is over, you’ll be assigned another one that’s just as dangerous, maybe more so. Who cares about what you’re risking? Hm? Why is it you’re the only one taking risks to make the world a little better for someone else? Why can’t I do the same thing?”

His lips became a thin line.

This wasn’t about her feelings for him. This transcended her heart. This was truth. Because while she was guilty of being reckless, he was a habitual risk-taker himself.

She lifted a hand, cupping his jaw before she could think better of it, and swiped her thumb just under his bottom lip. “That logic can apply to you just as much as it applies to me, Samuel. We’re both important. What we do is important.”

For one precious moment, they stared at one another. It was the sensation of his stubble against her finger that recalled her to reality.

She snatched her hand back. “Sorry...”

Or, she tried to. Before she could move, his hand covered hers, pressing her fingers against his jaw more firmly. As if that was exactly where he wanted her touch.

If he’d let her, she’d touch a whole lot more. But she’d never gotten that vibe from him. Most days it seemed like he’d be perfectly fine if she rolled over and died. But the way he’d just dug into her as if he saw not only what she did but understood her drive to lift the darkness and clear the ladder for others to get to a better place in life? No man had ever seen all those sides of her and still had anything remotely positive to say. And out of everything he’d said one thing was on repeat in her head.

Samuel cared enough about her to stubbornly insist that she stay alive.

It wasn't a roses and candlelight confession of love, but when had she ever wanted that?

Wait.

Was it her imagination or was Samuel's face closer now?

There were only a few inches between them now.

Her gaze dipped to his lips. They'd been compressed into a tight, annoyed line. But now? They were parted and oh so kissable. Seriously, he had the perfect mouth with just the right amount of fullness. It was a damn crime he spent most of the time scowling, because when he smiled? It was like the heavens parted and angels sang. Though that could just be her libido.

He was so close now. Was she dreaming? Was this real?

The lightest brush of his lips to hers sent an electric current of need through her body. Her fingers cupped his face more firmly, and she reached for him with her other arm. He leaned into her, bringing their bodies together.

She pulled him closer as her lips slid against his in a hungry, needy kiss. He tasted like the vanilla lip balm she'd bought earlier. And here he'd said he didn't want to use it. Someone was a naughty liar.

"Jess?" he said against her lips.

She kissed her name away until his fingers were tunneling through her hair. But he was a determined man.

"We should stop. And talk," he said a moment later, though his voice was softer now.

More of an idea and less of a request.

Chapter Six

Jessica slid her hands over his lean chest well aware this might be her only chance to do so. “Is that what you want? Because I would really prefer no talking at all.”

Once their mouths started moving, she knew this sensual mood would dissipate.

Samuel stared at her for one long moment. He curled his fingers in her hair, bringing her face to his. She held her breath as he studied her mouth as if he wanted to commit it to memory. And then he leaned in once more, taking her mouth in a demanding kiss. His tongue thrust past her lips to tease her while his hands coasted over her body. All at once, her nerves were alight with sensation as he touched and stroked her over her clothes.

She wrapped her arms around him and leaned back. She’d have fallen to the mattress if it weren’t for how slowly he was moving. Here she was wrapped around him and he never missed a beat. He gently lowered them to the bed, their lips never parting for even an instant. She arched her back, pressing against him as he made love to her mouth.

Jessica had no fucks to give when it came to playing hard to get. She wanted him, and now that he’d made the first move she saw no reason to be coy about what she wanted. She wrapped her legs around his hips. His body undulated, grinding against her, hitting just the right spot to send pleasure radiating through her body. She moaned as lust rushed through her system.

It almost felt like she was out of control, driven by something she didn’t understand.

And yet, wasn't this what some part of her had wanted? Okay, another part had been firmly in the roses and wooing camp, but she'd always been a plunge into the deep end kind of girl.

She pushed her hands up under his shirt. He hissed as if even his skin was too sensitive. She stroked her palms up and down his sides and chest, all while his lips continued to seduce her. He kissed her so thoroughly it was getting hard to think. All she wanted to do was feel. To focus on this, here and now.

Why was he still wearing a shirt, anyway?

She shoved it up under his armpits.

“Jess? Jess...” He breathed deep. “W-we should—”

“Shut up,” she said and kissed him quick and hard. “You should shut up and keep kissing me.”

“But—”

She groaned. “Why do you always ruin things with talking?”

That startled a laugh out of him even while his palm molded to her cheek.

Jessica grabbed handfuls of his shirt on the off chance he decided to put distance between them.

“Stop talking and kiss me like you mean it,” she said.

“I want to.” His gaze dipped to her lips. “But if I kiss you even one more time, I’m not going to stop with your lips.”

For a precious moment, she was too stunned to think or speak.

Was it possible he'd been attracted to her this whole time? Or was this a dream?

A slow grin spread across her face. She eased her hold on his shirt and in turn slid her hands up and around his neck.

“That’s just it, Samuel. I want so much more than a kiss...”

He groaned and closed his eyes.

“There’s one problem.” And she hated having to bring this up every time.

“What?” he asked, his voice strained.

“I’m allergic to latex. It’s a whole thing on my mom’s side of the family.”

His eyes popped open, and he gaped at her.

Under normal circumstances, she insisted on using condoms she provided for casual encounters. If a guy had a problem with that, she walked. But Samuel was different. She trusted him implicitly.

“Then... We should stop...” And yet, he didn’t sound like that was what he wanted.

“Or...” She swallowed, rolling the idea around in her head, but there was no hesitation in her whatsoever. “We make an informed, mutual decision. I’ve had so much blood tested in the last two months I know with certainty I’m safe.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Samuel's eyes widened.

She took his hand and pressed his fingers to her left bicep, right above the slight scar.

“Feel that?”

“Yeah...”

“That bump? That's my birth control. This one was put in a year ago.”

“Jess...”

She lifted her head and pressed her lips to his, kissing him soft and slow. His body relaxed by degree until he was kissing her back.

“That's... Are you sure? Are you positive?” he asked.

“Only fools are positive.” She chuckled at the quote. “Contrary to what you might think of me, I don't do this. But you're all I can think about.”

“There's a good reason—”

She arched her back. “That I don't care about.”

Samuel groaned and kissed her back, this time with a sense of urgency. But she needed the words.

Jessica pushed against his shoulders. He responded immediately, pushing up so there

was space between them.

How was it a smart woman hadn't already scooped this man up? He might be a little brusque, but he was thoughtful and considerate. She could see him growing with someone, to create a beautiful partnership.

Samuel closed his eyes. "I haven't been with anyone in two years..."

That tidbit of knowledge shocked her, but she filed it away for later.

"And?" She slid her hands down his chest then up under his shirt.

His lids lowered the moment her skin touched his. "No STIs or anything of the kind. But, Jess? I could—"

"You could just stop talking and go with it? If you want to, that is. Because I really, really want to."

She yanked on his shirt and Samuel finally obliged her by pulling it up over his head.

This was not the first time she'd seen him shirtless or even the second. She still felt a moment of reverence looking at him. Sure, he'd been laid up in a hospital bed for weeks—just like her—but the softness of his body was the only thing that made him look like a real person and not a figment of her too-perfect imagination. She had a feeling that when he was in top physical shape, he'd blow her mind.

Two almost perfectly circular scars marred his dark flesh. She reached up, covering the wound closest to his heart with her hand. No, she hadn't known him when it happened. At that point in his investigation, she'd thought Harper was just a right-time-right-place kind of guy.

It meant the world to her that Samuel had done everything possible to stop the men kidnapping her best friend. A part of her would love him until the end of time for that. Robin was closer than her own family, and she wouldn't be here now if it weren't for Samuel. But at the same time, Jessica wished he hadn't taken that risk. She wished he'd have a little more care for his safety.

In that aspect, they were the same.

He held still as if he knew she needed a moment.

Her gaze rose to his face and emotion clogged her throat.

Today was another brush with death. This time it could have been final. But they'd made it through. Together this time.

Jessica reached up and pulled him down. His mouth was soft and yielding when their lips met. His hand pressed to her chest, just as she'd done to him. As if he needed to feel her pulse to reassure himself she was okay.

They were both alive, though not quite whole yet.

Samuel wrapped his other arm under her then lifted, dragging her up the mattress.

She chuckled and tried to smother her giddiness. Getting manhandled was a turn-on for her. Was it cliché? Probably. Were her panties wet as hell? That was a positive.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Jessica pulled him down, sealing her lips over his. Maybe it was her imagination, but she thought she felt him smile. Her heart did a happy little leap.

The hand he had pressed to her scar slid just a tiny bit down then up. Her nipples were beyond hard and aching. She grasped him by the wrist and guided his fingers past the loose neckline of her T-shirt.

Samuel needed no further encouragement.

His big hand slid into her bra and cupped her breast. She groaned and arched up against him, rubbing herself on him like a cat in heat. His fingers gently abraded her nipple, teasing a gasp out of her. His tongue slid inside her mouth. She clutched his hips and pulled. His pelvis ground against hers, creating the most delicious friction.

Why were they wearing clothes? Clothes were so annoying.

Samuel pinched her nipple gently, yet the sensation that zipped through her was enough to make her eyes roll back in her head.

Holy shit.

Desperate to feel more of him, she grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it up.

Samuel pushed up so that he was kneeling between her legs. She tossed the offending shirt over the edge of the bed. He caught her hands before she could dispense with the bra.

“Wait,” he said softly.

“I don’t want to.”

He chuckled and a gentle smile curved his lips.

Jessica changed her mind in that instant. She’d do things for that smile.

His gaze traveled down to her chest. “I want to look at you.”

“Fine.”

She relaxed and lay back, bringing her hands up over her head.

Jessica did the bare minimum when it came to exercise. Unlike Samuel, her body had always been a little soft, a little curvy, but her boobs were great.

His attention centered on the pink scar where the bullet had gone into her and ricocheted around.

She found herself holding her breath and her body tense as if she were balanced on a tight rope. What had begun as need now felt... More significant.

Samuel lowered his head and pressed a kiss to her shoulder, far above the scar. He kissed along her collarbone to her sternum. She tilted her head back and sighed, letting those bigger, scarier feelings drift away. Right now all she wanted was to be with Samuel.

He kissed down between her breasts while his hands tugged the straps off her shoulders.

“Are you serious about not talking?” he whispered.

Her eyes popped open. “What?”

His gaze locked with hers as he pressed a lingering kiss to the top of one breast.
“Talking?”

“I didn’t really mean no talking. Unless you want to talk about work right now...
Work talk is not allowed right now.”

He grinned.

Grinned!

It was a brilliant slash of white teeth and shadowy creases.

Damn these lights. She couldn’t see him well enough to commit it to memory.

His voice became deeper, sensual. “Work is the last thing on my mind...”

“Oh. Good.”

Her eyes drifted shut as his lips kissed along the cup of her bra.

She trained her fingers over his chest and sides while his mouth drew ever closer to her nipple.

“You’re so soft everywhere,” he muttered.

Despite her resolution to enjoy this, she couldn’t help but want more.

His hand slid under her and she arched her back to make more room for him.

“Samuel?”

He didn’t pause his kiss-ploration of her body. “Hm?”

“I want on top.”

His fingers made quick work of the clasp before he sat up, towering over her. “On top, hm?”

Jessica smiled up at him as she grasped the thin material between her breasts and lifted the bra away from her body. “Yes. Me. On top.”

“Deal.”

Samuel grasped her by the hips then rolled them both. She squealed and laughed as

the world spun around her until she was splayed over his chest. His hands moved around to grip her by the ass as he lifted his hips. She felt the long ridge of his erection nestled against her and moved with him, enjoying the way his head tipped back and his body shuddered.

Then his hands were on her, sliding and stroking not just erogenous zones, but everywhere. Like he, too, wanted to memorize every part of her for all time.

Her body was alight with lust and need. She moved her hips grinding against him.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered.

“Mm, fucking, yes.”

She slid her fingers down his stomach to the waistband of his sweats and tugged them down his hips.

Samuel made a noise deep in his chest before sitting up, wrapping his arms around her, and standing. She clung to him, chuckling at the serious expression creasing his face.

And then he said the four most beautiful words any man had ever said to her: “I need you naked.”

“Yes, please,” she purred.

He set her on the edge of the bed, in much the same way this had begun, only this time he wasn't gentle. He grabbed the stretchy yoga pants and yanked, dragging them and her panties down her hips and legs until she was very naked. As he tossed the clothing aside, she sat back, knees pressed together, and smiled at him.

Samuel was just as serious as he'd always been, but this felt honest. Real. Different.

He pressed his hands to her knees as his gaze dropped to her mouth and he leaned forward. She met him halfway in a kiss that made her body relax. He pushed her knees apart and his hands coasted up to the apex of her thighs to stroke her pussy. She moaned into the kiss and tilted her hips, making more room for him, but he merely stroked her.

“Samuel...”

He muttered something in reply and stood. She watched him kick off his shoes then shove his sweats and underwear down in a rush. Her brain screamed for him to slow down, let her savor this, while everything else just wanted him to hurry. Before she was ready, he scooped her up in his arms, turned, and fell back to the bed with her on top.

“Better,” she heard him mutter.

She situated herself with a knee on either side of his hips. “You are the bossiest, not bossy guy I’ve ever met.”

His hands covered her breasts and his gaze remained transfixed on her chest. “Yes.”

She wasn't certain he was even listening to her, but that was okay. It was time for their bodies to do the talking.

Jessica wrapped her hand around his cock and he hissed. She slid her hand up and down, learning his length and shape.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Fuck me.” Samuel’s voice was strained, and was that a quiver she felt against her breast?

Did he want her as much as she wanted him?

“You shouldn’t let me do this,” he muttered.

“I’ll let you if you ask nicely.” Who the hell was she kidding? She’d probably get a thrill out of him not asking. Consent was usually a sticking point for her. But Samuel? He was so careful, so controlled, she couldn’t help but trust him completely.

He opened his eyes and stared up at her. Without looking away, he trailed his fingers down her stomach and mound, then between her legs. He drew a line straight down her pussy to her opening and thrust inside. She gasped at the sudden intrusion all while a thrill shot through her.

Hell yes, this wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t in her head.

“Oh, my God...”

Jessica fought the urge to let her head drop back. She wanted to watch him and feel this. She was greedy.

Samuel pumped into her several times. She shifted her hips, helping him find just the right angle, then with no warning he pulled out of her. She whimpered for a moment. Just one, because he slicked his fingers down his cock and there was no mistaking that purpose.

“There,” he said.

She couldn't help but grin at him as she pushed his hand aside to pump him, his skin slick with her arousal now.

It was her turn to grin at him. “Oh, that's much better.”

“Almost...”

He slid his hand back between their bodies and this time his touch was teasing. He caressed her folds and around her clit while she pumped his cock.

“Oh...” Her muscles were warm liquid under his touch. “I need you in me.”

“Sh. Don't say that.”

“Why not?”

He thrust his fingers inside of her and she groaned. Unlike before, his touch was not all that gentle. The way he fucked her, curling and twisting his fingers, it was with purpose.

“You're going to come,” he said in a tone that brokered no argument. “Do you hear me, Jess?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Make me come. Do it.”

Her grip on him faltered as he pressed her clit. She groaned and shifted her hips, working with him.

“Fuck, yes,” she groaned when he found just the right angle to stimulate every nerve

ending she had down there. “Yes, don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.”

Samuel kept that pace and depth, allowing her to shift with him. Suddenly, his free hand tweaked her nipple. Awareness and heat pooled low in her belly as she gasped, swiveling her hips while he massaged her clit.

“Oh!”

Pleasure rippled through her, but it wasn’t enough. She could already tell she wanted more. So much more.

She rose up, still gripping his cock on one hand.

“Jessica, you—”

She stared into his eyes as she pressed down on him.

Samuel’s eyes widened as he stared at the place where their bodies joined, and his mouth went slack. Jessica rolled her hips as her mouth went dry. She’d never been big on vibrators, preferring to use her own hands to get herself off. And she hadn’t been with a man in so long.

“Oh, fuck,” she muttered and rose up.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He gripped her thighs, steadying her as she eased back down. He slid deeper, eased by her orgasm-slick body.

“Jess—fuck,” he muttered.

“I know.” She whimpered and shifted her hips. “I know.”

His fingers slid along her labia, and while her internal muscles tightened at first, the longer he touched her the more sensual it became. She’d also never been with a man who paid quite so much attention to how wet she was.

Maybe she had been over-eager, but she didn’t regret it.

Samuel’s other hand rose to scrape his nails over her nipple. She gasped and in the next moment, he pushed up, licking the same nipple he’d just abused.

Jessica gripped his shoulders, the better to push herself up with. This time, when she sank down she felt him go deeper and deeper until she sat draped over him, their bodies flush together.

His arms wound around her and he hugged her to him, nose to nose.

“Hello,” he whispered.

She tightened her internal muscles and watched his eyes roll back. Just a little.

“Hi,” she whispered back at him.

“Fuck, Jess...” His chest heaved. “You’re so tight you’re going to make me come.”

“That’s kind of the point.”

His gaze narrowed.

She felt alive. Needy. Ready to come apart.

Samuel grabbed the back of her head and brought her down for a hard, clashing kiss. She held onto him and rose. The feel of him sliding out of her made goosebumps break out along her thighs.

This was her favorite thing. Sex without condoms was a rarity for her and a treat. There was nothing like the feel of skin on skin in the beginning. She rose and fell in short thrusts, all while Samuel’s tongue teased her lips. He groaned into her mouth and held her tighter until it was hard to breathe.

Jessica planted her hands on his shoulders and pushed him down to lie flat on his back, staring up at her.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“And you’re mine.” Only for now. She would be okay with it.

Braced over him, she began to move in earnest. His hands covered her breasts, and he slid the pad of a finger back and forth over her nipples. She tossed her head back and pushed away the frantic feelings about what came next in favor of experiencing this moment.

Samuel’s hips rose as she fell. The joining of their bodies sent tantalizing tremors through her. She moaned, and he chuckled, the sound so full of promise.

“Jess...”

She looked down to see his face creased in pleasure as if he felt too good and were coming apart at the seams.

Was he close?

She didn't want this to end.

His eyes opened, and he snaked an arm around her hips, pulling her down onto his cock hard and sudden. She moaned and her thighs shook with the effort of keeping herself upright.

“I need you to come,” he said in a tone that would hear no argument.

Jessica nodded.

Her little appetizer of an orgasm wasn't nearly enough.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Ride me,” he said and lifted her.

Holy shit.

His dark gaze bored into hers, lending her new strength.

“That’s it,” he muttered.

Samuel fall back to the bed, but his hands remained on her hips, guiding her as he moved in time with her motions. She watched the way his face went from hard to hungry and back again.

Tension built low in her stomach, driving her weakening legs to hold out a little longer.

His hand dropped from her hip to her pussy. Once more his fingers stroked her folds, but this time he drew the moisture forward to her clit.

She wasn’t close enough.

Not yet.

“S-Samuel, I—”

Jessica opened her mouth to tell him, to warn him she needed more, but at that moment he proved he knew how to play her body better than she did. A single, gentle caress to her clit and that was it. Pleasure erupted out of her. She was vaguely aware

of Samuel grabbing her hips and moving her on his cock in a few, frenzied motions before he clutched her close. She felt it as if from a distance because she was already floating, utterly content to be in his arms.

Samuel Jenkins was going to ruin her for all time and all men, and she didn't give a damn.

Chapter Seven

Friday. I-70 Eastbound.

Samuel stared straight ahead at the gray horizon. The sun would be up in another hour, hour and a half. He'd be grateful for the sunglasses Jessica had grabbed for the both of them last night. It was going to be a long haul today.

He'd slept for exactly four hours before his eyes popped open and he hadn't been able to go back to sleep. Despite his soreness and exhaustion, his mind had been racing. And if he were completely honest with himself, the very naked woman lying next to him had played a part as well. He'd probably lain there for half an hour doing mental gymnastics as he thought through the night before.

Eventually, he had gotten up and tried the other bed. They'd both been so drained they'd fallen fast asleep almost immediately, a fact he wasn't proud of. At no point had sleeping arrangements been discussed, so it seemed like the respectful thing to do. However, he discovered very quickly the frame and box spring were broken. Someone must have had an exceptionally wild party here. There was no way to lie on that mattress without fighting gravity and rolling off. Under normal circumstances, he'd have made it work, but he had to be real with himself. He'd pushed his still-healing body to the limits yesterday. Today would be long. He had to be kind to himself when and where he could.

By the time he'd showered and decided the best thing was to lie down with Jessica again, she'd been awake and wanted to shower as well. At that point, there was no reason not to get on the road.

So here they were.

An hour later.

And not more than a dozen words spoken between them apart from where to grab breakfast.

This was not great.

Jessica was not a woman who was ever at a loss for words. The fact that she hadn't said much had to mean that she wasn't thrilled with him. She might even hate him now. And here they'd finally sorted things out between them for like ten glorious hours. Probably not even that if he did the math right.

Fucking hell.

He'd replayed last night a dozen times already and while it was his every fantasy brought to life, he also knew he'd fucked up. Though he'd known exactly what they were doing and why he hadn't stopped himself. Jessica didn't understand. She was probably mired in a lot of emotions and confusion. And it was his fucking fault.

They had a thousand miles to cover today. That was at the very least sixteen hours between driving and stops, probably more with road delays and traffic. At some point, they'd have to talk.

Did he rip the bandage off now? Or wait? Would she feel unsafe and trapped after they talked? What was best for her?

The last thing he wanted to happen was Jessica needing to part ways with him because she felt unsafe. If it came down to it and she wanted to get as far from him as possible, he'd get out of the Jeep and make a call to Zora. It was a risk, but it kept Jessica moving and safe.

Colombia was fast approaching. It was a nice-sized college town. He'd studied the route yesterday while they ate. The best plan would be to wait until St. Louis where there was more city to get lost in. Plus, there would be an FBI field office there if he needed immediate assistance.

His mind continued to spin out of control. Baruti would chastise him for overthinking. This was what Samuel did. He rolled problems around in his head until they were chipped and smoothed down into an actionable first step. But that process might take hours or days.

He needed to make this right. Now.

“Jess?” he said and shifted in his seat.

She turned her head to look at him. “Hm?”

What the hell was he going to say?

He licked his lips and tightened his grip on the wheel. “About last night...”

The words he wanted to say slipped away, leaving him balancing on the edge of doom, all while every muscle in his body went tight.

“What about it?” Jessica asked slowly.

He just needed to start talking. She was smart. Brilliant even. She would understand him. Especially once he broke down exactly why things had happened. Then they could discuss it like rational, reasonable adults.

Fuck he was sweating through his shirt already.

“I don’t know how you’re feeling about what happened at the hotel, but I wanted to offer some context.” He glanced at her but found her face devoid of expression. Her hair had air dried, and he was surprised to learn that her normally straight hair had a gentle wave to it. “It’s completely natural after having a life-or-death experience like yesterday morning, that you would feel the need to do something life-affirming. Something that makes you feel alive. It’s actually very common for people to want to

have sex after going through something traumatic or a brush with death. It's a natural survival response."

Samuel eased his hold on the steering wheel. This wasn't going as poorly as he'd feared. He was getting the ideas out in a way that made sense instead of jumbled together. That much was a relief. He'd really been worried about botching this. This wasn't so bad. Sure he still wanted a sinkhole to open up under the Jeep and swallow him whole, but it could be worse. It could be a lot worse.

Now for the most painful part.

"I also want to apologize." He knew he should look at her, but he couldn't turn his head from the road. They were one of very few vehicles right now, so it wasn't a safety issue. He just couldn't look at her and say it. "I knew exactly what was going on in my head last night. I understood the psychology. I should have... I should have stopped us. I overstepped and I'm sorry."

Friday. I-70 Eastbound.

All the muscles in Jessica's body were tense to the point she was beginning to feel nauseated.

Talk about out of left field.

Here she'd been agonizing about her part in things, how she'd pretty much thrown herself at Samuel and steamrolled him into having sex with her. Granted, it wasn't like she'd had to convince him very much. They'd exchanged words. They'd had an understanding. And now he wanted to chalk it up to psychology?

What the actual fuck?

She couldn't think of a single damn thing to say to his diatribe.

Had he not wanted to have sex with her? Was that what this was about? Had she coerced him into it because his brain was sending mixed signals?

Here she'd been worried about coming on too strong. It was a regular criticism she received from men who preferred to be the ones initiating things. Which was why she really should have slowed down.

But...

Hadn't Samuel kissed her? Not the other way around?

Between stress and heightened emotions, it was hard to recall everything with clarity and she found herself second-guessing those memories.

Had she...?

Had she forced herself on him?

The very idea made her want to scrape her own skin off then boil herself in oil, to begin with. She prosecuted rape cases. They gave her nightmares and was the reason she'd made sure to go to therapy once a week so that she could keep doing her job the best way possible.

"Jess?"

"We're good." Her words were wooden and automatic.

She wanted to snatch them out of the air and stuff them back inside her mouth.

Page 39

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

They were not good. Not in the least.

What the fuck?

Had she allowed her ill-advised crush to go too far?

He had kissed her. She could remember mentally holding herself back, knowing she couldn't be the one to move first because her crush was bound to over-ride her good sense.

What did she say? Should she say anything?

Jessica wished she could open the door and take a walk. Some space could be ideal. A little breathing room so she could organize her thoughts and sort through her feelings. Instead, she was trapped in this box on wheels hurtling down the road.

She felt at the door until her fingers found the window button. She jabbed it and let the brisk, morning breeze slap her in the face. The air was heavy with morning dew and the scent of newly cut grass stirred up more pleasant memories.

Only, she'd smelled grass yesterday as well.

Jessica swallowed, but her throat was too tense.

“Stop the car,” she blurted out.

“What? Here?”

“Just stop the damn car.”

He pulled onto the narrow shoulder. The moment the Jeep was somewhat stopped, she threw open the passenger door and got out, sucking down oxygen. She staggered forward and into the grass. The ground sloped away from her to cultivated fields already sprouting with new crops.

She closed her eyes and breathed deep while her jumbled thoughts stopped moving.

Jessica often felt like her thoughts were all marbles and sometimes they rolled and shifted in her head, making it hard to keep track of them. Clearly, she'd taken the old saying about losing her marbles seriously as a kid.

Holy shit.

What was she supposed to say to all of that?

“Jess? Jessica?”

Her spine stiffened automatically, and she peered at Samuel out of the corner of her eye.

He stood at the front of the jeep wearing the basketball shorts and hoodie they'd bought last night. He was such a formal guy. The sport wear really didn't fit his personality. Robin had spilled the beans from the other ladies that Samuel around the office was stylish and impeccably dressed. That fit his personality so much better than this, and yet a part of her liked this fish-out-of-water side of him.

Damn it. What was wrong with her? After all that she was still just a horny bitch.

“Jess, what's wrong? Did I say something?”

“You said a lot of things!”

She turned and walked away from him, past the Jeep.

Yeah, things had been awkward this morning, but what morning after wasn't a little weird? She'd never realized this was where his head was.

“I'm sorry,” he said, sounding far closer than before.

She spun around. He was so close her left hand smacked his arm. She quickly held up her hands, keeping him at arm's length.

For once, his face wasn't a smooth, beautiful mask. His eyes were wide and his mouth moved.

“What I'm hearing in all of this is that you did not want to sleep with me and that I practically—God.” She pressed her hand to her stomach and bent forward. Just thinking about it was going to make her sick.

“That's not what I meant.”

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Really?” She straightened and gaped at him. “What’s playing in my head is, Jessica, did you force a guy to have sex with you last night? Because that’s what it sounds like. I’m going to be sick.”

“No! What? No, Jess. No.”

He took a step toward her and she threw her hand up. “I need you to be really fucking clear because this awkward morning after has me really close to completely losing my shit.”

“I thought you might have regrets... I thought you were the one who was mad at me.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“You weren’t saying anything...”

“It was four in the fucking morning when we got up. I’m not exactly chatty after a few hours of sleep. For fucks sake, Samuel.” She pressed a hand to her stomach and glanced around. It was not a good idea to be out in the middle of nowhere as a Black man and a white woman. One passerby getting the wrong idea, and they’d have a whole other issue on their hands.

“I’m sorry.”

She threw up her hands. “I’m sorry, too.”

A higher power needed to give her some mental fortitude to not strangle this man,

because right about now she wanted to. As if they didn't have enough problems.

"I want to drive," she announced and stalked around the Jeep.

Samuel didn't protest and wordlessly got in the passenger seat.

