



Jael (Inspired by Judges #4)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Jael's freedom has always been an illusion.

Raised under the tight grip of a father who once exploited her for his illegal schemes, she remains his pawn as he continues to wield her as a tool for his strategies, even after leaving the underworld behind. Now, in order to cement his family's legacy, he orchestrates a union between Jael and the new CEO of Heber Industries, Christopher Sisera, regardless of his daughter's objections.

But while Jael's future is being manipulated, the FBI has its own plans. Deputy Director Deborah Mills, leading a specialized task force, is determined to bring Christopher and his father to justice, despite their lethal reputation. When her best agent, Thomas Barak, refuses to embark on what he considers to be a suicide mission, she turns to Danny, a criminal with a connection to the Hebers who has helped her in the past. His task: infiltrate Jael's life, earn her trust, and use the upcoming marriage to open a door for the FBI to dismantle the Sisera empire.

As Danny embarks on his assignment, his history with Jael blurs the lines between enemy and friend, and dangerous secrets surface, forcing a deadly confrontation that could cost Jael everything.

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Jael secured a band-aid on the woman's forehead, running her thumb along the edges to make sure they stuck.

"Sorry about the cartoon frogs," she said. "It was all I could find." Her fingers lingered, hoping the positive touch would counteract what Becca had experienced earlier in the day.

"I don't mind," Becca said, gently prodding her puffy nose and the black bruise below her eye. "Too bad there's no band-aid to fix this." She huffed a laugh, but Jael recognized it for what it was—a cover for the fear, obvious to Jael who was all too familiar with the emotion. She'd witnessed more than one man's terror as he stared death in the face and lost. It didn't matter that she hadn't been the one inflicting it. Her senses were still so attuned to such vulgar acts that her stomach turned even as she tried to make up for her past by restoring other's lives.

"Only time will do that," Jael said, collecting the pieces of band-aid wrapping and stuffing them in her pocket. She smiled almost apologetically as she lowered her voice so the two kids in the room couldn't hear. "I still think you should go to the hospital. I can only fix the cuts on the outside. You said he hit you pretty hard in the stomach."

"It's not the first time he's done it, and I always recover."

"You've been lucky."

Becca shook her head. "They'll ask too many questions. You know I'm not ready to talk about it yet. If it wasn't for you—" Her eyes shimmered with tears that she didn't

bother to blink away. “Thank you, Jael. I don’t know how many times I can say it, but you’re a godsend.” Her voice croaked, and she coughed a little before rubbing at her neck where light bruising was visible.

“Then I guess mentioning the police again is pointless.” Jael sat back and looked at the kids. The older of the two, Jack, had his baseball cap on sideways and his legs draped over the arm of the chair while he played a game on his phone. The younger one, ten-year-old Kaitlin, was reading a thick fantasy book.

“One thing I can give you,” Jael continued, “is some time to process your thoughts. But we can’t wait too long.”

“I know.” Becca rubbed her hands down her thighs. “I know there are timelines I’ll need to follow. Martin has made it clear to me more than once that I can’t disappear with the kids, or he’ll send the police.” Her voice wavered, and she cleared it. “I’ll be more prepared to face everything in the morning.”

“I hope so. A restraining order would help.”

“Would it?” Becca’s question was sharp and accusing, coating her fragility in a quiet fury out of necessity. Her eyes flicked to the kids, then to the ground. “Sorry.”

Jael rested her hand on top of Becca’s. “Right now, you feel like you’ve lost everything. But you haven’t. This is the beginning of getting your life back.”

“I wish I could see things the way you do.”

“That’s why I’m here. So I can help you.”

“Can’t you do it for me?” Becca laughed a light, sad sound.

“You know I would if I could. But you need to be ready for what’s ahead. You have to be sure that this is what you want. There’s no point staying if you’re going to go back to him again.”

“No. No, I won’t. Not this time.” Becca looked at her kids. “It’s different this time.”

Kaitlin, sensing the directness of her mother’s gaze, looked up. Her tired eyes drifted across to Jael with a depth of understanding a kid shouldn’t have.

Jael’s heart skipped a beat, and she almost called out what she saw, but instead, she said, “We’ll find someone the kids can talk to as well. It will be good for them to tell their side of what’s happened.”

Becca chewed on her lip, already raw and close to bleeding. “Okay.”

“At least you’ll be safe here tonight. Hannah will contact you about the next steps?—”

“Hannah?” Becca asked warily.

“She’s the one you spoke to on the phone. She’s a very good friend of mine who works closely with the foundation. She knows a lot about women in your situation and can talk you through the process.”

“But you’ll come back?”

With all the uncertainty Becca and her kids were facing, what they needed was a small amount of stability and a sense of home.

“How about I bring you your groceries on Saturday, and I’ll include the ingredients to make chocolate chip cookies.” The kids looked up, and Jael winked. “I have a few

appointments during the day, but I can come by at dinner, and we can bake together.”

She looked at Jack, who was nodding eagerly. Even the video game couldn’t compete with freshly baked cookies. It made Jael wonder if they’d had much in the way of home-baked anything. It was the one thing her mom had taken the time to do with her when she was a girl.

“Thank you,” Becca said. “For everything. I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“Getting your life together would be the best gift you could give to me.” Jael glanced at the clock on the wall and internally grimaced. “I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“Already?”

“I have a prior engagement I can’t miss.”

“Of course. You would be very busy helping others. I’m being selfish. I’m sorry.”

“Not at all.” Jael licked her lips instead of explaining that her appointment had nothing to do with helping anyone. “At least you can all rest well tonight. No one knows you’re here except Hannah, myself, and the caseworker we contacted.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible to relax yet, but thank you anyway.”

“Lock all the windows, and deadbolt the door. It won’t be necessary; this is a good neighborhood. But it will make you feel better. If you need anything at all, you have my number. There’s enough food in the kitchen to last a few days at least, so if you’re not comfortable going out, there’s no need to leave the house.”

She stood and gave Jack a handshake, then rubbed Kaitlin’s head, eliciting a giant grin.

Becca walked her to the door and gave her an awkward hug.

“We’ll talk soon,” Jael said.

When the door was shut and the deadbolt engaged, she went to her car and drove around the block to a quiet stretch of road where she pulled over.

After confirming she had the road to herself, she took off her sneakers, then worked her jeans down her legs before bending with some difficulty to pull them all the way off. She reached for the slim skirt off the back seat, shaking it out before she wriggled into it.

All that was left was to touch up her makeup. With the mirror down, she added a brighter shade to her neutral lipstick but hesitated as she ran her finger under her bottom lip to tidy it up. Her lonely green eyes stared back at her. They were like Kaitlin’s, who had seen things way too young.

Her breathing became labored, but she jabbed at the mirror, flicking it up to sever the memories before they dragged her into a dank pit of despair. She didn’t have time to wallow in self-pity. Not when Becca genuinely feared for her life and the lives of her kids.

Pulling back onto the road, she focused on the street ahead and steeled herself for the meeting that lay ahead.

Catalina was not the trendiest restaurant in the city, but it served the highest clientele with the best service. Anyone who was anyone dined there.

Jael pulled to a stop at the front door and slipped on a pair of silky white stilettos before stretching her long limbs to the curb. She handed the valet her keys and wasted no time entering the restaurant. She was already late.

He was at his usual table. He liked things to be a certain way and had the financial bulk to pull it off. Whatever Gregory wanted, Gregory got. Even at eighty years of age.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said as she leaned down to kiss her dad’s cheek. He’d been in his fifties when she was born, and most people who didn’t know them assumed he was her grandfather.

“Traffic?” he said, looking amused, like when a cat plays with its prey.

“A little.” She sat across from him, tucking her knees neatly under the white tablecloth before shaking out the napkin and placing it in her lap.

“How was your morning?” He opened his menu and, before she could respond, said to himself, “I think I’ll have the duck today.” Then he looked up at her, waiting for her reply.

“It was fine.” She straightened her fork, then opened her own menu to avoid his gaze.

“I take it you were doing work for the foundation?” This was meant as a jab. She knew the tactic well. When she was a girl, and she saw her mom taking a sleeping pill early in the afternoon, Jael would often say, “Are you having one already?” Her tone was always silky with innocence, but her meaning was clear.

“Yes, Dad. I was doing work for Vita Nova.”

He nodded, his eyes drifting back to the menu. “It takes up a lot of your time. Makes you late for your other responsibilities.”

“Isn’t it better to be late because I was helping people instead of because I got caught up playing tennis or getting my nails done?” She fisted her left hand and dropped it

into her lap when she remembered she'd chipped a nail carrying Becca's bags into the house. He would notice.

"I suppose, if that's how you want to look at it. Should I order the duck for you as well?"

She nodded, setting her menu aside. If she let him choose her meal, it would give him the sense of control he needed in order to let the matter drop. "That would be lovely. Thank you."

The waiter approached with a bottle of wine. "Jael, it's good to see you again. We always enjoy having you and your father with us. Gregory?" He said, turning to her dad. "I believe this is the vintage you were referring to."

Gregory did a quick study of the bottle. "You are a wonder, Mattia. Thank you."

After the waiter poured the drinks, he left with their order, and the conversation dimmed into the same bland small talk they always had and which would last throughout the lunch. Her dad would tell her about issues he'd had at work and would ask her opinion but then not listen to the answer. If she bothered mentioning a detail about the foundation, his face would slacken until he came up with a suitable change of subject.

"You haven't told me your thoughts on Christopher's appointment," he said, wiping his mouth once he'd taken the first bite of his meal.

"Yes, I have. I told you he'll do a fine job." Which was mostly a lie.

She'd known the Siseras most of her life. Not well, but enough to know that, while her own dad had steered away from crime in the later years of his life, Artus Sisera, Christopher's father, had dug deeper into it. And gotten better at it. They already had

Jabin Enterprises, and now, with Christopher taking over the reins of her dad's company, they'd rule over Heber Industries as well. Probably using it to advance their illegal activities.

But she'd already processed this move and left it behind her. She'd never had an interest in the business beyond how it could fund Vita Nova. Once her dad had promised the funding would continue after his departure, she didn't care who was in charge. She'd grown up surrounded by questionable activities and had learned, finally, how to distance herself from it.

"I'd like you to expand on that," her dad said. "If you don't mind."

"What do you want me to say? I've never worked with him before. I hear his work ethic is solid, and I assume he knows how to do the role, but beyond that, it's not really any of my business."

"What are your thoughts about Christopher beyond his role as CEO?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"As a man."

"Like I said, I don't know him well enough to comment. You'd know better than I would."

"Then you trust my judgement about him?"

"Sure. But I don't see why it matters. You've never cared about my opinion in the past."

"That's harsh." He smiled. "But true. You don't have the experience to offer."

Christopher's a good man. Dependable."

"Okay."

"I'll be working closely with him. He'll be around more."

"Then I'm glad you like him."

"It wouldn't hurt you to take an interest."

"Why?"

"You don't want to better understand the man who will be responsible for your future?"

"You mean the foundation?"

The smile he gave her said more than words, but it could have simply been a way to keep her off balance. She knew her dad well, but sometimes it felt as if she didn't know him at all.

"He's different from me and Artus," Gregory continued. "He sees the world as it should be. You'd like him if you got to know him."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"You can be thick sometimes, my dear. He's going to be running my business. I'd appreciate it if it mattered to you more."

"Fine."

“Wonderful. In which case, I should inform you that I’m organizing a dinner for Saturday.”

“This Saturday?”

“The one and only.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t make it. I have other plans.”

Gregory pulled his chin in and made a noise between a scoff and grunt. “Then cancel them.”

“I can’t.” She was looking forward to baking cookies. A small delight in a joyless life.

“Whatever it is, this is more important. We’re celebrating new beginnings with Christopher at the helm of Heber Industries before we make a public announcement. You just said you’d make an effort.”

“I understand why you’d like me to be there, but you can’t expect me to drop everything?—”

“Why not?”

“It’s a business dinner. I have nothing to do with your business.”

“I can’t believe you would say that. Heber Industries is my life’s work, and I’m handing over the torch. It’s one of the most important nights of my life, and you don’t want to be there?”

He always did this. Made her feel small and selfish when he didn’t get his way. There

would be more dinners and more occasions to celebrate. This one wasn't as important as he made it out to be.

He shook his head in disgust. "I'm sorry, but you're coming to the dinner."

She wouldn't give in. Not this time. "No."

Gregory slammed his hand on the table, clinking the glasses and silverware. She'd been expecting it, but it still made her jump. A few patrons at nearby tables turned, but he ignored them.

"It's that foundation again. Am I right?" His face had taken on a reddish sheen.

"Yes."

"Handing out Girl Scout cookies is more important than a groundbreaking dinner with our closest friends and allies?"

"I help people, Dad. I save lives. Start lives."

He held back what would have been a derisive laugh. "You save lives," he muttered. "Listen to yourself."

"If you took any interest in my work, you'd have a very good idea of what I do."

"Because I don't already have enough on my plate?"

Jael took a breath, tangling her fingers together in her lap. The conversation never went anywhere positive when they talked about this. Her dad had allowed her—in his mind, anyway—to create the foundation. He thought it would be a nice plaything and hadn't been prepared when it became a passion for her.

“I’m a grown woman. If you cared to see that, you’d let me order my life how I see fit.”

“You know nothing of life. Not real life. How could you?”

“How could I? Isn’t that what you had in mind when you included me in your extracurricular activities?”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Why? I didn’t give any secrets away.”

“People will get the wrong idea.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Really? Wouldn’t it be better if they got the wrong idea than the right one?”

“You know what I mean, and you know how it sounds when you say things like that. I don’t like this attitude on you.” His lips puckered. “It’s ugly.”

“Then stop criticizing my choices.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“How is a dinner party helping me?”

“I don’t have time for this. If you want to keep your foundation running, you’ll be there.”

“You’re threatening me now?”

“That’s not a threat. It’s sound advice. With Christopher taking over as CEO, he’ll be the one signing your checks. Do you think it’s a good idea for him to believe you have no interest?”

Jael bit her lip. She hadn’t thought about the full implications of Christopher’s new role. In her mind, the payments would keep coming. But her dad was right. The new CEO of Heber Industries wouldn’t necessarily go along with it, and Christopher was somewhat of an unknown quantity to her. It would help if she could find out from him what his thoughts were about Vita Nova. At least she could let him know she would appreciate Heber Industries’ continued support.

She kept her voice steady. It didn’t matter how many times she was forced to concede ground to her dad, it always felt like she was losing another part of herself. “Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Wonderful.” He smiled as if there had never been a doubt in his mind.

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Deputy Director Deborah Mills was of average height, but that was the only thing average about her. Her hair, prematurely white, was always drawn into a braid that trailed down her back. It gave her an unusually carefree look that did not match her eyes. A striking blue. Icy. People often had trouble looking her in the eye, and that suited Deborah just fine. It was better to keep people from getting too comfortable. She was fair and more than competent, but being a woman in the top job meant you couldn't show any weakness, and she was okay with that too. It was easier to pretend strength when everyone around you was convinced that it was the indisputable truth.

She propped her glasses on top of her head when there was a knock at her door.

“Come in.”

A stocky, dark-haired man entered. He nodded at Deborah, then dropped comfortably into a nearby seat.

“Agent Barak, thank you for coming.”

Thomas Barak was the special agent in charge of the taskforce Deborah had created with agents from multiple agencies. It was a group that helped facilitate the capture of suspects that crossed boundaries from drugs to guns to people smuggling and everything in between.

His half-smile carried a familiarity that matched the casual way he sat in the chair—not choosing the one across her desk but relaxing in a seating area with his foot propped on the coffee table in front of him. They'd known each other for more than a decade and had a lot of water under the bridge.

“Don’t want to keep the deputy director waiting,” he said. “How’s Charlie?”

“Didn’t you play golf with him last week?” Her husband wasn’t a good golfer, but that never stopped him.

“He said he pulled a muscle in his shoulder.”

“He always makes excuses when he’s losing,” Deborah said. “He’s fine.”

Barak squeezed both his fists, cracking his knuckles. “So, what is it I can do for you?”

She tossed a file to him. It spun like a frisbee before plopping neatly in his lap.

He flipped it open. “My report on the Siseras?”

“Calling it a report is quite generous, don’t you think? That’s more like a memo. He’s top of the list as far as these things go, and we can’t get one thing on him.” Her tone was steady and low, but her eyes flashed.

“What do you want me to say? We’re doing everything we can.”

“That’s my problem. Your best isn’t good enough on this case.”

Barak scoffed before spreading his hands in a grand gesture. “Then please, tell me what we should be doing differently.”

“You take a lot of liberties with our friendship.”

“You know I wouldn’t be so flippant if anyone else was around.”

“I hope it doesn’t affect the efficacy of your work.”

“You think we have nothing on Artus Sisera because I’m being lazy?”

“Not lazy.” She stood and walked around the desk. “But when everyone is afraid of the Siseras, it’s easier to hang back than push forward. Especially when you don’t believe there is a prodding stick in your back. Have I been going too easy on you lately?”

“When have you ever gone easy on me?”

She smacked his foot off the table. “You could at least do me the courtesy of sitting up straight.”

He looked annoyed but did as she asked, tugging hard on his jacket to be obtuse.

“On this matter,” she said, returning to her desk, “I’m your boss, not your friend, and I won’t give you any scope to do less than what is required to bring the Siseras and Jabin Enterprises down.”

“You think we’re afraid of him. But we’re not.”

“Oh, no? Then why haven’t you sent anyone undercover?”

Barak balked. “You know as well as I do that the best we’ll get out of a stunt like that is nothing. And more likely, we’ll lose a good agent.”

“I’ve been in this game longer than you have, Barak, and I haven’t lost my edge, but you seem to have. If you don’t want to make the hard calls, fine.”

“You think I won’t make hard calls?”

“I think you’ve become too narrow in your focus, so I’ll fix the problem myself. Why send a man in to do a woman’s job?”

“You’re going to play the gender card now?”

“I’m not playing,” Deborah said, steepling her fingers. “The job was yours to do. You haven’t done it, so I have someone else in mind.”

“You’re not going in yourself.” He looked worried. Good.

“Of course not.”

“Then who? Agent Hartley?”

“Veronica?” Deborah shook her head. “No.”

“Artus won’t let anyone near him. Man or woman. I don’t care who you have in mind, it won’t work.”

“You might not know anyone who can get close to him, but I do.”

“Who?”

She left a long pause. Long enough to see him shift uncomfortably. Then, she said, “Jael Heber.”

“Jael?” He shook his head with a laugh. “You’re out of your mind. Not only is her father out of the game these days, but Jael would smell us coming a mile away. And I’m sure she still believes we’re the reason her mom is dead.”

“We are, aren’t we?” Deborah said, leaning back in her chair.

“You want to be the one to add that to the report? Natalie Heber was in the wrong place at the right time and in possession of illicit drugs. End of story. None of our guys laid a finger on her.”

“That doesn’t mean we didn’t play our part.”

“Your point?”

“I know for a fact that Jael believes it’s our fault. Am I sorry? No. Natalie was a criminal. It’s as much her fault she’s dead as ours. That doesn’t mean it’s not a sad scenario that requires some finesse.”

“The FBI is finessing our missions now?”

“When it’s required.”

“Still, I don’t see it. Even if Jael agreed to help us, which she wouldn’t, how would that get us Artus?”

“While Gregory Heber may have gone legit before we could get enough evidence to put him away, his ties to the Siseras and Jabin Enterprises are stronger than ever.”

“Are you talking about the rumors that Christopher will be the next CEO of Heber Industries?”

“Those aren’t the only rumors.”

“You know something I don’t?”

“From what I understand, there will be other causes for celebration. Word on the street is that Jael and the soon-to-be-appointed CEO of Heber Industries are to be

engaged.”

“Christopher and Jael? Where’d you hear that?”

“I have ears everywhere. Why do you think I’m the deputy director?”

“Doesn’t matter, though, does it? Because it would still be impossible to get Jael to cooperate with us.”