She checked the mirrors and adjusted the seat. There was a good eight inches of height difference between them. Once that was set, she eased them back onto the highway in a break in traffic.

"I swear to God, I want to throw something at you," she muttered. "Maybe next time you ask how I'm doing before you spin me up like that? Shit."

"You were quiet, I just..."

"Just? Samuel, we had an entire conversation about birth control, don't you think I was engaging my brain and making a decision then?"

"Yes."

She blew out a breath, gripped the wheel with both hands, and leaned back. "I think I kind of get what you were trying to say, but if I may offer some constructive criticism? A suggestion?"

"Please."

She turned her head and looked at him. "Ask how I'm doing before you assume shit. Ask! Engage in some fucking conversation. I didn't need you to explain how we had sex and give me a complex about being too forward."

He nodded.

Jessica needed to separate herself from her emotions. This had to be handled right now, so she did what she always did when a case became disturbing. She wrapped a mental hand around her marbles and pushed them away, distancing herself from the intense feelings coursing through her right now.

“Did you or did you not want to have sex?” she asked.

Samuel shifted in his seat, a clear sign he was not at all comfortable.

Well, too fucking bad.

“Jess—”

“Yes or no, Samuel. Just yes or no.”

He sucked in a breath while she held hers.

“Yes,” he said in an unwavering voice.

With one word he lanced the toxic knot of emotions right out of her, but the one word didn't soothe the sting.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Then why apologize?” she asked.

“Because I knew neither of us were in our right mind.”

Jessica thought back through last night. At any point had she confessed her feelings to him?

She couldn't recall. Without that information, without some knowledge that she'd been harboring a crush on him for weeks, she could understand his own mental gymnastics.

“In the interest of salvaging whatever this is, Samuel?” She glanced at him, frustrated she couldn't have this conversation face to face. “I have had a crush on you almost since the very beginning. I have watched you do yoga and had some very adult ideas, okay? Do you still think I made an emotional decision based on trauma? Only on trauma, I should say.”

“You—what?” He gaped at her, looking a lot like the one fish they'd caught on their excursion. “I thought...”

“You thought I hated you? Yeah, we covered that yesterday. At least I thought we did. I swear... It makes so much sense why I like you. So much sense it's laughable.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“We both over-think everything, the only difference is that I'll talk your ear off while I over-think myself to death and you're over there just digging us both a damn hole.

Are we going to bury ourselves in this hole?"

Samuel sputtered a laugh.

"I'm so glad you can laugh right now because I'm still not okay. Sweet baby Jesus, do you realize that my head went to, did I make this guy have sex with me?"

"No," he said quickly.

She blew out a breath. Again. Deep breathing was her go-to at this point.

He turned to face her, and damn if she didn't squirm as the full power of that gaze was laid on her. "I... I really just wanted to clear the air. Make things okay. And you didn't make me do anything. I kissed you first."

"Thank you! I was beginning to wonder if I remembered it all wrong. If it was all in my head." She glanced at him, still frustrated they couldn't pause and have this conversation face-to-face. "I genuinely like you, Samuel. Yes, we aren't always going to agree about things, but you on a basic, human level? I think you're a really good person. And you tried to save my friend and got hurt in the process. That's like an instant I'm-going-to-crush-on-you combo. You're attractive. We have similar ideals and drives. We're in careers that are parallel. Did I mention you're hot?"

"You said attractive the first time."

"Okay, well, they're both true. But my point is, fuck your reasoning. Under completely normal circumstances I needed no encouragement to willingly have sex with you. None. Just a green light."

Oh. My. God. She had to stop talking before she started digging this hole.

“May I ask a question?”

She tossed her head back. “Please! Let’s have a fucking conversation instead.”

Unlike her over-the-top reactions, he was quiet for a moment. He sat with his shoulder against the door and most of his attention on her, though he did glance at the road and mirrors every few moments.

“Why did you automatically go to, you forced me?” he asked.

She groaned and almost banged her head on the wheel. Almost. There were more cars on the road now and the last thing they needed was an incident.

Jessica drew in a calming breath and gripped the wheel with both hands. “A reoccurring criticism I receive from men is that I’m too forward.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I emasculate men because I don’t always wait for them to make the first move.”

He blinked at her a few times as if they weren’t speaking the same language. “How is that a problem?”

“Thank you! It shouldn’t be. It does help me weed out the guys who are not going to be okay with me being more successful than they are, but it also sucks to hear that over and over and over again.”

“I’m thinking the problem isn’t you and more about where you’re picking up men. Shit.”

“So maybe you understand why my head just spun right off? Granted, I probably

overreacted back there. I tend to do things like that when I haven't had a lot of sleep.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“I do understand. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

A gas station sign came into view ahead.

She glanced at Samuel. “I don’t want to drive anymore. I know. I’m sorry. I wanted to be in control, now I just... I don’t. I’m sorry I overreacted. I’m sorry I yelled. I’m sorry, okay? Want to fill up and trade back?”

“Sure.”

Did he think she was totally out of her mind now? Because she felt like she was spinning out. Maybe she wasn’t just reacting to this morning, but everything in the last twenty-four hours?

Jessica pulled the Jeep into the gas station parking lot and stopped at a pump. Samuel was out while she was still sitting boneless behind the wheel, exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster of the last—what? Ten freaking minutes?

The driver’s side door opened and Samuel braced his hands on the top of the Jeep. She turned her face up to look at him.

“I could use a nap now,” she said.

“You should try to sleep then.”

She shook her head. “What are you going to over-think while I sleep? No, thank you. We just made that mistake.”

He chuckled and shook his head. "I want to crawl under a rock right now. I did not mean to cause a problem."

"You'd crawl under a rock and leave me alone right now? How cruel are you?" She turned so that her legs dangled and she faced him. "Are we okay? Because I woke up pretty optimistic about things and now I feel all over the place. I guess what I'm really saying is, please reassure me everything is okay, sir."

"I'm taking it all in. I was not expecting to hear you say the attraction was mutual, so I'm processing. But, everything should be okay. And next time I think something is wrong, we'll talk about it."

"That's fair. Do you regret...?"

"No."

Wow.

He didn't even hesitate.

The last of her rawness was soothed away with one simple word.

Jessica slid off the driver's seat. There wasn't much room between the Jeep and the pump for the two of them. Only a few inches separated their bodies, but it felt like an ocean.

"Can I have a hug?" she asked. Given this little misunderstanding, asking seemed better than assuming.

Samuel pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. She slid hers around his waist and laid her cheek on his shoulder, sighing as a sense of rightness wrapped

around her. For such a stiff guy, this was the perfect hug. Not too tight, but she wasn't going to escape his embrace either. One hand slid up her back then down, and with each pass, she felt the tension leaking out of her.

There was no doubt she was still reeling a little, but she could also acknowledge that in a sense, Samuel was right. Stress and trauma did things to the mind and body. For her, last night had been the calm within the storm. Being with Samuel like that wasn't something she wanted to regret. But she could also fess up that her over-reaction was more than likely directly connected to ongoing trauma from yesterday. Because they still had no closure. They weren't safe. Everything could go to hell in an instant.

Jessica eased back, fully aware that she could probably live quite happily in Samuel's arms. She'd admired those biceps and shoulders long enough, it was more than enjoyable to feel them wrapped around her again.

His hands came to gently clasp her arms, keeping her close.

"I don't know what happens next..."

"Well, still pumping gas so you can adjust the seat, or..." Was she going to? When had she ever not? "You could kiss me."

His brows rose, but otherwise, his expression remained the same.

Damn him and his iron-clad poker face. She'd figure out his tell eventually, or how to ruffle his feathers. More than anything, she was enjoying the freedom of being able to just watch him because she wanted to. He was so handsome.

And he still wasn't saying anything. Was he honestly surprised at her suggestion? Did she need to make the man a gold-embossed invitation?

Samuel slid one hand up her arm to her shoulder then her cheek.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

She curled her toes in her sneakers and stopped breathing all while marbles shot around in her head.

His breath fanned across her skin a moment before he pressed his lips to hers in a gentle, sweet kiss—that was over too damn soon.

That was okay.

Just because she was a jump into the deep end kind of girl didn't mean that was how he operated. Pumping the brakes was a good idea, all things considered. What mattered was that from here on, they were together. In every sense of the word. Because if she were truly honest with herself, she'd fallen for Samuel before meeting him. She just needed to bide her time and tell him later. Much, much later.

Chapter Eight

Friday. Undisclosed, London, UK.

Maxwell pressed the phone to his ear. He'd already wanted to reach through the phone and rip out the man's throat for keeping him waiting a whole damn day. During their briefing, Maxwell had been pretty fucking clear about what he wanted and expected from the team he'd hired to handle this issue with the nosey woman poking into his business. He'd laid out his expectations, so by all accounts, he had the right to be wholly pissed off because this phone call should have happened yesterday. Not today. Bloody yesterday.

“Explain to me why it has been twenty-four fucking hours of silence?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the American on the other end said in his thick, muddy accent.

“Sorry? Sorry? How is that a reason? I want a fucking reason!”

“There were problems, sir. We wanted to handle them before we briefed you.”

Maxwell’s stomach knotted up. “What does that mean? What problems?”

Silence.

He pulled the phone away from his face to make sure the call hadn’t dropped.

“Well?” he snapped.

“The targets are missing,” the man said.

“What?” Maxwell roared.

“They’re missing. We moved in just like we told you, using the storm for cover. We blindsided their security detail and proceeded into the recovery facility, but there was only one woman there.”

“What did she say? Did she know where they were?”

“She died before we could question her.”

“She—what? You dumb cunts fucked this all up? How? It was such a simple bloody job.”

Maxwell was wasting precious breath.

These mercenaries weren't worth what he'd paid, and he was sure as hell not making the second payment.

He hung up without another word.

What was the point?

At best, they'd tried and failed to find the woman nosing about in his business. If she were dead, they'd have led with that to appease him.

Damn it.

He set the phone down on his desk and stalked to the windows to stare out over the city.

This was one, minor hiccup. Honestly he should have left it up to someone else, but given how much of a pain the Americans were being he'd wanted to take a personal approach. Not that he was going to make Daar's mistake and go to the US himself. Hell no.

In the grand scheme of things, one woman didn't matter all that much. It was the chaos of the world playing him like a fiddle, as the saying went. It was time to take a page out of Daar's book.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He was going to sit back and watch the show. One woman didn't matter.

Friday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA.

Samuel had always enjoyed going to work. His life was his job. He took pride in that. But today as the old grain depot came into view, he was relieved. And so damn glad. His eyelids were doing their best to stick to his eyeballs. He had a cramp in his left shoulder for no reason that made it hard to breathe. But most of all? He'd finally be able to tell himself that Jessica was safe. He'd gotten her somewhere he knew she'd be looked after by people they could trust.

There was always the chance that they had another mole. It was hard to believe that Nadine and the two people she'd killed were the only ones given how sophisticated their enemy was. To that extent, they'd made a lot of changes, not the least of which was their location.

After their headquarters had been destroyed in the wake of Nadine's betrayal, Zora had moved the Task Force here. On the outside, it was an old grain depot. The tracks had long-since been overgrown rendering the place useless. Its weather-worn exterior was both a defensive structure but also camouflage. The insides were a completely different story.

He didn't know how long the NSA or whoever was behind this place had been developing it, but inside and under the old grain depot was a state-of-the-art command center like something out of a Cold War-era movie.

"Where are we?" Jessica asked, her tone weary.

“Safe.”

He turned away from the grain depot and wound through the sleepy town on the outskirts of DC. He turned into the parking garage of an office building and slowly let the Jeep descend into darkness, winding his way lower and lower until they reached the very bottom.

Jessica sat up and peered around them. “What is this place?”

He kept circling until the tunnel came into view.

“Samuel?”

“This is our headquarters.”

That perked her up. “Seriously?”

“It should go without saying but, you never saw this place, okay?”

She had her nose pressed to the window, though all there was to see was concrete and a tunnel of darkness broken every twenty or so yards by lights.

“This place looks like a horror movie set,” Jessica muttered.

“Good news for you then, the Black characters usually die first.”

She whipped around scowling. “Don’t say that. It is too soon for death jokes, Samuel. Not. Fucking. Funny.”

Her reaction caught him off-guard. He held out his right hand, and she took it immediately. They’d done this from time to time while driving, but this was the first

time reaching for her felt natural. As if he'd been holding onto her his whole life.

"I was just trying to lighten the mood," he said.

"Yeah, well, I'm feeling very sensitive today. Try that joke again tomorrow and I might laugh." She screwed up her mouth and squinted. "Though if you think about it, if we were in a horror movie I'm so much more likely to be the first one dead. You know how to use a gun and defend yourself. I... Yeah, no. I'd be the first one dead."

He smothered his chuckle. Of course, Jessica would take his words seriously and rationalize through the scenario. She might be sunshine and light and laughter, but her mind was razor-sharp.

The very idea of losing her, even in a fictional sense, didn't sit well with him.

Samuel grimaced and squeezed her hand. "Yeah, I see what you mean. Too soon for that joke."

"How long does this go on for?" she asked.

"Three miles." He shook his head. "I don't know how they pulled this off without anyone finding out about it."

"Right? How much did they pay the construction crew to not say anything?" She curled one leg under her and cradled his hand against her thigh. "It's almost midnight. Is anyone going to be here?"

"Security will, for sure. Other than that, I don't know. It's not unusual for people to work night shifts depending on what they're working on. Given that the Aegis team is in Europe, chances are high that support staff is on-site should they need assistance."

“Wow. Anyone I know work here?”

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“You met Kelsey and Diha, didn’t you?”

“And Logan. He came by with Kelsey once or twice. And a really talkative pair...”

“Cat and Felecia?”

“That sounds right, but it’s fuzzy. One of them had reddish hair. Is Robin around?”

“The red head will be Cat. Robin should be close by.”

Samuel was dreading Jessica joining the office girl gang. He’d been working with Kelsey for years, so he was accustomed to her brusque, no-nonsense ways. He’d thought he’d been ready for this new office environment.

Truth was, no one was ready for when the girls got together. Some trouble always cropped up around them.

At long last, he pulled into the garage parking for the grain depot. There were more than a dozen cars present, including Zora’s.

Shit.

It wasn’t likely a good sign if Zora was at the office at midnight.

Four figures in black were positioned behind concrete barricades set a few feet from the reinforced security doors granting entry to the facility.

Samuel knew the moment Jessica saw the guards.

She pressed herself back into her seat and cried, “Oh my God!”

“Relax,” she said softly. “It’s just security. They don’t know it’s us.”

He shifted the Jeep into park then flipped off the headlights. With little to no light, the cameras probably hadn’t been able to identify them on approach so the caution made sense. He lowered his window and waved his hands.

Immediately the four guards lowered their weapons.

They were all on edge after losing their own.

“Stay here for a moment,” he said.

Jessica stared at him with wide, worried eyes.

“They’re just going to verify who we are and call Zora. Everything’s okay now,” he said.

“Okay,” she muttered and squeezed his arm. “But if anyone hurts you, I’m going to have Robin’s boyfriend kick their butt.”

Samuel sputtered a laugh, but it took him a few more moments to peel back the layers on that look and her words. Jessica wasn’t concerned about herself. She was worried about him with the same tenacity as she expressed over Robin.

He wasn’t used to being the object of concern for anyone.

Before emotion overwhelmed him with this realization, he opened his door and

stepped out.

One of the security detail approached him while the others watched from behind the concrete.

“Samuel Jenkins, FBI.”

“Jenkins?” The security guard’s body jolted in surprise and he quickly closed the distance while grabbing his radio. “Who is with you?”

“Jessica Chapin.”

“You’re both alive?” the man asked then spoke into the radio. “Samuel Jenkins and Jessica Chapin for clearance.”

“What?” an astonished voice crackled from the radio. “Escort them to Ms. Clark, immediately.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“On it,” the guard said.

“Is everything okay?” Samuel asked slowly.

The man was decked out in tactical gear from head to toe. Samuel couldn't see so much as a bit of skin or identifying features. He had no idea who he was talking to or why they were astonished, he was alive.

“We were told you were presumed dead,” the man said. “The both of you.”

Friday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA.

Jessica surreptitiously pinched her inner arm while pretending to scratch her wrist.

Nope.

Not dreaming.

This place was out of a movie. She wasn't sure what kind of movie yet, because that long, ominous tunnel had fueled horror movie vibes, but given the job they were here to do, she could see suspense. Either way, this stuff was on a whole other level of secure.

Her muscles and joints were protesting the brisk pace after more than sixteen hours spent in the Jeep. Just as she'd expected, her ankle wasn't as tender after being off it for a whole day. But she really was looking forward to a bed and being able to breathe without feeling the iron vise of anxiety.

“Is Zora here?” Samuel asked after they’d walked for a moment in silence.

Clearly whoever designed the place liked long halls and tunnels. Though if Jessica thought about it, the long stretches didn’t allow for any cover. If someone intended to break-in, the defenders would be entrenched and set up to repel an attack while causing heavy losses.

Was Samuel rubbing off on her? Because this was not something she’d have thought about before.

She snuck a glance at his profile.

What would work-Samuel be like? How would entering the sphere of his career change him? And them?

They hadn’t actually discussed what they were after this morning. She’d been too raw after the misunderstanding. The more she sat with those memories, the more she realized her reaction hadn’t been as much about his words as everything else all lumped together. She’d appreciated the tender side of him today, holding her hand, small touches, his attempts to lighten the mood.

She hoped that didn’t stop simply because they’d arrived here, though she knew everything would more than likely change now.

What if this was a fling for him?

Jessica swallowed and mentally set aside that concern. She was obsessing about Samuel because it was something she could control. To an extent. Unlike literally everything else.

Eventually, they turned right at a T-intersection. She noted what looked like big,

metal barn doors that slid into the walls. If the world went to hell, she knew where she was coming to hunker down.

They wound their way through the building and a few open work areas. There were a handful of people diligently working despite the hour. None of them glanced up at their small group. Not until they passed through a set of double doors to a bustling, bright room. People were on phones, squinting at their computers, or watching the spread of six TVs showing... Okay, she had no idea what they were looking at.

And in the middle of it all was the ever-elegant Zora Clark.

Jessica had met her twice, and each time left her in awe of the woman.

Zora turned toward them, eyes wide. "Are you ever a sight for sore eyes!"

The security detail did an about-face and left without another word, their job done.

Samuel stepped forward leaving Jessica no other option but to follow. She felt incredibly frumpy and gross standing next to Zora in her impeccably tailored navy suit and pearls.

Zora's wide-eyed gaze swung toward Jessica. "I can't believe you're both here. Are either of you hurt?"

"Just bumps and bruises," Jessica said.

Zora glanced between them, mouth open, eyes wide.

Jessica held up her hands. "We aren't ghosts, I swear."

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Sorry.” Zora smiled ruefully. “I just... I didn’t expect to see either of you again.”

“Was it that bad?” Samuel asked softly.

Zora glanced around. Most people were focused on their own work, but several people were watching them.

“Come to my office,” Zora said and turned.

Samuel’s hand pressed against the small of Jessica’s back. A wave of warmth swept her as they followed in Zora’s wake. His hand fell away, but it didn’t change the fact that it put a little smile on Jessica’s face.

Maybe this wasn’t a fling?

She had no idea how they got to Zora’s office. The halls seemed designed to confuse a person, which Jessica supposed was the purpose.

Zora’s office was stark and white with little pops of color on the bookcases. Her glass desk was regal, right out of a magazine, and covered in stacks of files.

“We thought you were dead,” Zora said the moment the door closed.

Samuel inclined his head. “We thought we were, too.”

“What happened?” Jessica asked. “I know we were there, but we left so fast... Is Maureen okay?”

Zora glanced at Samuel and Jessica's stomach sank.

"Why don't we sit down?" Samuel suggested.

Zora gestured for them to use the small seating area in the corner. The four peacock blue armchairs were clustered around a circular table. Jessica sank into the closest one and felt as though exhaustion were crashing down on her head. She could pass out here and now with very little encouragement.

"There's no easy way to say this." Zora unbuttoned her suit jacket and leaned back, crossing one leg over the other. "Everyone died."

"Shit," Samuel muttered.

Jessica could only sit there in shock. She'd guessed as much, though she'd hoped for a better outcome.

Zora continued. "We assumed the two of you were taken or dead. The grounds were completely destroyed, leaving no evidence. All we have are some garbled transmissions before they took out the security system."

Samuel leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and rubbed his face.

"I'm glad the two of you survived. What happened?" Zora asked.

Samuel related the last two days while Jessica was still taking it all in.

Poor Maureen...

Had their attackers known about the pageant? Had that played into their time and date?

“It’s a miracle you made it,” Zora said, bringing Jessica back to the present.

“And you don’t have anything on them?” Samuel asked.

Zora shook her head. “No, but I’m hoping the Jeep tells us something.”

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” Jessica blurted out.

Both Zora and Samuel turned to look at her.

Jessica could feel her face heating. “I kept looking into Maxwell Edward despite Samuel telling me to stop.”

“It’s a strong possibility,” Zora replied. “But I wouldn’t say it’s your fault. We cannot accept responsibility for the actions of bad people. We can plan and mitigate what they might do, but we cannot let their actions dictate how we proceed. Otherwise, they’re in charge.”

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Jessica resisted the urge to rub her chest. It had become a habit whenever she felt deeply. Anything that touched her heart, it felt as though her scars ached. It was all in her head and she knew it. Still, she hurt for those lost lives.

Samuel nodded at her. “Jessica still has her laptop. It’s the only thing we escaped with. I’m thinking she was close to something Edward didn’t want revealed.”

She swallowed and set the backpack on her lap. It was a miracle the water hadn’t damaged it.

Zora’s gaze came to rest on Jessica. “I’m aware of your investigation. I must confess, I didn’t think that highly of what you were doing. I assumed your contacts would be sketchy at best. It turns out I was wrong about you.”

Jessica felt as though a microscope had been aimed directly at her. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling.

“I’d be interested in looking at what you’ve uncovered,” Zora said.

Jessica set the laptop on her thighs. “I can give you what I have.”

Finally!

She’d offered before but received nothing but silence as a reply.

“That would be ideal. Diha can do an initial analysis. She should be in early today, while you two are still resting. I imagine you’re both in need of some sleep, food, and

hot showers.”

Jessica groaned. “Yes, please.”

Zora grabbed a pen and a sticky note off the coffee table in front of them. She jotted something down then handed it to Jessica. “My email. Samuel can get you connected to the Wi-Fi to send it. I propose the two of you make use of the quarters here. I can get Baruti and Robin to bring you whatever you need in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Samuel said. “I think we’re both at our limit.”

“Do you need a doctor? How are you both healing up?”

“I’m good,” he said. “My routine was mostly vitamins and working on adding in exercise, getting my core strength back up.”

“I’m good, too,” Jessica said, ignoring Samuel’s scowl.

“Your heart though?” he asked.

She glanced at him, choosing to find his attentiveness adorable instead of utterly annoying. “It’s still undecided if the damage to the valve needs surgery or not. It’s why I’m not cleared for anything more strenuous than walking until the doctors pronounce me completely healed. Slow and steady recovery. That’s the plan.”

There would be stress tests later, but she didn’t want to get into that.

“Have you eaten?” Zora asked.

“On the road.” Samuel glanced at Jessica. “I just want to sleep. You?”

Her shoulder's slumped, and she nodded. "Stretching and sleep."

"I won't keep you then." Zora stood.

"Is the team okay?" Jessica asked in a rush before they were kicked out.

Zora glanced at Samuel then Jessica. "They're fine."

She didn't think she'd get more of an answer out of Zora, so Jessica smiled and said her thanks. Samuel promised he'd show her the available accommodations then they were dismissed. It wasn't an outright dismissal, but Jessica recognized it for what it was.

Samuel led the way back out into the confusing warren of halls. They were alone, and Jessica felt as though the last of her strength was just sucked out of her. She glanced up at Samuel and found him looking at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She frowned. "Nothing is never nothing."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He began walking, leading her down yet another uniformly painted hallway. “I’m just impressed by you is all.”

“What did I do now?”

“Most people in your shoes would want to say, I told you so.”

Jessica shook her head. “No way. I don’t give two shits who was right. I only care about the end result. Okay, not entirely true. There are a few circumstances where I’d say that, but never to anyone I want a good, working relationship with. I genuinely don’t care if I turn out to be right. What other people do or how they chose to be petty, that’s their choice and it speaks to where their priorities are. I only care about making this stop, you know? I try as best I can to keep my ego out of my work because it’s not about me. It’s about helping other people. And, if I’m honest, I also know that my last name works against me. People who know about my family before they meet me have certain ideas about what I’m like.”

“Like you said, that says more about them than you.”

Samuel kept glancing at her with this strange look. Like he hadn’t really seen her before. But none of this was new to him.

Whatever.

She just wanted to sleep.

“Where are we staying?” she asked.

“There are studio apartments here. I believe the original intent was to also make this place a bomb shelter if need be. So there are a number of apartments, though only a few are furnished.”

“Fascinating.” She’d want more answers, but later. “Are you going to stay? Or do you live close by?”

“I moved to the area, but I suspect my place is being watched.”

“Oh, yeah... That makes sense...”

Samuel’s tone changed and his voice dropped nearly a whole octave. “Your heart? Is it really okay?”

Jessica resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Yes. The plan really is to wait and see. When they went in to repair the ricochet damage, I guess something didn’t heal quite right. It’s all speculation unless they go in there, and I really don’t want to sign up for exploratory surgery I don’t have to have.”

“You’ll tell me if you aren’t okay? If something’s wrong? You won’t try and push through?”

She huffed, initially annoyed. But, would he ask these things if he didn’t care?

That made her mentally pause.

Samuel paused in front of a door that looked exactly like all the others.

“Here we are...”

He swung the door open and flipped on the light.

The room was square-shaped with a dividing wall halfway down the middle separating what appeared to be a kitchenette space from a queen-sized bed. Curtains could be pulled aside to offer some privacy, leaving a small sitting area and desk.

“Wow.” Jessica stepped through the door and peered around. “This is nicer than I was expecting.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Samuel now leaning against the wall and all at once the memories of last night surfaced.

If only she wasn't dead on her feet.

Samuel scratched his jaw and stared at—her shoulder? He wouldn't quite meet her gaze.

“Would it be okay if I stayed with you?” he asked. “I'm not after anything, I just have this reoccurring fear in the back of my head that it was all a dream and I'll wake up...”

Jessica crossed to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Yes. Please? I don't want to be alone, either.”

Chapter Nine

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Saturday. Task Force Headquarters,

Samuel stared at the shadowy form of Jessica's body still swathed in the thick, plush comforter. She'd barely stirred when he'd gotten out of bed. He still didn't know if leaving her to rest was the best idea.

What if she woke up and panicked because she was alone?

He wasn't sure this was the right thing to do, but he couldn't bring himself to wake her. He stepped out into the hall and shut the door as quietly as possible.

"Sneaking around, bro?" a deep voice asked.

Samuel jumped and spun, scowling at the too familiar face of the man leaning against the wall.

Baruti Wimbush grinned back at him with a smile that belonged on a magazine. He was a big guy who would look right at place on any NFL team, and yet he was one of the gentlest people Samuel had ever met.

Baruti's gaze traveled the length of Samuel's body then back up. "Look at you."

He resisted rolling his eyes, only because it would encourage Baruti. "Shut it. Did you bring my clothes?"

He fell into step with Samuel as they began to walk toward the locker rooms. "I did. I did. Left it in our office. You and Jessica, huh?"

What could he say to that?

Samuel hadn't wanted to put more on his plate yesterday. His priority had to be their safety, so he'd pushed the complicated relationship with Jessica to the side. She hadn't tried to discuss the issue either, and while he didn't know what exactly they were to each other, he knew that so long as they were both breathing they could figure it out later.

He'd just made the mistake of thinking he would have time to process and plan without outside input.

Baruti shoved his hands in his pockets and kept pace with Samuel. "She's a mighty fine woman."

"I'm not talking about Jess."

"Oh, it's Jess now, is it?"

Fucking hell.

Samuel schooled his face into a mask.

"Don't do that." Baruti jabbed his elbow into Samuel's ribs. "I don't even remember your last girlfriend and quite honestly I'm tired of telling all our friends you aren't gay and I won't set them up with you."

He aimed a flat stare at Baruti.

That wasn't a joke. His words were very real.

Baruti and his husband had created their own little cluster of community in New

York. It was why he continued to commute every few days to see his children. Samuel lived with them for a time and had spent a number of holidays with them when they were still based out of Manhattan and considered them family.

“Would you not?” Samuel finally asked as they stepped into the office they shared.

Baruti closed the door behind them and gestured to the suit hanging on the hook. “What? She’s a pretty lady.”

Samuel blew out a breath. “Because other things are more important right now.”

“The heart is always important, my friend.”

The only person he could talk to about this was Baruti. “There isn’t anything to tell you. Yet.”

Baruti just grinned in response.

Samuel pulled his hoodie over his head then tossed it on his desk chair. It would feel good to wear a suit again. More like himself.

“The face you’re making? It says there is something to talk about,” Baruti said in a sing-song voice.

“Not with you there isn’t.”

“Oh, come now. Don’t be like that!”

Samuel pulled the undershirt over his head then unbuttoned the white dress shirt from the hanger. “She is an infuriatingly brilliant, beautiful woman. And I’m glad we both survived the last two days. Anything else is a conversation for her and I to have later. This doesn’t involve you.”

“Infuriatingly brilliant, beautiful woman.” Baruti nodded slowly. “She sounds like exactly your type. I’m looking forward to meeting her again.”

Samuel stifled a groan and focused on getting dressed.

They’d survived two days, but that was just the beginning. Maxwell Edward knew who Jessica was now. The threat wasn’t over. If Samuel wanted the time to explore and consider what a relationship with her might look like, he needed to do the work to protect her. Because the more time he spent around Jessica, the more he found to like.

She’d surprised him, truth be told.

He’d been completely wrong about her and Robin. He’d never been happier about fucking up in his life, because they were both wonderful people.

Samuel turned to face his partner.

“You look like a king,” Baruti said with a grin.

“Shut it, you. Where are we? What can I do?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I was hoping you’d have learned how to relax a little.”

Samuel just glared at Baruti. “I’ve been sitting on my ass for two months.”

“Actually, you were in a hospital bed for the first part.”

“I’m going to put you in a hospital bed if you don’t stop.”

Baruti threw his head back and howled with laughter.

Samuel smiled. He’d missed this banter. But part of him was still uneasy. There was so much to do and so much to protect.

Saturday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA

“Jess? Jessica!”

Jessica pried her eyes open. They felt like they were glued shut. She was also acutely aware that something wasn’t... Right?

“Jess?”

She rolled over and stretched her feet, pointing her toes up to her hips as best she could until the back of her ankles and calves protested.

Robin.

That was Robin's voice.

But Robin was halfway across the country, and Jessica...

She sat up in bed as reality crashed into her skull, playing the last two days like a movie. The attack. Maureen's screams. Running and sliding through the rain. Stealing the Jeep. That night at the motel with Samuel...

Samuel!

The door to the apartment creaked open as Jessica felt across the sheets for his form, only to be met with cool material and no Samuel.

"Jessica!"

The curtain separating the bed from the rest of the space was thrown back. Jessica blinked as Robin shone her phone's light in her face.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Shit,” Jessica croaked and held up a hand.

Robin threw herself onto the bed, wrapping her arms around Jessica as she sobbed. They were thrown back onto the surprisingly comfortable bed. Jessica winced as something hard and unyielding was driven into her chest, but she did her best to say nothing as Robin clung to her.

Zora had said they’d assumed both Jessica and Samuel were dead.

No wonder Robin was beside herself with grief.

Jessica peered across the mattress. There was no sign that Samuel had slept there. But she remembered putting on a clean pair of sweats before getting into bed and him holding her. They had a lot to talk about and figure out, in time. But last night they’d both needed comfort and sleep. Despite how exhausted she’d been, she’d dozed then started awake several times. If it weren’t for Samuel’s presence, she might have succumbed to the nightmares.

It would have been rather awkward if he were still there now. Last Jessica had spoken to Robin they still hadn’t been on great terms.

“I really need you to get off me,” Jessica said. “Are you trying to stab me with your phone?”

“Sorry.” Robin rolled off Jessica to lie next to her. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“You might have cracked a rib.”

“Not funny.”

“I’m being serious.” Okay, Jessica wasn’t entirely serious about that, but the ache in her chest was a stark reminder that she had to take it easy. She was damn lucky things hadn’t turned out worse. “What time is it?”

“Almost eleven, I think.”

“What?” She rolled to her side. No wonder Samuel was gone. And he’d just left her to sleep?

“Zora called me to let me know you were here and to bring you some stuff.” Robin shoved Samuel’s pillow under her head. The phone lay between them, casting a pillar of light. “I can’t believe you came all this way without letting anyone know you were okay.”

“We didn’t know if it was safe.”

Robin grimaced, which was somehow still adorable on her. “That makes sense... So, what happened? Zora wouldn’t say...”

Jessica launched into a kinder retelling of events. She left things out and glossed over the unsavory parts. Robin had been through enough. She didn’t need more guilt heaped on her.

“Oh, my God, that’s awful,” Robin whispered.

Jessica chewed her lip. Robin was the one person she wanted to tell about Samuel, but how did she start that conversation? And where was he? Didn’t he know it was cruel to leave without saying goodbye? Why did he get to go to work and not her?

“Knock, knock,” another familiar voice called out from the opening door.

Did people just walk into apartments around here like this?

“Kelsey?” Robin sat up.

“No, it’s the muffin man.”

“Will you turn the light on, Mr. Muffin Man?” Jessica asked.

“Haa. Haa.” The overhead lights came to life. “I brought friends.”

“What?” Jessica blinked at the curtain.

The fabric was drawn aside and five women stood on the other side. There was Kelsey, barely over five feet still sporting a spiky pixie haircut. Her broad, Polynesian features made her grin seem too large for her small face. Next to her was Diha, looking elegant as always in her flowing, Indian tunic and pants. Her long, dark braid was adorned with a ribbon running through it today. The red head, Cat, was just closing the apartment door behind the two Jessica didn’t know on sight.

“Sorry to barge in on you like this,” Kelsey said and crossed her arms over her chest.

“These slackers wanted to tag along.”

“Hi.” A woman with wavy hair waved at Jessica. “We never met. I’m Felecia.”

A petite Asian woman came to stand next to Diha. “I’m Candi and I tagged along because I’m nosey.”

Page 53

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Wow.” Jessica stared around at the women and pushed up to lean against the wall. “Well, this is one way to wake up.”

Cat leaned an arm on Candi’s shoulder. “I heard Baruti giving Samuel a lot of shit this morning. Know anything about that?”

Well. Shit.

“Samuel and Jess don’t really get along,” Robin said.

Jessica steeled herself and charged ahead. “That’s not entirely true...”

Robin’s head whipped around. “What?”

Cat plopped onto the foot of the bed. “Oh, storytime!”

“I’m going to want to hear this,” Kelsey agreed and came to sit on Jessica’s side of the bed.

Within moments the queen bed was almost completely covered with people. And Jessica had no idea what to say if she should say anything, or what was happening. So she went with the truth.

“Samuel and I are... Friends. I think,” Jessica said.

Cat arched a brow at her. “Friends?”

“That’s pretty good given how you two were at each other’s throats,” Robin chimed in.

Jessica cringed. “I wouldn’t say we were at each other’s throats.”

Robin gaped at her and Jessica knew immediately that she’d said the wrong thing.

Kelsey threw up her hands. “I can’t see Samuel butting heads with anyone. He’s just too nice.”

“I have to disagree,” Felecia said slowly. “He didn’t like me.”

“Well...” Kelsey opened and closed her mouth. “You’re weird.”

Felecia shrugged. “That’s the truth.”

What was that story?

Robin continued to stare at the side of Jessica’s head.

“Samuel and I argued a lot, and I had occasionally strong feelings about him, but we talked it out while we drove.” She shrugged and pulled her knees up to her chest. ”

“That sounds like Samuel,” Kelsey said.

Jessica was acutely aware of Robin staring at her. With any luck, she wouldn’t say anything until they were alone.

Diha held up her hand, as if this was an orderly class and not chaos. “Not to be the one to break up the party, but... I do actually need your assistance. I am verifying the intelligence you gave Zora and had some questions.”

Felecia groaned loudly.

“Girls can’t ever just have fun,” Candi muttered.

Jessica seized on the opportunity to change the subject. “Yeah, how can I help?”

“When you’ve had something to eat and are up for it, will you come to the lab?” Diha asked.

“Of course.” Jessica glanced down at the sweatshirt she’d worn to sleep in. The temperature down here underground was rather cool.

“I brought you a few things,” Robin said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“It’s almost lunchtime.” Cat held up her phone. “What if we just ordered lunch and did a briefing while we ate?”

Diha frowned. “I don’t know...”

“Oh, it’ll be great,” Cat insisted.

Robin leaned closer to Jessica while the others were distracted. “We aren’t done talking about you and Samuel. What the heck, Jess?”

Jessica flopped over on her side, closing the distance. “When we’re alone? I’ve got to talk to you.”

Robin nodded and her features relaxed into an easy smile.

One thing was certain, Jessica needed to talk this out with someone and Robin was her go-to girl.

Chapter Ten

Saturday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA

Samuel re-read the email one more time. Despite being looped in through email and calls, he was behind on so much else. Baruti could only help so much because of his ongoing duties supporting the team currently in Europe.

It was frustrating to go from being in the middle of the action to sidelined. He still

couldn't do much, but he was determined to pull his weight. Which was easier said than done considering that at least once every half-hour he had to pause, wonder how Jessica was doing, then convince himself to go back to work.

He'd been doing this for more than eight hours at this point, and he was damn tired of it.

Was she okay? Had she slept well?

She'd kicked him once during the middle of the night. He'd woken to her jerking about in her sleep, clearly distraught. He'd whispered to her and held her tighter. Eventually, she'd calmed back down and he'd fallen asleep, but he hadn't forgotten waking up to her pained whimpers.

What had she been dreaming about? Was this new? Or something from her past?

He wanted to know all her secrets.

Baruti gripped Samuel's shoulder suddenly and turned him from the laptop.

"What? What is it?" he asked, his mind going to the worst place possible.

"Stop. Working," Baruti said, his nose inches from Samuel's.

He rolled his eyes and shoved the bigger man away from him. "I'm fine."

"You sure about that?"

Baruti handed his cell phone to Samuel with the texts pulled up from Robin's phone.

Hey

Srry 2 bother u

I ned 2 talk 2 Sam

Samuel

None of that looked right.

He glanced at the clock on the wall.

A little past six.

Baruti started snickering and turned his back on Samuel.

“Any idea where they are?” he asked.

Baruti peered over his shoulder, his shit-eating grin splitting his face in two. “Are you going to admit what’s going on?”

“I’ll find her myself.”

“They’re probably in the lab,” Baruti said.

Samuel thrust the phone back at Baruti and stalked out of the office. After a day of sitting at the desk, Samuel could feel it in his muscles. At the recovery center, he’d had regular physical therapy and light activity interspersed with periods of rest. He hadn’t sat hunched over for a whole workday at a computer in months.

That would have to change.

He had to regain some muscle tone and get back into the shape he’d been in before getting shot.

What was Jessica doing?

That message had not sounded like her. He’d traded a few emails with her during their time at the center and she was so eloquent.

Something wasn’t right.

It seemed like he was saying that on repeat lately.

Samuel made the short trek to the lab where Diha reigned supreme. Entry required a badge and code to gain entrance, but once he passed through the doors, music that vibrated his very bones erupted, smacking him in the face. He covered his ears and took several steps into the lab proper where the people who worked under Diha were trying to get things done.

“What the hell?” he muttered, his words drowned out by the noise.

He strode past the workstations to the office beyond, where Diha, Cat, and Felecia worked on the most sensitive aspects of the case. They didn’t want another leak.

Samuel stopped in the doorway.

Diha sat behind her desk, shoulders up to her ears, and headphones on, while chaos swirled around her. Cat, Felecia, and Candi clutched each other, swaying and laughing about something. Shrill laughter drew his attention to his left where Jessica had her knees clutched to her chest and was being spun in an office chair by Kelsey.

“Guys, I’m going to be sick,” Jessica called out.

Robin threw out her hand, grabbing Kelsey’s arm. “She’s not joking!”

Kelsey threw her head back and laughed.

He strode to the speaker sitting on what had to be Cat’s desk judging by the rainbow banner draped across the front sporting little babies. She and her wife had recently welcomed a child into their home. He jabbed the biggest button, cutting off the sound.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered and turned to look at the women.

That was when the smell hit him.

Sweet enough it tried to cover up the lingering scent of alcohol but failed.

Wine.

His gaze went from the bottle in Kelsey's hand to the line of six very empty bottles sitting at the table pushed up against the far wall next to the door.

Seven women. Almost seven empty bottles of wine. It was extremely unlikely Diha had partaken of more than a sip given it was still a workday.

His mind raced doing the mental math.

"Oh, Jessica, look!" Kelsey jabbed her finger in his direction. "I found Samuel."

"Yeah, what the hell is going on here?" he asked the room.

"It's a party!" Cat shouted. "You're alive!"

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He glanced at Diha who still had her eyes on her computer screen and her jaw clenched tight.

Either the noise was getting to her, or she was on the trail of something. No matter what it was, this party was ill-advised.

He glanced at Jessica who was now clutching the armrests of her chair looking a little green.

“I think it’s time to wrap this up, ladies. Jess?”

Her chin drifted up, and she looked at him with unfocused eyes. His every fiber said to get her back to bed, pour water down her throat, and finish it off with some painkillers. She probably hadn’t even done her physical therapy today, which was for the best.

Did she not realize how delicate she was still?

“You’re no fun,” Cat announced.

“What time is your wife expecting you home by?” he asked.

He saw the exact moment Cat realized her mistake. Her head whipped toward the clock on the wall then her eyes grew impossibly large.

“Shit!” Cat yelped and snatched her purse off a hook hanging from her desk. “She’s going to kill me.”

With the primary instigator fleeing, the rest glanced at each other.

Diha's shoulder's relaxed by degree. They all knew Cat was fantastic at her job and loyal, but she got carried away. A lot.

Kelsey squinted at him. "Samuel, why are you always a... A party pooper?"

This wasn't like Kelsey. He'd worked with her for years. Okay, she'd always called him a party pooper, but it was an affectionate jab. This was different. She didn't drink to excess. She didn't carry on like this. What had changed?

Logan.

Logan had changed her.

Their relationship was still only a few months old. If he thought about it, wasn't this the first mission the team had been sent on that she hadn't gone with them?

And just like that, everything made sense.

Cat alone couldn't budge the group of women to do anything. These were some of the most dedicated, loyal, and tenacious women on the planet. But throw Kelsey spinning out into the mix? Felecia would join in simply because she was fretting about her husband, Evan, who was also part of the Aegis Group team.

"I should go," Candi announced. Her words coming slowly as she no doubt tried to hide how tipsy she was.

Kelsey whirled on Candi. "You're leaving?"

"Yeah, sorry." She grinned at the other women. "I made plans for tonight I can't

really get out of.”

Candi’s husband was CIA and had accompanied the Aegis Group team on their mission. Like Kelsey, this was probably the first time they’d been separated.

The ladies had probably needed to blow off a little steam. Not to mention Jessica’s appearance had given them cause for celebration and hope. Still, couldn’t they have been more careful?

Candi was swarmed by Felecia, Kelsey, and Robin. All of whom had someone they loved out in the field.

His gaze went to Jessica and found her looking at him. He lifted his brows, and she smiled sheepishly then shrugged.

What did that mean?

She’d said she wanted to talk to him earlier.

“I think I want to lie down,” Jessica announced.

He was at her side in an instant, offering her a hand up.

Page 57

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Robin whirled. “Oh! Do you want to come home with me?”

Samuel bit the inside of his mouth to keep from explaining what a poor idea that was.

“I want to so bad, but... I can't. Or, I don't think it's a good idea.” Jessica squinted up at him. “Can you translate? Why it's not good?”

“I live super close, with security,” Robin said.

“That's not it.” Samuel met Robin's gaze. “Our theory is that Jessica is a target. On the off chance someone has identified and located you, they would be watching you to find her.”

Robin's eyes widened and her jaw dropped in horror. “Oh, my God. I didn't even think of that...”

“Yeah, that's not a good plan,” Kelsey chimed in.

Robin glanced at Jessica. “Well, what if I stayed with you?”

Her face screwed up. “I really just want to sleep, then you'd be stuck with me in the dark wanting to do something.”

“Oh.” Robin's face fell.

“Come home with me,” Kelsey said and hooked her arm through Felecia's. “Both of you. You're coming with me!”

Robin glanced at Jessica.

“I’ll be fine,” she said and waved Robin off. “Have fun. Email me, or whatever.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Jessica pressed her hand to her head. “So sure.”

“Okay.”

Robin dove in, hugging Jessica, and trading softly spoken words, not for his ears. He resisted the urge to leave and give them privacy. Jessica had asked for him. There must be a reason and in her current state, he wasn’t keen to leave her to her own devices. Not to mention he hadn’t seen or spoken to her all fucking day. The knot of something that had been lodged in his chest all day giving him grief was finally easing. Because she was here? Because he could finally see her?

He could be patient.

Robin said what she needed to then turned to look at him. “Make sure she puts pajamas on, okay?”

“Uh, okay...”

What was the story behind that?

Robin nodded, seemingly satisfied, then turned her attention on Kelsey who lost no time at all grabbing her arm and hauling her out on whatever their next adventure entailed.

He watched them go, and couldn’t help but wonder, was that a good idea?

It wouldn't take much to connect everything back to Robin, at which point Jessica was still at risk.

"Security follows them," Diha said quietly.

He turned to look at her as she rubbed her shoulders. "Do they know?"

She shrugged. "Kelsey's probably picked up on it, but I don't think Felecia or Robin know they're being looked after. It'll be easier on the security detail if they're all together."

He nodded, relieved they'd thought so far ahead.

"Between us?" Diha pushed to her feet and stretched. "I'll be surprised if Zora doesn't strongly encourage all of us to move into the facility as things get... More intense?"

Samuel nodded slowly then glanced at Jessica.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Was it a good idea to say all of this in front of her?

Jessica's head lolled to the side and her eyes were barely open.

"Shit." He crossed to her side and cupped her face. "Jess?"

"She only had two glasses, but they were heavy pours," Diha said. "I didn't realize how much was in the glasses or I'd have said something sooner."

Jessica's hand wrapped around his wrist and she pressed his palm more firmly to her cheek. "I did a bad thing..."

"I can see that. How's your stomach?" he asked.

"I don't feel like hurling quite as much."

"Want to go back to bed?"

Her lower lip quivered. "Please? Dear God, my head hurts, the room is still spinning, and I just really want to stop talking."

"Can you walk? Or should I roll you?"

Jessica shot to her feet. "I'll walk!"

No sooner was she upright than she tipped to the right. He grasped her by the arm and pulled her against him.

“I’m going to be here a while longer if you want to take a minute to collect yourself,” Diha suggested.

Jessica leaned her head on his shoulder. “I want to be horizontal.”

Samuel slid his hand up and down her arm and glanced at Diha, who was looking at them with wide eyes.

Well, shit.

“Come on, tipsy princess, let’s get you to your room,” he said and turned Jessica toward the door. “Thanks, Diha.”

“See you two tomorrow,” she called after them.

Jessica clung to his arm as they proceeded out of the lab and into the hall. There were fewer people around, probably because most had headed home at last.

“I used to drink way more than that,” Jessica muttered.

“Your body has changed.”

“I know that now,” she whined.

He eyed her. She looked a little less green. “Are you really okay?”

“I will be. Promise.”

Yeah, he’d wait and see. Jessica seemed like the type to gloss over her own needs.

She took care of everyone else. Who took care of her? What about Robin?

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said out of the blue.

“What for?”

“Robin’s going to pester you about me now. I’m sorry in advance.”

“Do you want her to stay with you?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“No. Yes. Not really. I feel like a bad friend saying no.”

“You feel how you feel.”

Jessica’s face was still scrunched up.

“What does that face mean?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He decided not to push the issue. At least not until he had her safely in her own room.

Which reminded him he hadn’t looked into accommodations for himself.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Fine.”

She was quiet for a moment. “That’s it? Fine?”

“Yes... How was your day?”

“You don’t want to know...”

“Okay, how did the party get started?”

“Have you met Cat?” She squinted up at him. “I think she keeps a party packed in her

purse. Or desk drawer.”

He gaped down at her, horrified. “Wait, you’re telling me all that wine was in her desk?”

“Yes! I thought she was joking when she pulled out one bottle, but then they just kept coming, Samuel. I think there’s more in there, still.”

They turned down the hall heading toward the apartments at last.

Samuel opened and shut his mouth.

Sure, plenty of people had drinks and snacks they kept in their desk. But a full wine bar?

“She said something about her wife needing the wine out of the house or something?”
Jessica shrugged. “They have the cutest baby.”

“They do. Here we are.”

He pushed the door to the apartment open and stepped in first, doing a quick visual sweep of the room.

There’d been a lot of thinning down the staff with the move here in the hopes they were eliminating any other potential leaks. That didn’t mean they were guaranteed to be safe. A threat could always be among them. But nothing was waiting this time in the shadows.

Jessica shuffled in and went straight for the sofa. Instead of sitting, she turned and held out her hand, wiggling her fingers.

Well, it wasn't like he was going to leave her alone any time soon.

He closed and locked the door before taking her hand. She pulled him to the sofa, planted her free hand on his chest, and pushed. He sat down with a little bounce. Jessica sat next to him, looped her arm through his, and snuggled in close until she could put her head on his shoulder.

She sighed. "This is better."

Samuel peered down at the top of her head.

He shifted, turning his body more toward her. She sort of oozed closer, which allowed him to extract his arm and wrap it around her. Jessica in turn slid her arm around his waist and buried her face against his chest.

"You smell good. And you look good," she mumbled.

“Thank you.”

She ran her fingers up the lapel of his jacket. “Are all your suits like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“It looks like you were poured into it.”

“A good tailor can make all the difference.”

Her lips quirked up in a smile and her eyes fluttered shut. “That’s true.”

“How much did you drink?”

“Two cups.”

“That doesn’t tell me much.”

“Almost a bottle. Not quite.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “Jess...”

“Shut up. I was drinking my feelings.”

That made him pause. “Your feelings? Is something wrong?”

“No...”

Samuel wanted to know, but should he pry?

They'd agreed they were attracted to each other. He knew they were bound to butt heads still. That was inevitable. But what else? Where did they go? What were they to one another?

"Maureen and the whole security team died," she said in a small voice.

He hugged her closer and kissed the top of her head before he could think better of it.

Of course, Jessica was still upset. She cared deeply. It was one of the things he respected about her. She wasn't jaded and cold to the plight of others. Every little thing he found out about her was another thing to cherish.

Now if only he could talk her into caring for herself the way she worried about others.

"Did it help?" he asked.

"No. I'm just more sad now. And I feel guilty."

"That's natural. Survivor's guilt."

"I know," she said softly. "That doesn't help."

"How can I help?" he asked.

"Is it wrong we survived?"

"No. It's also not our fault. Have you ever been threatened because of a case you were part of?"

“Yes.”

“Did you stop doing your job because of the threat?”

“No.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“This is the same thing. Like it or not, you are part of this investigation. We made you part of it, and you ran with it. Zora took all the necessary steps to make sure you and I were safe. We were both working the same thing, just in different ways. And the other side decided to go too far. That’s not on us.”

She drew in a shaky breath. “Okay...”

“Have you eaten recently?”

“No. I don’t think so...”

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out, not the least bit surprised there was a text from Robin. He showed Jessica, and she tapped the notification then read it aloud.

“Tell Jess not to go junior year. Feed her before then. Hugs and kisses.” She barely got the last three words out before she began to snicker.

Samuel eyed the text. “What does junior year mean?”

She shook her head.

“Jess...”

She covered her face with a hand. “I’ll be good.”

“What happened your junior year?”

“A lot of things. Be more specific!”

He chuckled and stroked her hair. “What is Robin talking about?”

Jessica groaned and peered at him from between her fingers. “That was a coded message for me. Not you.”

He stared at her, waiting it out. Either she’d tell him or dig in and say no. She knew where her boundaries were.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “You only get to laugh about it tonight, and then we pretend it never happened, okay?”

Now he was truly intrigued.

“Deal.”

She pushed away from him and crossed her legs under her. With a heavy sigh, she fixed her gaze on him. “Robin and I were in a sorority, right?”

“I recall.”

“So, lots of parties.”

He nodded.

“Our junior year was... Eventful. Lots of random stuff was going on, silly drama, and every party it was like... Another silly thing. But Robin’s talking about the Spring Fling party. It’s semi-formal, but most people end up dancing in their underwear by the end of the night. Whole thing. Don’t ask. It was weird then and if it’s still happening, it’s probably weird now. We always left when the first person started

undressing.”

Samuel had so many questions, but it soothed part of him to hear she hadn't paraded around like that. He had no right to feel this way, but there it was.

“There was this guy who'd been a total ass. He was central to some of the drama going on. Anyway, he starts hitting on me that night. Won't leave me alone. I finally have hit the right combination of booze and don't give a fuck, so as we're trying to leave he grabs me and starts making this whole scene getting me to stay.”

Yeah, he already didn't like this kid, but he couldn't imagine Jessica merely putting up with it.

She closed her eyes and scrunched up her nose. “He went down on his knees to beg, and me in my drunken, pissed-off glory grabbed him by the hair and... I face humped him while... Robin remembers it better. I just yelled about how unless he was promising to go down on me or let me ride his face, he wasn't man enough. It was mortifying and not my best moment by far.”

Samuel felt air on the back of his throat.

He knew his jaw was hanging open.

But he also couldn't shake the visual of Jessica in a cocktail dress sliding up her thighs...

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

She covered her face with her hands. “I cannot believe I just told you that. I cannot believe I did that!”

“What did the troublemaker do?”

Jessica shook her head.

“What’d he do?”

Her hands parted. “Well, he never so much as looked at me again, that’s for sure.”

He pulled her back against his side, smothering his laughter with his other hand.

Tonight was about feeling safe and grieving. They both needed to decompress. But she’d just given him ideas he intended to follow up on. Unlike that boy, Samuel recognized Jessica for the kind of confident, capable woman she really was. And for a real man, that was worth getting on his knees and doing a little worshipping.

1

Chapter Eleven

Sunday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA

Jessica barely dared to breathe. Samuel’s arm was wrapped around her and his face buried in the crook of her neck. She’d never slept with anyone who cuddled this much. Hell, she’d never have pegged stern ass Samuel as a card-carrying cuddler, but

here they were.

It helped that the room was chilly and his warmth welcome. If it weren't for her brain deciding it was time to be very awake, she'd probably have dozed off again. The bed wasn't the most comfortable, but the company made all the difference.

Her head was a little achy and her mouth bone dry, but she didn't appear to have a hangover. It wasn't for lack of trying on her part, clearly.

Used to, she'd held her booze just as well as anyone else.

How was it she'd lost all of her tolerance for alcohol in two months?

Talk about embarrassing.

She'd sobered up enough by the point Samuel showed up she remembered every silly thing she'd said.

God.

Why had she told him about the face humping?

Jessica would never live that down. The guy had been a jerk. He deserved to get taken down a few pegs and embarrassed. She just wished that taking him down hadn't been her job. It was after that when she'd first been told she was too much for a guy.

Had last night been too much for Samuel? Had she scared him away?

The fears propping up those two questions quickly eroded.

If Samuel thought poorly of her behavior, he'd say something. The man had zero problems with that. He'd not only stuck around all evening, but they'd eaten and watched a movie. She'd enjoyed his company and appreciated how he reached for her. It wasn't all cuddling. After her right side pretty much went numb from the way she was leaned over on him, she'd laid on her left and dozed while he watched the news. And woken up to him gently rubbing her feet and asking about her ankle.

Were those the actions of a man grossed out by her college behavior?

A deep breath that wasn't hers tickled her neck, and she shivered. The arm around her tightened, pulling her more firmly back against Samuel's chest. He shifted slightly, pressing his pelvis to the curve of her bottom—and good morning.

She wiggled her hips a tiny bit and received a low groan.

Jessica turned her head into the pillow, muffling her amusement.

"I hear you," Samuel's deep, sleep roughened voice said.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"It's morning."

“You can’t tell.”

“I can.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” she protested, though he was probably right.

Samuel turned away from her and she regretted needling him. He grabbed his phone and held it in front of her while peering over her shoulder.

Just past six.

Lovely.

And, he had a text from Zora pulled up on the screen.