“She will if she doesn’t know she’s helping.”

Barak blinked as the wheels turned, but they didn’t reach any destination. “I still don’t see it.”

“We send someone in to get close to the family. Jael and Gregory. To encourage them in the direction we want them to go.”

“We don’t have enough time to send someone in undercover to get close to her and then convince her to let us close to her soon-to-be father-in-law.”

“I know. That’s why we send in someone who’s already familiar with the family.”

Barak shook his head. “Why do you always make me work so hard for the answers?”

“It’s good for you. Keeps you sharp. If I don’t let you think for yourself, then you become useless to me. Besides, I shouldn’t need to do your job for you, but somehow, I am.”

“There’s no one on the taskforce who could pull that off.”

“I told you, you’re being narrow-minded. You need to think outside the box.”

“You must be pretty far outside.”

“Not as far as you might think. You remember Daniel Fletcher?”

“Danny? You want to bring Danny back in? I thought he’d paid his dues.”

“He did. And then some. I would never tell him this, but we got more out of that bargain than he did.”

“Do you even know where he is?”

“I always keep tabs on my best assets. I figured we’d need him again.”

“You have dirt on him I don’t know about? Because that’s the only way you’ll get him to come back.”

“No. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t something he wants that I can give him.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

“My husband tells me all the time.”

“Do you remember when Danny finished with us? You promised he’d never have to see any of us ever again.”

“Especially you.”

“Exactly my point. How do you think he’ll react when you turn up on his doorstep and ask him to join my team?”

Deborah pushed a grim smile up her face. She knew how the meeting would go. But

she was not a woman to back down in the face of a challenge.

“There’s too much at stake to worry about things like feelings,” she said.

“Is that what you’re going to tell him?”

“Danny’s a smart man.”

“And he’s had time to stew.”

“He’s not the stewing type,” she said.

“How do you know? It’s been—what—ten years?”

“Or thereabouts.”

“He’ll laugh in your face. Or worse, he may have let himself go. Sure, he was good for the work you gave him back then, but what if he’s spent the last decade playing video games and drinking beer?”

“He hasn’t.”

Barak narrowed his eyes. “This is a done deal, isn’t it?”

“I’ve made up my mind, if that’s what you mean. I’ll do what I need to do to make it happen.”

“So before I walked in, you knew what you were going to do. What was the point of this meeting?”

“I left some wiggle room for a change if you’d brought me something useful. I gave

you your chance.”

Barak stood stiffly and paced the room. “It won’t work.”

“You’re defeated before we even begin? Perhaps you’re not the right person to continue leading this taskforce.”

He turned on her then, his face contorted in anger and indecision. He knew he’d failed her, but she could see he didn’t have it in him to rise up and be the leader she’d hoped he’d one day become. He was a good agent, but when it came down to it, she needed more.

“I hope you’re not threatening me,” Barak said.

“No threat. All I need is for you to be a team player. When Danny comes back, you give him whatever support he requires.”

“He won’t work with me. Not again.”

“You made that bed yourself. Now you have to lie in it. If you would have recognized why I chose to use him back then, you wouldn’t have burned your bridges.”

“I did what I had to to protect the bureau. He could have been a liability.”

Deborah rose slowly. She was done arguing. “But he wasn’t.”

“None of us could have known that. I was watching your back.”

“No, you weren’t. You were watching your own. This is happening. If you don’t like it, request a transfer. I’ll approve it.”

Barak's fists tightened at his side. "Fine. I'll be available for this idea of yours. But when he refuses to come back, what are we going to do then?"

"He won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'll persuade him."

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The chandelier cast spatters of geometric light around the room. Jael paused at the arch leading into the dining room and surveyed the guests.

At the head of the table, wearing a tux, was her father. His eyes were shining from the whiskey he'd started drinking an hour before the guests had arrived. He was laughing at something Artus Sisera was saying.

Artus was positioned to her father's left. He was a very attractive man in his late fifties with a full head of salt-and-pepper hair and a short, well-groomed beard to match. He wasn't currently married but courted a lot of women, mostly younger, who were happy to take whatever morsels they could from a powerful man like Artus.

Christopher, who sat on the other side of the table with one seat between him and her father, was talking to the other guests. He got his looks from his dad and had an open, handsome face that gave the impression of a welcoming and generous man. But Jael thought his eyes told a different story. They were a closer match to what she'd heard—that he was cold and calculating when it mattered.

He noticed her and smiled, a charming grin that lifted higher on one side than the other. If she hadn't had a deep aversion to the type of business he and his father ran, she may have been duped into having an interest in him. But up until now, she'd always given him a wide berth. That would soon have to change.

She smiled back, pushing aside thoughts of the text she'd received from Hannah only minutes ago. It would be impossible to concentrate when all Jael wanted to do was find out why the credit card Vita Nova used to buy groceries had been declined.

“Jael,” her dad said too loud. “There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever show up.” His look held a warning.

“I wouldn’t miss tonight for the world,” she said with a close-lipped smile. If anyone looked hard enough, they’d recognize the derision in her eyes even though they wouldn’t understand her real pain. The depth of her disappointment about what she was missing out on was a struggle to ignore, and she was an expert at ignoring her own sorrow. But this dinner held purpose for her now. As soon as she had the chance, she’d find out from her father what was wrong with the credit card and get it fixed.

She made her way to the head of the table to kiss her dad hello.

“I need to talk to you,” she whispered before taking the seat beside him and smiling again at Christopher, who would have been placed beside her tonight on purpose. Everyone sat exactly where her dad had positioned them on his chessboard.

“This is hardly the time for secrets,” Gregory said, peering at her over his whiskey glass before swirling the burnished contents around the clinking ice.

“He’s right,” Artus said. “We’re here to celebrate.”

“I realize that.” Jael remained polite. “But unfortunately, an urgent matter has come up. Nothing to spoil everyone’s night, but too important to ignore.”

“Nothing is so important that it can’t wait now that we’re all here,” Gregory said. “Why don’t we begin?”

“Dad—”

“Let me pour you a drink.” Artus lifted a champagne glass to cut her off and filled it until the bubbles nearly overflowed.

“Thank you,” Jael said tightly as she took the offered drink.

“Perfect time for a toast,” Gregory said and stood, holding his glass up. “I’d like to propose a toast before we begin our meal. Christopher.” He nodded past Jael. “You are the closest I will ever have to a son, which makes this all the sweeter.”

Jael stared at the thin lines of surging bubbles as they raced to the rim of her glass, barely listening to her father gloat and fawn before finally saying “cheers.”

Glasses were lifted, and she took a sip that wasn’t really a sip before abandoning her champagne on the table. Everyone would drink too much, and she had no interest in being a part of it. She’d played the perfect hostess for too many years. Tonight, the only way to protest her forced appearance was to refrain from engaging in the revelry.

“I know my son will rise to the challenge,” Artus said, adding his own toast, “and bring Haber Industries into a new and more prosperous season. And my hope is for many more prosperous mergers to come.”

It was an odd comment, and he’d glanced down at her briefly as he said it, but the moment passed as there was more clinking of glasses and Jael was compelled to smile and clink and sip.

Christopher leaned in toward her. “I hate to say this,” he said as plates of food were brought in and set before the guests. “But you almost look disappointed.”

She thanked the waiter when he set her plate in front of her, then looked at Christopher. “My dad told me about the dinner at the last minute. I had other plans I had to cancel in order to come, that’s all. No harm done.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but I don’t mean about dinner.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” she said. Even though she did.

“Gregory told me you had no interest in the business. He said that you were happy for him to choose who he felt was the best fit. Has that changed?”

“No,” Gregory said, leaning across his plate to interrupt. “Nothings changed. Jael’s fine. It’s probably a headache. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

“My head is fine.” She hated it when he addressed her affectionately. “I’m thrilled for you, Christopher. Truly I am. I know my dad has made the best choice.” She almost added “as he sees it” but didn’t want to stir the pot. “And it will be good for Dad to retire. He’s long overdue.”

“Oh-ho,” Gregory said with a boisterous laugh. “Don’t get too ahead of yourself. I’m as entrenched in the business as ever. Until my dying breath. This company is my heart and soul.”

Jael caught a quick glance at Artus, whose face went blank for a moment before returning to its usual composed smile. “I know Christopher wouldn’t dream of casting you aside,” he said.

Gregory seemed satisfied with that answer. Ten years ago, he would have been more self-aware, but he was content now to trust in the Siseras, assuming that their friendship was stronger than the business deal.

She ignored the pang it gave her to understand in a way that her father no longer did. It wasn’t her fight. If Christopher threw her dad out, he would only get what he deserved for trusting them. The only thing that really mattered to her was keeping the doors of Vita Nova open.

She wasn’t hungry, but she ate so she wouldn’t have to talk. Instead, she listened, and

watched through unnoticed glances how the others interacted. She despised the way her father looked to Artus for approval until Artus turned his attention to the woman beside him. Mrs. Tuttle was recently divorced and looking very busty tonight. She'd probably begged Gregory to seat her beside Artus. Poor Mrs. Tuttle. She was in her forties and probably too old for him.

With everyone's attention away from the head of the table for a moment, Jael took the opportunity to speak to her dad. "I got a text from Hannah before I arrived."

"Hannah?" Her dad's questioning gaze was interrupted when he thrust a forkful of greens into his mouth.

"She works with me at Vita Nova. You've met her."

"Have I?"

Jael took a drink to hide her contempt for the games he insisted on playing. He never tired of them.

"Yes. She said the credit card was declined. She's trying to buy groceries for a woman and her kids who have been abused by her husband. They need food, Dad."

"Hmm." He slowly lifted his napkin from his lap and dabbed at the corners of his mouth while he pretended to consider what she'd said. "Is Hannah the one with the limp brown hair?"

"Dad—," she punched out his name, then pulled in her temper. "Why was the credit card declined?"

He shrugged. "Maybe Donna forgot to put more money into the account."

“Donna never forgets.”

“Perhaps, but I keep her very busy with actual work. And with the extra duties required of her for Christopher’s appointment, she may not have gotten to it yet.”

“You’ve cut me off, haven’t you? Is this to punish me because I didn’t want to come here tonight?”

“Will you keep your voice down?”

“Not if making a scene will get me what I need.”

“You’re a bit old for tantrums, aren’t you? And your accusation is baseless. You’re here, aren’t you? What would be the point of punishing you?”

“Then can you call Donna and tell her to put the money into the account?”

“Right now? We’re in the middle of dinner.”

“We’re in the middle of dinner, but Becca’s not because she has no food.”

“You’ve never been one for histrionics. What’s gotten in to you?”

“Someone I care about is suffering. It will only take a minute to call Donna.”

“I could.” He nodded as he rested his napkin back in his lap and resumed eating.

“However, I have all these guests to entertain. It goes against everything I stand for to leave them wanting for a thing. Should they suffer for another?”

“I can’t believe you’re stooping so low as to compare the two.”

“As far as I’m concerned, they’re no different. My guests need to understand how much I care for them. I can’t do that if I’m off making phone calls.”

Jael’s jaw tightened the way it always did when she was forced to succumb to her father’s manipulations, which was too often. He always knew exactly where to cut so that she would release to his demands.

She forced her mouth to relax so she didn’t respond to him with gritted teeth. It would give him too much pleasure. “Don’t worry about your guests,” she said evenly. “I’ll make sure they’re well looked after.”

He placed a hand on her arm. “Would you? It would mean so much.”

“Go make the phone call.”

He excused himself, and Jael did what she’d done best for so many years. It was a position she had enjoyed once because she was so good at it. Her dad had trained her to please those around her, and she did that now.

By the time he’d returned, she had half the table engaged in delightful conversation, giving compliments whenever she could.

She’d flattered Mrs. Tuttle so successfully that the woman had forgotten Artus for a moment before becoming flushed at the realization that Jael’s compliments would surely seal the deal. Unfortunately for her, Artus remained engaged with Jael like the rest of the room.

By the time they’d finished dessert, the whole room was in much happier spirits. Everyone but her. She continued the pretense until they’d finished. Then she excused herself to call Hannah and let her know the worst was over.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:38 am

A watery blue reflection bounced off the walls of the pool and hit the low fence highlighting the blackness beyond, where a dull glow of city lights could be seen.

“Hannah, sorry to call so late,” Jael said as she stood at the edge of the pool, trying to keep the fatigue out of her voice.

“Don’t worry about it. You know you can call me any time. Did you find out what went wrong?”

“Yes. I won’t get into the details, but it should be sorted now.”

“You don’t think it could happen again?” Hannah didn’t know a lot about Jael’s situation, but she’d picked up enough. More than Jael would like her to know. But the worried inflection to her tone suggested Hannah knew it wasn’t a simple matter.

“It could, but I’ll do my best to make sure it doesn’t. Can you get the groceries tomorrow? Or do you need me to do it?”

“We can leave it for a few days. I got her enough to last her through the weekend.”

“I thought you said the account was empty.”

“It was,” Hannah said. “I covered it.”

“With your own money? You shouldn’t do that.”

“It wasn’t that much, and I don’t mind.”

“Send me pictures of the receipt so I can reimburse you.”

“I took this job to help people. I’m prepared for the cost.”

“The issue with the credit card was my fault. And I should have been the one buying the groceries. Not you. The kids were looking forward to baking.”

“I know. Becca told me, so I got what they needed and hung around for a bit to bake with them. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it is.”

“It’s just...I know it’s your thing.”

“It’s not my thing. It was for the kids mostly. But thank you so much for going the extra mile. I know it would have meant a lot to them. How was Becca, by the way?”

“Pretty relaxed. Still bruised, but happy. Or at least as happy as you can be, considering. I did mention to her about calling the police, but she’s solidly declining. She said that she didn’t want to do anything until it was necessary. I told her if she wanted full custody, she’d need to prove the kids are in danger with him.”

“If I’m right about her daughter, the police will get involved anyway. But thank you for trying. And thanks for being there when I couldn’t.”

“I love the job, but it’s not like I’m not being well compensated for the work I do.”

“Still. You’ve picked up what I’ve dropped on multiple occasions. I want to make sure you know how much I appreciate you.”

“You’ve got a busy life with a lot of expectations. It happens. I, on the other hand,

have an ordinary life, so I don't mind doing a bit extra now and then. I love my cat, but she's not always what I need. This job has meant a lot to me. And your friendship."

Jael felt herself internally retreat. She didn't do friends well. There had been too much hurt passed around, and the last person she wanted getting tainted by her was Hannah.

Before she could come up with a suitable response, she heard the swish of the door behind her and turned. "Hey, Hannah, something's just come up. I've got to go, but I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Talk to you then. And look after yourself."

"I will." She hung up and smiled at Christopher. "I had to make a phone call."

"I see that." He had his hands in his pockets and took his time ambling over. "Everything okay?"

"It is now."

"Good. You seemed distracted at the start of the night. I was worried maybe I was the cause. Your dad didn't give me the opportunity to get to the bottom of our earlier conversation."

She shook her head. "Honestly, my preoccupation has nothing to do with you. I have a mountain of other things to worry about. Mostly I'm relieved it's not me in your position. There was a time when my dad expected me to step up. You've taken the heat off."

"I'm glad I could be of service." He looked up at the sky. "You know, it's strange."

“What is?”

“That you and I barely know each other.” He took a step forward so she was behind him. “Our families have been friends for decades, but you and I haven’t crossed paths much.”

“We have different lives and run in very different circles.”

He turned to her. “Not that different. We’ve often been at the same parties, big and small.”

“As I get older, I prefer my own company over a crowd.”

“I can see that about you. You’ve been fantastic tonight though. You always have been. The way you work the room is something of an art form. But I’ve always noticed a distant look in your eye, like you’d rather be somewhere else.”

“Lucky it’s not that obvious to my dad.”

“I don’t think it’s obvious to anyone. They just like your attention. But once I take over at Heber, I wouldn’t mind the opportunity to cross paths with you more often.”

“Why?” she said too aggressively. “Sorry.” She shook her head. “It’s been a long night.”

“Is that all it is?”

She huffed a laugh. “I came here unhappy. And now you’re wearing it.”

“A woman like you amongst the wolves. I don’t blame you.”

“You consider yourself a wolf?”

He gave her a devilish grin. “When the mood strikes. But that’s not what I meant. Everyone here tonight came for something. You’re probably the most selfless person at the table. Your dad has done a good job protecting you and raising you to be strong, but it comes at a cost.”

Her lips flattened into a thin line. “Yeah, Dad has always been protective.” She watched him, wondering how much he actually knew.

His face retained its quiet contentment. He was a man who never gave much away. An important trait when your dad’s a crime boss.

“I want you to know,” he said, shifting closer. “You have nothing to worry about with me. My intentions are all honorable. I promise you.”

“I’ve heard that sentiment stated on more than one occasion, right before a knife is plunged into the other’s back.”

“Your own?”

She shrugged. “I’m still standing.”

“You’re protective of your foundation. Is that what’s bothering you? Vita Nova, is it?”

“Yes.”

“New Life . I like it.”

“Thank you.”

“For me,” he pressed his hand on his heart, “my desire is for Vita Nova to continue to prosper. I’ve asked around. You have a fantastic reputation. All I’ve heard are good things.”

“But I take it my dad has informed you of the drain it has on the coffers. Not much, but enough that he makes sure I know.” She was defensive. “It might be a tax deductible gift, but that doesn’t always appease the shareholders.”

“Is that what he says?”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t shared his thoughts.”

“I’ve seen the figures, but I don’t share his sentiments. I think it’s important for any business or anyone with wealth to help those less fortunate when they can.”

“Forgive my skepticism, but I do know what you and your father get up to.”

He laughed. “Fair point. But that’s business like any other. Surely you can understand that. I might not know a lot about you, but you aren’t innocent of those activities either. And yet there is obviously a passion in your heart to help those in need.”

She wasn’t about to tell him she considered it part of her penance for all her past wickedness. “That is all true.”

“My schedule is quite hectic at the moment, as you can imagine, but if we could make some time, I’d like to know more about Vita Nova. Hear the stories. It would mean a lot, and it would help me convince the board if I’m to get you more funding.”

“You want to get me more?”

“Unless you have enough?”

“No. I mean. We get by, but there’s so much more I’d want to do. We’re tied up in a lot of ways, and we can only help so many people at once. If we had more money—” She slammed her mouth shut. Her exuberance was getting the better of her. Sharing her passion had never had positive results in these circles.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I was getting ahead of myself. If you would consider increasing the support, that would be most appreciated.”

“You don’t trust me.”

She looked at him so she could judge his eyes and saw his brief glimpse at her lips. If he’d had any interest in her previously, she’d never noticed. Artus had mentioned mergers, and her dad wanted her to get to know Christopher better. Was everyone conspiring to make something happen between them?

“Trust isn’t easy for me, no,” she said. “But I do appreciate you taking an interest in my foundation.”

She looked out at the night and got a chill.

When she wrapped her arms around herself, Christopher took off his jacket. “Are you cold? You look cold.”

She let him slide it over her shoulders only because she didn’t know how to refuse without appearing rude. If Christopher had plans to become Gregory’s son-in-law, she knew her dad would do whatever it took to make that happen. He’d always wanted to keep the business in the family. She’d thought he’d finally let the matter go, but it appeared she could have been mistaken.

“I know you’re not a woman who takes compliments with the same fluttering blushes as others, but allow me to say how stunning you look tonight. And I say that with no caveats.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Compliments make me uncomfortable. Especially after you said everyone at the party is here to get something for themselves.”

“Not me. I’ve got everything I want.”

“Still, you’d find a more willing recipient in Mrs. Tuttle, although she was completely taken by your father, so there’s probably no point.”

“Does that mean my admiration is unwanted?”

“I don’t take offense to it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He let out another round of his easy laugh that would make a room relax as it lightened the atmosphere. She couldn’t say it didn’t have the same effect on her. The last thing she wanted was for things to get too serious.