Can you and Jessica come see me as soon as you’re available?

Shit.

The vague idea of what she could do with his morning erection vanished.

Samuel’s languid body went tense.

“How soon can you be ready?” she asked.

“Throw on some sweats and I’m good.”

“I’m going over to the locker room for a sixty-second shower. I can smell the wine on me, still.”

Samuel buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled. “I don’t smell it.”

She shivered and shimmied her hips, which earned a groan from him.

“Cold shower’s a good idea,” he agreed, then muttered, “Damn it,” as he rolled away from her.

Jessica grinned and smothered a giggle.

Okay, being text-blocked sucked, but his reaction was priceless.

“What does Zora want to talk about?” Jessica asked as she sat up, moving slower than Samuel.

Maybe she was a tiny bit hungover?

“Could be anything,” Samuel said as he pulled on a pair of sweats. “If I had to guess? She’s found something in your investigation that holds water.”

Jessica resisted the urge to roll her eyes and instead focused on getting her things together. It was irritating to have her material scrutinized like it all might be made up, but on the other hand that thorough attention was crucial. No one person should direct an operation of this size and scope.

Samuel escorted her to the door of the women’s locker room. He didn’t touch her, and yet she felt doted on. Which wasn’t at all what she’d thought being with Samuel would feel like. She’d assumed a man as serious and focused as he was would vacillate between hyper-focus and practically ignoring her. In truth, he was

somewhere in the middle.

She took a blazing quick shower, then braided her hair, and threw on the other outfit Robin had brought for her. It was just a pair of jeans she'd left at Robin's ages ago with a slouchy, off-the-shoulder sweatshirt over a tank top, but it was comfortable and warm. Both were important qualities in her book.

Of course, Samuel was waiting for her by the time she was done. She surreptitiously drew in a deep breath. Whatever soap or product he used left this woody, spicy scent she'd begun to crave. More now than before. He was quickly becoming a source of comfort for her, which was all his fault. He shouldn't hold her quite as much or nearly as well.

Together they headed for Zora's office. Without Samuel escorting her, she'd have never figured out which way to go, and this early the place was almost eerily empty what with the lights dimmed.

She spied Zora's office ahead with the door open and a light on.

"Does Zora ever sleep? Is she a robot?"

Samuel chuckled. "I've wondered the same thing."

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Jessica couldn't help but wonder, what drove her? What was it about this case that consumed her?

This had all started for Jessica because of Daar Suleiman killing Robin's mother back when she was a kid. The whole time both Jessica and Robin thought the danger only extended as far as Daar. It wasn't until Daar was fighting for his life in the hospital that Jessica came to understand it was a much bigger problem. Daar was the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

Working this much couldn't be healthy, and yet Jessica completely understood Zora. That drive spoke to a deeply seated need in Jessica as well. A need to make things right. To improve the world, she lived in.

It wasn't until they were passing into the office that Jessica realized the sign on the door was assistant director, not director.

Zora had a boss. Someone over her that was really calling the shots.

So who the hell was that person? And where were they? She didn't think she'd ever heard of anyone mention a person other than Zora. That was strange, but something to worry about later.

"Morning," Zora said briskly and stood from behind her desk. Her gaze went from Samuel to the hand he had on Jessica's back to her face. "I hope I didn't wake you two."

"Not at all," Samuel said smoothly.

Zora didn't comment further.

Did she know?

Jessica hadn't felt like it was her place to divulge her relationship with Samuel to anyone other than Robin. And yet, she felt like Zora already knew. Or had maybe always known.

"Have a seat?" she gestured to the same peacock blue seats as before. "Jessica, what do you know about your contact, Oliver Taylor?"

"I know that Oliver was one of the most popular baby names in the last two years and that Taylor is in the top five most common surnames in the UK. Chances are high my contact is using an alias, so I am confident in saying I know nothing for certain."

Zora nodded slowly. "I was thinking along the same lines."

Jessica shrugged. "Given who we're talking about, I'm not surprised this guy would use an alias. It's the smart thing to do. That said, his intel has been accurate, as far as I've been able to tell."

Zora tapped her phone then glanced up at Jessica. "That's what I'm worried about. You're right, this Oliver Taylor has been a well of information. How does he know so much? Who else is he telling? Why is he sharing?"

"He isn't talking to me willingly. I have a contact in the UK who owed me a favor. I asked them to find me a source. They found me Oliver. My understanding is that Oliver owes my contact a great debt, and this is part of how he pays it off. Getting anything out of him is like giving a cat a bath."

Samuel snorted while Zora didn't so much as blink. Tough crowd.

She leaned forward. “And you’re certain he won’t say more? Your contact can’t lean on him harder?”

Jessica shook her head slowly. “I’ve been trying to do that for a week. Nothing. It doesn’t help that the guy who found Oliver for me hasn’t been answering my messages. Doesn’t give me any leverage to make Oliver talk, which is probably why he hasn’t backed down from his demand to only talk in person.”

Zora’s gaze traveled down then up Jessica’s body. “How are you feeling? Any problems?”

The sudden shift in questioning felt deliberate. Like Zora was circling toward an end goal.

What was she getting at?

“I’m fine,” Jessica answered.

“Are you fine enough to fly to London and meet with this source? Hear what he has to say in person?”

“No,” Samuel said immediately. “No, way.”

Zora’s gaze flicked to him, then back to Jessica. “I would send Samuel, Baruti, and Kelsey to escort you and keep you safe. I know I can trust them completely. Our liaison with UK law enforcement would ensure quick support, should you need it, but I’d like for this trip to be as fast as possible. There and back. That’s it. If you’re up to it?”

“This is a terrible idea,” Samuel said.

Jessica reached over and pressed her hand to his knee. She knew him well enough all his arguments were in her head. And she understood his concern, especially considering what they'd just lived through. But it still didn't change her answer.

“When can we leave?” Jessica asked.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Sunday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA

Samuel had a headache by the time the meeting finished from grinding his teeth. Neither woman would even listen to him pointing out all the reasons this was an awfully stupid plan. It was like they wanted to tempt fate.

Yes, let's send the two people Maxwell Edward most wanted to kill directly to him.

Brilliant.

Couldn't think of a better course of action.

He stalked out of Zora's office behind Jessica, his eyes fixed to a few short curls of hair that had escaped her braid at the nape of her neck. His hand reached out, and he watched himself tug on the fine, baby-like hairs.

"Ow!" Jessica whirled, slapping away his hand. She gaped up at him, her brow wrinkled. "What was that for?"

He glanced at the mostly filled desks and workspaces outside Zora's office.

This was not the place to talk or fight or whatever they were about to do.

He took her by the arm and pulled her down a side hall. There was nothing between Zora's office and the warren of old halls from the original facility.

"Samuel," Jessica said with warning in her voice.

They turned a corner and stopped. He gripped her by the shoulders and locked gazes with her.

“This is a bad idea, Jess,” he said and prayed she heard him.

She drew in a breath, but instead of immediately moving to deny his statement she smoothed her hands down his chest and stared thoughtfully at a spot on his sternum.

Was she hearing him?

Did she have any regard for her life at all?

“Your reasoning isn’t wrong,” she said.

That admission did not inspire confidence in him. Because he already knew her mind was made up. She was going to do this.

She tipped her chin up and met his gaze. “Let’s pretend you and I are dating, like normal people. A few months down the line, you have to take a dangerous work trip. If I ask you to not go, will you listen to me?”

He opened and closed his mouth.

“That’s completely different,” he said.

She nodded. “Yeah, it kind of is. But my point is you and I are alike. Neither of us will turn away from what we feel we must do. It’s what dictates both of our lives and why I feel drawn to you. Because you get it. You really get it. And I think that makes us better suited to each other, while also creating conflict we have to figure out how to deal with. Or if we want to.”

He tilted his head to the side. That last sentence sounded ominous. “Jess...”

She held up her hands. “I’m just explaining things how I see it, okay?”

Samuel’s shoulders slumped in defeat. This wasn’t the time to be selfish and think about them. He needed to focus on the job first, because that’s what they were not-quite arguing about. “You’re going no matter what I say.”

Her face softened and her hands curled into the material of his sweatshirt. “Yeah.”

He wished he had the tools to deal with this, but instead of clocking experience in relationships, he’d focused on his job. Which left him wholly unprepared to reason with her. Conversations were multi-dimensional and emotional. He simply didn’t have the tools to communicate on all levels at once. So he had to focus on one.

Samuel agreed that their similarities was what made them work. And if he were honest with himself?

If he were in her shoes, he’d go.

Yet he couldn’t sit back and let her make that choice without trying to change her mind. Ultimately, it wasn’t up to him and that sucked. No matter what they were to each other, this was her choice, and he was both proud and furious, which led to him holding onto her tighter so his hands didn’t shake as much.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

In choosing this risk, she might die and he would lose her forever.

When had his emotions gotten this strong?

One thing was certain, he would not be capable of remaining objective on this trip. He would be over-protective and jump at his own damn shadow out of concern for her. That made him a liability.

“Maybe I shouldn’t go,” he said slowly.

“What?” Her brown eyes grew wide. “No. You have to see this through with me.”

“Jess...”

“I won’t hear of you staying behind. I trust you. I need you.”

He couldn’t tell her no, so he pulled her to him, hugging her so tight that he thought she might protest. But she clung to him just as hard.

He’d have to figure a way around his emotions.

“Fine,” he said while he knew it was not fine. Not at all. Samuel had a very bad feeling about this. “How’s your head?”

She pressed the heel of her hand to her temple. “I should probably take something.”

“Let’s take care of that, then we can see about clothes and toiletries for the trip.”

Jessica groaned. “Shit.”

He kept his hand on the small of her back, guiding her toward their room with a brief stop to grab some pain killers from the first aid station. Breakfast courtesy of Baruti was waiting for them in the room. A quick reheat and they settled back on the sofa to eat and make their plan.

Samuel spent most of the meal with the TV on but watching Jessica. He couldn't take his eyes off her while she ignored him, pretending it was just a normal day.

He knew about her, and yet they'd gotten close in a bubble apart from the world where outside opinion or stress didn't matter as much. When they returned to true reality, what were their chances of withstanding that together? Was this doomed to fail? Or was this a fling?

She was a district attorney from Illinois from a prestigious family. With her inclination, he could see her becoming one of the most tenacious district attorneys in the country. That was probably why she'd started in Illinois. From there, she could rise in the government, enacting real difference.

Or maybe she became a judge?

Yeah, he could see that. Offenders would not get off easy when it came to her rulings.

Any way he looked at their situation, their paths diverged from one another. Maybe not right now, but eventually being together would take work.

Samuel was tied to the east coast. He could transfer, get assigned a new partner, but that meant leaving Baruti. They'd been together since almost the beginning. Samuel couldn't imagine leaving his brother behind. The FBI was a friendlier place now, but Baruti was a gay, Black man with a family. That was something a lot of people

struggled with. What happened to him if his new partner opposed the pairing?

No, Samuel couldn't leave New York. He would only hold Jessica back. Either people would whisper about him not being good enough, or being forced to divide her attention between work and a long-distance relationship would take its toll. Unlike her, he was a poor boy from Georgia who'd hustled to get where he was. That kind of history would only weigh on her. And Jessica was a shooting star.

How long until they fizzled out? Until they couldn't make it work?

Everything in him wanted to be selfish and take what he could get while it was here. But continuing with a romantic relationship would only further jeopardize his ability to think rationally about this trip and her safety.

Samuel carefully wiped his fingers then his face.

There was one solution. One way he saw how to do it all.

He wasn't going to leave her safety up to anyone else. He was going on this trip regardless of his thoughts about it. That was non-negotiable. Which meant everything else had to fit around that.

"Jess?"

Her head turned toward him, brows arched. "Hm?"

He reached over and linked his fingers with hers while it felt as though his heart were trying to ooze between his ribs to get closer to her.

“I’ve been thinking about this trip...”

“Okay,” she said quickly.

Samuel licked his lips, already hating what he had to do. “I think, for the sake of the mission and ensuring I can keep you safe, we should put a pin in the... The romantic side of things. Just for this trip. I keep rolling it around in my head, and I already don’t trust my judgment enough. Without a little distance, I worry I am going to mess this up. And I can’t live with myself if I do that. I need to be at the top of my game for you, and I’m not right now.”

Jessica’s face fell and her mouth hung open. She looked like he’d just popped her balloons.

He reached out and slid his fingers along her jaw. “I don’t want to say this, but if I have to choose between acting on how I feel and protecting you, it’s no contest. I’m going to pick your safety.”

“Oh. Alright.” She shook herself a little.

Her disappointment was somehow a balm to his soul. As if knowing they were both disappointed to step back made it easier on him.

She clutched his hand tight. “It’s only for like, what? Two days, right? No big deal.”

He nodded. “Exactly.”

“Just so I’m clear, that means...?”

His gaze dropped to their joined hands. “I’ll move into another room. Let’s keep things platonic. Until we’re back.”

“And then?”

Samuel shook his head. “I guess we figure it out then?”

Jessica launched herself at him. Her free hand gripped his shoulder, turning him to face her more as her mouth crashed against his in a hard kiss. He fell back against the armrest and her body weighed him down in the best way possible. He had an arm around her waist before he realized it, the other delving into her hair as their lips moved together.

He groaned, his confidence eroding as she seduced him with her mouth.

How was he supposed to keep his hands off her for days?

And then she sat back on her heels, staring at him.

“Okay.” Her chest heaved and her eyes were dilated as she licked her lips. “I couldn’t let you go without a goodbye kiss.”

“Christ,” he groaned.

This was going to be the longest few days of his life. But when they got back, he was going to be selfish for once.

Chapter Twelve

Sunday. Task Force Headquarters, Fairfax, VA.

Jessica threw open the door to her very lonely studio apartment. Samuel had only moved his things out a few hours ago. The way she was acting, it was as if he'd just broken her heart instead of prioritized her life.

Robin and Kelsey stood on the other side, their arms loaded down with the list of things Jessica had asked them to get her in preparation for the trip.

"I'm so happy to see you guys!"

She resisted the urge to throw herself at them and instead stepped back to allow them into the room. It felt so empty without Samuel's things there, and she missed him immensely already. Which was silly. He was close by, just down the hall, and yet it felt like a million miles separated them.

Robin set the things down on the bed on the far side of the room then turned toward her.

"How are you?" Robin asked.

Jessica closed the door and leaned against it. She no longer had the energy to pretend she was okay with what was going on either. "I feel like I got dumped."

Robin's face creased in understanding. "I'm so sorry."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Kelsey plopped down on the sofa, her bags on the coffee table. “I still don’t understand what’s going on.”

Robin crossed the room, something held behind her back. “Before we get into that, I know you said Mr. Jim got left at the center, so... His girlfriend is coming to live with you.”

She held out a floppy, pink stuffed rabbit.

Jessica gasped and reached for the animal. “You didn’t!”

“I know, it’s silly, but—”

“It’s not silly at all!” Jessica wrapped an arm around Robin and squeezed. Her eyes prickled with tears. She knew it wasn’t about the rabbit itself. This was an emotional response to everything, but the rabbit was really special. “Thank you.”

Of all the things Jessica had lost on account of the attack, that little rabbit was what she missed the most. When she couldn’t be with Robin or when she had a bad day, she’d hug that stuffed animal and felt better. The last few days hadn’t been so bad given that she had Samuel, but now that they were taking a little break she felt lost. She to hold something tight.

“God, you two are so fucking sweet it hurts my damn teeth,” Kelsey grouched.

“Just wait, Robin will figure you out.” Jessica waved the rabbit’s paw at the other woman. “Then she might very well buy you your own token of affection.”

“Okay,” Kelsey said slowly, her eyes bouncing between them. “I’m officially weirded out by you two.”

Jessica nodded. “We will indoctrinate you.”

Robin sputtered a laugh. “What are we, a cult?”

Jessica tilted her head to the side. “I mean, we could be...”

“No.” Kelsey shook her head vehemently. “No, way.”

Robin gestured at the bags. “Want to look through everything?”

“I probably should.” Jessica sighed and dumped the first bag on the bed.

It was underwear and bras, all her typical brands and styles, so stuff that didn’t need trying on. It got folded and put into the big, black duffel Samuel had left her with as a parting present. She might have put her whole head in it to see if it smelled like him.

It did.

Secretly she hoped her things came out on the other side of his trip smelling like him.

“You guys have any update?” Jessica asked.

“Nope,” Robin said.

Kelsey wandered over and sat on Jessica’s side of the bed. “Logan warned me there would be zero communication on this one.”

Robin propped Samuel’s pillow up against the headboard then settled in. “Harper said

the same. I don't have to like it, though."

Jessica focused on the bag in front of her instead of snapping at Robin to leave Samuel's side alone. He wasn't going to sleep there again. It didn't matter. This was a completely irrational urge, and she knew it.

"What happened with Samuel?" Robin asked.

Jessica forced herself to focus on the simple sheath dress in gray. She had it in black and red back at home. It was one of those items she could wear several different ways. It also didn't wrinkle. Crucial when traveling. Adding a gray one to her wardrobe wasn't a bad idea.

"What's going on with Samuel, anyway?" Kelsey asked.

Well, shit.

She glanced between Jessica and Robin. "You two have left me out of something. I know I'm going to London with you, so spill."

Jessica steeled herself for the truth. Baruti already knew. Kelsey might as well, too. Jessica didn't have a reason for keeping this to herself. Then again, it wasn't like she and Samuel had agreed to put a label on whatever this was, either. And that made it hard to talk about to others. Which had led to her saying nothing because she wanted to enjoy what they had without stressing over what they were.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

It wasn't lost on her that she and Samuel didn't live remotely close to one another. This would be a stressful, long-distance relationship. And those were uncertain arrangements. Was it wrong of her to keep it to herself until now?

"Samuel and I are... Well..." Her chest got tight as her mind raced to settle on a word to describe them. Jessica screwed up her mouth. "I'm changing. I have to do something and talk."

Kelsey waved a hand. "Have at it."

Jessica whisked the sweatshirt over her head and settled on a polite explanation. "We're exploring our options together."

Kelsey squinted her eyes at Jessica. "What the hell does that mean? In normal people, please?"

"We slept together. I like him a lot. And we're figuring it out for now. Well, not for now because now we're going on a break and we aren't even a couple," she said in a rush before pulling the dress on over her head.

"What?" Kelsey shrieked.

By the time Jessica had the dress on, Kelsey was up on her knees, eyes wide in shock. "You and Samuel?"

"Why does everyone call him Samuel and not like, Sam?" Robin asked softly, as though she were talking to herself.

Jessica and Kelsey spoke in unison, “He doesn’t like it.”

Yeah, Jessica had learned that early on.

Robin’s eyes widened. “Oh. Well. Good to know.”

Kelsey pointed at Jessica. “You and Samuel?”

“Yeah...”

“Holy shit.” Kelsey sat back on the bed. She looked from Robin then back to Jessica.

“Who else knows?”

Wasn’t that a great question?

Jessica ticked off the people on her fingers. “Baruti and I’m guessing Zora, though we didn’t come out and tell her that.”

“Holy fucking shit,” Kelsey muttered. She blinked several times. Her eyes were taking up her whole face at this point. “I’d just about decided he was asexual or something...”

“What?” Jessica paused reaching for the hem of the dress and laughed. “He’s not. Trust me.”

Kelsey’s gaze narrowed as if she weren’t sure she could extend that trust. Jessica didn’t know a lot about Kelsey’s work with the guys, but she knew they were all close. Like, family close.

Jessica held up her hands and decided to drop one little detail. “He made the first move. Not me.”

That seemed to seal the deal for Kelsey. She sat back and shook her head. “Wow. I mean, I know he’s gone out on dates every now and then, but... Holy shit. I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, I was surprised, too.” Wasn’t that an understatement?

Kelsey looked Jessica up and down more critically now. “You’re by far the best catch of his I’ve seen. If he’s smart, he won’t let you get away, that’s for damn sure.”

Jessica drew in a deep breath. “I really needed to hear that right now, thanks.”

“So...” Kelsey frowned. “What’s the deal? If you two are falling in love, why isn’t he here?”

Jessica tipped her head back and groaned. “Because it’s too distracting for him if we’re in a relationship and we’re working together. So for the next two days—or however long this trip takes—we aren’t together. And it’s so much bullshit. But I get it. I don’t have to like it.”

Kelsey closed her eyes. “I swear, men are more trouble than they’re worth.”

“Tell me about it,” Robin muttered.

This trip was going to be harder than Jessica had thought. A lot harder.

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

She perched on the foot of the bed and locked gazes with Kelsey. “I know we don’t know each other very well, but I’m really going to need a friend on this trip.”

“I’m here for you,” Kelsey said without hesitation.

“Thanks. I felt pretty good about everything until Samuel said he wanted space. I mean, I understand his reasoning. I really, really do. But...” She closed her eyes. “I don’t like it.”

“Wow,” Robin whispered. “You... You really like him, don’t you? I thought this was just a thing. Something you didn’t really mean, but... You’re serious?”

“Like a thousand times more than when I just thought he was an arrogant, hot asshole. He can be so sweet and thoughtful. But he gets me. And the way he talks about my career? It’s downright swoon-worthy. And if we’re all completely honest, I can’t be with anyone who doesn’t have the capacity to be an asshole.” She quickly jabbed a finger at Robin. “But I’ve got a bone to pick with you!”

“Me?” Robin squeaked.

“Why did you mention junior year to him? Why? How could you do that to me?”

She cringed and held up the other pillow as a shield. “I drank too much. And I was trying to distract myself. I always laugh when I think about his face.”

Jessica blew out a breath and stood. She was satisfied with how the gray dress fit, so it was time to move on. “I know. I get it. You both have to be feeling a lot of stress

right now, too. Thank you for listening to my petty whining.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m here for this.” Kelsey grinned. “Don’t get it twisted. Samuel is an arrogant asshole, but he is fiercely loyal and he will do anything for the people in his corner. He’s a little emotionally closed off, but you’ve clearly already broken through that with him. I’ve said for a long time that he deserves someone in his life who will appreciate that about him.”

Jessica bit her lip.

She wanted that to be her. And that scared her a lot. But the best things were always scary in the beginning.

Monday. London, UK.

Samuel already hated this fucking trip, and they weren’t even to the hotel yet.

It was both a blessing and a curse that he and Baruti had been seated behind the ladies on their trans-Atlantic flight to London. Samuel had watched the two put their heads together and talk for much of the flight. And the whole time all he wanted to do was pick Kelsey up and trade seats with her.

The worst was when they fell asleep.

He’d sat awake the whole damn time wondering if Jessica was comfortable, did anything hurt, was she warm enough, hungry, thirsty...

The list went on, which did shit for his mood.

Samuel shoved his hands into his pockets and trudged forward toward their hotel with the group following in his wake.

He still stood by his decision to pause their relationship. Not that they'd defined what it was or what either of them wanted. He couldn't think about all of that right now. His head had to be focused on safety.

Samuel scanned the road, looking for a tail that might have followed them. It was late afternoon, and the sun was dipping toward the horizon. They all needed to eat. There were too many different things to juggle, and his mind kept going back to Jessica.

Damn it.

This was exactly what he'd wanted to avoid. He was the wrong person to send on this mission. It should be someone else, and yet he couldn't see himself stepping back to allow anyone else close to her. Not to mention there was no one else. Her source wouldn't stay on the hook forever.

He glanced over his shoulder at the group behind and his gaze snagged on Baruti's. What was with him? Why wasn't he looking for a threat?

This was a terrible idea.

The awning for their hotel was ahead of them. They'd been booked into a small, boutique hotel in an effort to decrease the number of eyes on them. It was a quaint little place in a part of the city that appeared to be struggling. There wasn't a ton of foot traffic, which he liked. But a few streets over were all the shops and pubs they could want, so it balanced out.

Samuel turned into the hotel and in a short exchange took possession of both room keys.

He desperately wanted to know what plans Jessica was making with her contact, but he'd decided the best thing was to separate himself and focus on their

accommodations. He would prioritize their safety and allow the others to strategize about what moves they made. It was the best way he could think of to cover all their bases.

While the others waited, he ran up to their rooms and did a quick look at the accommodations, ensuring they were safe before signaling to the others they could come up. The goal was to avoid getting trapped anywhere. High on their list was a place that had multiple exits.

By the time he heard their voices in the hall, he was ready to pull his hair out. Not that there was a lot left after he visited the barbershop yesterday. He probably shouldn't have, but he couldn't go another day with his hair looking a mess. He'd wear his jeans and T-shirt to blend in instead of stand out, but he drew the line at his lock-down, recovery hair sticking around for another week.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Kelsey was first through the door.

“This place is so cute, and we have excellent visibility. Just look at these windows.” She went immediately to the large windows that let them peer out on the street.

Her words faded from his awareness as Jessica entered and their gazes locked.

He swore he heard the air crackle and his mouth went dry.

Never in his life had he craved anything the way he wanted her all the damn time now.

She looked away quickly, breaking the moment and severing the connection.

This fucking trip had better pass soon.

“Where are we?” Samuel asked.

“London,” Kelsey quipped.

“Haa. Haa.” Jessica rolled her eyes and set her bag down on one of the beds. “Oliver said we could meet in an hour, which considering how long it takes us to get around, isn’t long.”

“Agreed,” Samuel said.

An hour was great news. They could be out of here in no time. First thing in the

morning even. And this would all be behind them.

Kelsey unzipped her backpack. They'd all traveled light. "Then should we get you ready?"

"I suppose." Jessica glanced down at herself. "Can I change?"

"Get to it. I need to mic you," Kelsey said.

Samuel caught Baruti's eye and nodded toward the adjoining door. They wordlessly vacated the room so Jessica could get changed and the mic in place.

"Man, you've got it bad," Baruti said as soon as the door was closed.

Samuel stalked to the window and peered out. "Shut it. I do not want to hear it from you or anyone else."

Coast still looked clear, but for all they knew there were a dozen people out there. He couldn't like this one bit.

"Take a damn breath and stop pacing," Baruti said. "You haven't slept. You're running on fucking empty, bro."

"I can't."

He sighed and watched Samuel prowl around the room.

"She likes you," Baruti said. "I don't know why, but she does."

Samuel didn't reply. That was bait if he'd ever seen it.

“She want kids?”

He scowled at Baruti. “What business is that of yours?”

He shrugged. “Making conversation. I know you’ve never been crazy about the idea, so I was curious if she was.”

Samuel didn’t, in fact, know the answer to that question. It wasn’t like he and Jessica had spent any time discussing things a typical couple might. They’d been too busy staying alive and together for all the rest. But now he needed to know.

Damn this whole thing.

“Take a breath and sit,” Baruti counseled.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“I can’t.” Samuel shook his head. “I can’t help but feel like... It’s a bad feeling, B. I’ve got an itch like someone’s watching us, man. I don’t like it.”

Baruti sighed, no doubt dismissing Samuel’s unease. “Zora wouldn’t have agreed to send us here if the lead wasn’t solid. She had everyone check it out. You know that. You got the security brief.”

“And that doesn’t mean shit now that we’re here. We have no idea what we could be walking into.”

What they could be sending Jessica into...

“I get that, but are you certain it’s a real threat? Something neither Kelsey or I have seen? Or is this all in your head?”

Samuel didn’t know what he could say in reply, so he chose to say nothing. Because he couldn’t tell the difference, and Baruti was right. Everything that mattered said they were fine. So why did he feel like they were waiting for the shoe to drop?

Monday. London, UK.

Oliver Taylor watched the two windows closely. His targets were there.

He drew in a deep breath.

Talk about a right fucking disaster. This was going to come down around him, he just knew it. At least he’d come clean to the boss early on. That was more than likely his

saving grace, otherwise, he'd have been a loose end tied up a long time ago. The boss didn't take kindly to people who ran their mouths.

Fucking hell.

He had learned his lesson about owing favors. After this, he'd trade in cold, hard cash only. No more of this debt bullshit.

That's how this started.

It had sounded easy enough. Answer a bird's questions, and satisfy the debt once she was happy. But that was the problem. She was never bloody happy, the bitch. Always coming at him with another question and then another. He'd revealed far more than he should have all to settle a debt.

Movement in the window drew his attention. The lights flipped off.

They were on the move. Probably to the meeting spot.

Oliver pulled out his phone and drew the hood of his jacket up to shield his face. This Jessica woman wouldn't know what he looked like, but he'd seen pictures of her.