“I’ll take what I can get,” he said. “As for Mrs. Tuttle, I doubt she’ll get what she’s hoping for. She’s a stunning woman, but my dad...I’m sure you know.”

“She’s too old for him.”

“Exactly. As for me, I’m much more content in your company, compliments or not. I think it’s good when a woman doesn’t have to be fawned over. You know who you are. I like that.”

“You think so?”

“Don’t you?”

She knew who she was all right. “Do you ever wish you could be someone different?”

“You mean am I unhappy with my life?”

“Not necessarily. But do you ever want to escape?”

“People with as much money as you and I have can do that whenever they want,” he said. “I would never want another life than this one.”

She nodded. “I guess you’re right. We have everything we could ever want.” And also nothing worth having.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:38 am

Danny Fletcher's shoulders were stooped. An unusual look for a guy who always walked with purpose and strength, even before coming to Kenya to find it. But it had been a hard morning, and he'd spent the last few hours on his knees praying—no, begging God to do a miracle. So far, there had been no sign from above.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for,” he muttered, straightening his back as if that could change anything. “The evidence of things unseen.” The verse was gritty in his mouth. Words spoken out of rote more than because he believed them at that moment. But the words out of his mouth and the rigidness in his posture couldn't change the sourness in his stomach. He kept his shoulders back anyway because, in the last few years, he'd learned a lot about standing on truth. He'd spent a lot of years in darkness, so when he'd finally stepped into the light, he'd tested the reality of those words. And time and again, he'd always found that the best way forward was to not rely on how he felt as an indicator of anything beyond his own frivolity.

“That's no guarantee.” It was a reminder to himself that God's plan was not always what he hoped for. He may not get the miracle he wanted today, but God had given Danny more than his fair share in his younger days. He should be dead about a dozen times over from when most of his decision making had come from compulsion or adrenaline. Back then, he'd pilfered as much from life as he could before it all came crashing down on him. But that expected demise had never come. Now, at thirty-six, he had a lot of years left to live—God willing—and he'd do his best to live them right.

He tugged his cap lower over his eyes against the glare of the sun, then glanced at the swirling pattern of the tattoo wrapping around his arm as he squeezed his hand into a fist, watching the muscles in his forearm shift the pattern of the ink—a reminder of

what he'd once been and everything that could have happened but didn't, thanks to his salvation. He needed to remember the power of God now more than ever.

Loud shouting brought his focus back out in front as a group of boys ran toward him. He forced a smile but knew they'd see through it.

More than a dozen kids, all between the ages of eight and sixteen, were sprinting at full speed, their white-toothed grins making him blink in the fierce sunlight. Most of the smiles had disappeared by the time they reached him. He wasn't sure how, but they could always read him.

The oldest of the group, Ekele, stepped forward. They'd celebrated his sixteenth birthday the week before, choosing an arbitrary day to celebrate his birth because no one knew for sure. "Did you see him?" he said.

"No," Danny said.

"You said you prayed. Sielewi, " Ekele finished in Swahili.

Usually, Danny would make them translate anything they said in their native tongue into English. He wanted them to be ready for any opportunity God opened up for them. But this wasn't the time.

"I don't understand either," Danny said with a sigh. "But sometimes, God has other plans."

"You've been telling us your god is powerful," another of the boys said, crossing his arms. "Or maybe he's just another mzungu . Making promises he can't keep."

"My God is not a man. Black or white," Danny said. "He's God. And He decides what's best better than any of us can."

Ekele nodded solemnly. “You believe Adisa has to pay for his sins?”

“I’ve explained this before.” Sometimes it was so hard for them to accept things that were contrary to everything they knew. “Adisa’s sins have already been paid for. Jesus died so we don’t have to. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t consequences for our actions. One thing I do know about Adisa is that he’s prepared to face what comes to him. He knows what he did in the past is wrong.”

“Unakata tamaa,” another boy said.

“No. I won’t ever give up on him. I won’t stop praying. I know Adisa has changed. And he trusts in God. No matter what, his soul is at peace.”

They were empty words to most of the boys who didn’t yet believe. The few who did didn’t look hopeful. It would be a test for them all. In Danny’s mind, this would be the perfect opportunity for God to display his power, but that was Danny’s own wisdom speaking. Only time would tell if it lined up with God’s.

“There’s nothing we can do right now,” Danny continued, “so how about we get back out onto the field and keep practicing?”

They were all reluctant to head back. Adisa was well liked, but they didn’t want to let Danny down, either. And he knew better than anyone that sitting and sulking when you were feeling down was the wrong way to move forward. He’d climbed into too many pits only to find that the only way out was to climb back up again. He’d rather skip the whole process and keep his head above water.

He jogged with the boys back to the field while stealing a quick look at a building being constructed nearby. It was the beginning of what would become a multipurpose area for these boys and other kids from the slums. He’d worked hard to get support for the new building that would house a library and study space to help get these boys

and more through school.

Once they were gathered at the side of the field, rough with stones and dirt, he clapped his hands to bring them in, and they started running through drills. A couple of times he found his mind wandering to Adisa, but he couldn't let himself get distracted when there was a whole group in front of him that needed guiding.

He jogged down the sideline, calling out encouragement or instruction. Then, he noticed someone standing on the other side, watching.

Ekele noticed her too and ran over to Danny.

"She's back," he said.

"Who is?"

"Don't know. She was here earlier asking for you. We all thought you knew her."

Danny squinted, but the most he could tell was that she looked like a Westerner. "Guess I better go find out. You guys keep going."

He didn't hurry as he rounded the field. When he got closer, the woman put her hand on her forehead to shade her eyes in the light. Her white hair made her head glow like a halo. When she dragged her braid across her shoulder, his stomach plummeted.

"What could she possibly be doing here?" he muttered. "God, this is a challenge I don't need right now. Please let me be dreaming."

"Jambo," she said with a wave, and what he'd prayed was only an apparition in the shimmering heat became a solid form. "Habari gani?" she added with a disarming smile he knew was a tool she used to get what she wanted.

“We speak English whenever we can” was all he gave her as a greeting.

“My apologies. Let me start again. Hello. How are you?”

“I’ve been better.”

“I hope that’s not due to my presence. My intention in coming here was not to upset you.”

“You can’t take all the credit. My life does consist these days of things other than the bureau.”

“But you’re not happy to see me.”

Danny looked out at his boys to keep a level head and give him time to find a response. “Did you expect me to be? You took advantage of the help I offered.” She may want to act like there were no hard feelings between them, but he wouldn’t ignore the past. Not when it could bite him again.

“You were a criminal, Danny. Did you really expect me to play fair with you?”

“Was that too much to ask?”

“I’m sorry we didn’t agree on all the outcomes, but in the end, we both got what we wanted.”

“Did we? Because I recall you promising I’d never have to see you again.”

A soccer ball soared through the air, and Danny jumped to catch it before drop-kicking it back.

Deborah watched it bounce once before one of the boys trapped it with his feet and they started playing again.

“I bet you’re happier having soccer balls speeding toward your head than bullets,” she said.

“I am. But I take it you’re not here to see what I’ve done with my life.”

“I already knew what you were doing.” Her eyes were steady on him, watching for his reaction to her bluntness.

“Which leads me to the pressing issue of why, when you said you’d forget I existed once I walked out of your office, do you know where I am and what I’m doing?”

“You should be flattered I kept tabs on you.”

“I’m not.”

She tugged on her braid, then flicked it to her back. “I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t important.”

He took his time responding. “It couldn’t be because you want my help with another case.”

“It is.”

He laughed lightly and scratched his head. “You can’t be serious.”

“You know me well enough to recognize this look on my face.”

“Yeah. It’s the one that says you won’t take no for an answer. But you’ll have to start

because I paid for my crimes. Nothing's changed since the last time we spoke. I'm done with all that."

"Are you?"

A shout came from the field, and Deborah's attention was drawn to the team. She took a few steps past Danny to watch the boys as they continued their drills. "Looks to me like you've still got sins you're atoning for."

"That's not what this is."

"No? You're not trying to pay back your debt to society?"

"I've found a better way to live, that's all."

"Well, some of us still have responsibilities."

"And mine are here."

She huffed a frustrated breath. "There must be something you want that I can give you to make it worth your while."

"I doubt it."

"I'm the deputy director now. I have more influence."

"From what I recall, you had a lot back then."

"I do know how to get what I want. Keep that in mind."

"Sorry you wasted your time, but I'm not interested." Danny called out to the boys.

“Davu, watch Imani’s feet. Work on your ball control.”

“You don’t even want to hear what the job is?”

“It wouldn’t make any difference.”

“So you’ve cut all ties to your old life?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Including the Hebers?”

It wasn’t a big jolt that hit him, but it was enough. He hadn’t thought of them for years and wasn’t prepared for the memories to surface so easily.

“What do you want with them?” he said, hating that he couldn’t stop himself from asking the question. “I thought Gregory went straight.”

“It’s not the Hebers I’m after. Gregory was always a small fish anyway. It’s the Siseras I want.”

“Artus and Christopher?” Danny shook his head. “No way. There’s no way in with them.”

“That’s what Barak said.”

“I’m surprised he’s still kicking around. I thought you would have gotten rid of him by now.”

“He’s one of my best.”

“Thomas Barak is the best you can do?” Danny said.

“Just because you guys didn’t get along doesn’t mean he’s not a good agent.”

“He liked to color inside the lines.”

“And you had a problem with that?”

“He’s got no imagination.”

“He’s a good agent,” Deborah said.

“He’s smart enough not to go after Artus Sisera. I guess that counts for something. But you’re wasting your time with me. I have as much chance with Artus as Barak does. I was never part of that circle.”

“I don’t need you to get close to the Siseras. Gregory already is.”

“You think my old connection with Gregory is enough to get my foot in the door with them? Won’t happen.”

“Barak might not have much imagination, but give me a little more credit.”

“Maybe I’ve chosen to forget how clever you always were. You ran rings around me.”

“I brought out the best in you.”

“Is that what you call it?”

She smiled. “Artus’s son will soon be CEO of Gregory’s company.”

“Christopher’s running Heber Industries?”

“And that’s not all. The word going around is that Jael’s about to become engaged.”

He flinched. “To who?” Deborah lifted an eyebrow, and Danny shook his head. “Not to Christopher.”

“The one and only.”

“I don’t know where you got your information, but she would never marry him.”

“My information is reliable. You haven’t seen Jael in a long time. Maybe you don’t know her as well as you think you do anymore. She wouldn’t be the first to accept a match to keep Daddy happy.”

It had been years, but he couldn’t picture Jael stooping so low. “But they’re not engaged yet?”

“No.”

“Then what does any of this have to do with me?”

“I need someone who can get close to the family. And quickly. We expect the engagement to come any day, and we need you in place. That way, when the time comes, you have some sway over the venue for the marriage festivities.”

“You came all this way to hire me as a wedding planner?”

“See? It’s an easy job, but you’re the only one who can do it. And if you do this one last thing, I’ll lose track of you for good. I promise. You’ll never hear from me again.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“I chose my words more carefully last time. I never made promises I didn’t expect to keep. Come on, Danny. There must be something you need. Or something you want?”

There was a lot he needed, but he found it hard to believe this was God’s answer to his prayer. Then his thoughts drifted to Jael. The FBI wanted to use her engagement to pull the strings they needed, but all Danny wanted to do was go save her from it. He sighed.

“There we go,” she said. “There is something.”

“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to like it. Since when has that ever been a consideration?”

“If I help you, we’re doing things my way.”

“Within reason. I have no intention of babysitting you. I know how you work. I trust you to get the job done.”

“But if you can’t get me what I want?—”

“I can.”

“We’ll see. One of my boys has been arrested.”

“Let me guess. He didn’t do it? You want to blame a corrupt police force? I’m sure I can find some dirt.”

“No. He did do it. But he was a different kid back then.”

“They all are, aren’t they? You want to help him because he’s a reflection of yourself?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really. Okay. You want him exonerated? Consider it done. Now, would you like to hear the rest of my plan?”

“I’m not finished yet.”

She looked impressed. “I’m listening.”

“These boys need new uniforms. Sneakers, jerseys, everything.”

“Easy.”

“And my building.” He pointed to a tangle of metal and cement. “I want to make a place where the kids can study and learn. I’ve gotten it started, but the construction has been moving too slowly. I want it finished within a year. Also, I want books, desk, tables, chairs. The works.”

“Is that all?”

“I don’t have any money, so I’ll need my expenses covered while I’m back in the States. ”

“Done and done.”

“You must be really desperate.”

“Sisera is making a fool out of us,” she said. “He’s gotten stronger and more shrewd. But also more dangerous. We need to bring him down, and we’ve tried everything else. So, are you in?”

“I guess so.” He held out a hand, but neither one of them smiled as they shook.

“You ready to hear the rest?”

“May as well.”

“Fantastic. I’ve got your backstory lined up. You’ve been in prison. I have all the paperwork.”

“Already?”

“I had reason to be confident.”

“Makes me want to change my mind,” he said.

“But you won’t, because you care too much about others. And right now, you’ve got a good deal. May I continue?”

“By all means.”

“You’re getting back on your feet, and you’ve come to Gregory for help.”

“And what if he doesn’t want to?”

“Gregory loves you. You’re like a son to him. He’ll do whatever he can.”

“How do you know?”

“You told me.”

“I wouldn’t have told you that.”

“It was back when we were getting along better. Anyway, like I said, I need you to influence where they hold the engagement party. We have a conference center where everything is set up how we like it.”

“Recording equipment?”

“Exactly. Get them to hold it there, and we’ll record what we can. Who knows what they’ll give away while they’re drinking?”

“Is that even legal?”

“I have the warrants. The hard part has been getting them where we need them.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Then there’s always the wedding.”

Danny thought through all the requirements for a job like this. And all the things that could go wrong, including complications around his reintroduction to the Hebers.

“It’s not a great plan.”

“It’s better than what we have.”

“I won’t kill anyone for you.”

“It shouldn’t come to that.”

“Good.”

Deborah hiked her bag closer to her body in preparation for leaving. “I’ll send you your flight details. Do you need time to organize things here before you leave?”

“It shouldn’t take more than a few days.”

“Then I’ll be in touch.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:38 am

Danny had taken several days to reacquaint himself with the area he'd spent a lot of years causing trouble in. Some stuff had changed, some hadn't. Currently, he was parked beside a large garden and playground that used to be an old, abandoned warehouse. It was at least one positive change the city had made.

He shifted on the leather seat of the Acura TLX that had been waiting for him at the airport, and he flipped open the file that was left on the coffee table of his two-bedroom apartment with views and a gourmet kitchen. Deborah was looking after him this time around. Either someone owed her a favor, or she had a lot riding on this. Probably both.

His eyes retraced the last paragraph. It was full of conjecture about what Artus Sisera was up to but had little in the way of evidence, which he expected. What he wasn't expecting, was the exposé on the Hebers. Gregory had kept himself clean as far as the FBI knew about it. His business was successful and funded a foundation called Vita Nova that helped women caught in domestic violence situations. Jael was the founder.

He lifted his eyes to the garden, gave the thought room to sink in. To most people, she was a sophisticated, if not a little cold, woman who hosted grand parties at her father's mansion. But he'd gotten to know the real Jael. The curious and big-hearted woman with deep wounds he'd never had the chance to get to the bottom of.

He flipped the file closed and tossed it in the passenger's seat. The first thing to do was reintroduce himself to Gregory. He wasn't ready to face Jael yet.

Danny thanked the gardener who let him through the gate.

“It’s good to see you again,” the gardener said, giving him a pat on the back. “Mr. Heber is inside. He’ll be pleased to see you after so many years.”

“I hope so. I’m looking forward to catching up.”

He crossed the familiar driveway, his shoes crunching on the pebbled driveway until he reached the wide stairs to the front door.

He took a breath, then reached for the doorbell, but the door opened before he could push it.

“Oh—” Jael stepped back, startled, but her head cocked to the side. “Danny Fletcher?”

The angles of her features had become more defined since he’d seen her last. The maturity in her face suited her.

“Jael. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

She turned to look back into the house, then focused on him with a smile he knew she put on for those she was wary of but didn’t want to know it.

“How long has it been?” she said.

“Around ten years, I think.” He knew exactly how long it had been since stepping out of the life he’d known here and entering into a contract with the FBI so he wouldn’t go to prison. It was the best and the worst thing that had happened to him. “Uh, I hear congratulations are in order.”

Her smile dropped a fraction, and her eyes went cold. “For what?”

He hesitated, reminding himself he couldn't expect a warm welcome from her. He didn't deserve one. "Your engagement."

"You seem to think you know a lot for someone who turned up out of the blue."

"I was in prison."

"We figured."

"It's good to see you. Your family was always very good to me."

A cynical laugh popped from her throat. "You did everything my dad wanted, of course he treated you well. Is that why you're here? Looking for work? My dad's not into that stuff anymore. He has a heart of gold now. Hadn't you heard?" Her lips pursed in cynicism.

"I know. I'm not looking for a crime to commit."

The housekeeper, a short, wide woman with streaks of grey that didn't used to be there, walked past and peered out the door.

"Sofia," Jael called to her. "Would you find my father and tell him Danny Fletcher is here to see him?"

"Danny Fletcher?" She stretched her neck to get a better look. "Is it really you?" Her Mexican accent was still strong, even though she'd worked for the family for decades.

Danny waved. "Hey, it's good to see you again. I still dream about those churros you used to make me."

Her face lit up. “Stick around, and you may get lucky.”

“Sofia,” Jael said. “If you wouldn’t mind, my father? I need to get going, and I’m sure Danny has other things to do today.”

“Not really.” He tried to remain lighthearted, but she frowned. “You don’t have to wait around,” he said. “If you need to go, I know Sofia will look after me.”

Jael might not have fond memories of him, but he’d make the most of those who did.

“I certainly will,” Sofia said. “If you’ll wait here, I’ll find him right away.” She hurried across the foyer and disappeared faster than it looked like she should be able to move.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Jael said, and Danny moved aside to let her out.

“I hope we’ll have time to catch up later,” he said.

She grimaced. “Maybe.”

When she hurried down the steps, he called out to her. “People do change, you know. It’s been a lot of years.”

She stopped, but only half turned. “You did a lot of growing up in prison, did you?”

“I’m not the same man I was.”

“Good for you. I mean it.” She smiled tightly and then was gone.

“Danny!” Gregory called out as he walked to the door, his arms spread wide in expectation of an embrace. They patted backs and released. “Please come in. I can’t

believe you're here. You were the last person I expected to see today." He was the same strong and robust man Danny remembered from a decade ago, which was impressive considering he had to be close to eighty by now.

"I should have called," Danny said.

"No. Don't be ridiculous. My door is always open for you, and it's been too long. Can I get you a drink?"

"No. I'm fine, thank you."

Gregory put a hand on his back and led him down a wide hall. "We'll sit out on the terrace. It's a beautiful day. Even better now that you're here."

Danny followed him outside, and they sat on wide, padded outdoor chairs near a pool he'd swum in more times than he could count.

He ran his hand along the wooden arm rest. "This is new."

"We have to update our furniture out here regularly. It gets damaged too quickly by the weather. Now, tell me where you've been hiding."

"Prison."

Gregory sucked in a breath through gritted teeth. "They finally got you, huh?"

"Unfortunately."

"That's tough. You didn't deserve it."

"Yes, I did. Although how you maintained your freedom and then stepped out of the

underworld is quite a feat.”

Gregory shrugged. “You could have given me up when they arrested you, and you didn’t. It’s because of trustworthy friends like yourself that I’m the man I am today. And I never forget loyalty like that.”

It had nothing to do with loyalty that Danny hadn’t given him up, although he was glad he hadn’t been asked to. Deborah had taken him away from his regular circle. A small mercy she’d now cashed in on. It was like she’d known what was coming.

“You were always like a father to me.”

“I wish you’d told me you were in prison. I would have visited. Or better yet, I have a fantastic lawyer.”

Danny shook his head. “I wouldn’t have liked that. I didn’t want to bring you into it.”