He'd known she was a big fish after their first exchange. In a panic, he'd gone to the boss' man and spilled his guts. He'd wanted to be told to cease all communication. That would ease his conscience and allow him to refuse the debt request. Instead, the boss had given him the impossible task of teasing out what the damn woman knew. It wasn't much. Or, she was simply better at saying nothing than he was.

Oliver had gotten creative, though. He'd had to tell her something, so he'd dribbled out bits of the truth. Not much, just enough to keep her talking until she, too, had nothing more to say to him.

Which was why he'd pushed for her to come to him. He couldn't read her. Couldn't twist the conversation where he wanted so long as they traded messages. No, he had to see her face to face for this one.

He figured he hadn't told her anything terribly important. It was all the type of knowledge she could get off a well-informed street tough, nothing more. But she knew what questions to ask. Damn did she ever.

The boss needed to be wary of this one.

Four figures exited the hotel.

Oliver tapped his phone screen, checking his socials, while the group grew drew farther away from him. After a moment he began to follow.

Damn it.

He had hoped to end this tonight, but if she was going to break their agreement and show up with her back-up, they would have a problem. Namely, he couldn't take four on one odds. Especially considering the two big, Black bruisers following her. Fucking hell.

Even if she showed up alone now, he knew he had to be careful. These other three could easily swoop in and make a mess of him.

An idea occurred to Oliver, and a plan began to form.

Yeah, he could do this. The boss might even be impressed.

Chapter Thirteen

Page 73

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Monday. London, UK.

Jessica really wanted a shower. She hated how the recycled air in planes made her feel. She'd made do with a washrag wipe down and a change of clothes. At least she didn't smell like barbeque chips anymore. Thank you row-mate from the plane!

She pushed her hands deeper into the fleece pockets of her light jacket and leaned her head back while the train shifted on the tracks, making her sway.

Samuel stood just to her right, so it was easy to pretend she wasn't looking at him. But she was.

How could she not? Wasn't every woman looking at him?

Okay, maybe not Kelsey. Jessica preferred it that way, honestly. Besides, Kelsey seemed more like the guy's sister the way they bantered back and forth.

Jessica had appreciated Samuel's slightly rough around the edges look, but him freshly shaven in jeans and a T-shirt?

He was too good to be true.

Would he jump if she pinched him?

The imp in her wanted to find out, but she decided to hold back. This was already stressful enough without her being a nuisance. He'd have to learn to love that side of herself if they were going to work out. She might have chosen to walk a narrow path,

but that didn't change the fact that for a while she'd liked making trouble. In fact, being on Samuel's bad side might even be fun depending on how into it he got.

Would he spank her?

"What are you smiling at?" Kelsey whispered.

Jessica swallowed and schooled her face into a blank mask. "Nothing."

Kelsey snorted and sat back.

Jessica tipped her head back and closed her eyes. She really needed to be more serious.

Samuel's concerns made sense. She could even agree with the logic behind cooling things off for a moment. Didn't mean she liked it.

Samuel had gone from being sandpaper on a sunburn to...

Her floppy rabbit.

That realization made her shift in her seat uncomfortably as shock and warmth swirled together within her.

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and dropped her gaze to the ground.

When had that happened?

How?

This fast?

She'd known she liked him. The feelings were intense. But she'd attributed that to a deep-seated respect allowing her to skip over the stage where she often had to feel out whether a guy's values lined up with her own. Most guys tended to cover up their unsavory qualities for a few dates then busted out surprise misogyny, racism, or homophobia, among other things. Given who Samuel surrounded himself with, none of that was a concern.

But to feel this way about him?

It shook her.

Kelsey nudged Jessica. "You okay?"

She glanced up at the other woman, thankfully on her left. "Hm? Oh, yeah. Fine. Just jet-lagged, you know?"

The day Robbin had given Jessica that silly floppy rabbit was the day it became her greatest physical comfort. It was a tangible object she could hold on to when she'd had a bad day and knew that she wasn't alone. That ridiculous stuffed animal had brought her peace of mind and inner calm in a way she couldn't explain. It was why Jessica often felt closer to Robin than her blood-family.

And now she found herself wanting to reach for Samuel to comfort herself.

Wow.

The automated voice announced their stop and Jessica pulled herself to her feet, still reeling.

“You sure you’re okay?” Kelsey whispered.

“Yeah, just doing some mental gymnastics.”

She eyed Jessica cautiously. “Anything we need to know about?”

She linked her arm through Kelsey’s as they began shuffling toward the doors. Baruti was between them and Samuel, so Jessica leaned closer to the other woman.

“Do you remember the moment you realized you’d fallen for Logan?” she asked.

Kelsey stiffened and whipped her head around to stare at Jessica as if she could see into Jessica’s brain.

Jessica shrugged. “I’m just... Processing.”

“Wow. I mean, good for you. But you have to get your head in the game. Now.”

Jessica leaned so close she almost had her mouth pressed to Kelsey’s ear. “I know. I know. I can’t look at him anymore. Every time I do my brain is like hard-wired to think, climb him like a tree.”

She snickered and pushed Jessica's face away with a palm to her cheek. "Stop. Please, stop. There are things I don't want stuck in my head!"

They both laughed, doubling over a bit as they moved with the press of people out onto the platform while the recorded voice encouraged them to, "Mind the gap."

"How much time?" Jessica asked.

Kelsey looked at her watch. "Fifteen minutes, so basically nothing."

They followed close in Baruti's wake through the throngs of people.

Jessica had gone over street views of the area and felt reasonably prepared should she have to stage a solo retreat. Hopefully. They'd devised several plans, and she'd memorized each. That didn't give her any peace of mind now, though.

Very soon she'd have to leave the others behind and go the rest of the way by herself.

Oliver had been very clear about her coming alone. The others would be close and out of sight, listening in on the exchange thanks to the nearly invisible microphone Kelsey had set her up with. It was the size of a grain of rice attached to a clear, plastic sticker. Honestly, it was amazing. But it also had a very short lifespan.

If Oliver was late or something happened, they might be screwed.

They exited the tube station and went with the flow of foot traffic. It looked exactly like the street view maps she'd studied. Ahead of them was the small pizza joint that would serve as their meeting point if all went well.

Jessica blew out a breath. This was it.

She side-stepped the crowd with Kelsey, just like the guys ahead of them so they were out of the flow of foot traffic. The three FBI agents turned to face her, and she looked at each one in turn, saving Kelsey for last, because out of all of them Kelsey knew what it was like to be in her shoes.

Jessica's head had to be in it. The personal stuff came later.

"You're going to do great," Kelsey said.

Jessica nodded and drew in a deep breath. Samuel took a half step toward her before he stopped himself.

His gaze bored into Jessica. "Get in and get out. Don't take any risks. Understand?"

"Loud and clear." She pasted on a bright smile. "Here I go."

Baruti lightly smacked her on the shoulder. It was gentle yet she still staggered a step and chuckled.

Her gaze snagged on Samuel's and it took everything in her to keep going instead of stopping and just staring at him. He was her comfort now. Where she wanted to be. And she didn't know what to think or do about that. No man had ever mattered that much to her. No man had ever tried to understand her as well as he did. Not even her own father.

But duty drove her forward.

Jessica forced herself to compartmentalize her feelings as best she could. Before Samuel, it had only been Robin who mattered this much to her. And they were doing this for Robin and all the people like her who would be hurt by Maxwell Edward if he wasn't stopped.

What they were doing was important.

Jessica walked with the crowd down a few doors. A simple sign over an aged, wooden door proclaimed it a pub. She pushed the door open and descended some stairs down into the basement level bar. The exposed brick sported random scrawling signatures, posters, and stickers from previous patrons. The lighting was dim. Despite the grunge aesthetic, the floors were clean, and the furniture made from solid wood polished until it shone. A massive bar stretched one side of the space with neon lights running under the glass bar top. Bottles decorated mirrored shelves on the wall. What struck her as odd was the curved ceiling. Like this used to be part of the subway or something.

Maybe it had?

It was an interesting place, that was certain.

But there were also very few ways out, which was one of the leading concerns about this meeting.

Jessica had pointed out that few exits meant a small team could cover them with no

trouble, but Samuel hadn't appreciated that input.

Well, too bad.

She let her gaze slide over the room, but didn't see a man by himself anywhere.

Try as she might, Oliver hadn't given her a description of himself. He might not even be a man, for all she knew.

Jessica crossed to the bar and ordered whatever was on tap. She wouldn't drink, but she looked less suspicious with her hands occupied holding onto a frothy beverage. Which was a shame, really. Her favorite cider in the world was exclusive to the UK.

She took her drink to a tall table to the left of the entrance in a darker corner close to the end of the bar. From this vantage point, she could watch most of the room freely.

The clock ticked down to the appointed time.

Still no Oliver.

Where was he? Was he going to stand her up? What would she do if he did?

Jessica wasn't certain she could reach out to their mutual for much help. He considered the debt paid now that they'd been connected. Did Oliver know that?

Shit.

What would she say to the others if he didn't show up?

A man jogged down the stairs. Alone. And paused on the last stair, his gaze searching the bar much like hers had. She held her breath as his gaze reached her and stopped.

This was him.

She wasn't entirely certain until he took a step toward her, but even then she knew this was Oliver.

If she had to guess, he was around thirty, white, with dark, curling hair, and a clean face. From their exchanges, she hadn't expected him to be a fit, attractive guy. He'd given off more cringey geek in his parent's basement vibes.

He pointed at her as he came within five feet. "Jess?"

She wrapped her hand around the beer, ready to toss it at him if she needed to. "Oliver?"

A smile spread across his face that made her squirm. And not in a good way. There was that uncomfortable vibe again. Yeah, he was not the kind of guy she wanted to watch her drink while she ran to the bathroom, that was for damn certain. No matter what happened here, she could not go anywhere alone with him, that much she knew.

He grabbed an empty stool and sat while his brown eyes traveled over her. She resisted the urge to shudder and lean away.

She had known going in he wasn't exactly a good person. They wouldn't be in this situation if he was completely above-board.

"I can't believe you bloody came," he said.

She smiled. "Here I am. You kind of forced my hand on this."

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the room. “And you’re here alone?”

“Yup. You ready to talk?”

His gaze fixed on her and he turned down the attempt at being charming. It wasn’t much, and yet it left her wanting to hold the stool in front of her like a shield.

This man was dangerous.

But that made sense if he knew anything else worth knowing about Maxwell Edward.

Oliver crossed his arms on the table and frowned as if he’d heard her thoughts. “You shouldn’t be asking questions about that bugger.”

“Is that what you had me come all this way for?”

He blew out a breath. “Why do you want to know about him so much? You got a thing for old, rich guys?”

She bit the inside of her mouth, content to wait this out.

Oliver shook his head. “This isn’t good for either of us, I hope you know?”

“So you’ve told me.”

“How can I trust you? Really? Are you a copper?”

“Would it matter? I’m American.”

His gaze narrowed. “That’s my point.”

She shrugged. “No, I’m not a cop. I’m not a fed. I’m just trying to look out for a friend.”

He shook his head. “Better be some good friend.”

“Are we going to talk business or shoot the shit?”

“Shoot the shit?” He chuckled like she’d told a joke. “Yeah, I’ll need some time.”

“What? Wait, that wasn’t the deal. You told me—”

“Yeah, well I didn’t think you’d actually come, and I wasn’t about to stick my neck out for you without a good reason to.”

Jessica glared across the table at him. “You told me. You said very clearly you were in possession of police records that had been removed or hidden. Is that a lie?”

“No. They exist. I just... I don’t actually have them in my possession.”

Her jaw dropped.

This whole trip was about coming here to meet with Oliver and get these files. Files someone with the police had carefully removed and never allowed to be digitized.

Was it all for nothing?

“I’ll get it,” he said quickly. “I just needed to know you were serious before I did

this.”

“How long? How long will it take?”

“Calm yourself.”

“You are wasting my fucking time.” She slid off the stool.

He reached out and grabbed her by the arm. He held on so tight it hurt. “And I wanted to make sure you weren’t wasting mine. These little requests of yours are dangerous.”

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

She twisted her arm out of his grasp. “Are you going to deliver? Or are you going to keep telling me what I already know?”

He reached over and took her untouched beer, draining a quarter of it in a few gulps.

“I’ll be in touch,” he said and got up.

Jessica clenched her jaw and watched him stalk back to the exit.

“Asshole,” she muttered.

This wasn’t at all what they’d agreed to.

Monday. London, UK.

Samuel fumed the whole way back to the hotel.

He’d known this trip wouldn’t be as easy as one meeting. He’d fucking known.

No part of him liked prolonging this stay. The longer they were in London, the greater the chance that someone working for Edward would inform on their movements.

Damn it all to hell.

They got off near the hotel and he took lead, stalking ahead of the others and keeping an eye on pedestrians. It wasn’t as popular of a stop, so there weren’t many around.

Still, it only took one person with a gun to end the lives of many.

At least they had a picture of this Oliver Taylor guy now.

Kelsey had sent the image off to Diha and her fiancé to cross-reference and try to find his real identity. By the morning, they'd know what he had for dinner every day for the last week. And if they didn't, they'd likely have bigger problems to sort out.

“Samuel? Samuel, wait up,” Jessica called out.

This wasn't working.

He was so fucking distracted and the situation was going to hell. How did he protect her and get the job done?

All this time he'd watched the Aegis Group team and their ladies, thinking they needed to act more professional. Now here he was ready to go fucking feral.

Hands gripped his elbow.

He glanced down at Jessica holding onto him, his arm clutched to her side, as she looked up at him.

The only thing he wanted to do was protect her. And all she wanted to do was put herself in danger.

Fucking hell. What a pair they were.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head and indulged himself by patting her hand. “Let's get to the room

first.”

Their small group proceeded up to their rooms. It was late enough the building was quiet and the hall lights dimmed.

He let them into their rooms then did a quick walk-through, peering into the wardrobes and bathrooms—just in case.

“Well, that went about how I expected,” Kelsey announced.

Jessica flopped back on the bed in their room. “Really?”

Samuel came to stand in the door as Baruti flipped the lock.

“I think staying is a really bad idea,” Samuel said. The warning bells in his head were ringing like crazy. “What use do we have of old police reports?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“I’m inclined to agree,” Kelsey said slowly.

That surprised him. He blinked at her a few times, relieved to have some support.

“Whatever is in those files, Maxwell didn’t want anyone to see,” Jessica said.

“How does that help us?” Samuel countered.

Baruti crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the door. “I think it’s worth getting our hands on those files. If we can. And if it’s safe to do so.”

“We came all this way and you want to leave?” Jessica swung her head looking from Kelsey to Samuel and back. “My hope is that the files give us actionable intel we could use with the help of the UK government to get Maxwell into custody. But you’re right, without knowing what’s in them... That’s why we’re here.”

Samuel crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s a lot of risks to take when we can’t afford more.”

Baruti stroked the thin chin strap of hair along his jaw. “It would help us a lot if the UK police could step-in and handle Edward.”

Samuel glared at his partner. Seriously?

Read the damn room.

“Samuel?” Jessica stood and crossed to stand in front of him.

“You said we’d leave after the meeting. Now you want to stay. That wasn’t the agreement.” And he’d fucking known. He’d known it wouldn’t be that simple.

“Think about the difference this could make. What’s the harm in waiting to hear from Oliver, hm?”

“We don’t know that we can trust him,” he said slowly.

“But in a little while we’ll know who he is and then we can make a better choice.” She threw her hands up. “We were going to stay through the night, anyway. What’s wrong with considering all the options?”

Because he knew it wasn’t about options. It came back to Jessica wanting to protect Robin and this being the only way she saw forward. There were other ways. Though eventually, they would have to confront the Edward problem head-on.

“How long then? How long do we stay and take this risk?” he asked.

She blinked at him. “I... I don’t know.”

He shook his head. “That’s not good enough.”

Jessica stared at him for several moments, her face growing more impassive by the moment until the lawyer was looking at him. “Is it not good enough because I’m here and this involves me? Or is it not good enough because you think there is a threat to all of our lives equally?”

The answer was obvious to him, which meant she knew it, too.

Was there a point in answering? Would he apologize for wanting to keep her safe?

Jessica shook her head after a prolonged silence. “Samuel, I think it’s best if we hit pause on this and talk about it in the morning. After we’ve all had a chance to think things through and get some rest.”

“I won’t change my mind,” he said.

Her tone was downright frigid as she said, “That’s unfortunate.”

“Come on, man,” Baruti said softly and took a step toward the adjoining door.

“We need to make a plan now,” Samuel insisted.

“There is no plan to make right now because we aren’t in agreement, and I won’t simply leave because you’re over-protective.”

Baruti patted Samuel’s shoulder.

What was wrong with her? Did she want to die? Was that it?

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Fine,” he said and stalked across to the adjoining door.

He wouldn't magically change his mind by the morning, either.

Baruti closed the adjoining door, and the room immediately felt small. Suffocating. Samuel paced to one side, whirled, and strode toward the other.

“I'm going outside,” he announced.

“Is that a good idea?” Baruti countered.

“I don't fucking care.”

The words were a lie.

He cared. Far too much, clearly.

Samuel strode out into the hall and took the stairs down to a back patio area near some vending machines. The city felt like it was pressing in on all sides. Damn it to hell, why did it have to be like this? Why?

Monday. Edward Residence, London, UK.

Maxwell clicked through the latest surveillance images. The Americans had sent a team to harass the chancellor's boogeyman. It was amusing as hell, but it wouldn't accomplish anything.

Chances were, the Americans weren't prepared for the defensive capabilities. They were, however, managing to keep the attention off him, and for that he was grateful. If the Americans weren't such a thorn in his side he might even send them a thank you for all their hard work.

The way he saw it, this little conflict would stretch out for a while, then the Americans would turn tail and run. In that time, they could learn a number of things. Many of which even Maxwell didn't want them to do. And there was always a chance this was a distraction. Could they have something else up their sleeve?

No doubt Daar was behind this. Maxwell couldn't see how the Americans would connect them otherwise.

And if Daar had changed sides, it was only a matter of time until they came for him, too.

Maxwell sipped his now lukewarm tea and considered his options.

There wasn't much the Americans could do. The chancellor's blackmail was now null and void. He wasn't beholden to their agreement beyond his desire to be here. And take over. But that would take more time than this, or the complete implosion of their organization.

All in all, he wasn't terribly upset with how things were going. There were bound to be some hiccups, but that was okay.

A phone in his desk rang.

Frowning he opened the drawer and stared down at the various devices.

Oliver Taylor flashed on the screen of one.

And there was the thorn in his side. Maybe this was good news finally?

Chapter Fourteen

Monday. London, UK.

Oliver slumped down in the driver's seat of the borrowed car. He could just see both of the hotel windows at this angle. As best he could tell, Jessica had gone from their meeting back here.

She was a hot little thing.

It would be a pity to kill her. Tits like that should be enjoyed.

He reached for his phone and took a deep breath.

Calling the big boss was never fun. Before this little mess, Oliver had only spoken to Mr. Edward twice previously, and he would have liked to have kept it that way. Being known by that man was a good way to get himself killed.

Oliver pressed the phone to his ear and listened to the line ring, praying the boss was too busy for the likes of him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

He wasn't that lucky.

"How did it go? Did she show up?" Mr. Edward asked.

"She did. I stalled just like we talked about."

"I see. Good." Something creaked in the background. "Bring her to me."

Oliver's body tensed. "Sorry?"

"Bring. Her. To. Me. She could be crucial in coming to an understanding with the Americans. Tell me when it's done."

The line clicked.

Oliver pulled the phone away from his face, gaping at the ended call screen.

The boss wanted him to magic a whole damn person to him? How the fuck was he going to do that?

He groaned and threw his phone onto the passenger seat. Dragging a hand over his face, he took a steadying breath and cursed his fate.

How the hell was he supposed to get to her?

The other woman with her shouldn't be a problem. A bird-like that he could practically ignore. It was the two big, Black fellas that he was worried about. Were

they her bodyguards or something? How the fuck was he going to get her alone?

It hit him a moment later.

He leaned forward and smacked his forehead on the steering wheel.

Of course!

If he told her he had the file already, she'd go wherever he told her. Alone. It was the perfect answer and so fucking obvious he should have thought about that first.

Oliver started the car. He needed to find just the right spot. It was late enough side streets like this were almost dead, which would work in his favor.

It took half an hour, but he found a place a few blocks away.

He parked down the street then sprinted the entire distance, his lungs and legs burning. As he reached the little courtyard area, he jabbed Jessica's contact while bending forward breathing deep.

The line rang and rang.

Shit.

Would she not answer? Was she asleep?

"H-hello?" Jessica said.

"I've got it."

"What? You do?"

“Yeah, but I’m fucked, man. Fucked. I’m handing this off to you now or not at all.”

“Uh, I can’t... Where are you?”

“Nowhere I want to be. Where are you?”

She was silent, no doubt hesitant to admit where she was staying. That much was smart.

“I swear to fucking God I’ll burn this to save my ass,” he said in a low voice.

Page 81

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

There was some muffled sound on the other end. Like she was talking to someone else.

“I’m close to the Norwood Junction station,” Jessica finally said. “Can I meet you around there?”

That was a lie. That wasn’t the closest station, but it would work for his purposes.

“Fuck. Yes. I know a little place around there. I’ll text you. Half an hour. Be there—alone—when I get there, or no deal.”

Oliver ended the call and straightened. His legs felt a bit like jelly after that run. He wasn’t much for the physical stuff, least of all running.

He glanced up and down the road then crept into the shadows.

There was a time when he’d had a plug who met him around here. That was ages ago, but this little courtyard between buildings was the perfect out-of-the-way spot. Residents here weren’t quick to report crime either because it happened so often. There was a good chance he’d get away without anyone the wiser.

The boss better reward him handsomely for this. Though chances were Mr. Edward would consider this just part of the job. Fucking hell.

Fifteen minutes passed, and he began to get antsy, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

She should show up any moment now. Any damn moment.

Where the hell was she?

What would he do if she didn't come?

He'd look like a fool, that's for sure. And then he would lose his direct line to her. Because he couldn't risk looking weak.

Fuck.

He shouldn't have given the ultimatum about destroying the files.

Oliver lifted his head and listened.

Were those...?

Footsteps.

He heard footsteps.

Grinning, he pressed his back to the brick and watched the street.

A lone figure with pale hair walked down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, peering at her phone. She paused, then turned and looked almost directly at him. Least it felt that way.

She glanced up and down the road before venturing across at a brisk pace.

Oliver's gaze slid behind her.

Had she come alone? Were the men with her? How close were they?

He couldn't imagine they were far. He would have to move quickly, subdue her, and get out before either of her bodyguards figured out what was going on. If either of them were like him, they would be watching from a safe vantage point.

The car was too fucking far away.

He should have moved it closer.

Fuck.

He could do this. He had a gun, not that he'd actually shot one before. They were easy enough. Put the bullets in. Take the safety off. Pull the trigger.

If he got her off the street and out of sight, they'd be fine.

Page 82

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Oliver let Jessica stand in the courtyard a moment, peering about her, confident she couldn't see him behind the large, potted plant standing on the remnant of a brick column.

Five more minutes passed without any sign of her three friends.

Time to make his move...

Jessica turned toward the road, putting her back to him. He stepped quietly out into the open and drew the gun. The safety was on. He didn't actually want to kill her. Yet. She didn't have to know that, though.

Oliver held his breath, certain she was going to whirl around any moment now, but he got right up behind her and pressed the business end of the gun to the middle of her back.

"Hello, Jessica," he said.

Her body went stiff. "Is that a gun, or are you just happy to see me?"

"What do you think?" He grabbed her arm and backed up, pulling her with him. "Be quiet and don't make trouble."

She balked, but he pulled her along, regardless. "I thought this was an exchange. What happened?"

"Don't you worry about it," he said.

Jessica turned her head, peering back at him. “Oliver? Oliver, talk to me?”

“Shut up,” he snapped.

“I want answers,” she said, talking over him. “This isn’t what we agreed on. I’m willing to pay and make this all go away.”

He laughed and yanked on her, forcing her to turn halfway. “You have no fucking idea what’s going on, do you?”

“You could tell me.” Her eyes flicked down to the gun. “I’ve already been shot once. I’m not crazy about going through that again. Just tell me what you want. We can make a deal. I’ll make it worth your time.”

“I want you to move that perky little ass of yours,” he growled.

“Okay. Okay. See?”

Her hands darted up, and her forearm hit his, swiping the gun off its mark.

And then she changed.

Jessica’s face twisted into a snarl of rage and she rammed her knee right up into the family jewels.

“Mother fucker,” another voice roared right before something small and hard barreled into him.

Oliver hit the ground and rolled, seeing stars.

Get up! Move!

His brain screamed at him.

Those two Black fellas would kill him.

His feet scrambled for purchase as a foot connected to his side.

“Jess? Jessica!” a deep voice called out.

Fuck.

“You piece of shit,” the other woman roared.

Tiny his ass.

She hit like a fucking lorry.

He kept rolling, and this time got his feet under him. Voices and feet echoed off the brick. He didn't look back, just ran and prayed.

Monday. London, UK.

Jessica stood anchored to the spot, staring down the alley where Samuel and Baruti peered in both directions.

“Where'd he go?” Baruti asked.

Samuel's fists were clenched, and he swung his head left then right, still searching. “I don't know. I don't fucking know.”

Jessica's knees shook.

The man had a gun on her. Pressed right to her back. She hadn't been that scared even when they'd made their escape in Colorado.

Holy shit.

“Safety was on,” Kelsey announced.

Jessica whipped her head around. “What?”

Kelsey held up the sidearm Oliver had. “The safety is on. There isn't even a bullet in

the chamber.”

“Shit,” Jessica muttered. “Shit. I should have stalled longer. God damn it.”

Kelsey shoved the weapon down the back of her pants then flipped her shirt over it. “You didn’t know.”

Jessica’s gaze went past Kelsey to Samuel.

He was going to be so pissed, and rightfully so. She couldn’t justify any of this. She’d made a snap decision, and it had been the wrong one.

This angry, passionate man was foreign to her. She didn’t recognize him at all.

Kelsey edged closer. “I’ve never seen Samuel this upset. Word of advice? On a relationship note.”

“Please?” Jessica muttered.

“Tell him whatever he wants to hear. That’s not anger. That’s fear. And whatever happens in the next few hours? Don’t hold it against him, okay?”

She swallowed and nodded.

This was her fault. She’d thought the risk was worth it, that they’d gone this far without incident. Of course, she could trust Oliver a little bit more.

Clearly, she’d been wrong.

“Did he say something I didn’t hear about why he was holding a gun on you?” Kelsey asked.

Jessica shook her head. “No. Nothing.”

Samuel and Baruti turned back toward them. While Baruti focused on studying the street, Samuel stared straight at her.

Jessica forced herself to breathe and stand her ground as Samuel bore down on her.

“What were you thinking?” he snapped.

“I was wrong,” she said without hesitation.

“Damn right you were wrong.”

Page 84

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Baruti held up his hands. “Let’s take this back to the hotel, huh?”

“That’s a good idea,” Kelsey chimed in.

Jessica remained silent, staring up at Samuel.

“Get walking,” he said in a cold tone.

Those words hurt for some reason.

Jessica turned and fell into step with Kelsey.

“Thank you,” Jessica muttered.

Kelsey glanced at her. “It was a calculated risk. We lost this one. That’s all there is to it.”

Was there, though?

They walked almost a whole block in silence. Baruti led the way with Samuel hot on Jessica’s heels. She could feel his angry glare every now and then.

She’d really fucked this up.

But was it really too good to be true?

Eventually, the hotel came into view. She hadn’t given Oliver the closest tube station

to the hotel on purpose.

Would they stay here? Did they think it was another risk?

When Baruti entered and climbed to the second floor, so did she. They filed into the guy's room. The adjoining door was open again, and she eyed it longingly, tempted to flee in there and lock herself away.

It sucked being wrong.

"Is it safe to stay here?" Kelsey asked.

"I don't fucking know," Samuel replied.

Baruti went into the other room and peered out onto the street. "We weren't followed, but this Oliver character could already know where we are."

Samuel whirled to face Jessica and Kelsey. "What the hell happened out there?"

Jessica winced and took a deep breath. "I messed up."

"I'll say."

She watched him cross his arms over his chest. His face was mostly in shadow, giving him an ominous air.

"Let's focus on one thing at a time, right?" Baruti stepped between them. "Are we staying here? Or are we moving?"

"I think we stay put," Kelsey said. "Jessica had him on speaker when he called and I listened to their exchange. I'm not certain the guy was going to do anything."