“Well, you’re out now. And you were always a clever boy—man. You’re not a boy anymore. I’m sure you’ll be on top again in no time.”

“You always were way too generous with your compliments. Sounds like some things haven’t changed.”

“I’m not being generous at all. I mean it. I can see it in your eyes. You’ve still got that spark.”

“I hope so. It’s not easy getting back into life in the city.” And he meant it. He’d been in Nairobi for several years with no intention of coming back to America. It was proving difficult to assimilate.

“I had a cousin who spent six years in prison. When he got out, it was like he’d given

up on life. Ended up robbing a bank and got himself shot.” Gregory shook his head. “A sad story. But one that won’t be repeated with you.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am. I’ll make sure of it. You’ve got too much life left to live. I mean look at you—you’ve just gotten out of prison, but you look better than you ever have.”

“Thank you.”

“Whatever you need, all you have to do is ask.”

“You’ve probably guessed, but as much as I was looking forward to catching up with you, I came with another motive.”

“You need work?”

“If you have anything. Even if it’s cleaning toilets.”

“Please. I’d never make you sink so low as that.” The wrinkles on Gregory’s face deepened as he thought. “It would be easy enough to find you a position within my company, but I don’t think you’re suited to office work.”

“I’ll take what I can get. I realize you don’t need my skills in the same way you used to.”

Gregory tapped a finger on his lip. “That may not be true.”

“Don’t tell me you’re considering returning to your old life.”

“No.” Gregory smirked. “But there is something. A task I’ve been pondering but

haven't found the best way to go about it. Then you walk in. It's very delicate. I don't think there's anyone else I'd trust besides you. That is, if you're still capable."

"I'm as sharp as ever."

"So it's a yes?"

"What do you need me to do?"

Gregory leaned forward and slapped Danny on the knee. "I knew I could count on you. I'd call it kismet if I believed in such things. As I said, it's a delicate matter, so I need subtlety on this."

"I can do that."

"I need you to follow someone. Find out everything you can about their comings and goings. I want to know when they eat, when they sleep, what they do in their spare time, and how much they spend. Everything. Can you do that?"

"I can do it, but you suggested it wasn't illegal. Stalking is an arrestable crime."

"Not for you, it won't be. I'll make sure of it. And." He lifted a finger to emphasize his next point. "I'll give you a bonus if you can get me details of who else is involved and dig up enough dirt to bring them down."

"Bring who down?"

"An organization. I want all the skeletons in the closet. Everything you can get on employees or volunteers. Financial records. Where the money's going. Whatever's there."

“Is this a rival business?”

Gregory leaned back in his seat with an expressive sigh, suddenly looking his age.

“No. And it pains me to do this because it will hurt someone I care about very much. But do you think you can do it?”

“Absolutely. I’ve got a few old contacts who could help me get the information together. Besides the organization itself, is there someone specifically you want me to target? The head of this organization?”

“Yes.”

“And who’s that?”

“My daughter.”

Danny’s expression went blank. “Jael.”

“It’s for her own protection.”

“Wait a second. You want me to spy on Jael and her foundation?”

“You know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. And I know you’d want to protect her as much as I do.”

“But I thought Heber Industries supported Vita Nova?”

“You know about that?”

“I, uh, did my research before coming back. Wanted to know where everything stood with you.”

Sofia brought out coffee and cakes and set them on a low table in front of the two men.

“Thank you, Sofia,” Gregory said, quietly adding milk to his coffee and stirring. His spoon clinked against the cup while he watched Sofia leave. “That woman adores Jael. I don’t want her to worry.”

“It’s that bad?”

“If I had known what Vita Nova would become, I never would have supported Jael in her project.”

“I thought it helped women escape domestic violence situations. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I have nothing against it philosophically. And I am aware that there are those less fortunate than others, but...it’s taking over Jael’s life. She’s losing focus, and she’s neglecting important aspects of her life. Things that used to matter to her, she’s now abandoned.”

“Are you saying she’s become obsessed?”

“Exactly.” Gregory breathed out, relieved that he could share the burden with someone who understood. But Danny wasn’t so sure they were on the same page. He knew Gregory would spin a situation to suit his opinion and get what he wanted.

“I can see why that would trouble you.”

“You remember how close we always were? She was curious about every aspect of my business. Both sides of it, if you know what I mean.”

“I remember,” Danny said, having already decided he would wait until he’d heard Jael’s side to form his own opinion on the matter.

“She was engaged and helpful,” Gregory continued. “She had insight that I came to rely upon, and she has obligations to fulfill.”

“Obligations?”

“To me. To her family. To the future of everything. I need to shut down the foundation. Whatever it takes. And...” Gregory leaned forward so he could lower his voice. “There’s more going on than she’s telling me.”

“In what way? Do you think she’s getting caught up in something illegal?”

“You know how she was raised. You know the things she’s been involved in.”

Danny had an idea, but he didn’t know for sure how much of her father’s business back then she had participated in. “She’s had an unusual upbringing.”

“The things she’s seen and done. Those battered women don’t know the meaning of the word pain. But Jael does.”

Danny’s jaw tightened, but he wouldn’t allow himself to speculate. Gregory could mean anything. It was clear he was emotional about the issue so would likely exaggerate in an effort to get his point across.

“Maybe she believes it gives her insight into these women’s situations,” Danny suggested.

“Or maybe she gets some kind of pleasure out of other people’s pain.”

“Is that what you really believe?” Danny didn’t buy it for a second.

“Honestly, I don’t know. All I want is for things to go back the way they were. I’m getting old and don’t know how many years I have left on this earth. Is it too much to ask to want her back where she belongs? To want her to be with her own people where she’ll be safe? I need to know she’ll be looked after when I’m gone.”

“You mean Christopher?”

Gregory’s eyes narrowed. “You have done your research.”

“I heard a whisper there will be a wedding soon.”

“I wish I was as confident as the rumors. It’s the perfect match, but so far Jael can’t see it. She’s resisted, and it’s all because of that foundation.”

“Are you sure that’s the reason?”

“What else would it be?”

“If she married Christopher, it would tie a nice bow around everything now that he’s taking over as CEO. It would keep everything in the family.”

Gregory looked at him and nodded warmly. “Even after ten years, you still see things the same way I do. It’s a breath of fresh air. You couldn’t have returned at a better time. If you were my child instead of Jael, my life would be far less stressful.”

“I don’t know about that. I wasn’t a good kid.”

“But you’re a man. I know how your mind works. I don’t know what to do with a strong-headed woman. If her mother was still here, this would have been smoother.

Natalie always knew how to talk to Jael. I've done my best, but...her mind is full of all the wrong things. I'll be glad to have all this behind us."

"And what if I can't find anything?"

"You will. It'll be there. You just have to dig. Every time I ask her to do something for me, she makes excuses. There's always something more important to do. She's late to lunch, moody all the time, and so far, she's been nothing but cold to Christopher, which makes no sense. He is a successful, good-looking man. He's everything she could ever want in a partner, and she's throwing it all away. It's like she's gotten stuck in a cult. Christopher will only put up with her snub for so long, and I can't expect more from him. I've done everything I can on my end. Now I'm relying on you to bring this thing to an end."

"I'll do everything I can to help you and her."

"Exactly what I want. Be careful with her, okay? She's a strong woman, but in this, I'm afraid she could crack."

"Leave it to me. I'll begin right away." He stood, and Gregory joined him.

"You know," Gregory said as he led Danny out, "I was feeling pretty low today, but you've changed that for me. And I'll compensate you accordingly."

"I appreciate it. And I appreciate you giving me another chance to work with you, but more than that, it means a lot to have you back in my life."

"Me too— Oh, one more thing." Gregory stopped him when they reached the door. "I'd like you to join us for dinner tonight if you're available. Or if you're not, make yourself available."

“That’s kind of you to offer, but I remember your dinner parties. Do you really want an ex-con at your table?”

“You think I care about your prison time? It would mean a lot to me if you came.”

“Then I won’t say no. Maybe I’ll even have something to report by then.”

“You’re a good man, Danny Fletcher. No matter what the law says.”

“I’ll see you tonight.”

After a quick phone call to Deborah with the update, Danny bought the necessary gear. He didn’t like the idea of spying on Jael, but if she really was in trouble, he’d do whatever it took to get her out of it. He owed her that much.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:38 am

Jael finished typing her report, then leaned back in her chair and stretched. Things were looking good for Becca. The gears didn't always move this smoothly or quickly. It was always a relief to get more support on board. It had helped that Becca remained firm in her resolve. And as always, Hannah had been a huge part of the process, contacting Becca every day to encourage her and let her know what progress was being made.

There wasn't a lot about Jael's past that she was proud of, but it had given her the skills and knowledge to navigate the cat-and-mouse game that some spouses tried to play. And she was better at it than they were.

"I'm getting lunch," Hannah said, sliding her purse off the back of the chair. "You want me to get you anything?"

"That would be nice. Thank you. Where are you going?"

"The sushi place. You want the usual? Chicken and avocado?"

"Perfect."

"And what if I told you I was swinging past Harold's bakery to get a cinnamon roll smothered in cream cheese frosting?"

"I'd say you'd better bring me one of those too."

As soon as Hannah went out the door, Jael let go of the smile that had been for Hannah's benefit. Jael didn't want the cinnamon roll. Her appetite had been almost

nonexistent lately, but she knew it would make Hannah worry if she didn't eat. There were so many things she did to make other people happy. Hannah's motivations were far different from her father's, but did that matter when she didn't know how to just be herself?

Her thoughts inadvertently drifted back to Danny's sudden appearance. It had shocked her to see him there, no longer the wiry young vigilante always looking for trouble. He'd filled out in all the right ways, and the attraction that remained after all these years was not only unexpected but it was unwanted. She didn't still hold a grudge for the way he'd treated her back then, but that didn't mean she was willing to rekindle what should be dead and buried.

The office phone rang, and she answered, thankful for the distraction. "Vita Nova, this is Jael."

"Hello, Miss Heber."

She recognized Christopher's smooth voice.

"Good afternoon, Christopher. I wasn't expecting you to call the landline. Don't you have my cell number?"

"I'm sitting in my new office going over reports and came across your foundation. Thought I'd give you a call and see how your day's going. Do you spend many hours in the office?"

"When I have reports to write. It helps me focus. And my day is going fine, thanks for asking. Business as usual. I hope you're settling in well over there."

"Everyone has made me very welcome, as I'm sure you can imagine."

“I hope my dad’s not giving you too much grief. I expect he’ll be popping in from time to time to keep his finger on the pulse.”

Christopher’s laugh was easy. “It is his baby. It will be hard for him to let go.”

“I hope it doesn’t drive you crazy.”

“I won’t have any trouble. I completely understand where he’s coming from. These things are always difficult for the one moving on. If it were me, I’d go on vacation for a month or two to abate the temptation to interfere. But your dad is his own man, and if he needs to move out slowly, I can put up with the disruption for the time being.”

Jael’s leg cramped after sitting so long. She stood and paced the room.

“I appreciate your patience with him. I’m sure you can find ways to make him feel included.” When she reached the front door, she looked out at the busy street.

“Do you have much going on right now?” he said. “Many cases?”

“Uh.” Her attention was drawn across the street. “Yeah. Well, no. Not a lot of cases. Right now, we can only handle one or two at a time.”

“I’d be very interested to hear all about it. If you’re free for lunch this afternoon, I’ve got some time in my schedule.”

“Today?” Her attention was focused on a car parked half a block up the street.

“Yes. I figured, if I could make room in my day, you shouldn’t have too much trouble. You said you have a team to run the place?”

“Not a team exactly.” She’d seen the car earlier in the day. “Listen, something’s

come up. Maybe we can do it another time?”

“It’s that urgent with only one or two cases?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I’m afraid I have to get going.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“Nothing I can’t handle. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Hope the rest of your day goes well.”

“You too.”

She hung up and shifted position to get a better look at the driver, although she’d already made her assumptions. One thing her dad had taught her was how to spot a tail. Maybe it wasn’t Becca’s husband in the car, but she’d heard Martin was working hard to find his wife. If it wasn’t him, maybe it was a private detective. Either way, Jael would get rid of him.

After putting the phone back in its cradle, she marched out the door, then jogged across the street. If she was noticed, the driver hadn’t reacted. She hurried to the passenger’s side and yanked open the door, ducking her head to confront Becca’s pursuer. But it wasn’t Becca who was being pursued. It was her.

“Danny?”

He smiled. “Hey. Fancy meeting you here.”

“What are you doing? Are you following me?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny.”

“You used to be one of the best guys my dad had. Prison time has made you sloppy. Which shouldn’t surprise me.”

“Maybe I wasn’t trying very hard.”

“Maybe I don’t believe you.” She raised an eyebrow.

“You want to have a seat? We may as well have a chat.”

Her fingernails drummed on the roof where she’d anchored her hand. “That’s what you wanted this whole time, isn’t it? You knew I wouldn’t give you the time of day without feeling threatened.”

“Oh, come on. You don’t feel threatened. And if all I wanted was to talk to you, I would have asked.”

“Then why are you following me?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s my dad, isn’t it?” She slid into the car and closed the door. “He’s the one who sent you. You asked him for work and he gave it to you.”

“He’s worried you’re involved in something nefarious.”

She laughed. “Is that what he told you?”

“You don’t believe him?”

“I thought you knew him better than that. He said what he had to in order to get what he wanted. You said you’d changed, but he hasn’t.”

“He’s not involved in organized crime anymore.”

“His activities have changed, not him.”

“Still,” Danny said. “It must be a relief to be out of that life.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You never liked it. I could tell.”

“Don’t pretend you knew what was going on inside my head. You don’t get to do that.”

“Sorry,” he looked down at his hands. “You’re right.”

She could see she’d cut him deep. Good. “So what is it you want?”

“Your dad said he’s concerned about how much of your life the foundation is taking up.”

“That is true. He is concerned. At least he was honest about that. And your job is to...what?”

“Find out what’s really going on.”

“And if you find nothing, he’ll accept that and pay you so you can go on your merry way?”

“I can set his mind at ease if everything is operating to a high standard.”

“You mean to my father’s standard.”

“If everything is legitimate, it shouldn’t matter.”

“My father will do whatever it takes to shut me down. I’m so glad you’re back and happy to oblige.”

Danny shrugged. “I’m just here to find the truth.”

“The truth? Right.” She scoffed. “You and I both know that my father has never been interested in the truth, so don’t pretend you believe him. When you said you’d changed, I didn’t realize it was for the worse.”

His face darkened, losing the boyish charm he’d always had. “There’s a lot you don’t know. Don’t assume you know me either.”

“I don’t know that I knew you back then. But nothing’s changed for me.”

“That’s not how it looks. When I left, you were working exclusively for your dad. Doing more of his dirty work than you wanted to. He said you—never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“He said I what?”

“He gave me more insight into what it must have been like to be raised by him.”

“You say that like you didn’t know.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to believe things were as bad as they appeared.”

“Yeah, well, they were worse.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “I do what I can with the life I have left.”

“Helping women in domestic violence situations.”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. I always knew you had that in you— Sorry. I did it again.”

“Just because I do good things for people doesn’t make me a good person. It doesn’t erase what I’ve done.” She pressed her back into the seat. She hadn’t meant to say that, but she saw something in Danny’s eyes. Like he already knew. Maybe he really did know what was going on inside her head, but she couldn’t make sense of that after the way he’d treated her.

“Is that why you do it?”

Jael sighed. “Everything I’ve ever done in my life has been for duty, whether to my father or something else. I don’t know any other way of living life. But at least now I’m helping people instead of hurting them.”

“I don’t think you can compare your foundation to working for your dad.”

“But it doesn’t matter because nothing’s changed in my life. Whether it’s my dad or now Christopher, I’ll forever have to jump through hoops to keep the funding.”

“Is that what you do?”

She hated that he sounded so sincere. “Like I said, everything is for duty. But Vita Nova is not a cult, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“That’s what your dad said.”

“I know.”

“Is there no way for you to raise the money other than having to beg for it from Heber Industries? It would give you the distance you need.”

“I tried. I couldn’t get enough. And there were too many restrictions. This way, I can run Vita Nova the way I want. And I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep the doors open, even though my father hates this place and has now hired you to tear it down.”

“He doesn’t like the time it takes away from other things. Could you maybe lessen your focus here?”

“It has nothing to do with that. He doesn’t like it because he can’t control me the way he wants. Although he’s staring a gift horse in the mouth. It offers him numerous opportunities to manipulate me into doing what he wants just to keep the funding going. He does it all the time. I don’t know why he can’t see how this works for him.”

“I’m sorry it’s like that.”

Jael turned to face him. “What are you doing?”

“What? Right now?”

“Is my dad not paying you enough?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You’re not doing your job very well.”

“I’m not trying to.”

“Is that what you’re going to tell him when you report back?”

Danny thought for a minute. “What do you want me to tell him?”

He appeared genuine, but she couldn’t reconcile that with Danny from the past. “If you want to get fired,” she said, “you can tell him to leave me alone.” Her cell phone rang. It was Hannah. “Give me a second.” She answered. “Did they run out of avocado?”

“Hey, uh, no,” Hannah said. “It’s about the house where Becca’s staying.”

“What about it?”

“She said she found an eviction notice on the front door today.”

“What?” Jael squeezed her eyes shut. “He never gives up.”

“Who? The husband?”

“No. Never mind. I’m sorry about this. Everything’s gotten complicated, but I’ll get it sorted. Leave it with me.”

“Becca’s pretty rattled. She said if she doesn’t have a place to live with the kids, they’ll have to go back home.”

“No. Tell her everything will be okay—actually, I’ll call her. I can reassure her there’s nothing to worry about. It’s just a mistake.”

“Okay. Let me know when everything’s settled so I know where we’re up to.”

“I will. I’ll talk to you soon.” She hung up and opened the door. “I’ve got to go, so...tell my dad whatever you want. It won’t make any difference. He’s already made up his mind. If you want to get paid, just understand that he won’t be happy unless Vita Nova is buried and gone. And I will fight till my dying breath to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

She moved to get out, but he put a hand on her arm. “Is everything okay?”

“Nothing I haven’t had to deal with before. And feel free to keep tailing me if you have to. I’ll leave you alone from now on. Let you get to work.”

She called Becca as she hurried back across the street.

“Hannah told me what happened,” she said as she went back into her office.

“I’m sorry,” Becca said. “I’m causing so much trouble for you. I just don’t know what to do. I don’t have any money to pay for rent, and I?—”

“No, none of this is your fault. It’s a hiccup on our end. Don’t worry about that notice. It won’t mean a thing soon. Okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ll get it taken care of. It’s a misunderstanding. That’s all. And I haven’t forgotten about making cookies. I know Hannah has looked after you really well, but I was so disappointed to miss out.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I would have much rather done that than what I had to cancel for. You think your kids would be up for more baking?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

“You’re trying so hard to keep us happy. I know you’re very busy.”

“Are you kidding? It’s as much for me as for you and the kids. I love baking. But for now, you sit tight and let me handle this.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Trust me.”

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Jael threw the doors open to her dad's house and didn't bother closing them. "Where is he?" she said to Sofia when the maid scuttled into the room.

"Jael? Is everything okay?"

"I need to speak to my dad. It's urgent."

"He-he's not here. He's gone into the office."

"Of course he has." She sighed out some of her anger. Sofia didn't deserve her wrath.

"Do you know how long he intends to be there?"

"He told me not to expect him home until dinner. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. I'll find him at the office. Thank you."

"Do you need me to do anything?"

Jael had never been one to air her dirty laundry to anyone, so she forced a smile. "Just the usual father-daughter stuff. Don't worry."

"If you're sure."

"Sorry to upset you." Jael went to the door. "That wasn't my intention. I shouldn't have barged in like that. Everything will be fine."

She pulled the doors closed and walked back to her car, contemplating what she

would find at the office. If he was hovering over Christopher's shoulder, it could mean she had an ally when she spoke to him. Whether Christopher's interest in Vita Nova was more to do with impressing her than anything else, it didn't matter. He'd be on her side in this.

"Miss Heber?" said the security guard to Jael when she reached the lobby. He sucked in his gut and puffed out his chest with a semi-confident smile. "It's good to see you. What brings you into the office today?"

"I'm looking for my dad if he's still here."

"As far as I know. You going up? Or do you want me to call him down?"

"I'm going up. Thanks. But I didn't bring my pass."

"Not to worry." He followed her to the elevator and swiped his own card. "Have a nice day."

"Thanks, Manny," she said, glancing at his name tag without him noticing. "You have a good one too."

The empty elevator was a blessing, giving her the space to strengthen herself. She breathed in deeply, slowing the impatient tap of her fingernails on the gold bar that looped around the inside of the elevator.

When the doors opened, she used long strides to reach the half-circle mahogany reception desk. Both receptionists were on the phone, but the brunette looked up at her and smiled.

"My dad?" Jael mouthed, pointing the direction she expected to find him.

The brunette shook her head and covered the mic on her headset. “He’s in a meeting. Boardroom.”

“Thanks.”

Jael’s heels continued their clack on the burnished concrete floor, muffling when she entered the carpeted hall.

The conference room to the right had windows that took up most of the wall, and she could see Christopher and Artus—the latter of whom didn’t have any reason to be there—along with three other employees and her dad, whose face was crumpled in a heavy frown that set his eyes deep into his face. She knew the look. He was digging his heels in.

She continued to walk by, her eyes shifting to each in the room. Artus looked annoyed. He said something to the group and shook his head. Christopher had his back to her. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table in a relaxed posture that suggested either he was confident of winning the argument or it didn’t matter.

She continued past the room and entered her dad’s office, sitting on a forest-green leather couch while she looked at her phone to go through emails. Having to wait to speak to her dad was only increasing her agitation. She’d need to keep a cool head with him if she was going to get anywhere. Especially since he was clearly in a bad mood. If she was lucky, he’d come out of the meeting on top. But with both the Siseras in the room, she wasn’t confident that’s what would happen.

There were things her dad wanted that she could give, but whether it would be enough... She reminded herself that if he failed her, she could appeal to Christopher.

The rustle of an expensive suit brought her mind back to her task, but when she looked up, Christopher was standing in the door with a mildly shocked but very

pleased look on his face.

“This is a surprise,” he said, walking to his desk to put a folder there before leaning against it to face her.

“This is your office now,” she said curtly as she stood. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think. I’m here to see my dad.”

He nodded with a frown. “I was afraid of that. I’d hoped you’d changed your mind about lunch. There’s still time if you’re free.”

“Thank you. I may have to take you up on that sooner than later.”

“Great.”

“I’ve had a problem come up.”

“So it’s all business then?”

“It has to do with Vita Nova.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Possibly, but it’s clear my dad is still using his sway here to make things difficult.”

Christopher’s eyebrows bunched together. “He has a tendency to do that.”

“I walked past the conference room. It didn’t look like things were going well. There was lots of frowning.”

Christopher laughed. “There’s always frowning in meetings like that. Don’t read too

much into it.”

“I was surprised to see your dad there. I wouldn’t have thought he’d be interested.”

“My dad is always interested. We’re looking at ways that Jabin Enterprises and Heber Industries can work together.”

“I wouldn’t think their interests intersect very much.”

“You’d be surprised. Both companies have their strengths and weaknesses. But if you need to speak to your dad, we shouldn’t stand around chatting. He left in a huff.”

“I take it he wasn’t as satisfied with the meeting as you were?”

“Transitions can be tricky.”

“So I should expect to find him in a bad mood.”

“Sorry, but yes. If you don’t get anywhere with him, though, you know where to find me.”

“I do now. Thank you. And I won’t make myself at home in your office anymore.”

“I really wish you would. My door is always open to you.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you later.”

She hurried to the elevator and called her dad.

“Sweetheart, now’s not a good time,” he said.

“I’m at the office.”

“What office?”

“Yours—I’m at Hebers.”

“Oh. I must have walked right past you.”

“No. I came in while you were in your meeting and waited in your office until I realized it wasn’t yours anymore.”

“Mm,” Gregory said in a low growl. “No. It certainly isn’t. And Christopher is doing everything he can to make sure I remember that.”

“He is the boss now. You’re not regretting hiring him, are you?”

“No. Nothing like that.” He huffed. “What is it you wanted to see me about?”

“You don’t know?”

“Should I?”

She eased the scowl off her face as she looked at her reflection in the elevator doors. Maybe he was too distracted by the outcome of the meeting to remember what he’d done. Or maybe he was doing what he always did.

“Have you left yet?” she said. “I’m on my way down. I’d rather talk in person.”

“I’m at my car now.”

“Stay there. I’ll see you in a second.”

“Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes.” She hung up and knew it would irritate him, but she didn’t care anymore. She already hated herself for chasing him this far. If it wasn’t Becca’s welfare on the line, she’d bail. Whatever the outcome, she was walking into a fight that she might win for Becca, but no matter the outcome, Jael would lose.

“It’s not about you,” she reminded herself as the doors opened and she quickly found her dad. He was on the phone.

“Tell him I don’t want to hear about it,” he said. “This is his problem, not mine.” He listened, not bothering to acknowledge his daughter. “I don’t care about that. He knows where I stand.” Another pause. “I already told you my final offer. Get back to me when you have something worth my time.” He hung up. “Hi.” He kissed her cheek abruptly. “I hope this is important. I’ve had a bad day. I don’t need more bad news.”

“I wouldn’t have chased you across the city if it wasn’t important. And I’m sorry that you had a bad meeting, but I will need to add to your discomfort.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “What is it now? Let me guess, the foundation again?”

“It wouldn’t be if you didn’t insist on sabotaging me. What do you expect me to do? Give up?”

“If you can’t run your organization, I don’t see how that’s my problem.”

“The house we’ve been renting off Heber industries was issued an eviction notice. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

“This was your project, not mine. And yet you keep coming to me every time there’s

a problem. That place causes you more trouble..." He shook his head. "I don't know why you don't give up on it."

"Why is my client being evicted?"

"Listen to you. Your client. Maybe if you weren't so consumed by that place, you'd know what's going on around you. The world doesn't revolve around you."

"Is there a reason you're avoiding my question?"

"I'm not avoiding anything. You're wasting your time with me. Christopher is the one in charge now."

"But you're still signing the checks. Have you chosen not to sign any more for the mortgage?"

"I told you. I've taken my hands off. If you want to get your way, you'd better start cozying up to the CEO. He's ready for it, by the way. And I wouldn't take my time if I were you. He's not a very patient man."

"Is this whole thing engineered to make me marry him? Because it won't work. I'm not going to marry Christopher, even though that's what everyone seems to think. You should be more careful about spreading rumors."

"Trust me, Jael, if I want you to marry him, I'll make it happen."

"I can't believe you said that. I've been old enough to make my own decisions for many years. You don't think I should have a say in who I marry?"

"Not with the way you've been making decisions lately. And I won't be around forever. I have to look after my girl. It's for your own good."

“Why? Because he’s the most convenient suitor?”

“Convenient? You think that’s why I chose him for you? He’s the whole package, and you could see that for yourself if you weren’t so busy rejecting him just to spite me. Get your head out of the sand and open your eyes. He’s the best you’ll ever get.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

“It’s about time you start being responsible for once. You’re so focused on yourself and what you want that you’ve put everything and everyone else behind you.”

She took a deep, tremored breath. “It has nothing to do with spite or ignoring my duties. I won’t marry someone as a business decision. Especially someone like Christopher Sisera.”

Gregory’s face reddened. “That’s no surprise. You’ve never done anything I’ve wanted.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, wondering if he really had no clue at all. “Dad?—”

“Do whatever you want, but don’t come crying to me when the funds dry up for your pet project. If you want to keep the money rolling in, you’re going to have to keep Christopher happy, and the best way to do that is to become his wife. Now, I’ve got things to do. I expect you at dinner tonight. I’ve invited Danny.”

“Of course you did.”

“He’s a good and faithful friend, and you will be courteous to him. And don’t tell me you have other plans.”

She didn't have the energy to deny him, and he'd already made it clear that she wouldn't get what she wanted from anyone but Christopher. But she didn't have the patience to face him now. He'd be at dinner. She'd make sure she was ready by then. "Sure. Whatever."

"Great. I'll see you at seven."

She didn't let her face fall until she turned away from her dad, and her shoulders didn't sag until his car had left the garage.

So far, her encounters with Christopher gave the impression he was willing to help her foundation, but if it was connected to an expectation that they would be married soon, she'd need to find a way to convince him that marriage was not in their best interest, which shouldn't be difficult. She couldn't possibly be his first pick for a wife. It was more likely he was going along with the plan. But once he understood he was off the hook as far as she was concerned, they could both move forward.

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Danny continued following Jael, although his reasons for doing so were varied and shifted continually. Working for Deborah, his job was to regain the trust of both Gregory and Jael. Not an easy thing to do under the circumstances. But his report to Gregory wouldn't have substance beyond vague conjecture, and Danny hoped it would be enough to give him room to keep searching. But what he was searching for, he wasn't quite sure yet.

When he'd first begun tailing her, he hadn't been discreet. He'd wanted her to find him. Or at least he'd hoped she would. He was pleased to find she was as sharp as ever. He'd do what he had to in order to keep Deborah and Gregory happy, but it was Jael he was the most concerned about. It was half the reason he'd agreed to do the job in the first place. From the beginning, it had been his intention to find another way to bring the Siseras down.

His phone pinged with an email, and he opened it to find a detailed timeline for the building project back in Kenya. Besides Jael, the boys back home were the real reason he was doing this, and he couldn't lose sight of that. Once this assignment was finished, he'd go back to brand new opportunities with Adisa beside him. He pushed away the homesickness that was creeping in.

"God, I don't want to go back if I've left this place a mess. I need help here. Show me what to do."

He rang Deborah, and she picked up on the second ring. "Danny, it's good to hear from you."

"I know how you like your regular updates."

“I take it everything is running smoothly?”

“You know how it is with these things. Always a tangled web.”

“But you’ll be able to untangle it.”

“You know untangling is never an option. It’s more about choosing the right thread to follow.”

“I like that analogy. I’m going to steal it.”

“It’s all yours.”

“Does that mean you’ve found the thread?”

“Maybe, but I’d like to know what would happen if Jael decides not to marry Christopher.”

The line was quiet for a moment, and when Deborah spoke, her voice was soft but controlled. “You need to stay on task. I can give you a bit of leeway, but our focus has to remain on the engagement party. I’ve got a lot of wheels turning so we can put pressure on Artus at just the right moment for him to spill his guts to us.”

“It’s an important question to consider.”

“You might not like the guy, but this is the plan, and you had better be doing your best to make sure it happens as outlined.”

“You expect me to convince her to marry a guy she doesn’t want to?”

“Not you. But Jael does what she’s told. She always has. If you need to push

Gregory, then push. I expect you to do whatever you can to make this happen.”

His eyes shifted when he saw Jael’s car emerge from Heber’s parking garage. Judging by the speed at which she took off, things hadn’t gone well.

“I’ll do my best,” he said without really meaning it.

“Was there anything else?”

“Not yet. I’ll keep you posted.”

After he hung up, he pulled into traffic and went in the opposite direction from Jael. He’d done enough stalking for one day. He’d go home and get ready for dinner.

Danny parked his car at Gregory’s house in the same place he always had, then buttoned his suit coat. He tugged at the sleeves as he walked toward the house. It had been a long time since he’d dressed up.

He stretched his arms in the thick fabric, flexing pointlessly before ringing the doorbell.

The man who opened the door had sunken cheeks emphasizing the bones in his face. He was tall with large lips that pressed together as he looked over Danny. “Can I help you?” he said in an unexpectedly high-pitched voice.

“Hi, yes. My name is Daniel Fletcher. I’m here for dinner.”

The man nodded and stepped back to invite him in. “This way, please.”

Danny followed the familiar path to the formal dining room, where Gregory was already seated. Artus and Christopher were there talking to a lively couple. The

woman was laughing with a loud bark. Jael was nowhere to be seen.

“Danny. So good to see you,” Gregory said, standing to greet him.

“Thanks again for the invitation. It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“I’d like you to meet my dear friends. I don’t know if you’ve met Artus Sisera?”

“No.” He smiled at Artus and shook his hand across the table. “I have heard a lot about you, though.”

“It’s all true,” Artus said. “I assure you. Especially the bad stuff.” The smile that graced his lips for a moment was devious.

“A man of many talents.” Gregory laughed. “And this is his son, Christopher, who’s taken on the role of running my company.”

“Nice to meet you, Christopher. I had heard about your appointment. Sounds like a big job.”

“But one he’s more than capable of carrying out,” Gregory said, a hint of resistance on his face.

“It’s nice to meet you, Danny,” Christopher said. “I understand you are an old friend of Gregory’s.”

“Yes. I did a lot of work for him about a decade ago.”

“And continuing around the table,” Gregory said. “That seat beside Christopher will be for Jael when she arrives, which should be any moment, and beside you are the always elegant Dr. and Mrs. Prescott.”

Dr. Prescott stood and took Danny's hand. The little bit of hair left on his head was slicked back. "Please call me Larry. This is my wife, Trish."

"It's nice to meet you both."

"Then we have Ms. Brandy Jennings. She's a soon-to-be Senator."

"I believe you're getting ahead of yourself." Brandy had a young face, but her hair was gray. "I'm on the campaign trail at the moment. Stopping by for a nice dinner and request that we steer clear of politics. I could use the break."

"You mark my words," Gregory said. "That woman is headed for the top seat in Washington. And last but not least, we have Simon Harris. He's on the board of Heber Industries."

Before Danny sat, he leaned close to Gregory. "I don't suppose we'll have time this evening for a report?"

"Do you have information already?"

"Not much. But I thought you'd like to know where I'm up to."

"We'll find a moment to slip away after dinner." Gregory's eyes lifted behind Danny. "Jael. Fashionably late, as always." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

Danny turned, and she made eye contact with him, but her face didn't change in recognition or greeting. "Sorry I'm late." She gave Christopher a warm nod as she sat beside him, and he leaned toward her, whispering. She let out an easy laugh, playing her part like a pro.

The dinner was as delicious as Danny expected. He'd always eaten well at Gregory's

house, but he was unaccustomed to the rich food these days. It left him feeling heavy and groggy.

He'd kept an eye on everyone's state of mind throughout dinner. If guards were let down now, it could give him the opening he needed to shift Deborah's focus in a new direction.

Almost everyone at the table drank freely. But Jael, always the perfect hostess, remained reserved and controlled. Artus and Christopher had had a few glasses but didn't appear to be as affected as Gregory and the rest.

When they moved into the large living room for more drinks and conversation, Gregory drew Danny to the dark fireplace where he rested an arm on the mantle, exposing a slight tremor in his hand.

"Give me the highlights," he said. His words were lazy with drink.

"I'm still in the preliminary phase. Getting a feel for Jael's movements and how she works," Danny said, glancing around the room. "Getting my bearings and so forth. But you know as well as I do that everyone has skeletons in their closets. And if there is something to find, I'll find it."

"I knew I could count on you."

"I don't know if you're aware she was at Heber Industries today?"

"I do. She was there to speak with me."

"Does she visit your office regularly?"

"No. Only when she wants something bad enough. But I didn't give it to her."

“That would explain why she appeared angry.”

Gregory let out a dry laugh. “Yeah. She won’t be happy, but it’s for the best. You can’t imagine the relief this has given me knowing you’re on the job.” He looked across at his daughter, who was nodding at something the doctor was saying. “Don’t forget to speak to her about Christopher if you have the opportunity.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but Jael and I aren’t close enough for my words to carry much weight on the subject. I don’t know that that door will ever be open to me.”

“But if you get the chance?”

“I’ll make sure I speak freely to her about my thoughts on Christopher.”

“Good.”

Danny wanted to tell Gregory the truth about Jael, but more than that, he wanted it to matter, and he knew it wouldn’t. She had a good heart, and all she needed was a father who supported her.

“Let me give you a little tip about Jael,” Gregory continued. “She can be strong-headed and appear to be unbreakable, but all you need to do is push in a crack and work it until it expands. It won’t take long for it to break open.”

“Who will break open?” Artus said, interrupting their conversation.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Gregory smirked.

“You do like your secrets.”

“No secrets,” Gregory said. “Just talking business. Tearing down someone or

something can be an art form, but you can use a cudgel when necessary. Am I right?"

"True," Artus said. "But I do prefer a bit of flare. What are your thoughts, Danny?"

"I think it's important to include wisdom in any action you take," Danny said. "However, when you're forced into action, that's where real men stand out from the others. How you handle yourself under pressure. What the fallout is."

"Well said." Gregory slapped him on the back. "Danny has proven himself a real man on more than one occasion."

"Is that so?" Artus said. "And what is it that brought you back into Gregory's life all these years later?" The tilt of his head suggested he was suspicious.

"I've recently regained my freedom."

"Danny just got out of prison," Gregory said. "Could have gotten a reduced sentence if he snitched on me, and he didn't."

"Is that so?" Artus said.

"I pay my own time. I'm not going to give up a friend."

"You will have found things have changed since you were last here."

"I'm not disappointed, if that's what you're wondering. I respect Gregory and his choices, and I'll do what I can to help him, no matter what side of the law that's on."

"But your experience falls within the—shall we say—shadier side of business."

"Even as a young man he was gifted at his job," Gregory said. "But I always know I

can count on Danny no matter what needs doing. He is somewhat of a renaissance man.” Gregory’s head shifted to the side in a new thought. “Artus, I don’t suppose you have any work for him?”

Danny tried not to look too surprised or eager. This was an unexpected turn of events. If Gregory could get him a foot in the door with Artus, that would change everything.

“I might,” Artus said, scratching his chin. “I don’t normally bring in outsiders. You know how cautious I am, Gregory.”

“I do. It’s what’s kept you in the game so long.”

“And so successfully. But I am recently down a man, and you say you can vouch for him?” He lifted an eyebrow toward Gregory.

“Absolutely,” Gregory said. “Danny’s one of the best men I’ve ever known.”

“One of the best, huh?” Artus looked Danny up and down. “Well then, if you’re interested, Danny. I’ll keep you in mind and let you know if the right opportunity comes up.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Danny said. “Thanks. Whatever you need. You let me know.”

“But you need to understand that if you get caught, and I get a whiff of you turning against me, your life is over. And it won’t be a pleasant end.”

“I completely understand, and you’d be well within your rights.”

“Good.”

As they continued talking, Danny noticed Jael pouring herself a drink nearby. He

removed himself from the conversation and turned to speak to her.

“I’m surprised you’re still here,” he said. “I expected you to bow out as soon as dinner was over.”

“It’s easier on everyone if I stay through drinks. And I have business to discuss with Christopher.”

“Just business?”

“You say that like you want it to be more.”

“That’s the last thing I want.”

Jael took a sip. “What did you end up telling my dad?”

“That I was sure I’d find dirt on you. He was relieved.”

“I’ll bet he was. There’s plenty to find in my past, but I’m afraid you won’t find much now.”

“I know.”

They looked at each other for a long moment. Jael was the first to look down at her drink before she sipped it. “How was the rest of your day? I lost track of you after I left Heber industries.”

“That’s because I wasn’t following you anymore.”

“Too bad. You missed all the good stuff.”

It was the first time Danny saw a twinkle in her eye.

His face dropped in mock disappointment. “I can’t believe it. Your dad is going to kill me.”

“Better him than me.”

“I don’t know. Are you two really that different?” He saw something like remorse pass across her face. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to?—”

“No. It’s fine. It’s been a long day.”

“You looked upset when you left Heber Industries.”

“You saw me?”

“I saw you drive out. I’m pretty sure you broke the law with your speed.”

She shrugged. “Same old stuff in different packaging, that’s all.” She took another sip and looked at him over the rim of the glass, blinking against the bubbles. “My life has been a series of bad times.”