“I was wondering if he intended to shake me down for some cash,” Jessica admitted.

Kelsey nodded. “He seemed very worked up. There was no one else there. It just doesn’t add up if this guy is after Jessica for this Edward guy. Besides, we’re at most risk when making rash, snap decisions. And we all know we’re most vulnerable when moving. It’s past midnight now. Where are we going to go? How are we getting there? Who is to say it’s more secure?”

“Agreed,” Baruti said. “Though I do say we move first thing in the morning.”

Samuel began to pace. “I think we should go the fuck home.”

Jessica was partially inclined to agree with him, but she couldn’t give up. Not after they’d come so far.

Page 85

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

“Let’s discuss it in the morning,” Baruti said. “With Zora, once we know who Oliver really is.”

Samuel wheeled on her again. “What were you thinking? Seriously, what?”

Jessica could only shrug. “It sounded urgent. I got swept up in the need to make an immediate decision.”

“I agreed with her,” Kelsey chimed in.

Samuel’s head whipped around and he glared at her. “I expected better from you.”

Jessica cringed as Kelsey took a menacing step forward. Baruti was quick to grab Kelsey’s shoulder.

“I think we should give them some privacy, yeah?” he said to Kelsey.

She glared at Samuel. “You’re a dick when you’re angry.”

With that, Kelsey spun on her heel and stalked into their room. Baruti glanced at Jessica and winked, then closed the adjoining door.

Well, shit.

She sat on the foot of the nearest bed and settled in. There wasn’t anything she could say. She’d made the wrong call. When that gun had pressed against her, she’d felt all the blood leave her body and knew this time she wouldn’t be so lucky. And here

she'd come away without a scratch, but only because of Kelsey.

Samuel remained across the room from her, arms crossed over his chest again. "Why didn't you call us for backup?"

She gripped handfuls of the comforter. "I didn't think. There wasn't much time. We just went."

"Yeah? Look how that worked out for us."

"I know. I was wrong," she said and hunched her shoulders.

He was silent for a long moment.

She stared at the carpet, replaying those moments.

When she'd gotten the call, adrenaline had narrowed her focus. She must have the files. At any cost. And she'd forgotten about not only her safety, but that of her team. This wasn't just about her. She could gamble with her life just fine, but not anyone else's. Though in those moments when she'd thought Oliver might shoot her, she'd wanted to live. She'd wanted to kiss him again. To hug Robin.

What they were doing was important, but so was her life. Which left her at an impasse.

What did she do?

The rustling of Samuel's clothing was the loudest sound in the room as he crossed to stand in front of her, then lowered to a knee. His gaze bored into her skull and his lips were pressed tightly together, as if he were holding back words.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” he asked, his tone gentler.

“No. Not at all.”

He laid his palms on her knees. His warmth penetrated the cold shell of shock still encasing her.

“What happened? Walk me through every moment?” he asked.

So she did. She walked him through each step, all her thoughts and feelings, the rationalizing process she’d taken to get to exactly where they were now.

“You did good. Real good,” he said when she was done.

“No, I fucked up.” Damn it. She was so mad at herself she was going to cry.

His hands traveled up her legs to her thighs. His body pressed against her knees until she parted for him. He wrapped his arms around her and she leaned against him.

“I was so stupid. I didn’t think it through. And I was scared. So scared. I’m sorry,” she said in a small, brittle voice that broke on every other word.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:34 am

Samuel wrapped his arms around her.

“Me, too,” he whispered. “When Kelsey texted us... I’m so mad at you. Don’t you realize your life is precious, too? What am I supposed to do if you...?”

Jessica squeezed her arms around him as the first tremor shook her.

Tonight could have ended badly. So very badly. She was lucky her self-defense classes had stuck. She was lucky Oliver hadn’t been paying close attention. She was lucky Kelsey, and the guys were so near. Without them, without everything lining up perfectly, tonight could have had a much different ending.

How long would their good luck hold out?

Chapter Fifteen

Monday. Hotel, London, UK.

Samuel clutched Jessica close. His heart was still hammering away at his ribs to the point it felt like it might burst out. He tightened his grip, though he knew he shouldn’t. She was still healing. Still fragile.

He’d been prepared for a knockdown, drag-out fight over this. For her to dig her heels in and tell him results were worth any cost. Because that sounded like a Jessica sort of thing to say.

He hadn’t been prepared for her fear. For her to realize just how close this had come

to being a complete and total disaster.

Her legs wrapped around him, as if he were the one who needed to be held prisoner.

“Don’t do that. Not ever again, understand? We talk these things out together or they don’t happen. Agreed?”

She was only quiet for a moment before whispering, “Okay.”

Samuel knew she could very well change her mind once the height of emotions had passed. In her current state, he shouldn’t ask such a thing of her. But he needed those words and even the grain of a hope that she might change. Asking her to stop taking risks was too much. That would be like a duck giving up swimming. But at the very least, she could have someone watching her back. Someone there for her. And he wanted that to be him. For however long she’d let him.

Jessica cupped his face and tipped his chin up. Her brow had a little wrinkle marring it, and her eyes were watery and sad.

This wasn’t what they’d agreed to, but damn it, he couldn’t separate how he felt no matter what they’d said.

She kissed him this time, tender, soft little kisses she trailed over his mouth. He let his eyes close and his soul exist in this one moment where they were okay.

Samuel rose to his feet, with Jessica wrapped around him.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked.

She pressed her face to his neck and nipped his skin. “I might have thought on several occasions about climbing you like a tree...”

His body warmed and his cock hardened.

“Is that so?” he muttered.

She sighed. “Sorry, not supposed to say things like that, am I?”

Samuel kissed her. He didn’t give a fuck about what they’d said when. Right now, he needed her.

Jessica’s mouth was soft against his. He thrust his tongue past her lips, teasing and tasting her. She moaned and slid her fingers around to press to the back of his head while her legs locked around him.

They weren’t supposed to do this. But what they were doing already wasn’t working. He didn’t want to waste time regretting when she was right fucking here.

Samuel took a few steps to the exterior wall and pressed Jessica’s back to it. She arched into him while her hands slid over his face and neck. He kept kissing her, needing that connection.

When had he become so fixated on her? How had this happened?

It hadn’t come about because of one thing or another. It had begun slowly and grown, despite his attempts not to care for her.

She bit his lower lip as she shifted her hips, grinding against him.

“Samuel,” she muttered.

He was breathing heavily now. It was hard to think past the throbbing of his cock and her soft body wrapped around him.

“Put me out of my misery and fuck me already, will you?” she whispered.

There were reasons not to. Very good ones he didn't give two shits about right now.

He eased his hold on her and she dropped her legs to the ground.

He stared back at her. “Someday we're going to do this right. With no hurrying.”

Jessica grinned at him. “I'll be there.”

He reached for her pants while she pulled her shirt off. Their hands tangled as they rushed to strip off clothes. He wasn't kidding about wanting time to linger. Every time they were together, it wasn't exactly an opportune moment. He wanted to savor her. Learn all her ticklish places. What made her moan and what buttons to press until she clawed his back and begged for release.

The moment Jessica kicked off her leggings, Samuel grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet. Her greedy hands clenched his face, bringing their mouths back together for a kiss that felt as if it touched all of him.

It was pure mutual need. And he wanted more. Everything she would give him.

Samuel stroked her pussy, delighted to find her wet for him.

“Fuck me, Samuel,” she whispered. “I want you.”

He thrust into her and groaned. Jessica clutched his shoulders and threw back her head. He swiped his fingers over her nipple and grinned when she hissed.

She was so responsive.

He tilted his hips, pressing up into her. Her jaw dropped, and she moaned as he slid in deeper.

This was perfection.

Jessica’s legs tightened around him and she sealed her lips over his. She was so honest, so open. There was no performative aspect to Jessica. She was honest in her pleasure.

He gripped her hips and pulled away from her, swallowing her whimpers. He held her there with barely the tip of his cock being hugged by her tight little pussy. Without warning, he thrust, sinking all the way into her.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned.

“Sh.”

“What?” One side of her mouth hitched up. “I’m never going to hide how much I want you. Not from anyone.”

“Fucking hell.” He braced a hand against the wall. “You can’t just say shit like that, Jess.”

“Yes, I can.” Her hands slid down his back as she worked her hips in a circle. “I want you, and I’m not about to let you forget that.”

“As if I could with the way you hug this cock.”

She drove her heels into his ass. “Give it to me.”

How could he not oblige?

Samuel thrust, staring deep into her eyes, losing himself in the desire for her. He was no relationship savant, but he knew this was a good thing. And he wasn’t about to let her go.

Jessica came chanting his name with her nails digging into his shoulders. It was sudden, and she hugged his cock so tight the sheer pleasure of her orgasm teased his out. It rolled up out of him in waves of pleasure, leaving him drained and very aware of the fact that he’d been laid up for two solid months.

He clutched her close and for several moments neither of them spoke or moved beyond, hands sliding over skin. But after a few moments, he carried them into the small bathroom.

There was something far more intimate about the aftercare of sex with Jessica. It was the teasing brush of fingers, the demure smiles, and how her eyes grew heavy-lidded, betraying her exhaustion.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

They were all pushing themselves.

Neither of them said much. His body was relaxed, his mind winding down.

Samuel took Jessica by the hand and led her back to bed. She crawled in and he was quick to follow, though this wasn't his room. Eventually, he'd need to leave so Kelsey could come back. But for a moment, he just wanted to hold Jessica.

She flashed her phone in his face, practically blinding him. "Baruti texted and said Kelsey has already passed out in your bed."

"Shit," Samuel muttered.

He would hear about this later. Kelsey wouldn't pass up the chance to have a laugh at him over this. But was he really embarrassed?

Jessica wiggled her hips against his groin as she settled in.

Nope.

He was not the least bit embarrassed.

She put her phone away, then drew his arm around her. He kissed her shoulder and breathed a sigh.

They were okay.

All of them.

For now.

She trailed her fingers over the back of his hand in lazy circles.

“We should sleep with clothes on,” he said, hating to be the reasonable one.

“In a minute?”

He squeezed her a little tighter.

They lay like that for a while. Just existing in this pleasant little bubble.

Samuel was the one to break it. His mind just wouldn't stop. He rose up on an elbow so he could talk to something besides the back of her head. She rolled toward him, the better to look up.

“Are we okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She blinked up at him. “Did you think we weren't?”

He grimaced. “Why else wouldn't you tell me you were doing something reckless?”

She sighed heavily. “Because deep down, I knew you and Baruti would probably try to push it back or delay it out of an abundance of caution.”

“You are right on that front.”

“And you would have been right. I let my ego and my need to do something over-ride my better judgment. I'm sorry.”

He blew out a breath. “That’s one lesson you’re going to have to learn.”

She nodded.

He reached up and smoothed a bit of hair off her face. “I’d also like it if we could stop having sex because we’re in a high-emotional state.”

Her face lit up, and she wiggled around to face him. “I like where this is headed. Tell me more?”

Samuel chuckled and propped his chin on his hand. “You aren’t mad?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“Why would I be?” She pressed her palm to his chest. “What’s going on?”

He closed his eyes. “I was so mad. And I yelled. And...”

“And I deserved your anger. We’re both going to yell sometimes. We’re passionate people in our own way. I wouldn’t even say we’ve had a fight yet. Just intense disagreements. Samuel. There’s going to come a day when we get really heated about something and you’re going to have to remind me I’m not in a courtroom, okay? Sometimes I get entrenched in making an argument and proving my point. But all of this? It’s just high emotion, like you said. We’re okay. I think we’re pretty darn good so far for two people who aren’t technically dating.”

He rolled his eyes at that. Yeah. They were doing so well at being apart. “Okay...”

“For the record, good sir?” She nuzzled closer and kissed his chin, then the corner of his mouth. “I don’t like angry sex. I’m good with mad sex, but if I’ve got something to be angry about? I’m going to want to work that out first, okay? I much prefer make-up sex.”

Now that was a good tip. “Good to know.”

“But you want to know my favorite?” she whispered.

“No.”

He laid back and closed his eyes. In no way did he need to know that tidbit of information right now. Jessica laughed and smacked his shoulder.

“Oh, come on.”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

She leaned on his shoulder and he felt the brush of her lips on his ear. “I’ve always wanted to wake-up getting fucked.”

Oh, hell.

Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday. Hotel, London, UK.

Jessica stared at her reflection. The dark circles weren’t as prominent. Her eyes were brighter, more alert. She couldn’t lie. Sleeping next to Samuel had made all her fears go quiet. Her one, real night alone hadn’t gone all that well. That was why she’d passed out on the plane so easily. Samuel had been near, and when he was close, she didn’t have a fear in the world. Now if only she could cover up this permanent blush.

God.

She was fine with everyone knowing she and Samuel were together. Hell, she needed to be honest with herself here. She liked that the others knew. It made their wonky relationship real to her. It wasn’t something they were hiding. He wasn’t playing both sides. She wanted to give this a serious shot.

“Oh, Samuel,” Kelsey moaned on the other side of the door.

Jessica’s face flamed hotter. “Shut. Up.”

Kelsey howled with laughter while Jessica closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“Fuck me,” she muttered.

Then again, fucking was what got her in this predicament, to begin with.

She wasn't sorry. Baruti or Kelsey should have closed both adjoining doors. They couldn't blame her for everything.

Honestly, Jessica felt better after last night. Knowing this connection was important to both of them really made a difference. It settled her knowing she and Samuel were on the right side, hand-in-hand together. Maybe they hadn't quite put a boyfriend-girlfriend label on things, but this was a level of commitment. And she was all in.

Jessica opened the bathroom door and glared at Kelsey, who was perched on the foot of a bed putting her shoes on.

“You're really obnoxious, know that?” Jessica said.

Kelsey grinned back then glanced at the closed adjoining doors. “You make him human.”

Jessica flopped down next to Kelsey. The stiff mattress bucked hard enough it almost sent the shorter woman flying off the side.

“Shit!” she yelped.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Jessica smiled smugly. “Serves you right.”

“Guys should be back any moment.” And just like that, Kelsey was all business. “You packed?”

Jessica glanced at her duffle. “And ready to go.”

Kelsey’s words played back in Jessica’s head.

She made him human.

It wasn’t hard to understand what Kelsey meant. Samuel’s personality was the type that would make work his life. Just like her. The only difference was she hadn’t been born like this. She’d nurtured this in herself. Whereas Samuel didn’t always know how to step back from work and be himself apart from expectations.

She wanted to show him how to relax and enjoy himself. She wanted that for him, because no one should live only for work. Everyone needed something for themselves.

The beep of a door made both Jessica and Kelsey freeze and stare at the adjoining doors, straining to listen. A rhythmic knock sounded from the other side and both women exhaled.

They were all a little on edge after last night.

Jessica let Kelsey unlock their side and admit the two men. Jessica glanced at the

window, acutely aware of Samuel crossing to sit next to her.

“I got that sweet mint gum you like,” he said quietly.

It was a simple gesture, and yet it made her grin. It also meant he’d been paying attention to her a lot longer than she realized. He’d only know she liked that gum if he’d been paying attention back when they were in Colorado. At least once a week she’d ask someone to pick her up a pack.

“How long have you filed that bit of information away?” she asked and glanced up at him.

His dark eyes felt as though they were going to suck her in. “I don’t know... The beginning, I guess.”

“Okay, break it up you two love birds,” Kelsey said. “What’s our next move?”

Right.

Back to business.

“Did we get intel on the Oliver guy?” Jessica asked.

“We did.” Baruti pulled out his phone. “His name really is Oliver Taylor, and he has a colorful record. But nothing that sticks out.”

“Damn,” she muttered.

Kelsey waved a fry around. “No red flags that say, I work for an asshole?”

Baruti shook his head as he chewed.

“I still think we should give up on this and go home,” Samuel said.

“Oliver knew things about Edwards. Things Robin confirmed with her uncle.” Jessica tipped her head up and stared at the ceiling. “If only we could get Oliver to just sit down and talk. Tell us what he really knows. Was he going to shake me down? Or did he have another plan?”

“I mean, we could do that,” Kelsey said.

“What?”

She nodded. “Snatch him, convince him to talk, then we know things.”

Jessica could see it playing out in her head like an action movie. “It’s not really that easy...”

Kelsey lifted a shoulder. “It can be, but not always.”

“Tracking Oliver might be the hard part,” Samuel chimed in. “Without working with local police, we don’t have a way to find him. Not without CCTV, bank records, or something.”

Page 91

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Kelsey leveled a look at him. “We do know a guy...”

“But can Miles help with this?”

Miles Green was currently dating Diha. That relationship was why he’d transferred to the US to work as a liaison. Jessica knew that much just from what Diha had told her when the girls had been hanging out. The relationship seemed both old and new. New enough Diha blushed and squirmed when the other girls spoke. And yet, old enough in the sense that Diha and Miles seemed to know exactly who the other was, what they wanted, and where they were headed. Jessica had only glimpsed them together for a few minutes, but she already knew she wanted that for herself.

She shrugged. “Don’t know if we don’t ask.”

“I still think we should pack it up and go home,” Samuel said.

Jessica turned toward Samuel, who held up his hand to stall her. “Just because I think that’s what we should do and I want to say it doesn’t mean we have to. I already know you want to stay, and I’ll not push the issue so long as I don’t think you’re at risk. I’m on the line, though.”

That, Jessica could work with.

“Why don’t we go grab some lunch, hm? Though I suppose by now, it’s an early dinner.” Baruti suggested. They were all out of synch with being jet-lagged and staying up late. “It’s getting later in the day. We’re all jetlagged. Last night was a lot. Let’s have some food and wait to see what Miles can tell us. Chances are, Diha has

already gotten his input and is working on more for us. We just have to be patient.”

“Probably,” Samuel muttered.

“Oh, shit.” Kelsey held up her phone and cringed. “It’s Logan...”

Jessica gaped at her. “Answer it.”

Kelsey drew in a breath, stood, and tapped the screen. Jessica heard a soft, “Hey,” before Kelsey stepped into the bathroom.

“I would not want to be her right now,” Baruti said.

Jessica whipped her head around. “Why?”

Baruti and Samuel shared a look.

“You never met Logan, did you?” he asked.

“I think he was in the room once.” She squinted. “Maybe? But no, I wouldn’t say I really met him.”

“Logan is...” He tilted his head. “Protective.”

“I’m fine,” Kelsey said loudly from behind the closed bathroom door.

Jessica cringed.

Oh, boy.

It was that kind of phone call.

She covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled.

It was endearing that even a kick-ass woman like Kelsey had someone in her corner ready to scold her for taking a risk.

Jessica felt eyes on her and turned her head to smile up at Samuel. He had a flat, unamused stare aimed her way. Whatever conversation Logan was having with Kelsey was probably a variation of the talk Samuel had given her last night.

Jessica understood the concern. She wasn't ignoring it. Those risks factored into her decision to stay. Because she believed in what they could do.

Everyone had come out okay last night. One bump in the road wasn't reason enough to stop. She knew if they stayed on this trail they'd find something.

Tuesday. Oliver's Apartment, London, UK.

Oliver stared at the plain wall of his flat while doom rained down on him.

He was fucked.

Page 92

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

If he didn't somehow get his hands on this Jessica chick, he was so very fucked.

He'd blown it. Completely blown a sure thing all because he got too hasty.

The boss wouldn't like hearing how much he'd screwed this up. The moment Oliver had reported back about her line of questioning was the moment when Oliver got too much of the boss' attention.

Fuck.

Could he call her? Say it was a mistake?

No.

He needed to know something. He needed help. He...

Wait, a minute.

He knew a broad who owed him a favor. Was it time to cash that in?

Before he could think through what he could do, he was scrolling his contacts. Suzan wasn't her real name, but it didn't matter. He'd helped her and had to get stitches as a result. She fucking owed him.

If a man couldn't get a job done, who better to send than a woman?

Tuesday. London, UK.

Samuel felt off. It was like he was half a step out of synch with Jessica and everyone else. But he couldn't help it. Though they'd talked and walked through every moment of last night, he couldn't shake the idea that being here was a bad idea. It baffled him how Baruti of all people thought they should continue the investigation.

Did none of them really get it? Were they blind? Did they see something he didn't? Or were they all willfully ignoring the threats?

Jessica's knuckles brushed his as they walked down the street headed toward a pub the attendant at the hotel had said served a good meal.

At the very least they should move. Go somewhere else.

Her soft, delicate hand wrapped around his. He glanced down to find Jessica smiling up at him. Her head was tilted one way just enough, so it looked like she'd asked him a question.

Had he not been listening?

Her hand squeezed his, so he squeezed back.

Jessica's smile widened, and she shook her head before turning her attention on the sidewalk in front of them.

What was that about?

He'd missed something again, hadn't he?

Damn it.

The cloud of concern seemed to dissipate a little. He drew in a deep breath and his

chest was a little lighter, too.

He glanced at Jessica out of the corner of his eye. Was she doing this to him?

Dad always liked to tell Samuel that his plans were too detailed, and sometimes he needed to live instead of plan. This was probably what he meant. After all, wherein his grand plan for life had he ever thought about a relationship? Starting a family? He'd made a plan with single-minded focus and forgotten about everything else.

“Why so serious?” Jessica asked.

“Just thinking,” he muttered.

“About?”

“What brought me to this moment?”

“Want to share?”

How would he even begin?

“Why’d you decide to be a lawyer?” he asked instead.

Her smirk said she wasn’t going to forget to drag his answer out of him. “A common theme with the people I spoke to in hospice was that life was okay for them up until a point when everything went wrong. For a lot of them it was something like getting caught with someone who had a joint or a bad traffic stop with a cop picking apart everything, and getting absurdly heavy sentences that made it near to impossible to recover in life. Stories about people who didn’t have an advocate looking out for them. People who wound up with bullshit felonies all because... I don’t know. I don’t want to speculate because that’ll just piss me off. I did a lot of shadowing nurses then cops, but it wasn’t until my dad had this judge friend over for dinner that it really clicked. His wife was a court reporter. She and I got to talking, and she spelled it out for me. These people need two things. First, someone who will fight for them. And second, someone who will change the game for them.”

His mouth went dry listening to her. Her words resonated in his very bones.

“There’s not a lot an eighteen-year-old can do to change how the world works. At best, even if I started working in politics, it was going to be a slow road. But if I went the law route? I can help people while I establish myself. I can touch individual lives and advocate for them. I can argue cases fairly and not how they’ve been handed to me. And someday maybe I’ll be in a place where I can change things for everyone.” She looked up at him. “Your turn. What are you thinking about?”

“I joined the FBI because I wanted to change things from the inside.”

“Have you?”

“I don’t know.” He thought back on how things had been when he first started. “No, it’s gotten better. But the bigger problems are things that one person can’t change on their own. But I will say that the environment has gotten better since I joined. We see fewer racial stereotypes tossed around, and I think that makes us fairer when investigating.”

She beamed up at him. Like she was proud of him.

“Be the change you want to see,” she said.

“What do you do for fun?” he asked. “You know when you aren’t raising money for cancer or changing the world for the better?”

“I listen to audiobooks and sculpt clay.”

“You—what?”

Jessica laughed. “What? Surprised?”

“I thought you’d be a pool league or softball kind of girl.”

“I love pool league and softball, though I’m much better at volleyball. And yeah, I like all that stuff. But if I need to take a break and do something for me? I need to just sit and be creative. Creativity isn’t something I get to express very much. So it’s very zen-like to sit down with some clay and tools, turn on a book, and just see where it takes me. I’m not amazing. I’d say I’m pretty bad, but I enjoy it.”

“What kind of things do you sculpt?”

“Mostly little figurines I smash back into clay. Every now and then something good comes out of it and I’ll keep one. Painting figurines is a whole other hobby I suck at. I wouldn’t even say I’m necessarily good at sculpting, I just enjoy it. And I’m okay with that. If I were good at it, I’d probably feel like I have to hustle and figure out how to market it, which defeats the whole purpose, to begin with. So I stay bad at it and just enjoy the process.” Her shoulder jostled him as they walked. “What about you? What do you do just for yourself?”

He watched the back of Baruti’s shoulders while the reality sank in. “Nothing.”

He was one-dimensional in his own life. Being near Jessica was shining a light on the fact that he’d settled into this head-down-and-work mentality so deeply that there was nothing else for him. Lying next to her had made him want to do other things. And not necessarily things together.

“Nothing? You can’t be serious,” she said. “I’ve heard you are quite the style icon around the office.”

“I told myself when I got into the FBI I’d be dedicated for five years. I wouldn’t let anything distract me...”

“How long has it been?”

Longer than five years.

That wasn’t to say he’d been a machine, but he sure as hell hadn’t made room for things that made him genuinely happy. Even while sitting on the sidelines watching Baruti crash and burn with his husband before figuring it out. Then there was the kids. Samuel had watched it all happen to someone else while he did nothing.

He glanced down at her. “You ever played soccer?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I never had the stamina to be really good at it, but it’s so much fun.”

“I’ve never played volleyball.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“Want to teach me sometime?”

“Uh, yes.” Her face lit up, like he was doing something for her...

Samuel narrowed his gaze. “What are you up to?”

“I mean, I think it’s easiest to learn sand volleyball so you don’t get hurt. We’d have to go to the beach somewhere. Besides, you and everyone else still wants me to relax. What’s more relaxing than the ocean and sand and waves? If I’m going to the beach, I’m wearing a swimsuit. And guys always seem to like taking their shirts off at the beach, so I’m thinking I like everything about this idea.”

Samuel just stared at her. “You got all that from me asking about learning how to bump a ball?”

“Hmm...” Her gaze turned heated, and she leaned closer. “On second thought we could leave the ball bumping to me.”

Fucking hell.

This woman would be the death of him. Literally.

Samuel shook his head and sighed.

Thankfully, Baruti turned into the pub at exactly that moment.

They emerged into the pleasant pub. There weren’t many people around at this hour.

“Aw, shit,” Kelsey muttered. “Logan’s calling again. I’ll be right back. Order me whatever.”

Baruti half-turned. “Let’s sit in the back.”

“Lead the way,” Jessica said.

Samuel studied the pub interior. “I’m going to the restroom.”

Jessica glanced over her shoulder at him. “And then there were two...”

He patted her ass after Baruti turned away earning a cheeky grin from her.

Kelsey might be on the phone, but she was also out there watching for anyone who might have been following them. Likewise, Samuel wasn’t going to the toilet as much as he was checking for a secondary entrance or anyone watching them.

Samuel stepped into the restroom and peered about, but it was empty like the rest of the place.

Good.

They could use a damn break.

He stepped out of the restroom into the narrow hall and bumped into another person.

“Oh my!” the woman said as she caught herself on the wall.

Samuel reached out a hand to steady her. “Sorry about that.”

She was an attractive woman of mixed race judging by her light brown complexion

and curly hair. Based on her blazer and heels, she probably worked nearby.

“Oh, an American?” She straightened, eyeing him with interest.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Her gaze slid down his body. “Want to join me for lunch and find out?”

“Not today, ma’am.”

“Well, I’ve got to eat dinner, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“And I’ve got someone I’m planning on spending a lot of time with,” he said as gently as possible.

She sighed and lifted a shoulder. “Good ones are always taken.”

He was taken.

Samuel smiled and nodded. “Have a good day, ma’am.”

There was only one woman who had his eye.

Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday. London, UK.

Oliver stared at his phone. Suzan should have sent him something by now. What the hell was she doing in there?

This whole situation was utter garbage. Why should all this be on him? All because he owed a guy. It wasn’t fucking right.

The passenger door of his car opened and Suzan sat down. She glared daggers at him while he just stared.

“Wow. You clean up real nice.”

“Shut. Up,” Suzan practically growled. “You could have told me one was gay.”

Oliver frowned. “What?”

“The real big bloke? The massive one? Gay. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that, you idiot?” She reached across and smacked his arm.

He threw up his hand, batting her away. “How was I supposed to know?”

“You stupid, idiotic man.”

“What about the other one? Huh?”

She kept glaring at him. “He’s fucking the blonde bird.”

“So?”

“So he wouldn’t give me the time of day. Those are two nuts I won’t be able to crack at dinner. This ain’t working.”

“Shit,” Oliver muttered.

“This makes us even.”

“No, it doesn’t. You didn’t do shit for me and I fenced that whole lot you couldn’t move. I did you a real solid and you’re just going to leave me high and dry?”

Suzan glared at him. “What would you have me do? Hm?”

Oliver scrubbed a hand over his face.