“What about Vita Nova?”

“What about it?”

“Doesn’t it bring you joy?”

“It should. It comes close, but it’s been hard to run it. Besides the constant groveling for money, I see those women and what they’ve been through. Yes. I’m glad I can help them, but there’s so much pain in the world and the little that I do isn’t much.”

Her eyes shifted and Danny turned to see Christopher walk over to speak to Gregory and Artus at the fireplace. “I don’t think my dad wants to let go,” she said.

“Of you?”

“That goes without saying. But no, I was referring to his business. He’s a man who survives off control. My guess is the new man running the show doesn’t want my dad interfering. They have other uses for the business, I’m sure. They don’t want him getting in the way.”

“You think they’ll use Heber the same way they use Jabin Enterprises?”

“I can’t think of any other reason Christopher would have agreed to take the position. He’s not the type to want to be tied down.”

“Maybe it was because he expected to get you in the deal.”

She laughed with her mouth full of soda and almost choked on it.

“You don’t think he likes you?” Danny said.

“I’m sure he likes the look of me, but not the brains or the attitude. Like I said, he doesn’t like to be tied down.”

“So neither one of you wants the marriage.”

“I didn’t say that. He won’t see marriage as restrictive. He’ll still do whatever he wants. But I do think he likes the idea of having Jael Heber on his arm and in his bed.”

“Jael, I?—”

“Danny,” Gregory called to him and waved for him to come over.

“You’d better not keep him waiting,” Jael said. “He doesn’t like to wait.”

There was so much he wanted to say, but none of it he could put into words.

“It’s okay,” Jael said. “There’s nothing to do. Go.”

She turned her back on him, and he went to the fireplace.

“I told you I’d look after you,” Gregory said. “Stick with me, boy, and you’ll have a bright future ahead of you.”

“You have another job for me?” Danny said.

“I don’t, he does.” Gregory nodded toward Christopher.

“I was just saying that I need a hand with a situation,” Christopher said. “If you’re available to help, my father and I would both appreciate it.”

“And so would I,” Gregory added.

“Sure. Yeah. That sounds great,” Danny said. “Whatever you need.”

“It’s not a big job,” Christopher said. “but I’d appreciate having a wing man. Especially since my plate is so full with my responsibilities at Heber. The less time it takes, the better.”

“Glad to help. When do I need to be ready?”

“I’ll give you a call tomorrow and make a time to meet.”

“I look forward to working with you. And thank you for the opportunity. I know you’re both very selective about who you work with.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Artus said. “And don’t expect our partnership to continue. We’ll see how this works out and assess from there.”

“Got it.”

Danny stayed for another half hour of conversation before he excused himself.

“It’s been a prosperous night for me,” he said. “Thank you, Gregory, for dinner. I’ll see you gentleman soon.”

“Stayed long enough to make a score,” Gregory said.

Danny winked. “You guys enjoy the rest of your night.”

When he reached the door, he turned and saw Christopher had joined Jael. He was running the back of his hand down her arm as he said something low, so she had to lean closer to him. The sooner they got the Siseras behind bars, the better.

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Danny leaned against the brick wall of his apartment building and checked his watch for the fifth time. Christopher was twenty-five minutes late. The waiting didn't help Danny's pondering about Artus inviting him on this job. It had been too easy. More than likely, this job was less about a task that needed to be completed and more about finding out what was behind Danny's reappearance in Gregory Heber's life.

He heard Christopher's car and its double exhausts before he saw it. When it screeched to a halt in front of him, he pushed lazily off the wall.

"Nice ride," he said after Christopher got out of the car and rested his arms on top of it.

"Thanks. Cost me close to two hundred K by the time I was finished fitting her out. Jump in."

The leather was noticeably nicer than in Danny's car, but the rest of the sporty interior was overdone for his own taste.

Christopher looked at him sideways, awaiting the fawning that never came. "You should hear the stereo."

"I heard it when you were driving up the road."

Christopher laughed at Danny's smug look. "Let me guess, you prefer listening to the Carpenters with the bass turned down and a mellow treble?"

"I like to protect my hearing. So where we headed?"

“You’ll see when we get there.” Christopher pressed his foot on the gas, and they took off into traffic. “You should see her when I open her up.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve taken her over two hundred miles per hour.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” Christopher said. “I love this car. It gives me what I need, you know? —No, you probably don’t. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“And being behind bars wouldn’t help. That must have taken some of the stuffing out of you. I hope it hasn’t made you too soft.”

“I like to think I’m sharper than ever these days.”

“We’ll see about that now, won’t we?”

“I’m confident I can do the job you need.”

“What if I needed you to kill someone?”

“Is that what this job is?” Danny had considered what he might be asked to do on this job. He still hadn’t decided how he’d handle the more delicate situations if they arose. He wasn’t against backing out if it was what was required.

“No. Gregory said you won’t do it. I was just checking if that still stood.”

“It does. I never killed for him. That’s not my skillset.”

“It doesn’t take skill to kill someone.”

“I won’t do it. If that won’t work for Artus, then you can drop me off right here.”

“It’s unfortunate, but not a dealbreaker. My dad doesn’t like his guys to have lines they won’t cross for him. But if your other skills are substantial, maybe it won’t matter.”

“I guess you’ll be the judge of that. So, this job we’re doing, why didn’t he send someone besides you?”

“Are you kidding? I asked for it. I love this stuff. I wish I could do more. There’s nothing quite like the feel of a man’s nose breaking under your fist to get your blood pumping.” Christopher weaved in and out of traffic. “It helps me focus when I’m stuck in the office. Desk work doesn’t suit me.”

“You play the part well. From what I’ve seen, you fit right in as a businessman. Are you putting that on for the benefit of others?”

“ Certain others. Don’t get me wrong. I was ready to step up and become that man. I’m good for the job. But I won’t deny what’s inside. I’ve got the best of both worlds. And running Heber Industries has other benefits as well.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a lewd smile. “Like Jael. I’ve wanted a piece of that for a while.”

Danny’s hand twitched into a fist, but he flexed it open. Punching the smile off Christopher’s face wouldn’t help anyone right now. “Oh, yeah?”

“The ones you have to work for are always the tastiest. I’m enjoying the chase. It’s a nice change. As you can imagine, women throw themselves at me. I don’t mind a

challenge once in a while. And it's only right that the woman I marry gives me a good run for my money."

"Yeah." It was hard for Danny not to say more.

"You must get a bit of that too. You're not a bad-looking guy. And you might not be rich, but you've got that bad-boy look that girls go crazy over."

Christopher was the last person he wanted to be honest to about the subject. "I haven't really noticed."

"Fine, you want to play coy? Play coy. I've got no problem owning it. But I'll tell you what, once Jael gives in to what she really wants, it will be that much sweeter."

Danny couldn't help himself. "And what is it you think she really wants?"

"You don't know? You've spent more time around her than I have."

"I had other things on my mind."

"She's followed Daddy around her whole life, but she's almost thirty. It's time for a real man to take control. No offense to Gregory. He's raised her well, but now it's my turn."

"If she's a grown woman, wouldn't it be better for her to take control of her own life?"

"Please. A woman like that doesn't know how. She plays like she does. That's the hard-to-get attitude. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a chauvinist pig. I know there are a lot of ladies out there who can look after themselves, but Jael is not one of them."

“It looked to me like she’s been doing fine on her own with her foundation.”

“What—Vita Nova?” The time he took to give Danny an incredulous gape nearly had them running up the backend of the car in front. After slamming on the brakes and swearing at the driver who couldn’t hear him, Christopher said, “That’s a joke, right? What am I saying? It’s clear you’re clueless. I hope you’re better on the job. What you have to understand is that Vita Nova is a hobby to make Jael feel better about herself.”

“From what I saw, she’s quite passionate about it.”

Christopher lifted an eyebrow. “Passionate? I’ve never seen Jael passionate about anything. Mark my words. Before the end of the year, she’ll get bored and give it up.”

“That’s not how it sounded when I spoke to her.”

“Trust me. I’ve known a lot of women like her.”

“Is that so?” Danny couldn’t keep the jagged edges out of his voice. If Christopher noticed, he didn’t act like it.

“Our families have been friends for a long time. I haven’t had much to do with her over the years, but I know the type.”

Danny decided it was time to change the subject before he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “How long have your dad and Gregory been friends?”

“Since college.”

“They were in college together? With that age gap?”

“Gregory wasn’t a student at the time. My dad was.”

“I’m surprised I never crossed paths with you when I was working for Gregory before.”

“By the time you and I were around, they were in different leagues. No offense to Gregory, but he doesn’t have the same killer instinct that my dad has. If you ask me, that’s why Gregory got out of the business. He couldn’t cut it. He’s done well with Heber Industries, though. Not everyone is made for the underworld. But you seem pretty keen to get back into the game.”

“Work is work, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Until you get caught.”

“That’s what I get for going out on my own,” Danny said.

“Hard lesson to learn. It makes a difference when you have the covering of someone powerful. ”

It was the first thing Christopher had said that Danny agreed with. Although the “someone powerful” Danny was thinking of was very different. “I appreciate you guys letting me have this chance. I recognize what a rare gift it is.”

“My dad trusts Gregory. But don’t expect to sit at our table anytime soon.”

“Got it.”

Christopher was silent for a few minutes, then he said, “So, uh...I heard the old man has you babysitting.”

“I wouldn’t call it babysitting. He wants me to see what I can dig up.”

“If she knew, she’d have your head.”

“She does know,” Danny said matter-of-factly, hoping Christopher would drop it.

“She’s playing you, man.”

“Actually, I think she’s resigned to it. She knows Gregory doesn’t approve.”

“Exactly. She knows he doesn’t like it, but she keeps pushing ahead anyway. Don’t let her fool you.”

“You think she’s hiding something?”

“That’s not the point. If Gregory wants the foundation dismantled, it’s not that hard to find a way. If he’d give me control already, I could do it in an afternoon.”

“He won’t let you touch it?”

“I think he wants to take credit when it crumbles.”

“Is that what you would do if Gregory did hand it over to you? You’d end it?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t decided yet. It makes me uncomfortable, but if it gets me on Jael’s good side?—”

“Helping battered women makes you uncomfortable.”

“Allegedly battered. You know how women can be. They make stuff up to get what they want.”

“Maybe some do, but what about the ones who don’t? Shouldn’t they get help?”

“In a perfect world. But in this world, you have to decide whose side you’re on.”

“I’m not convinced that the best outcome for anyone is the demise of Vita Nova.”

Christopher stopped at a red light and looked at Danny with delight. “You have a thing for her. Don’t you?”

“No,” Danny said a little too adamantly. He was saying it to himself as much as to Christopher. He couldn’t afford to get attached.

“Come on. I can see it on your face. I don’t know why I didn’t notice before. That’s not why you’re back, is it? To hook up with her? Man, you must be hating me right now, knowing she’s mine.”

“I used to have a thing for her. Not anymore.”

“I bet you did. The boss’s daughter. You two ever...” He bit his bottom lip suggestively.

“No.”

“Didn’t look twice at you, am I right? You’re not really her type. I never saw much of her in those days. What was she like?”

“Not much different. There’s always been something melancholy about her. Like she knew too much of the world.”

Christopher snorted. “Listen to you, all profound. I doubt she thinks too deeply about it. What about Gregory? What was he like?”

“He had an edge about him he’s lost.”

“No kidding. Softer in some places but harder in others.”

“I guess your interactions with him have been different from mine.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised that he’s holding tight to his company, poor guy.” Christopher shook his head. “Chances are he’s going senile. He’s too belligerent not to be.”

“Is that what you were arguing over the other day at the office?”

“How do you know about that?”

“It’s my job to know things. Sounded like things were tense.”

“It’s not any of your business,” Christopher said.

“I don’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’m curious.”

Christopher looked at him sideways. “You should know curiosity will get you killed in this business.”

“I’m not allowed to ask a genuine question?”

“Sounds more like you’re digging for something.”

“Just putting the pieces together. Heber’s not connected to any criminal activity. And while no one can prove it, I don’t think it’s a secret to anyone paying attention that Jabin Enterprises is dubious at best. It makes sense that you’d be looking at using your power as CEO to further your interests. I know I would.”

“Good business is good business.”

“It’s impressive what your dad has built.”

“He’s taught me everything I know. That’s why Gregory wanted me for the job. I don’t suppose he’s talked to you about it.”

“Not really.”

“He hasn’t said anything?”

That’s when everything crystalized for Danny. He wasn’t here to help; he was here to feed Christopher intel on Gregory and probably Jael. That was an angle he could work with.

“We haven’t had a lot of time together, but we were close a decade ago. We could be close again.”

“You’re loyal to him. That’s admirable.”

Danny shrugged. “He’s been good to me, and I appreciate it. I’m not going to bite the hand that feeds me, but I go where the most desirable work is. Where I’m most valued.”

“That’s smart. My dad likes smart, and so do I. But can you be discreet?”

“When it’s called for.”

“Then we may have a job for you.”

“I thought that’s what this was.”

“That’s not what this is. But you already knew that. We have a lot of work in progress. You could move things along. It would speak volumes to those who hear it.”

“You just tell me which wheels need greasing.”

“Gregory, for one.”

“I don’t think he’d listen to me about business matters. I couldn’t get him off your back if that’s what you’re asking. I’ve always been useful for the more hands-on assignments.”

“What about Jael?”

“What about her?”

“She likes you—I mean, in a friend zone sort of way.”

“Friend zone.”

“Yeah, you know, when a guy likes a girl, but she only wants to be friends.”

“I know what it means.”

“I see the way she is when you two talk. She’s comfortable with you. I’d go so far as

to say she trusts you to a degree. Talk me up to her. Tell her all my attributes. Why I would be a perfect catch— Actually, better yet, tell her you saw me talking to Molly Springwood.”

“Who’s that?”

“Daughter of a politician. She and Jael don’t get along. Say we looked very familiar with each other.”

“That wouldn’t work on Jael.”

“It works on everyone.”

Danny felt like he was in the schoolyard. “If you think it will work, I’m willing to give it a try, but what if she considers you to be in the friend zone?”

“I’m not friend material. Women only burn for me. Jael does too. You just need to help her see it. Butter her up. Make the process smoother for when she’s forced to rely on me for her wellbeing.”

Every muscle in Danny’s body tightened. “Why would she be forced to rely on you?”

“Time stops for no man. One day, Gregory Heber will be no more. I want the transition to be an easy one for her.”

“I’ll do what I can, but we’re not as close as you seem to think.” His voice was clipped.

“All I’m asking is for you to try. Your future with my family depends on it. It won’t be long and you won’t have Gregory to rely on anymore, either.”

“I get the distinct impression that wouldn’t bother you too much,” Danny said.

“I’m pragmatic, and your time is up.” They pulled up outside an aging two-story house with broken shutters. It was a bad part of town in the outer suburbs of the city.

“Are you in or out?”

“I’m in. Definitely in. But if this is the place, it’s probably time you told me what we’re doing.”

“You’re not doing anything besides keeping your mouth shut and backing me up. There’s a guy here named Burger who has made things uncomfortable for my dad. I’m here to make sure he stops doing that.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And this is what keeps you sharp? Scratches that itch? Seems a menial task for you.”

“I don’t mind lowering myself to something like this. Helps me get out the aggression that’s been building.”

“I take it you keep this side of yourself from Jael?”

“You say that like you think she’s the perfect little angel. Trust me, she’s as soiled as they come. That’s why I know we’ll get along so well together. But yes, it would be better not to mention it.”

Christopher opened the glove box and pulled out a gun, handing it over. “Only use it if you have to. We want this guy to live another day.”

“I told you, I don’t kill people.”

“You never know what will happen in the moment, though, right? Now, when we get to the door. I’ll stay out of sight. Burger knows me, but he doesn’t know you. You knock and call out a pizza delivery or something. I’ll do the rest.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“No.” He got out, and Danny followed, tucking the gun where it wouldn’t be seen.

When they climbed onto the rotting porch, Christopher stood with his back to the peeling paint, and Danny pulled open the ripped screen door before knocking. “Uber Eats,” he called out, then knocked again. “You want me to leave it on the step?”

“Hang on,” came a rough voice from inside. “I didn’t order anything.”

When the door opened, revealing a heavysset guy in his late thirties with stringy hair and a lazy eye, Christopher sprang into the door. He pressed the muzzle of his gun into Burger’s forehead and forced him backward.

“Hey, Burger,” Christopher said. “You miss me?”

Burger continued to stagger backward until he bumped against the wall. His eyes flicked between Danny and Christopher.

“I—I didn’t do it,” he stuttered. “W—whatever you think I did. I don’t know what they told you, but they’re lying.”

“What who told me?” Christopher pushed the gun harder against Burger’s temple so his head twisted to the side. “And how do you know they’re lying if you don’t know what they said?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

A blur of movement shot out of the nearby living room and down the hall.

“You,” Christopher nodded to Danny. “Go get ’em.”

Danny sprinted down the hall, letting his instincts carry. It was an easy inclination to follow. He’d been confident coming here that he still had the skills to do the job, but it was unnerving to find it so close to the surface.

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When Danny reached the end of the hall, he gripped the doorframe as he turned the corner to propel himself forward without slowing. The back door across the kitchen slammed shut, and he raced toward it, ripping it open and jumping down the porch steps in time to see a sneaker disappear inside a cubby house.

“A kid,” he said, slowing as he tucked the gun back into place before he walked furtively across the backyard through the tall grass.

He’d registered the fugitive was small but hadn’t gotten a good enough look.

When he reached the cubby, he held his hands up to show they were empty. “I’m not here to hurt you,” he said, ducking a little to get a better look inside. He caught sight of blue jeans, but the leg was quickly retracted.

The cubby was big enough that pulling the kid out would be a problem. He got down on his knees and looked through the door. The girl, about eight years old, had her back pressed against the rough wood and was hugging her knees to her chest.

“Sorry about that in there.” He jerked his head back to the house. “My frie—” His lips clamped shut for a moment. He had no interest in connecting himself in that way to Christopher. “My colleague was trying to scare Burger, that’s all. No one’s going to get hurt.”

The girl wiped at a tear on her face, smearing a trail of dirt.

“My name’s Danny.” He shifted so he was sitting on the dirt patch outside the rough-sawn door. “Do you think you could tell me your name?”

She shook her head and squeezed her knees tighter.

“Okay. That’s okay.” Danny mimicked her actions to put her at ease. “I don’t blame you. A couple of guys break into your house—you did the right thing to run. Smart. Burger must have taught you well.”

“Hey!” Christopher yelled from the door. “You find ’em?”

Danny turned. “It’s a kid.”

“I know. Bring her in.”

“She’s scared.”

“That’s the idea.”

“What if I left her here?”

Christopher’s features hardened. “I thought you said you’ve done this before.”

Christopher was right. Ten years ago, Danny never would have thought to leave the girl where she was. She needed to be brought inside so they could keep an eye on her until they were finished. He could find a closet or room to lock her in and make sure she covered her ears until he came to let her out.

“I’ll be a minute,” Danny said. “I’m not going to drag her out.”

“Why not? I need you in here. Let’s go.”

“Give me a second.”

Christopher shook his head, then added an eye roll. “It had better not take more than a second.” He added a second eye roll before disappearing back inside.

Danny looked back at the girl, realizing how far he’d come in some areas. God had done a big work in him since those days. But he was at a loss about how to handle this situation without causing any damage to the girl or himself.

God, I could use some help here. I’ll protect her with my life if you give me an idea about how to get her out.

She wiped at her nose and sniffed hard, reminding him of someone he didn’t want to remember. He closed his eyes for a second, but it didn’t dislodge the image from his mind. Danny hadn’t asked God to open old wounds, but that’s what He’d done.

“My little sister used to do that,” he said. “Sniff real hard. Especially after I told her to get a tissue. Her name was Lilly, but I used to call her Lolly because she liked candy so much. Do you like candy?”

The girl’s mouth twitched before her lips separated. “Does she still like candy?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“Why not?”

“We were in foster care. She was adopted, I wasn’t. I tried to find her, but I haven’t been able to. It’s probably for the best.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Very much.”

The girl chewed on her bottom lip, then said, “Some people came to put me in foster care once.”

“Oh yeah? So...is Burger your dad?”

She nodded slowly.

“Do you know your mom?”

The girl’s eyes dropped to the ground. “She didn’t want me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I know how that feels. But at least your dad does.”

She shrugged. “He makes me stay in my room a lot.”

“He doesn’t hurt you, does he?”

The girl shook her head, not noticing his concern.

“Good. Do you feel like telling me your name now?”

“Eva.”

“Eva. Really? That’s a very pretty name. Eva, I won’t let anything happen to you. Okay? That guy back there? I won’t let him touch you.”

“I don’t like him.”

“I don’t like him much either.”

“Then why are you here with him?”

“That is a good question. I think I’m here to make sure you’re safe.”

“Is he gonna kill my dad?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“I do. But in order to protect you, I’m going to need you to come into the house with me. Do you think you can do that? Is there a room in your house where I can lock a door to make sure you stay safe? Like your dad does?”

“My room has a lock. It’s on the second floor, so it’s too high to climb out.”

“Your dad locks you in your room?”

“No. He doesn’t have to. I like it in my room. But my mom used to.”

“I see.” He reached for her but left room for her to reciprocate. “I’ll let you stay in your room, but I’ll have to lock the door to protect you.”

Eva looked at his hand and frowned. “That man won’t hurt me?”

“No. He won’t even touch you. All he wants to do is make sure you don’t run away. That would make your dad sad, wouldn’t it? If he lost you?”

“I guess.”

“We won’t stay too long. We just need to ask your dad a few questions, then we’ll go, okay?”

He leaned in, and this time, she reached back and awkwardly climbed out, squeezing his fingers tightly. When she reached the door of the cubby, she scooted out.

Then she stood with him, her round, dark eyes fixed on his.

“You ready?” he said.

She nodded, and he walked her back into the house, keeping her behind him as they neared the living room. He pulled her closer when he saw what he’d expected. Burger’s arms were tied behind the chair he was sitting on. His head was hanging and bleeding. He looked unconscious.

“There you are,” Christopher said, shaking out his hand and taking a deep breath. He was winded. “Put the girl on the couch where I can keep an eye on her.”

Eva’s nails dug into Danny’s hand.

“I was going to lock her in her room.”

“Why?” Christopher paced in front of Burger.

“Because she doesn’t need to see this.”

“She’ll be fine.”

“She’ll scream, and then someone will call the police.”

“You think I haven’t handled a kid before?” Christopher said. “You’re a lot softer than Gregory made you out to be, you know that?”

“I like to work effectively. Involving the girl makes things messy.”

“I disagree. I think she’ll make this process much more efficient.”

“And if she screams?”

“Slap her. Then she’ll know not to scream.”

“I’m putting her in her room. I can lock the door.”

Christopher’s shoulders sagged before his arm reached for his gun and he dragged it out, pointing it at Danny. “Explain to her that if she makes a sound, I will shoot her. Otherwise, I’ll shoot you.”

Eva squeaked and buried her face in Danny’s back.

“You’re not going to shoot me,” he said.

“My dad chose you for this job for multiple reasons. One of them was that you’re disposable. Now. Give me your gun, and put her on the couch.”

Danny took a moment to stare down Christopher, but he saw a hungry look in the other man’s eyes and knew he would get pleasure out of killing Danny and the girl if that’s what it took to get the job done.

He gave Christopher his gun before crouching down in front of Eva. He held her shoulders in place, using his bulk to keep her from seeing past him to the living room. When her eyes fluttered up to where Christopher stood, he angled his head to block her view.

“Keep your eyes on me, okay?”

She did.

“Eva, I need you to be really brave for me right now.”

She shook her head lightly, her body trembling under the weight of his hands. “You said—” she whispered. “You said I could go to my room.”

“Is this really necessary?” Christopher said.

Danny held his anger in check. “Yes.” He turned his head enough so he could see Christopher in his peripheral vision. “I’ll handle it, just give me a second.” He waited to see if Christopher would offer any more objections. When he didn’t, Danny focused back on Eva. “You remember what I said in the cubby?”

She nodded.

“Nothing has changed except where you have to wait, okay?”

Another small nod.

“I want you to close your eyes.”

She hesitated for a second, then mashed them closed so her whole face was pinched.

“Good. That’s perfect. Don’t open them unless I say so. Do you understand?”

She nodded, and he took her hand, using his other to cover her face while he led her to the couch. He lifted her and set her down, watching her face for a couple seconds.

“Is everyone comfortable now?” Christopher said.

Danny took a pillow off the other end of the couch and pressed it into her lap. “Eva, if you feel like you have to open your eyes, you put that pillow over your face first,

okay? And if you have to yell out, you do it into the pillow.”

Her head jerked in agreement as tears made a path down her dirty face.

Danny sat on the edge of the couch and looked at Christopher. “Is it okay if I sit here?” He wasn’t asking permission.

“For now,” Christopher said.

When Danny took her hand, she pressed her face into his arm.

“Man,” Christopher said, dropping his head in disgust. “I gotta say, Danny, you are a disappointment. What prison did you say you went to? Because it has made you soft as a marshmallow.”

Danny kept his voice quiet. “She’s a little girl who has nothing to do with this.”

“You know nothing.” Christopher said this more to himself than to Danny.

“I know you’re using her as leverage.”

“And? You want a medal? If we did things your way, this job would take all day.”

“Speed isn’t everything.”

“In this case, it is.”

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Burger moaned, and Christopher patted his face. “Morning sunshine. You have a good sleep?”

Eva squirmed. Whimpering into Danny’s shoulder. He released her hand and whispered. “Plug your ears.”

Her hands slapped over her ears, and her face pressed harder into his arm.

Burger’s head lolled to one side, then he lifted it. One eye was swollen shut, but the other eye looked up at Christopher, then slid across to Danny. When he noticed Eva, he came fully awake and strained at his restraints.

“Eva, no.” His words were muffled by his swollen lips and tongue. “Please.” His one good eye focused back on Christopher. “I’ll do anything.”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.” He turned to Danny. “See how much easier things are now?”

“You don’t need her to be here to threaten him,” Danny said.

Christopher turned from him as he focused back on his task. “Does that mean we’re in agreement?”

Burger’s head dropped in defeat. He might not be a good man, but at least he cared about his daughter.

“I’ll do whatever he wants,” Burger said. “Just leave Eva alone.”

“Leave her alone?” Christopher’s lip curled up on one side. “Is that a request or a demand? Because it looks to me like you’re in no position to demand anything.” He walked over to Eva, who was humming softly between chokes of tears with her head squeezed between her hands.

Christopher ran his finger across her knuckles, and Danny stiffened, waiting for him to cross a line.

“It’s a tough world out there,” Christopher continued, sitting on the other side of her. She squirmed closer to Danny, her body shuddering.

“I think that’s enough,” Danny said. “Burger said he’d do what you want. We’re done here.”

Christopher feigned offense. “What is it you think I’m going to do to her?” Then he grinned. “But if I did do anything, it would only be a favor. Prepare her for the harsh realities of life.”

“I’m sure she’s seen enough for one lifetime. Leave her alone.”

Burger was watching Danny with his one good eye. It was damp with tears and full of pleading hope that Danny had the power to make it stop. Burger would know that, if he spoke, it would only make things worse, and Danny could feel the weight of his desperation.

“You think she has a nice childhood here with Burger?” Christopher said. “You believe all that crap he’s feeding us about caring about her? You think she hasn’t already faced the horrors of life with a man like that?” His face hardened, and he grabbed Eva’s ponytail, yanking her hair.

In the seconds that followed, Burger bellowed in fear, Eva’s hands reached for her

hair as her eyes bulged open, and she screamed. Danny jumped to his feet a moment away from throwing his fist at Christopher's face but pulled up short when he found a gun pointed at him.

Christopher tsked, shaking his head. He let go of Eva, who scrambled to the other side of the couch and compressed herself into a ball, shaking in terror. She was sobbing, but not making any other noise.

"Back at Gregory's house," Christopher said, slapping the back of Burger's head as he walked past. "I really thought you could gel with us, Danny. I thought you had a real chance. You still have your uses, but I thought we'd hooked a real winner. Trouble is, now you're in too deep. And if you're not with us, you're against us. Which is it going to be?"

"You got what you came here for. It's time to go."

"I say when it's time to go."

Danny's eye shifted to Eva, whose face was pale. She'd stopped crying, but her lips were pressed firmly together, and she was rocking back and forth. A brave girl, despite the terror that filled her eyes.

"You've totally ruined the moment," Christopher said, tucking his gun away. "I was ready for a good day today, but I've lost motivation." He walked over to Burger and backhanded him. Eva screamed, then clamped her hands over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut.

Burger was silent, and Danny thought for a moment that he'd been knocked out, but then his head tilted to check on Eva with one bloodshot eye.

"Now it's time to go," Christopher shouted and marched toward the front door, but

Danny moved around behind Burger to untie him.

“I said now!” Christopher shouted as he grabbed the door, throwing it open so it smacked into the wall and was held fast by the door handle now embedded into the wall.

Danny looked at Eva. “You think you can get him free?”

She nodded. Her focus was completely on him, too afraid to look anywhere else.

“I’m sorry for all this,” he said to no one in particular. “I thought I’d be able to do more. Burger, for what it’s worth, you have a good girl here, and she deserves the best from you. This is your chance to turn your life around for her sake. Whatever you’re mixed up with, stop.”

“I can’t. Artus won’t let me go. He’ll kill me first.”

“Yeah, well, you never know what the future holds. If you have the chance to get free of him, make sure you do the right thing by Eva.”

Danny followed Christopher out to the car, wondering if he’d be better off walking. He would rather have walked, but Christopher buzzed his window down.

“You coming? Or what?”

“I thought you couldn’t stand the sight of me.”

“I can’t.” Christopher laughed. “But get in anyway. You may not be good for a proper job, but you can now consider yourself in the full employ of Artus Sisera. Desertion carries a death sentence.”

Danny paused. He wasn't afraid of Christopher's threat. This was the break he'd been hoping for, but pretending to grovel didn't suit him. He took one last look at the house, then got in the car.

"You should have seen your face back there," Christopher said in another round of laughter.

"I'm sorry if I don't find it as amusing as you do."

"That's because you take yourself way too seriously. Wasn't there ever a time when this was fun?"

"Not really. I did what I was asked because I was good at it, and I got paid well. But I'd never been asked to hurt a kid."

"No kid was hurt, were they? Come on, Danny, even you have to admit that it worked wonders on Burger to have his daughter there."

"He would have caved with the beating you gave him. That would have been more than enough."

Christopher sped down the road. "I would have been better off on my own."

"Then why'd you bring me?"

"Test run."

"Oh yeah? Or did you know there would be a kid there, and you needed someone to wrangle her?"

"Of course I knew. Everyone knows Burger's the only one stupid enough to keep a

kid around when he works with dangerous folks like my father. He has only himself to blame. Oh, by the way, I can't make any promises that you'll get paid for today."

Danny had to turn his head to keep Christopher from seeing the revulsion on his face. "I expected as much."

"Good. At least you're man enough to know when you've messed up. I can't promise we'll have any more work for you into the future besides what we've already discussed. I don't know that you're good for more than gathering gossip."

"Probably not."

Christopher grunted. "I should have known that Gregory would only keep weak men close to him. The sad thing is you prop him up. He's fallen so far, even you stand out next to him."

"That's a pretty nasty thing to say about a man who's given you so much."

"If he hadn't given it, we would have taken it. Gregory is too full of his own self-importance to know what's going on right under his nose. Not that it will matter soon."

Danny wanted to ask but knew Christopher wouldn't give him any more information. He was on a high after abusing Burger. It made him boastful.

Christopher reached for the stereo and blasted his heavy metal, which meant Danny could focus on the houses streaming past out the window. He was relieved he wouldn't have to keep the conversation going.

The drive home went faster than expected, and when they pulled up outside of Danny's building, Christopher only turned the music down a couple of notches before

shouting, “I’ll probably see you around. Don’t forget about putting in a good word with Jael.” He gave Danny a warning look. “What goes on at work stays at work. You got it? If I find out she heard about our little outing, I’ll end you.”

“I thought you said it wouldn’t bother her.”

“It’s not about that. See you around.”

Danny shouldered out of the car, watched Christopher disappear down the road, then looked at his apartment building and sighed. He wasn’t ready to be cooped up yet, so he turned on his heel and walked down the sidewalk with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

As he passed a tall brick building, music drifted out the half-open door. A tune he recognized. He veered up the steps, poking his head in far enough so he could see into a lobby area.

“Can I help you?” A teenage girl was folding sheets of paper at a high table near the side wall. It had a giant “Welcome” sign above it.

“Sorry,” Danny said. “I heard the music.”

“Yeah. They’re practicing for Sunday, but you’re welcome to come in and listen if you want. Or I can get someone for you if you need to talk?”

“No, I’m good, but I wouldn’t mind listening for a few minutes.”

“Absolutely. Come in and sit wherever you like. You want anything to drink? Tea, coffee, soda?”

“No thanks. Listening is enough. It’s exactly what I need.”

She nodded with a smile, then focused back on her folding.

He entered a large auditorium space and made his way along the seats in the back row, keeping his focus low as he sat.

He kneaded his shaking hand with his thumb. The day had gotten under his skin more deeply than he realized, but he was thankful to God that he'd been there. Who knew what would have happened if Christopher had brought someone more sadistic? He steadied his breathing against the bile that rose at the thought.

"Please, God. Make sure Burger changes his life so Eva will be safe." He continued to pray for her and her safety as the music team finished their sound check and began to run through the songs. The woman leading had a rich, deep resonance to her voice that made the words melt inside of him and allowed God to do a work on his injured soul.

He hadn't been inside a church since coming back to America. In Nairobi, he attended a small fellowship and brought as many of the boys from the slum as he could, but it was a lot of work, and he never took as much time as he needed to look after his own spiritual health.

Having all this space around him to sit and meditate was uncomfortable at first, but as the music continued, his heart opened further, and God began cleaning off the filth of what Danny had experienced that day. He knew God was with him, but he also knew he wasn't allowing God's wisdom and discernment to steer him as much as he should be. In this environment, he'd been his own man with no god to lead him. He wouldn't let himself fall into the familiarity of that again. That's the person he'd been the last time he'd worked with Deborah; he wouldn't be that person now. He'd changed too much.

With that thought, a bitterness came that he hadn't realized he'd been harboring

against Deborah and how she'd used him. Coming back wasn't just about protecting people or putting anyone in prison. It was a cleansing for Danny as well, and he wanted to ensure that God could do the full work before his time here ran out. God could make the most of it if Danny could submit to his Father's leading.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Jael pawed through the drawer in the bathroom looking for a hair clip she kept there. She wanted to give it to Becca, who needed something to lift her spirits and remind her that she'd chosen the right path. They'd spoken on the phone that morning, and Becca had insisted she was making too much trouble.

"Martin's right. I ruin everything," she'd said.

"None of this is your fault."

Jael had begged her to understand, and when Becca had continued to struggle, made her promise not to make a move until Jael could get there.

The longer she left it, the greater the chance of Becca giving in.

But the clip remained elusive. She slid the drawer shut, moving to her bedside table to check there, but to no avail. She dropped onto the bed, thinking back to the last time she'd worn it. Earlier in the week, Bec had commented on it. Then Jael had had dinner with her dad.

"The dinner," Jael groaned, flopping backward in despair. At dinner, it had been biting into her scalp. She'd taken it off and couldn't remember picking it back up again before she left.

Rolling onto her side, she curled into a ball. Her dad had been demanding lately. More than usual. And with Danny's surveillance and her dad's constant attention, she avoided contact with him as much as possible. Today was the first time in a while he wasn't expecting her, and she'd looked forward to the break. If she went to the house,

she'd have to make time to sit with him or he'd become suspicious and make excuses to keep her there.

She rang Becca.

"Jael, hi. If you can't come, I completely understand. I'm feeling better now."

"That's not why I'm calling. I wanted to bring you a gift, but it's going to take me longer to get there than I thought."

"Why would you get me a gift? I should be getting you a gift for everything you've done."

"I want to do it. But I have to stop by my dad's place on the way, and visiting my dad is always a delicate situation."

"You two don't get along?"

"It's complicated."

"I didn't get along with my dad either. I think that's why he left my mom and I."

"I'm sure there's more to it than that, but if you can hang in there a little longer..."

"Yeah. I'm feeling stronger now. I get these thoughts in my head, and they tangle up my brain, making it hard to think straight, but I won't make any decisions until you get here."

"That puts my mind at ease."

"Then I guess I'll see you when you get here."

“It shouldn’t be too long. Just give me an hour or two.”

“I’ll see you then.”

When Jael entered her dad’s house, she wasn’t sure if she wanted him to be alerted to her presence right away or not. But the entry was empty and the house quiet. She shut the door softly behind her and considered taking her shoes off, hoping she could remain undetected for her visit. But if her dad found her, it would be too obvious and create more questions, so she tiptoed instead, ignoring how childish she was acting.

She listened for any indication of movement as she entered the dining room, but it remained silent as she searched the room with no luck. If Sofia had found it, she would have put it in the drawer of the side table in the living room.

She moved silently through the house and touched her fingers to the open door, leaning inside. Her dad was on the couch facing the window. She closed her eyes to compose herself. She would endure this visit for Becca.

After rapping her knuckles on the door, she pushed it all the way open and entered.

“Hey, dad. Sorry to disturb you—” As she stepped in, she saw his head was tucked against his chest in sleep and clamped her mouth shut. Today was her lucky day after all.

Her shoes pressed into the plush carpet as she walked to the long table against the wall and opened the drawer. Her clip was on top of a pile of random items. She lifted it, kissed it, then touched it to the air above her head to thank Sofia wherever she was.

Jael looked to confirm her dad was still asleep and noticed he still had a drink clutched in his hand. It was resting on his stomach where he’d likely spill it before he woke up. She hated that her legs brought her to him to fix it. If he wanted to drink

himself into oblivion, that was his problem. She shouldn't make it hers. But she couldn't help herself.

As she reached for the glass, she glanced at a newspaper lying on the cushion beside him. He liked to boast that he loved the smell of ink too much to give up on traditional newspapers, making a show of shaking out the pages and clearing his throat as he settled himself in to read.

She scanned the headlines, wondering if it was an article that had him drinking himself into a stupor so early in the day. But there was nothing of interest that she could see.

She tugged at the glass to pull it free, nearly spilling it when his fingers didn't release. She looked at his face to see if he'd woken, but she jumped back, her breath jerking to a halt as she stared into his dead eyes.

Even though she could already see the truth, she still looked at his chest, willing it to move in breath as she held her own. But he remained still.

She swallowed a lump. "You can't be dead."

She should have been more prepared. He was an old man. But he'd maintained a vitality that made it feel like he would live forever. A minute ago, that had been a bad thing, but loss was a traitor. It was unfair that even his death could give her so much pain. It would mean her freedom, but if caged birds don't know how to fly, what happens when they're set free?

She moved closer to him, pressing her fingers against his neck to confirm in the only way left to her. She kept her eyes averted, focusing on the meaningless words of an article on stem cell research while she felt for a pulse. She forced herself to hold her fingers still for several seconds before moving away.

When her phone rang, she jumped before scrambling for it. But when she saw Christopher's name, her thumb paused over the screen. She'd been hoping for a different caller.

She tapped the phone anyway. "Hello?" Her voice sounded strange.

"Jael?" Christopher said.

"Y-yeah. Uh..."

"Sorry...is everything okay? Have you been asleep? Or is this a bad time?"

She walked to the window, wrapping an arm around herself while she pushed her next words out. "No. I—" What was she supposed to say? "I don't?"