There was no doubt he couldn’t do this alone. He needed people. Problem was he was a solo kind of guy. He did small jobs. Little things. Something like kidnapping a

person was outside the scope of his usual work because that always required more help. But, now he had Suzan, and she worked with people.

“Just so you know, the boss asked who I’d brought in and I mentioned your name,” he said.

“What?” Suzan shrieked. “You did what?”

She didn’t work for Edward like he did. And he hadn’t mentioned her at all, but he’d lie if it meant she got on his side.

“Why would you do that?” she demanded.

Page 96

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“He asked what my plan was, and I had to tell him something. I had to tell him you were helping me.”

Suzan clutched her head and bent forward. “Oh, my God. You idiot. You fucking idiot. What do we do now?”

Oliver resisted the urge to grin.

He had her.

“Don’t you still work with those blokes? The guy with one eye? Those guys?”

“Yeah...”

“If getting the bird’s security away from her isn’t an option, then let’s out-muscle them. Round-up your guys. Let’s hit them quick, grab the girl, and it’s over. You get a nice thank you from the boss and we’re even.”

Suzan stared at him for several long moments. Would she cave? He needed her to. Without some muscle, it would be Oliver who paid the price.

She sighed and shook her head. “I know some guys. Different ones. They’re between jobs right now, so it’ll have to happen quick.”

Oliver grinned at her.

Gotcha...

Tuesday. Pub, London, UK.

Samuel had never been to London. Quite frankly he'd been less than enthusiastic about the idea of going to a bar for dinner. Instead, he'd been served a lemon and ricotta ravioli dish that should, by no rights, be as good as it was.

Holy shit.

American bars needed to set up their food game, that was for damn certain.

Yeah, Baruti's burger looked just as greasy as any bar food they'd ever eaten, but the fries weren't frozen bullshit. That didn't even touch what the girls ate. Some sort of meat-pie thing that smelled good enough he wondered if he could eat anything else.

Maybe he needed to travel more?

He'd been out of the country a few times on FBI business, but not very much. Travel had always sounded like something other people did. But why not?

Listening to Jessica, it was clear she'd been all over the place. This was not her first time to London by a long shot. What would it be like to play tourist with her? Would she roll her eyes and—yeah fucking right. He didn't need to even finish that question. Knowing her, the moment he made mention of taking a trip she'd start yammering about every place she just had to show him. She'd get excited and do that little bounce-in-place thing. In less than five minutes the whole thing would be mapped out.

“What are you smiling at?” Kelsey asked.

Samuel lifted his head and looked around the table. All three sets of eyes were aimed at him.

“What was that?” He reached for his water and took a sip. “You were saying something?”

Jessica chuckled and patted his thigh under the table. “I’ll get it out of him later.”

“So, what’s our next move?” Kelsey asked. “Are we seriously going to try to lure this Oliver guy out to talk?”

“If we’re going to lure out Oliver, I want Jess to go home,” Samuel said.

“This again?” Jessica sighed and bumped him with her shoulder. “I already said I don’t want to leave.”

“Samuel’s got a point,” Kelsey said and aimed a hard look Jessica’s way. “If we want to go this route—and I’m not saying we are yet—but if we do, this will be very dangerous for us. Jess, you can’t help. Samuel shouldn’t, but we only have the three of us right now unless things change. Which I don’t think they will. If Jess stays, at least one of us has to stay with her. That leaves two people trying to get the drop on Oliver. It’s a numbers game, nothing personal.”

Jessica blinked rapidly. There was a wrinkle between her brows and she had a fierce frown. He could already hear her protests, how she needed to stay.

Instead, she blew out a breath and slumped lower in the booth.

“Okay. I hear you. To get information out of Oliver, I need to go.” She glanced at him. “I’m not happy about it.”

“I didn’t think you would be.”

Kelsey leaned forward and tapped the table with her finger. “It’s not personal. This isn’t about what any of us want. We’re only talking about what gets the job done and everyone stays safe.”

Jessica flopped back. “This sucks, but okay. I’ll book a flight home. I’m all packed. There’s probably something leaving tonight.”

“What’s our real plan?” Baruti asked.

“Get Jess on the plane first,” Samuel said.

Kelsey nodded. “Yeah. We get Jess through security, then she calls Oliver. We give her a script. She gets Oliver to meet however possible and we show up instead. The rest is handled.”

Jessica scrunched up her nose. “You think it’ll be that easy?”

No, Samuel doubted it would be that easy, but he wasn’t going to tell her otherwise.

Kelsey shrugged. “We’ll handle it.”

Jessica pulled out her shiny new phone and began tapping at the screen. It was his turn to put his hand on her thigh.

This would pass, and then he’d take her up on that beach trip. This relationship

wasn't going to be easy, but he didn't have to balk at the things he wanted to do. Which was to spend time with her.

It took surprisingly little time for Jessica to book a return flight, which left them with not a lot of time.

"Baruti and I are going to head outside," Kelsey announced, but winked at Jessica. "We'll give you the all-clear."

The mismatched pair of Baruti and Kelsey made their way out through the growing crowd. It was into the evening rush now, which wasn't exactly ideal, all things considered.

Jessica turned toward him and took his hand in hers. "You'll be careful?"

"Of course. You'll be safe?"

She smiled. "I'll do my best."

He arched a brow. "Your best?"

"You won't be there. I'm so used to you being around and there for me that the idea of you being an ocean away is... I'm not going to like it."

Was it distance that would destroy them?

He hoped not.

Then again, they weren't officially anything to each other.

"Does this mean we get to take that pin out?" she asked.

He snorted. “Yeah, that didn’t work at all.”

She chuckled. “Sorry...”

“For what? It’s not your fault.”

“I didn’t try all that hard. I guess deep down I’m just selfish...”

“What?” He shook his head, unsure where this was coming from. “You and selfish are not words I’d associate.”

Her fingers stroked his. “I didn’t even try to act different.”

“And you think I did?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“Well, you did better than I did.”

He tapped the side of his head. “Only because you can’t hear my thoughts.”

A sensual grin spread over her face. “Oh yeah? Want to share?”

“When this is over.”

She leaned toward him. “You’re the worst, Mr. Jenkins.”

“Only because I have to be your match, Ms. Chapin.”

Jessica leaned in and smacked a kiss on his lips. He loved the way her face seemed to glow when she got excited. The idea that she glowed because of him was a boost to his ego.

“That beach vacation sounds real good right about now,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Would you go? Really?”

“I’d consider it.”

“Don’t tease me. Yes or no?”

Samuel had gotten where he was through hard work. Wasn’t it time he got to play a little?

“Yeah. Okay. That sounds... Nice.”

“Okay, this gives me something to think about that isn’t gloomy. Just us or do you want Baruti and his husband to come along? What about Kelsey and the others?” Her expression grew more serious. “I bet there’s some mad deals I could get for a big rental...”

“Wow. Wow. Slow your roll. I’m not saying that’s not a good idea, but probably not any time soon.” He couldn’t imagine what this group would get up to on vacation together.

“No, you’re right. I get carried away. Something small. Just the two of us.” She ticked both points off on her fingers. “Volleyball. Somewhere relaxing. With really big beds...”

They grinned at each other. He wanted time to be selfish with her. Before work and the world pulled them apart.

“We really doing this?” he asked out loud instead of keeping that question inside.

“What? The trip?” She leaned her other elbow on the back of the booth. “Or... Us?”

“Us.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Having second thoughts? I wouldn’t blame you. I can be a lot.”

He shook his head. “That’s not at all what I’m thinking.”

For once, Jessica didn’t say anything. She simply sat there giving him time to gather his thoughts.

“I grew up as a poor kid from Georgia and—”

“And look how far you’ve come?” She squeezed his hands. “You’re a successful FBI agent working on a task force that people are going to write books about. You’re going places, and I get to be with you through that. It’s exciting to see from the sidelines.”

“To some people, I will always be that poor, Black kid.”

“Those aren’t the kind of people I want in my life or who get a right to say anything to me. You’re who matters.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t want to diminish what you’re saying. I know that I will never fully understand what it’s like to be you. I want to be your cheerleader. I want to be excited about your wins and there for you through the losses. I want you for more than just your smoking hot body.”

That made him laugh.

“Am I coming on too strong?” she asked.

“No. No, babe. Not at all.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“Oh, I get to be called babe now?”

She slid across the booth until she was plastered to his side. He wrapped an arm around her and kissed her temple.

If only they could stay in this moment.

“We’ll figure everything out when this is over,” he promised and squeezed her to his side.

“Then get home quick, okay?”

He nodded then leaned in and kissed her.

Things with Jessica would always be interesting, but they would never be stagnant. His orderly life was about to be completely overturned, and he couldn’t be happier about it. Jessica was change and chaos in the best way possible. He just hoped he made the most of this shot.

“Come on,” he muttered against her cheek. “Let’s get you to the airport so I can come home to you sooner.”

“Music to my ears.”

They left the pub hand in hand. Baruti and Kelsey were waiting for them outside and their little group strolled back to the hotel.

The bad thing about moving about at this hour was that there were so many people coming and going, it was impossible to tell if they were being followed. Still, they made it back to the hotel without anyone too suspicious hanging around.

In quick order, a car was ordered, and it decided that Baruti and Kelsey would take Jessica to the airport. Samuel couldn't drag out their goodbye. And there wasn't room for four.

He kept his hands to himself and watched Jessica walk out of the hotel from his second-floor vantage point, feeling as if part of himself had just been cut out.

She'd been part of his everyday life for two solid months. He already missed her.

Sighing, he turned and surveyed their remaining bags. While the others made the trip to the airport, it was up to him to move locations. One person with a backpack and a duffel could move about easier than a group.

Samuel sat on the bed he'd shared with Jessica last night only to bounce back up. His stomach knotted, and he threw the blankets back.

"Shit," he muttered and picked up Jessica's laptop.

The laptop with all her evidence on it. Not to mention personal and professional email. Case files. Fuck.

This wasn't good.

How far away were they?

A hurried knock sounded on the door and relief washed through him.

“Realized you missed something?” he called out as he crossed to the door and pulled it open.

He had just enough time to process the masculine figure rushing at him wasn't Jessica before the man crashed into Samuel and took him to the ground.

Tuesday. Hotel, London, UK.

Jessica took the stairs two at a time.

While she hadn't wanted to leave, she also hadn't intended on sabotaging her flight back.

Shit.

That laptop had everything on it, and while she trusted Samuel implicitly, she could not in good faith leave it behind considering how much of her client's information was on it.

“I swear,” Kelsey muttered right behind her.

Baruti was down in the car making nice with their driver, who was a very pleasant, understanding person.

Page 100

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“I know exactly where it is,” Jessica said over her shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kelsey grumbled. “Better hope Samuel hasn’t checked out yet.”

They jogged down the hall.

Jessica skidded to a stop and frowned at the partially ajar door.

“Samuel?” she called out.

Kelsey shoved Jessica aside, putting herself between Jessica and the door.

“Samuel?” Kelsey called out in a firm voice while patting her hip.

Was she reaching for a gun she didn’t have?

Jessica pressed herself against the opposite wall while Kelsey kicked the door open, fists up.

The door swung inward. A lamp was overturned. Things were knocked off the bed. It didn’t look anything like the room she’d left not fifteen minutes ago.

What the hell?

“Oh, my God. Samuel? Samuel!” Jessica took a step forward but Kelsey pushed her back.

“Stay. There,” Kelsey said in a hard tone.

It took all of Jessica’s control to keep her back against the wall while Kelsey edged into the room then disappeared.

“It’s clear,” she called out.

Jessica didn’t know what that meant but she headed inside, anyway.

Blood smeared the cheap painting hanging on the wall.

“W-what happened?” Jessica whispered.

“Where was the laptop?” Kelsey asked.

Jessica stared at Kelsey for a moment. She cared about that right now? When Samuel might be hurt or worse?

“The laptop has everything you know about Edward. If we have to barter for Samuel, we need to know we have something,” Kelsey said with barely leashed calm.

Jessica crossed to the bed she’d shared with Samuel and pulled the blankets back, but the device was gone. And so was Samuel.

“Shit,” Kelsey muttered and grabbed her arm. “We’re getting out of here.”

“What about Samuel?”

“One thing at a time.”

They hustled downstairs and into the waiting car.

Baruti turned to smile at them. “You get it?”

“Drive, please,” Kelsey said over them.

Jessica couldn't speak. She was frozen to the spot.

Samuel was gone.

Page 101

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Oh, God. This was her fault. Oliver must have followed them back just like Baruti and Samuel feared. They must have been looking for her, and took Samuel instead.

Shit.

“We’ve got a problem,” Kelsey said. “Can you drop us at a different location?”

“Sure,” the driver said.

Jessica stared at Baruti, feeling lost. This was all her fault. Baruti’s easy smile faded as he looked between them, but said nothing.

For almost half an hour they said nothing of substance. Then the car pulled up to a curb and stopped.

“Thanks,” Kelsey said and bounded out.

Jessica scrambled after her while Baruti made nice with the driver one last time.

“What are we going to do?” Jessica whispered to the other woman.

Kelsey flashed her phone at Jessica. “I’ve already informed Zora.”

“What do we do?” Jessica asked again.

“Will someone tell me what we’re doing?” Baruti asked as he slung Jessica’s bag over his shoulder.

Kelsey stared up at Baruti. “Samuel was gone. It looked like there’d been a struggle. I haven’t heard from him.”

“Shit,” Baruti muttered.

“Let’s get inside.” Kelsey waved them to follow her into a brightly lit private condo building that stretched into the sky.

“Where are we?” Jessica asked.

“Aegis Group has a safe house in London. Logan told me to come here if anything went wrong.”

She followed Kelsey in a daze, up the elevator, and into a sparsely furnished condo. Any other time she’d poke around, admire the view of the city. But not this time.

Samuel was out there somewhere, trapped and alone, because of her.

Damn it all.

“Jess?” Kelsey stopped in front of her. “Jess, I need you to go into the bedroom and stay there.”

Jessica glanced at the door. “Why?”

“Because some things you shouldn’t have to hear.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her voice was higher now, almost frantic.

Kelsey took Jessica by the hands. “Go into the bedroom. Call Robin. Let us handle this. That’s the fastest way to get Samuel.”

“But—”

“No,” Kelsey snapped. “No more questions. Logan and the guys are headed for a plane right now. They’ll be here in six to eight hours. We have a lot to do if we want to track Samuel down before they get here, okay?”

Jessica nodded. It was tough to hear there was nothing for her to do, but that was the reality of the situation. “Okay, this is me going...”

She turned and headed through a door she hoped led to a bedroom. Sure enough, it did. She closed the door behind her and crossed to sit on the foot of a large bed, her insides going numb. Her fingers felt hard to manage as she pulled out her phone and tapped Robin’s name.

The call connected almost immediately.

Jessica covered her mouth.

God, this was a nightmare.

“Hey,” Robin said brightly. “Didn’t think—”

“They took him, Robin. They took him.” The first sob broke Jessica. She slid off the bed to sit on the floor, knees pulled up to her chest. “They took him and it’s all my fault.”

“What? No. Jess? Jess, start at the beginning. What’s going on? Talk to me.”

Jessica squeezed her eyes shut. They’d all tried to tell her. But she hadn’t listened.

God, what if something happened to Samuel? What then?

She would never forgive herself if something happened to him.

Chapter Eighteen

Tuesday. Unknown, London, UK.

Samuel didn’t try to stop his body from slumping over.

“He passed out,” one of the men said.

Another one muttered something, but their attention wasn’t on Samuel.

The adrenaline was fading, leaving him wiped out. Those two men had surprised him and he hadn't recovered. They'd taken him down easily, which galled. At least no one had seen that.

Fucking hell, talk about timing.

There were five big guys total in the van. Way more than Samuel could have taken on even with Baruti and Kelsey. If these guys had shown up just a few minutes earlier, things could have gone differently. He was actually grateful it was just him.

Once Baruti and Kelsey dropped Jessica at the airport, they'd start looking for him. Which meant Samuel just needed to hang in here, pretend he was passed out, and bide his time.

There was no doubt in his mind these goons were related to Oliver and Maxwell Edward somehow. That, and the smaller one had demanded to know where Jessica was.

Samuel had taken perverse joy in telling them she was long gone.

With any luck, Jessica would be safe. By the time she got home and learned about all this, he hoped it was all taken care of. Otherwise, she'd blame herself.

Good people shouldn't take ownership of the deeds sewn by bad actors.

He hoped she never changed.

Tuesday. Edward Residence, London, UK.

Maxwell picked up the phone. It was a night for delightful news, and here Oliver was with the cherry on top.

“Tell me something good,” Maxwell said.

“Mr. Edward. Sir.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Um, about the Jessica Chapin woman?”

“You have her?”

“No. Not exactly, sir. No.”

Page 103

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Maxwell sat up and frowned. “What do you mean, no?”

“She’s already left the country, but I believe I have her boyfriend.”

He sat back, considering this turn of events.

It would be ideal to have the woman herself, but a boyfriend was a good second. If she cared about him. He didn’t know enough about this woman to know.

“That’s not at all what I wanted,” Maxwell said slowly.

“I thought that might be the case, sir. So, I also have her laptop.”

Now that was interesting. “Bring them to me. All of it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Maxwell ended the call, his good mood soured.

It wasn’t all bad news, that much he needed to remind himself.

The Americans had been soundly routed in their endeavor to give the Armsman hell. It was downright comical. Maxwell had greatly enjoyed watching from afar, all while knowing that their precious chancellor was no doubt spinning out of control.

So many years of biding his time and playing the board, and it was all about to fall into his lap.

What a time to be alive.

Wednesday. Safe House, London, UK.

Jessica had never felt this helpless before. She'd seen this moment on clients' faces. She'd always felt for them and made it her mission to figure out how to make the situation better. This time she wasn't sure if that was possible.

What the hell were they going to do?

Samuel had been missing for over eight hours.

What was it people on TV said?

Every hour a person was gone decreased their chances of survival by ten percent? Or was she making numbers up out of thin air?

Fuck.

She didn't know and she should.

She hugged the blanket tighter around herself and stared out at the London skyline. The horizon was just beginning to turn gray. Soon enough, the sun would rise on a new day, and Samuel wasn't with her.

This was all her fucking fault. If Jessica could go back, if she could change things, she'd beg them to take her and not him.

Her eyes were puffy and irritated from the tears she'd already shed. By now she was all cried out. Her body was numb. Her emotions locked away. Getting hysterical wasn't going to help Samuel. It hadn't.

Kelsey had taken Jessica's phone shortly after arriving at the safe house. The lawyer in Jessica thought that was smart, but the woman who wanted to be Samuel's girlfriend was enraged by the betrayal.

She knew nothing good would come from blowing up her contacts in a desperate act to get through to Maxwell Edward. He had all the power here. She shouldn't give him more.

All this time she'd watched TV shows where someone gets kidnapped or is being hunted, and she'd scoffed at the idiotic women. Now it was happening to her, and she had to face a hard reality.

She was no better.

Despite knowing the best course of action was to settle in, wait, and make a plan, she was ready to scorch the earth and sacrifice everything in an effort to find her man.

Samuel didn't deserve this. She'd dragged him into a mess she'd created. He could tell her all day long that this wasn't a direct result of her actions, but it was. They could argue until they were blue in the face that they couldn't choose in-action because of the actions of bad people. None of that changed the fact that her decisions and actions had put them here and now. Her intent didn't matter.

Page 104

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

A soft tap at the door stalled Jessica's spiraling thoughts.

"Jess? You get any rest? Jess?"

She didn't respond to Kelsey's inquiry.

The shorter woman padded into the darkened bedroom and around to where Jessica sat with her back to the mattress.

Kelsey lowered to sit next to her. "Logan just called to say they landed."

The hours of waiting were almost over, then.

Jessica refused to believe that they'd all been twiddling their thumbs this whole time. It was more likely Zora, and the others were concocting a plan behind the scenes while leaving her out of it. That was the smart thing to do given that Jessica was most certainly on the outside here.

"Have you eaten anything? Want a drink?" Kelsey asked.

Jessica continued to stare straight ahead.

When was the last time Samuel ate or was offered water? Was he even alive anymore?

"Jess?" Kelsey pressed her hand to Jessica's shoulder. "We're going to get him back. I promise."

She couldn't believe that, though she wanted to.

Maxwell Edward was a dangerous person. Everything she'd learned had told her that much was true. There was evidence he'd trafficked people and drugs. It wasn't hard to find stories that tied him to threatening or intimidating members of parliament. The Edward family was old with powerful ties that made it far more difficult to pin a wrongdoing on them.

Jessica needed to understand the UK law system better. Maybe if she did she'd better understand where some of her intel could be used to prosecute Edward?

Eventually, Kelsey got up and left Jessica to her mental marathon.

The sun rose, bathing the city in a dull, gray light.

She knew the moment the Aegis Group team arrived. The front door banged open hard enough she jerked around and stared at her room door. They were loud after so much silence.

Jessica settled back on the carpet. She had a vague idea about what she could do, but very little faith in herself. Wouldn't her actions merely make the situation worse? What should she do?

She felt more than heard the bedroom door open. The footsteps were heavy thumps, unlike Kelsey's barely audible ones.

Harper stepped into view, though he was more of a dark shadow than a person without the lights on. He lowered to the floor next to her then reached over and pulled her into a side-hug. She drew in a shaky breath.

"Talked to Robin?" she whispered.

“Yeah. We talked. Is it okay if I’m her stand-in right now?”

Jessica nodded.

She’d spent enough time with Harper included in her conversations with Robin to have developed a friendship with him. Hell, he’d joked a few times about having two wives between Robin and her.

He gave her a little squeeze. “We need to pool our knowledge and go over the plan. Are you up for that? I’d like you to be in on it.”

“Is me knowing going to hurt things?”

“Would you knowingly sabotage our efforts to save Samuel?”

“No.”

“Then you should be fine. Come on.” He pushed to his feet then offered her a hand. “Let’s bring our boy home.”

Harper led her into the main room where the others had shuffled around the furniture and dining table to make one meeting space with food and tablets spread out.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Kelsey and Logan stood in the kitchen, their heads together.

The change in Kelsey was particularly interesting. She gave off such a tough, take-no-shit attitude that seeing her... Softer? It was different.

“TL?” Harper said.

Logan glanced over and nodded. “Everyone circle up.”

Jessica had to wonder who that statement was for. The only people missing were Logan, Kelsey, Harper, and her, but whatever. Jessica let Harper guide her into a chair between him and Baruti.

Logan placed Jessica’s cell phone on the table and remained standing. He tucked his hair behind his ears before launching into it. “Recapping where we are. Last night Samuel was abducted from the hotel. We have yet to receive demands or any sort of communication from him. It took Diha a while, but she was able to track Samuel’s cell phone for a while. That signal has since died or been deactivated. Last known location was southeast of here. I want to get wheels and eyes on that location as soon as we’re able. I’m going to divide people up into teams to cover more ground. Every minute counts.”

Jessica continued to listen, but there wasn’t much substance to Logan’s directions. They were merely going to look at places, see things, not people. As she listened, she began to formulate her own plan. But it would go nowhere if she didn’t get her phone back from Logan. That’s where the end of all this was going to start.

Wednesday. Edward Residence, London, UK.

Maxwell sipped his tea and looked over the man now restrained in his cellar.

The idiot Oliver had brought the bastard straight here. What a fucking moron. Not only had Oliver failed to deliver the woman, he'd brought this sorry sack of bones.

“Has he said anything?” Maxwell asked.

The two handymen he kept on retainer both shook their heads. They weren't big on speaking. They saved that for their tasks.

“Bugger,” Maxwell muttered.

Oliver stood in the shadows, wringing his hands. The fool. It would have been better to bide their time instead of making a premature grab for someone that could very likely do nothing for them.

Maxwell snapped his fingers and pointed at Oliver then the ground in front of him. Oliver hesitated for a scant moment before crossing to stand in front of Maxwell.

“Do you know why I am displeased?” he asked.

Oliver flinched. “Yes, sir. I understand, sir.”

Maxwell drank the last of his tea. “Tell me how you're going to fix this.”

“Oh, well, uh...” Oliver glanced over his shoulder at the Black man then back to Maxwell. “He's fucking the girl. The blonde. Jessica. He's her boyfriend.”

Maxwell eyed the man. He was tall and nicely built. It stood to reason that a person

with features as symmetrical as this man's would be viewed as attractive. But did he believe Oliver's story? Or was this the rat trying to scurry out of the fire?

"That only matters if she cares enough about him to do something stupid." Maxwell crossed his arms over his chest. "Have you heard from her?"

"Supposedly she got on a plane and left." Oliver shrugged. "Haven't heard from her."

Maxwell wasn't willing to over-play this weak hand.

The Americans had tucked tail and run from the Armsman. He'd enjoyed that little show to the very last act, so it was a shame to be roped into this nonsense.

He did the mental math.

Jessica Chapin would be back on US soil by now, just barely. Did she even know her man was in trouble?

A move had to be made. He wanted to flush his quarry into the open and have this nonsense done with once and for all.

"What about the laptop, sir?" Oliver asked.

"Hm."

Maxwell didn't know a thing about the laptop except it existed. He'd have people in today to take a crack at it. Until then it was hard to say whether it was valuable or not as a bargaining piece. Not that he intended to bargain, per se. More like lure the bunny in then take care of her and all her friends. With any luck, he'd be able to clean this up in one go. After all, there were more important things that needed his attention.

Page 106

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Oliver pulled his phone out of his pocket and frowned at the screen. Maxwell watched the man's eyes track back and forth. His brows rose and his jaw dropped. Finally, his eyes widened and his head snapped up.

“Sir? Sir, she just texted...”

Maxwell grinned.

The game was on, now.

Wednesday. Safe House, London, UK.

Jessica stared at the phone screen, willing a message to come to her. She'd grabbed her phone off the table while everyone was talking.

Following their escape from the recovery center, Robin had picked up the device for Jessica. She'd mostly set it up, but hadn't put her work things on it. Just in case. She was extra glad for that given how she wouldn't have been comfortable handing her phone over to the others after Samuel's abduction otherwise.

She leaned her hip against the bathroom vanity and bit her lip.

It was silly to think that sending a message would garner an immediate reply, but she stared anyway.

Fucking hell.

Someone tapped on the bathroom door.

“Jess?” Harper called out.

She sighed, pocketed her phone, then opened the door.

“Hey, I’m going to grab something to eat. Want anything? Coffee? Tea?”

“Hot chocolate if it’s an option.” She forced herself to smile. “Thanks.”

He stared at her a moment longer. It was unusual seeing him this serious. Usually, Harper had a smart-ass remark for every occasion. The fact he wasn’t making comments only underscored how dire this situation was.

“I know Logan said he wants you to stay here, but did you know there’s a little rooftop garden?” He thumbed over his shoulder. “Could be good for you to get some air.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

“Great.”

He stared at her a moment longer before turning and heading out of the bedroom.

She could hear the low voices of the others in the main room. Very soon most of them would leave to head out to look at things and hope for an answer to fall into their laps.

It was maddening.

She paced the bedroom, frustrated with the lack of direction or activity.

What were they all even doing?

Jessica yanked her phone out of her pocket—again—and looked at the screen.

Another phantom vibration.

Shit.

She turned and paced toward the windows.

What if there was no answer? What if this was it?

Page 107

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Her throat tightened and nausea had her mouthwatering.

Samuel had to come back to her.

As if her thought were a summoning, her phone vibrated.

Jessica's spine went stiff, and she glanced at the bedroom door, but she was alone. For how long?

She crept back into the bathroom and quietly closed the door. Only then did she unlock the screen and tap the message itself.

It wasn't a message. It was a video.

Jessica closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. She'd had to watch disturbing stuff as part of her law practice. This stuff always hit hard, but this time it was someone she cared about. Someone she loved.

Hands shaking, she tapped the video.

The footage was dark at first, then jerked up. She must have been looking at the ground or a dark corner. The camera went in and out of focus. She pressed a hand to her mouth and swallowed as the lump in the dim light became human.

Samuel.

He sat on the ground, one knee up, elbow propped on top with his hand shielding his

face. His clothes were dirty and ripped. It was hard to tell in the low light, but he had to be roughed up.

“We have what you want,” Oliver said. His oily voice was burned into her memory. “Make us an offer we can’t refuse.”

Jessica’s knees went weak and braced her hand on the vanity.

She watched the video again and again, though it became impossible to see it through her tears.

Fuck.

She set the phone down, gripped the vanity, and breathed deep. Again and again, while tears plopped down onto the pale marble countertop.

Samuel was hurt because of her. Because she’d tried to prevent Robin from being a target. Because another horrible man had killed Robin’s mother.

Why did horrible people get away with it?

Jessica straightened and stared at her reflection.

Like hell she was going to sit back and do nothing.

She wiped her face dry.

The logical thing to do would be to share the video with Logan and the others. There wasn’t anything in the video to tell them where Samuel was, and they didn’t have access to information that would help them locate Oliver’s cell phone. Sharing the video would do nothing except give the guys something else to look at.

Looking wasn't going to save Samuel.

She loved him.

She was going to do whatever it took to get him back. He was all that mattered. Not her. She'd made this mess, and it was up to her to make it right.

Jessica dried her face and opened the bathroom door. It wouldn't do to get caught hanging out in there which would only make people curious about her.

First thing she needed to do was get dressed. Something comfortable with a lot of movement that would allow her to run. She pulled out sneakers, jeans, and a hoodie from her bag and quickly changed into the clothes. She was pulling a brush through her hair when Harper tapped on the bedroom door.

"Come in," she called out.

He cracked the door open and held up a travel cup. "Chocolate. Hot."

"Thanks."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“Glad to see you up and around.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I thought I might go upstairs, get out of everyone’s way for a while.”

“Want company?”

“Not really.”

He held up his hands. “I get it. May I walk you up there at least?”

“Sure. I don’t know the way.”

He smiled and gestured behind him. “Come on.”

Jessica followed Harper through the main space where everyone was busy looking at maps or tablets or on their phones. No one paid them any mind as they slipped out of the condo. Harper didn’t press her to talk either as they rode up the elevator to the roof.

Sure enough, there was a lovely little sitting area and container garden someone—or several someones—had been tending.

Harper stopped in the doorway. “We’ll be downstairs.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon,” she said.

“Okay.”

And then he left her.

Honestly, she'd thought that would take more effort, but she was relieved nonetheless.

It was time to let Oliver know his trap had worked. She was in.

Jessica pulled out her phone, blew a breath, and sent her message. She crossed to the seating area and sipped the hot chocolate while she watched the texts for a new message. The minutes ticked by, but only a few.

She let out a breath and tapped the new message.

Directions to a meeting spot.

This was dangerous, foolhardy, and possibly even stupid. But she had to do this.

Jessica downed the hot chocolate despite it scalding her mouth. That done, she pulled out the notepad and pen she'd taken from the room and wrote a note. Harper was the one who'd probably see it. With that in mind, she found a small stone in one of the containers, put that inside the travel cup, then placed her fashioned paperweight on top of the note lying on the ground.

When someone came to look for her, they'd find the note. If everything went wrong, they'd know. And if Samuel came back, and she didn't? She hoped her words gave him peace. She couldn't let people suffer because of her.

Getting out of the condo building was easy. She took the stairs all the way down, warming up her muscles and her mind. At the street, she hailed a cab and gave the

driver an intersection down the street from where Oliver wanted to meet.

Jessica powered off her phone as she got closer. It stood to reason that Harper or Logan or someone else might be able to track her based on her signal.

It was a cruel twist of fate that she'd realized just how deep her feelings had grown this morning. It was too soon to tell Samuel how she felt, and if things went poorly she didn't want to burden him with that knowledge.

She drummed her fingers on her thigh and pocketed the phone. The address was memorized.

The drive through the city took longer than she'd have liked what with the morning rush of traffic picking up. She clenched her jaw and dug her nails into her palm at every light. By the time she saw the street sign of at least one of the roads she'd mentioned to the driver, she had to resist the urge to throw herself out of the cab and run the rest of the way on foot. Considering that she had no idea where she was going, that was a poor idea she skipped.

At long last, the cab pulled to the curb outside a curry shop. She paid the nice, older gentleman and got out.

It was lighter now and the day overcast. She pulled her hood up to save her from the drizzle that was threatening then turned.

Her meeting spot with Oliver should be a few blocks that way.

Jessica started walking. She moved through foot traffic, sometimes stepping off the curb to get around slower-moving pedestrians. The closer she got, the faster her heart raced.

Page 109

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

She would save Samuel from a fate he didn't deserve.

“Jessica!”

She whirled around and searched the crowd.

Oliver stepped forward. He wore a cap and a brown coat with the collar flipped up.

Their eyes locked, and she clenched her jaw.

He ambled toward her with a smirk on his face she wanted to slap right off. “Nice of you to make it.”

“Where's Samuel?” she asked.

He nodded. “You came alone?”

“Of course.”

“Alright. Follow me.”

She let herself imagine all the awful things she could do to him if she picked up the lid of that garbage can and bashed him over the head with it. Her satisfaction was short-lived.

They kept walking far enough the pedestrians thinned to nothing. And then Oliver led her to a solid gate set into a tall, brick wall.

She paused on the sidewalk.

Oliver hesitated, one foot already on the other side. “This is your only chance to bargain...”

“Is he here?” she asked.

“Who? Your man?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. This is a trade, ain’t it?”

They wanted her.

Not Samuel.

That had to count for something, right?

Jessica followed Oliver through the door and did her best not to jolt at the sound of it clanging shut behind her.

She swallowed hard as dread settled in.

“Where is he?” she asked.

Oliver waved her to follow. “This way.”

She peered around, but they were in some sort of walled-off yard. There was a loading dock and a van ahead of them and buildings on either side. The cobblestone made it seem old, like she should expect to see hoof scuffs.

Oliver headed toward the loading dock. Or at least she thought that was where he was going.

He pivoted and grabbed the back of the van, pulling it open.

A man stepped out, dragging a dazed Samuel with him.

Her heart seized, and she rushed forward without thinking and grabbed Samuel by the shoulders as he stumbled.

Page 110

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“What are you doing here?” he said, voice strained.

There were tears in her eyes. “I came for you. I had to.”

Samuel shook his head. “Shouldn’t... Have...”

She turned and glared at Oliver. “Let him go now. That’s the deal.”

Oliver cringed. Or pretended to.

Fuck.

“See, the thing is, I don’t have final say, and the boss has a different proposition for ya...”

Footsteps thumped on concrete.

She glanced up at a tall man with wide-set shoulders and a full head of snowy white hair. For a man in his sixties, he was built like a brick wall.

Maxwell Edward.

Chapter Nineteen

Wednesday. London, UK.

This had to be a nightmare. Samuel had to be asleep. This could not be happening.

And yet, there was no doubt in his mind that Jessica would do something exactly like this. She was a woman who stood by her ethics. She would never hesitate to sacrifice herself.

Damn infuriating woman.

There was no way Edward was letting them just walk out of here. If he knew Samuel was FBI, this would have ended a long time ago. They would have never gotten to this point.

He got his feet under him finally. These assholes kept jerking him around, literally, and that last blow to his head had sure as hell rung his bell. Samuel stood with legs braced and took in the situation.

Edward was above them on the loading dock. Of course, he would want to be above them and lord his power. Oliver wasn't a real threat. The man was as dangerous as a soggy sponge without a weapon. It was the goon still gripping Samuel's arm that posed the greatest threat and Edward himself.

With one word Edward could summon more men with weapons into the courtyard. Getting out of this meant taking down Edward first. Before help came.

Could Samuel disarm the goon holding onto him and get a shot off before Edward signaled the alarm?

Samuel didn't think so. He also couldn't communicate with Jessica any form of a plan.

"We had a deal," Jessica said as she stared up at Maxwell Edward.

Edward had his hands in his trouser pockets. "You didn't make that deal with me."

Samuel swayed on his feet, more by design than injury. He needed the guy holding on to him to get sloppy.

“So you’re not a man of your word?” Jessica snapped back.

Did she have a plan? Were the others with her? Or had Jessica come alone?

He feared he knew the answer to that, and he wasn’t going to like it.

“I am a man of business, and you have been very bad for it,” Edward said.

That was interesting.

Samuel hadn’t reviewed all of Jessica’s information, but he hadn’t realized it was that extensive. Or that her questions and digging might have had a real impact.

Page 111

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

The guy holding onto Samuel shifted his weight and dropped one hand to hook a thumb in his pocket.

That was very good for Samuel.

“I’m so sorry,” Jessica said without any remorse at all.

The guy was right-handed, but he had his weapon shoved in his left pocket, closest to Samuel. It was an idiotic move, but one he was grateful for. The weapon wasn’t even holstered.

Edward tilted his head to the side. “I must admit you’re prettier than I expected you would be.”

Samuel wanted to put a bullet between the guy’s eyes for simply looking at her.

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Fuck you.”

Everyone’s attention was on the banter. Samuel heaved a heavy sigh, but the guy didn’t so much as look at him.

He prayed Jessica kept rolling with that mouth of hers. So long as everyone’s attention was on her, he could make a move.

Edward shook his head. “How does one woman manage to be such a pain in the ass?”

Samuel swayed closer to his captor.

Jessica grinned. “It’s a gift. What can I say?”

He bent his arm just a little bit so that the firearm was mere inches away. If he could grab it and fire off a few shots to scatter their enemies, he had hope. But if they moved from this location? If Edward got them anywhere else? Samuel didn’t have any hope for them.

“As lovely as this chat is...” Edward spread his hands. “I have things to do. Bring her. Kill him.”

“No!” Jessica shrieked and lunged forward.

The goon holding Samuel took a step forward before he could move, effectively removing the weapon from Samuel’s reach.

Oliver had Jessica by the shoulders now.

She jerked away from the puny man. “I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll answer whatever questions you have. But I don’t cooperate if you kill him.”

Part of Samuel’s mind that wasn’t obsessed with tracking each person’s movements held onto her words. This was Jessica, who’d moved heaven and earth for the sake of her best friend who was more like family. And Jessica was willing to throw away everything she’d done on account of him.

Jessica might feel a duty toward him, to make things right, but he didn’t think she’d sacrifice the safety of the most important person in her life on his account if he didn’t mean something to her.

His heart ached and more than anything he wanted to get more time with this woman. He wanted to figure out why she risked so much. He wanted to better understand

what made her tick. He wanted to see one of these charity galas she threw and the communities she worked with in person, not just in photographs. He wanted to experience all of that with her. He wanted to cheer her on.

But first, they had to survive.

“Hm.” Edward studied her then glanced at Samuel. “Kill him. I don’t negotiate.”

“No!” Jessica shrieked, drawing all attention to her.

Samuel wasn’t in the best spot, but he moved anyway. They’d bound his wrists with duct tape, of all things. He reached out and snatched the weapon from his captor’s pocket before the man could react. While he was whirling to face Samuel, Samuel fired his first shot. Point-blank into the man’s chest.

That was going to hurt if it wasn’t fatal. Samuel knew first-hand.

More shots fired.

Samuel ducked his head and dove for Oliver, who was trying to wrestle Jessica away without any luck. Samuel dove into the smaller man, swinging him around so his grip was ripped from Jessica. As a bonus, Oliver was now between Samuel and Edward. A human shield.

But Edward was gone.

Two gunmen inside the loading dock were firing out, but not at Samuel. They were firing over his head at someone else who was laying down cover fire for Samuel and Jessica.

Page 112

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Those Aegis Group sons of bitches were the best damn thing to happen in a long time. They must have realized what Jessica was doing and followed her. Those bastards. He was so damn grateful for those cockroaches.

“Jess!”

Samuel shoved Oliver aside. He had to make choices right now and getting her somewhere safe was most important.

Something hard hit Samuel over the head and he went to his knees as his vision went dark then blurry. He crouched on one knee, fighting to remain aware. Losing consciousness now meant death.

He shook his head and glanced around, but Oliver and Jessica were gone.

“Samuel!”

He whipped his head around too fast and the world spun, but not before he glimpsed pale, blonde hair disappearing into shadow.

Jessica.

Samuel sprinted forward, keeping low, and circled around the front of the van so he could use it for cover. The shooters were too focused on whoever was firing from across the street to pay him any mind.

He charged forward, across the cobblestones as the rain finally began to fall. He hit

the wall next to the door and spared a moment to rip the duct tape off his wrists. If he was going to find and save Jessica, he would need both hands.

“Get off me!” Her voice echoed off the brick and concrete, sounding more distant now.

Samuel ducked his head and charged into the building.

Dusty racks of things lined the walls. A few industrial metal shelving units ran the length of the space with a wide walkway between. Samuel side-stepped through the dimly lit room, heading deeper into the building, following the sounds of struggle.

Keep fighting, baby...

Men yelled in the distance.

Samuel might have been content to drag this out until the police arrived, but he didn't have a lot of faith in the UK cops now that they knew Edward had his hooks in deep there. No, they had to finish this before the police arrived.

He jogged through the room to the next open doorway. It was darkness beyond save for the hall on the other side of the small office-like room. It didn't look like anyone had worked here in ages. Cobwebs clung to the ceiling and there was a thick layer of dust on the shelves.

This was more than likely a hub for Edward. A place he used to move goods and people around without too many prying eyes. With luck, there weren't many people around.

Where was she?

Samuel strained to listen. He leaned through the doorway, peering left then right.

“What are you doing?” someone shouted. Was that Maxwell? Or Oliver?

“Let go of me!” Jessica demanded.

Samuel turned left, jogging down the hall.

How many bullets did he have?

He slowed as he neared a doorway with light shining out of it and checked the chamber.

There was one shot ready at least. For all he knew it could be the only one.

He peered into the room.

Oliver had Jessica’s arms wrenched up behind her back.

A second man stalked out of the room and spoke over his shoulder, “Keep a hold of her.”

Samuel held his breath and waited.

Page 113

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

The newcomer left, straight out the door on the other side.

“You’re going to pay for this,” Jessica snarled.

Oliver merely snorted.

She roared her rage and stomped back on Oliver’s foot. The man howled. Jessica managed to get an arm free and turned, driving her fist into Oliver’s throat.

Holy shit.

Samuel stepped into the room, gun up. “Don’t fucking move, Oliver. Don’t fucking do it.”

Oliver turned wide, fearful eyes on Samuel.

Jessica’s head whipped around. “Oh my God, you’re okay?”

Oliver yanked out of her grip.

“Watch out!” Samuel rushed forward.

But Oliver didn’t attack. He turned tail and fucking ran.

Samuel’s heart pounded against his ribs and his head pulsed with an incoming migraine. Outside he could still hear the shouts of people and the fire of guns.

Where were the Aegis Group fuckers?

Only a few minutes had passed.

The cops would be here any damn minute.

“We need to get out.” He took Jessica’s free hand.

There were tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Later,” he snapped. “We need to—”

Her eyes widened. “Look out!”

He spun in time to take a fist to the jaw and the blazing eyes of Maxwell Edward.

“You bastard,” he roared. “What did you do?”

Samuel staggered back, one arm out to sweep Jessica far from the man. He held up the gun, but Edward ignored it.

“I’m going to kill you. I’m going to kill you, you hear?” Edward reached behind him.

Samuel’s vision was still slightly off. He had to have a concussion at this rate. He took aim as best he could and fired—but it went wide.

Edward ducked and brought up his own weapon. But something was already sailing past Samuel. The object hit Edward’s arm before he could fire.

The gun went flying.

Samuel took the opportunity and fired a second time, but instead of running, Edward charged him and Samuel wasn't fast enough. The built older man rammed into Samuel like a freight train, forcing him back.

The last thing Samuel heard as his vision hazed was Jessica's scream.

He hadn't saved her after all...

Wednesday. London, UK.

Page 114

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Jessica ducked away from the two men crashing to the ground. Everything was happening too fast. She couldn't catch her breath or hold a thought for longer than half a second to save her life. And she had to do something.

Maxwell clocked Samuel across the face again. He wasn't looking good. His body was limp and his limbs flopped as if he were trying to move but couldn't.

The gun. Where had the gun gone?

She turned in enough time to spy Oliver, arms out, right before he grabbed her. He wrapped his arms around her like a hug.

Her skin crawled and for a precious moment, she froze.

“You're coming with me!” Oliver shouted.

She heard the scuffle behind her. Grunts and the sickening sound of punches hitting flesh.

These people thought nothing of murder or the lives of others. Maxwell Edward and Oliver were exactly like Daar. They would kill and steal and never stop.

Jessica roared her rage and drove her elbow back into Oliver's ribs. He grunted but didn't let her go, so she rammed him with the other. His body jolted, and she felt his hot breath on the back of her neck.

She brought her chin down to her chest, then with all of her strength slammed her

head back.

Pain blossomed up and down her neck. Her temples throbbed. But it was Oliver howling in pain, not her. His grip relaxed, and she turned, ramming her knee up into his balls.

“You bitch! You fucking bitch!” he said in a voice three octaves too high.

Jessica dove for the gun. Samuel and Edward were grappling now.

She'd never been terribly good at shooting guns. It was just something she'd done with her brothers when she was younger, then to humor other people as part of ongoing self-defense training.

She snatched the cold, heavy piece up and turned.

Oliver was mid-lunge, his face red and blood trickling down from his nose.

She fired.

This close she couldn't miss.

It was not lost on her this was nearly the reverse from when she'd been shot.

Oliver's eyes bulged, and he dropped to the ground.

She'd just killed a man.

Her.

The rising panic threatened to make her freeze, and she could not. Samuel needed her

now.

She whirled and stared at the two bloodied men in horror. They were trading punches like bare-knuckle boxers. Edward's shirt was ripped. Blood stained his snowy white shirt. Samuel was no better. One eye was swelling shut, and he had a fat, bleeding lip. Both men swayed on their feet.

"Stop! Stop right now!" she shouted.

They were too close for her to get a shot on Edward.

Samuel threw his left hand out but never looked away from Edward. "Go. Get out of here!"

"I'll kill you both with my bare hands!"

Edward lunged forward, taking advantage of Samuel's exposed side to drive home two quick, hard punches to his ribs. Samuel grabbed the other man. She didn't know what he intended, but Edward twisted in his grasp until both men were on the ground.

She couldn't fire, but she couldn't do anything.

Page 115

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

Jessica took two steps.

Edward was on top of Samuel again.

She hauled back, but Edward whirled and grabbed her ankle.

“Oh, no you don’t.” His face was red and the veins on either side of his neck stuck out.

Edward yanked, pulling her feet out from under her.

Jessica went down hard. The back of her already aching head hit the concrete, and she saw stars.

“No! Jess! Don’t touch her!” Samuel snarled.

The fight or flight instinct in her took over, giving her strength she didn’t have. She rolled over and pushed up to her knees.

Edward was ignoring her in favor of facing off with Samuel. Only, Samuel had Edward by the throat from behind. The man’s face was impossibly red now.

Jessica didn’t have the gun anymore.

Where had it gone?

Edward lifted a hand.

The light gleamed off the weapon aimed at her.

Jessica scrambled, her feet sliding on the dusty floor. She crawled on hands and knees, putting a metal barrel between her and the men. Her heart raced.

And then she heard a singular shot.

Just one.

But it was so loud it felt as if the very world had just been shattered.

She held her breath, frozen.

Who'd fired? Who was hurt? Who was fine?

Something heavy hit the ground followed by a clattering sound, as if the gun had been dropped again.

She shot up, gripping the barrel and bracing herself for the worst.

Maxwell lay with his back toward her.

Samuel reclined against the wall, his head slumped forward.

They both looked dead.

A sob tore out of her and she staggered around the barrel.

“Samuel? Samuel!”

He raised his head, though he wasn't the least bit steady.

“Oh, my God!” She rushed forward, past Edward’s body to kneel at Samuel’s side.

“Where are you hurt? How bad?”

He lifted a hand and gripped her wrist. “Go. Get out.”

“No. Not without you!”

“Now. Go!”

He pushed her away from him roughly, but there was no more strength in him. He’d used it all up.

“No. No, I’m not leaving you.”

“Listen,” he said.

She cocked her head to the side.

There was yelling in the distance. It had faded from her awareness until now. Whatever conflict was raging was getting closer.

“Come on. We’re both getting out of here,” she insisted, but he pushed her hands away from him. “Do not ask me to leave you here.”

“Jess? Samuel?”

She turned to gape at none other than Harper standing in the far doorway. He had on jeans and a long sleeve shirt. Over that was tactical gear, complete with a Kevlar vest, helmet, and assault rifle.

Jessica stared at him for several long moments.

Harper had no such delay.

He quickly crossed the room to kneel at Samuel's side.

"I found them. Jessica appears mobile but in shock. I'm going to need help with Samuel."

"I'm good," Samuel insisted and grabbed Harper by the shoulder strap.

Harper grabbed Samuel's other wrist then hauled him to his feet leaving Jessica to gape at them.

She looked from man to man. "W-what's happening? How did you find us?"

Samuel snorted a pained laugh. He had one arm around Harper's shoulders, which was probably all that was keeping him vertical. "What does it look like we're doing? We're getting the fuck out of here."

Harper glanced at her. "Well, Robin said she thought you might do something, and I floated the idea of planting a tracker on you. Why make more work when we all knew you were going to find Samuel faster than the rest of us?"

She gaped at him. "You knew this whole time? You guys weren't trying to find him?"

Harper grinned at her. "Oh, we were, but you were faster."

Wednesday. Hospital, London, UK.

Samuel never wanted to see a hospital again. He was eternally grateful to Kelsey for handling the entire cover story. She had it worked out by the time they arrived. All Samuel and Jessica had to do was nod and do their best to look pained when they spoke about a hit-and-run accident while playing tourist. The hospital staff obviously

had some reservations given how beaten up he was, but no one questioned the story.

He had two fractured ribs, a concussion, and more bruises than could be counted. But he was alive.

“Keep those eyes open, love,” the nurse said.

“Sorry,” he muttered and pried them open.

The plump woman smiled at him then patted his hand. “That’s a good boy. Hold tight.”

“Will do,” he muttered.

He blew out a breath. There was nothing to be done about the ball of anxiety lodged in his chest. That was all Jessica. Having her out of sight where he couldn’t know at a glance she was okay was tearing him up on the inside.

She got into the worst trouble when someone wasn’t minding her.

That woman would be the death of him.

Page 117

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

He pressed his hand to the old scars and drew in a deep breath.

They'd made it through today.

The privacy curtain was ripped aside without warning. Samuel jumped and reached for the only thing nearby: his water cup.

Jessica stood there, dirt smudging one cheek, and stared at him with big, watery eyes.

"Scared the shit out of me," he muttered and relaxed back against the mattress. He reached out a hand to her. "Come here."

She crossed to the side of the bed then bent forward at the waist to gingerly put her hands on his shoulders in a semblance of a hug. She pressed her cheek to his chest and squeezed her eyes shut. He in turn wrapped his arms around her and squeezed as tight as he dared.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she muttered over and over again.

Samuel dug his fingers into her hair none too gently and forced her head up.

"You still don't care about yourself enough." Though he tried to tamp down on his anger, it simmered inside of him and his voice came out harder than intended.

A fat tear slid down Jessica's cheek. "But of course, I don't. I care about you more."

Emotion welled up inside of him. Big feelings he wasn't ready to tackle.

He pulled her to him and kissed her gently, mostly because of how swollen his mouth was from taking repeated punches to the jaw. Her lips were gentle and sweet, everything he wanted.

“You might literally be the death of me,” he muttered.

“Don’t say that.” She leaned an elbow on the bed and splayed her free hand against his chest. “I’m sorry. I was stupid. I’m sorry.”

He slid his fingers over her cheek and down to her lips.

“You were ill-prepared. I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“No, I’ll... I’ll stop. I’ll leave it up to you.”

He snorted and pain shot through him.

Fuck.

That was going to suck.

“That’s going to work about as well as asking a fish to stop swimming.” He couldn’t stop touching her. “Your first instinct isn’t to run, like most people. You’re a fighter, and I’ve been asking you to go against your nature. That was my mistake.”

He’d make sure she got more serious about her self-defense training for starters. She’d done well thus far, but she could do more.

Her lower lip trembled and he could see the waterworks about to start.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered. “I’m fine. It’s this concussion that’s got me messed up,

that's all.”

“It's my fault.”

“Sh.” He placed his hand over hers. “No more of that.”

“But—”

“No. More. Of. That,” he said in a firm tone. “It doesn't matter, anyway. Maxwell Edward isn't going to bother anyone else anytime soon.”

She took a deep breath then nodded.

Jessica had a big heart. She'd done all of this out of love. And that just made him care for her more. Because no matter how much he gave, she'd always be there stride for stride. That was someone he wanted in his life.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

“I love you,” he said softly.

Her body jolted and her eyes widened. “What?”

“I said I love you.” It wasn’t an overly romantic profession, just a fact. Because they were not promised more time on this earth.

For a moment she gaped at him and he wondered if that was one thing he should have kept to himself. Her brow creased and two fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I love you, too,” she blubbered then shoved her face against his neck. “I’m so sorry. I love you. I’m sorry.”

He chuckled and stroked her hair while ignoring the aches and pains plaguing his body.

There was a whole spiel in his head he’d put together since their poorly planned pause in their relationship. It was about how long-distance would be hard. That people would look down on her for being with him. All points he wanted her to think of, and he’d say them. In time.

Because he already knew what she’d tell him.

Worth the effort.

That was a two-way street.

Epilogue

Zora paced within the privacy of her office. It was late and most people had gone home seeing as their team was safely in the air. They'd land and come straight to the office for rest followed by a debrief in the morning. It was routine. It was normal. And yet she was counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds until Tucker walked through that door and said nothing to her.

She'd watched him take three bullets to the vest.

He was fine.

Logan had reported no injuries.

Tucker himself hadn't complained.

And yet, she'd had to stand there with all eyes on her and stoically watch the man who held her heart in his hands take three fucking bullets.

Just thinking about it made her knees weak with fear.

A few inches in any direction and he would be seriously injured.

Luck had been on their side this week, that was for damn sure.

Anxiety had her wound up, but her body was exhausted.

There was no way she was going home at this point. Best to just settle in.

Most people didn't realize how often Zora slept at the office. She'd developed quite the knack for appearing fresh-faced and pressed. But tonight she was run ragged.

Zora shrugged out of the suit jacket and tossed it on her desk then crossed to the futon. She kicked off her heels then lay down, pulling the fuzzy throw blanket over on top of her. It had been a gift from the girls in the lab when they moved offices. It was probably some kind of inside joke between them about how damn cold the place was, but it couldn't be helped.

She blew out a breath and stared at the ceiling.

Back when this had begun, she'd known it would be big. She'd known it would take part of her soul. She just hadn't expected it to go on this long or to fight for every bit of support they got. The team wasn't aware of what a dire situation they were in and she hoped to keep it from them. Because this whole investigation was one spiteful decision away from being closed for good.

Zora reached for her phone and using the climate app reduced the lights to fifteen percent. Dim enough for her to possibly sleep, but also light enough for her to move with a moment's notice.

She crossed her hands over her stomach and said another silent prayer that Tucker would be okay, then closed her eyes.

Tucker cursed himself under his breath as he stalked through the dim, deserted halls of the headquarters. He should be settling down like the others to catch a little sleep before the day started in earnest. They were all exhausted and worn thin after the last week, but at least they'd all come home. No, they hadn't accomplished all they'd set out to, but that was the way of things. Not every operation was a winner.

He passed Zora's office then circled around the back way in. While most people were aware that he and Zora had a particular relationship, he went out of his way to minimize what people saw. Mostly because he didn't know what the fuck he was doing.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 2:35 am

By all rights, he should have never taken this job. Putting him and Zora in close proximity was only going to end one of two ways: in heartbreak, or in hate.

They'd been poised on a knife's edge ever since he showed up. There was no doubt in his mind Zora had hired their team from Aegis Group because of Tucker. No doubt whatsoever. But whatever her reasons were, she'd never shared them.

Contrary to what people whispered, he didn't know any more about things than anyone else. Zora didn't talk to him. She tolerated his presence at best. And he was the sad fuck who kept coming back for more.

He stopped a good five feet from the hidden door.

She was on the other side of that wall.

Oh, everyone would think she'd gone home for the night, but he knew the truth. Whenever people were in the field, she didn't leave the office. NO matter what she tried to make people believe.

They'd been close once. Intimate even, though he couldn't say they'd had much of a relationship. He didn't know what the fuck they were, though he knew at one point he'd wanted more. For the last year, she'd held him in her thrall. Part of him wanted Zora in his life again. But they were strangers now despite all the time they spent together.

He drew in a deep breath and forced himself to turn around.

Just because they were both here didn't mean he had to torture himself anymore. It was time to focus on himself, and not her.

If she wanted him, she knew where he'd be.