"Are you okay? You don't sound well."

"I, uh... My dad. He's not—He's?"

"Gregory? Has something happened?"

"He's dead." She was grateful the words finally fell out of her mouth, although she still struggled to make them stick in her mind.

Christopher was silent for a moment. "Are you in any danger?"

"No."

"Where are you?"

"I'm—"

“Are you at your dad’s?”

“Yes.” One-word answers. That was what she could handle. Christopher understood that.

“You stay where you are. I’ll be there soon.”

“No—” She didn’t want Christopher, she wanted—but she pushed the thought away. She couldn’t deal with that right now. “Yeah, okay.”

“Hang in there. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll take care of it.”

She nodded at the phone before Christopher hung up. Her attention went back out the window to keep from focusing on everything that lay before her. Christopher said he would handle it. That was a good thing. He was more than capable.

A choked yelp of surprise came from behind.

“Mr. Heber!” Sofia shouted, clutching the pendant around her neck.

Jael hurried over to her, dropping an arm over her shoulder before directing her out of the room. “I’m sorry, Sofia. I should have come to find you right away. I don’t want you to see this.”

“What happened?” Sofia stretched her head over her shoulder to get another look at the room.

“I don’t know. Christopher’s on his way. He’ll know what to do next.”

Sofia made the sign of the cross, then wilted, bumping into a table and nearly knocking a vase off.

“You need to sit down,” Jael said, relieved that she had something to do. She led Sofia to an old decorative chair in the hall. “Let me get you a drink of water.”

“I should be the one getting you a drink,” Sofia said, fanning herself.

Jael rubbed her arm. “It’s okay. Everything will be okay. Can you wait here a second while I get you a drink?”

“No, you must be—I’m sorry. I’m so—your father.”

“I know. It will be okay.”

She squeezed Sofia’s hands and watched her until she turned a corner and went to the kitchen.

The water overflowed in the glass she filled, then she had to set it on the counter to steady her shaking hands. She dropped her head, breathing slowly.

“Everything will be okay.”

Her head spun, and she followed the slackening in her legs to the floor, resting her forehead on the cupboard while she waited for the giddiness to pass. She didn’t know how long she remained close to passing out, but somewhere through the fog, she heard the door.

“Jael?” Christopher called. But she kept her lips pressed firmly together for fear that any change to her demeanor would send her into the blackness.

His footsteps clapped across the floor, then were silenced. When he didn’t appear in the kitchen and her equilibrium returned, she pulled herself up and carried the glass back to Sofia, who was settling herself back in the chair.

“Christopher’s gone inside,” Sofia said, breathless.

Jael nodded and pressed the water into her hand, then went to the living room.

Christopher was standing in front of her father with deep furrows between his brows. His fists rested on his hips as he took in the scene, but he glanced up when he noticed her enter.

“You should stay outside,” he said.

She shrugged. “I’ve already seen it.”

“You don’t look well.” He only waited a beat before moving to her and wrapping his arms around her.

The warm gesture was unexpected, and Jael stiffened at first but relaxed into the solidness of his embrace when the world shifted beneath her feet. She savored it, forgetting how she felt about him, unable to think beyond the moment until Christopher slowly pulled her away, keeping his hands on her arms to steady her.

He looked her over. “I know this is a stupid question, but are you okay?”

“I’m...fine.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. “I’m not sure what that means. And I don’t like not being able to fix it for you.”

“I need time. That’s all. I don’t even know what to do next.”

“I’ve called the ambulance and police.”

“Police?”

“I’m sure it’s not necessary, but I thought it best.”

She nodded. “And then what?”

“We’ll need to organize his funeral, but don’t worry about any of that now. I’ll do what I can for you. My dad and I will be here for whatever you need.”

“This isn’t your responsibility. I just need a few hours to get my head around what’s happened.”

He took her hand. “Please. I know how independent you are. I know you can do this all yourself, but I want to help.”

“Okay.”

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her toward the door. “There’s no need to hang around in here. Is there a room I can take you to? Somewhere you’d be comfortable waiting? I’d take you home, but?—”

“No, I’m okay. I’ll sit with Sofia. We’ll wait in the sunroom. She’ll need the support.”

“You’re a generous person, Jael. Always looking out for everyone around you.” He tucked her hair behind her ear, his knuckles brushing her cheek. “But who will look after you?”

She couldn’t meet his eye. “I’ll be okay. My dad would have made sure of it.”

“Of course he would. He loved you very much.”

She bit her tongue. “Thank you for being here.” She pulled from his grasp and went to Sofia, who she found crying softly.

“I can’t believe he’s gone.” Her Mexican accent was stronger in her grief. “He was so good to me.”

“I know he was.” Jael helped her stand, supported her as they went to the sunroom.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do now that he’s gone.” Sofia sniffed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if my father made provisions for you to be looked after.” Jael directed her to a chair. “How about I make us some tea?”

“It’s not just that. Mr. Heber was so good to me for so many years.”

“And you were good to him. He’ll be missed.” The words tasted sour, but they were no less true. Jael would miss him. It would be impossible not to. As much as he frustrated her in life and diminished her by his manipulation, she’d come to rely on his support. She’d taken it for granted as much as she’d loathed it.

But there was no need to feel fearful about that now. He would have left her his estate, which meant she’d be in control for the first time in her life. It was both a thrilling and a terrifying thought. It would also mean that Vita Nova wouldn’t need to rely on Heber Industries any longer. Jael could run her company the way she wanted.

“Are you feeling all right?” Sofia was giving her an odd look, and Jael screwed her mouth up when she realized she’d been smiling.

“I was remembering the good things about my father,” she lied. If being cold-hearted was required to help others, then she’d give away all her warmth so others could have it. Her heart had lightened at the thought of all the doors opening before her. It was a

life she'd never dared imagine, but even now it was beginning to take shape.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

The sky was dark and heavy, and Danny was reconsidering his decision not to bring an umbrella. It had been sunny during the service, a solemn event full of family, friends, and a crowd of people who wanted to be associated with someone who had money and power.

Jael had spoken well, saying nice things about a father who she would have struggled to love. But now that they were at the gravesite with dark clouds pushing across the sky to blot out the sun, a weariness sat upon her shoulders as she listened stone-faced while the minister read from the leatherbound Bible lying open across his palms.

She wore a long, straight black dress that made her appear sophisticated and sturdy. It was another wall he knew she would have erected to get her through the day. She rarely let her true self show. She'd only really let him in once, and he'd made sure at the time she never made that mistake again. As much as he never would have admitted it back then, it had hurt him to hurt her.

The crowd stirred as the minister finished, and Jael slipped her arm into Sofia's, pulling the housekeeper forward so they could place a rose on the grave together. It was a thoughtful gesture on Jael's part, to involve a woman who'd been a diligent employee of the Heber household for years.

Artus and Christopher followed along with a cousin Danny had met once and a woman he thought may have been a niece, although he'd never met Gregory's sister.

A line formed, but Danny remained at the back until most had gone through. Then he moved up slowly, feeling the first pellet of cold rain on his cheek.

When he passed Jael, they made eye contact for a moment. He nodded, and her lips turned up in a sad smile, but she flinched when the rain hit her face, and she tilted her head toward the ground.

Danny tossed his flower onto the casket and moved to stand under a tree as the drizzle picked up and umbrellas were raised.

He watched as several people spoke quietly to Jael, but she was brief in her responses. Soon, only a few stragglers remained. Today, he wasn't here as Deborah's man. Today he was here as a friend, and he wanted to make sure that Jael understood that.

He waited until she'd finished speaking to a wide man with a grey handlebar mustache, then approached her.

"Thanks for coming," she said formally. It was the first time they'd spoken that day.

"I wanted to say," Danny started, but wished he had more substantial words to offer besides, "I'm sorry for your loss." She gave him the same nod she gave everyone else, and he was surprised how that stung. He shouldn't expect any different. He was no one special to her.

He turned to go but stopped when she said, "I was surprised you weren't at the house with me."

"At your dad's?"

"When I found him...I thought you would have followed me there. I got a phone call after I discovered my—what had happened. I assumed it was you."

"I wish it had been me. If I'd known, I would have been there for you."

“Would you?”

He stared at her too long. It wasn't a subject he should get into. “Your dad was a good man,” he said to fill the silence.

“No he wasn't,” she murmured, and he wondered if he'd misheard her.

“I'm sorry?”

She looked more confused than sad or angry. “Why is it that, when someone dies, no matter how they lived their lives, they suddenly become a saint?”

His lips flattened. “I didn't mean it that way. I know you two had your differences.”

“Differences. That's a polite way to put it.”

“I don't mean to upset you today of all days. But he was good to me.”

“Of course he was. You did whatever he wanted. He loved you for that.” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “I'm sorry. I'm not being very nice.”

“That's okay. You've spent a lot of time being polite today. If you have to let off some steam with me, I can take it.” He looked at her, white knuckles gripping the umbrella. “I hope you'll have time to rest.”

“I have the remainder of my life to rest. I can make it through today. It's been a rough couple of days coming to terms with everything. But compared to my past, my future should be a breeze.”

“What does your future look like?”

She licked her lips and thought for a minute. “I haven’t figured that out yet. But it won’t be the one my father prepared me for. I’ll make sure of that.”

Danny smiled, but it was short-lived. Christopher came up beside Jael and put an arm around her waist. Danny watched her face for a balk, or a flinch, but all she did was give him a small smile.

“Danny,” Christopher said in greeting. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, considering the circumstances.”

“I’m sure Gregory’s passing is a hard one for you to get your head around. You’ll have to find another benefactor.”

“I guess so.”

“Good luck with that. Jael, are you ready to go?”

She nodded. “I’ll see you later, Danny.”

Every muscle was taut as he watched them walk away together. He wanted nothing more than to rip Christopher’s hands away from her. With her father out of the picture, she had the freedom to choose for herself. Why would she open herself to him now?

He didn’t feel the rain soaking through his jacket. All he could think about was that a marriage to Christopher wouldn’t benefit her in any way. And if Danny had any way to keep her from making that mistake, he would.

But he didn’t have time to waste stewing. He wouldn’t waste any more time. Deborah may not think they had another way to bring the Siseras down, but Danny would find

one. It was the only way he could return to Kenya and know that his time here was worth it. But there was one thing that was necessary before he made another move.

Danny found a quiet spot on a rural road and parked his car. He walked slowly, following the gentle meander of the dirt path as he prayed.

“Evil men are prospering, Lord. I believe you’ve brought me here for many reasons, but one of them is to stop the Siseras from hurting anyone else. I know you care for Jael too, so please show me a way to keep her from harm as well.” His chest tightened, but he pushed the emotion aside. “Also...God, you know how I feel about her. I didn’t mean for it to happen, but it’s there. Don’t let my feelings for her cloud my judgement.” It was hard to see past wanting to protect her.

He stopped at a bend in the road and turned. His car was now a couple miles behind him, but as he headed back the way he’d come, silence was all that met him as he listened. Whispers of God’s disinterest in Danny’s prayers pushed into his mind, but he pushed them back. He didn’t have time to get lost in misery.

“God works for those who wait for him,” he said, repeating the verse in Isaiah that always steadied him when he struggled with his desire to take action. “I know you’re doing something. I’ll wait. I’m listening for your wisdom. Please help me not to miss it.”

He spent the rest of his walk back to the car praying for the boys back home, then got in his car and drove back toward the city, stopping at a small grocery store near his apartment to buy ingredients for dinner.

Cruising the aisle, he felt both hungry and not. The small selection of vegetables looked wilted and rubbery, so he changed his plans and decided to buy a couple of chicken breasts and make a stir fry that should last him several days, but when he noticed the gray tinge on the meat, he opted for a bowl of soup instead.

On his way past the bread stand, he grabbed a loaf, checking for mold before dropping it in his basket.

“Not a great selection here,” a voice said from behind.

“Agent Thomas Barak,” Danny said when he turned. “It’s been a long time. I was surprised when Deborah told me you were still hanging around.”

“The deputy director chose me specifically.”

Danny’s laugh was light. “Is that so? And yet, here I am doing your job for you.”

“Your barbs don’t hit home, I’m afraid. Not when I am positive that you know exactly why you’re here.”

“Do I?”

“You’re expendable.”

Danny nodded. It was the same thing Christopher had said. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself.” He should be more gracious. That would be the Christian way to act. “Love your enemies” and all of that. But he’d worry about that later. His patience was wearing thin, and Barak was the last person he wanted to answer to right now.

“What is it you want?” Danny said. “To rile me up? ’Cause you caught me at a bad time. It’s been a big day.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right, you had that funeral. How was it?”

“I take it that’s a rhetorical question? You would have had someone there.”

“We did. But I like to get more than one perspective. How’s Jael taking it, do you think?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose. It’s hard to adjust to the passing of a parent.”

“Not that you would know.”

Danny’s laugh was a snort. “That’s a low blow, even for you.”

“Look, I know we never got along well.”

“We could have if you hadn’t undermined me at every opportunity.”

“You were an unknown quantity. You still are. Unfortunately, you’re the only man for the job, so I’ll concede in the interest of bringing the Siseras down. But it’s no secret to Deborah that I’m not happy with this arrangement.”

“Well then, thank you for your support. Is that all? ’Cause I’m hungry, and this soup will take at least five minutes to warm up in the microwave.”

“Sorry to cramp your style, but some of us have a job to do.”

“Was there anything else pressing?”

“Yes. The report I received from my agent on the ground said Jael and Christopher got chummy. You have anything to add to that?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing at all. The whole reason you are here is to direct Christopher and Jael’s engagement, and you have nothing to say?”

Danny pushed his tongue into his cheek. He hadn't had to deal with his old aggression while in Kenya. The boys tested him, but in other ways. Here, he wanted to punch someone in the face nearly every day. "Nope."

"Doesn't matter. We all know how this is going to go. With her daddy gone, she'll need to find another honey pot."

Danny saw himself grabbing Barak by the scruff of the neck and booting him out the door. He kept the idea firmly in his head.

"She's learned to do what's necessary to survive," he said. "And if she gets a considerable inheritance, it's possible she can get rid of the men in her life and finally take control for herself."

"If that was true," Barak said, "then why was she so cozy with Junior?"

"If I knew, I would tell you."

"Would you?"

"Yes. Frankly, I don't know what she could see in the guy."

"It doesn't matter why. If she's as keen on Christopher as she looked, then you had better get busy ingratiating yourself to her so she relies on you for her decision making."

"And if no engagement comes?"

"There's no plan B, if that's what you're asking. We've exhausted every other option. This is it, so you better make sure it happens."

“What if I found another way?”

“There isn’t one.”

“What if there is?”

“Have you run your ideas by the deputy director?”

“Not yet, but I did do a job with Christopher the other day.”

Barak nodded. “I read the report. I didn’t sound promising.”

“It didn’t turn out how I’d hoped, but there may still be opportunity. I could still talk my way in.”

Barak looked skeptical. “How?”

“Christopher’s cocky, and he likes anyone he sees as a threat to know he’s in charge.”

“You think he believes you’re a threat?”

“Not now, but I can change that.”

“Won’t he just kill you if he doesn’t like you?”

“Not if I make myself valuable.”

“And how will you do that?”

“I’ll think of something. All I need is a little time.”

“You and I both know that Deputy Director Mills won’t settle for anything less than solid evidence to bring Artus and Christopher down.”

“I know. I’ll find it.”

Barak shrugged. “I guess you can go for it as long as it doesn’t interfere with our original plan.”

Danny didn’t expect him to agree so easily. He’d take an easy win, even if Barak only said it because he didn’t think there was any chance of finding anything.

“Great,” Danny said. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“But you had better tread carefully. If you put one foot out of line, you’ll have to answer to me.”

“Aw, Thomas, you sound worried about me.”

Barak stepped closer. “Don’t forget why she chose you.”

Danny narrowed his eyes. “My life’s not worth as much as yours. I’ve got it.”

“Good. See you around.”

“Always a pleasure working with you.”

Danny didn’t move until he heard the buzzer sound when Barak left the store. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling in a mock plea to God. He knew God was in control, but this added testing didn’t help.

“Is my anger that much of a problem that you have to give me so much opportunity to

strengthen my self-control?" he mumbled.

But now, he had Barak on board for another plan. And once Gregory's will was read and word of Jael's inheritance made its way to the FBI, he was sure Deborah would give him whatever he needed to find the required evidence.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Jael sat quietly next to Christopher as they waited for everyone to arrive. He was on his phone, but his hand had wandered over and rested on her knee. She left it there. Over the past week, she'd found it easier to accept his affection than to push him away. But once they got through today, that would all change. She'd already decided to sell her apartment and move somewhere cheaper to save money. Running the foundation had taught her a lot about budgeting, and she was confident she could use her inheritance for many years to come by living a simpler life. It sounded like a dream.

"We can talk about it on Thursday," Christopher said into the phone while his thumb rubbed on her leg.

He wouldn't mourn her loss. He'd have everything else he wanted now that her father was gone. He could run the company however he wanted.

Christopher hung up and smiled at her. "How're you feeling?"

"I'll be glad when this is all over," she said.

Her father's long-time friend and lawyer, Fredrick Housen, sat behind a wide oak desk. "I think that's everyone," he said to the room as he peered over his glasses, then proceeded to rearrange the papers in front of him.

"I don't expect this to take too long," Christopher whispered to Jael. "You know how precise your dad was with what he owned."

The confident smile he gave her irked her. She wondered if her dad had hinted at

what he'd left Christopher. The fact that he was there meant there was something for him, but besides hiring him for the CEO position, she couldn't imagine what her dad would have wanted him to have.

"There aren't many people here," she said. "So I'd say you're right."

Christopher looked into her lap and placed his hands over hers to stop her kneading. "You shouldn't be nervous."

"I'm not. I'm uncomfortable and tired."

He untangled her hands and wove his fingers between hers. "Not long now," he said, then leaned closer. "I'll tell you what." The lawyer cleared his throat to begin, but Christopher continued in a low voice. "I know this great spa in Arizona. Why don't I book us a weekend away there?"

Her stomach curled in on itself. She opened her mouth to refuse him, but the lawyer began, and Christopher said, "We'll talk later." Then he straightened and focused on Mr. Housen.

"Now that we are all gathered, I'll begin by reading a letter that Gregory Heber instructed be shared."

Christopher leaned close to her again, whispering in her ear, his breath warm on her neck. "How about dinner tonight? Followed by drinks at my place. We can celebrate the future."

She nodded toward the lawyer to get him to focus back on their purpose.

The letter said a lot of superfluous nonsense that she was used to listening to at her dad's dinner parties. Finally, the lawyer got to the will, beginning by declaring a

small portion of his wealth to a charity her mother had supported before she died. That was a surprise. They'd never gotten along well as far as Jael knew, but it was nice to hear that her father cared enough for that, even if it was only a token.

Then, the lawyer read out instructions for the bulk of Gregory's estate and wealth.

Jael kept her eyes focused on the floor as she listened, but as Mr. Housen explained Gregory's wishes, Jael couldn't do more than blink as her entire world imploded. Christopher shifted beside her and spoke softly to her, but she couldn't hear him. It was all over before her mind could catch up with the details.

"That was a surprise," Christopher said, retrieving her attention.

Her eyes slid dully to his. "What?"

"Did you know he'd put that in his will?"

She blinked once, then twice. "No."

"It shouldn't matter too much, though, should it? I mean, we all knew where this was headed. I haven't made it a secret how I feel about you."

The blood drained from her face, and she swallowed back bile. "Excuse me."

She wobbled as she stood, struggling out of the room. Breathing hard through her nose to steady herself, she reached the door and hurried down the hall, running her hand along the wall to keep from reeling.

She almost didn't make it to the bathroom in time, not quite securing the stall door before she threw up into the toilet. Her labored breaths echoed softly in the cubical as she listed to the side, resting her temple against the cold metal wall.

It was all exactly how it should have been, except for one small detail. Her dad had left her with everything she'd expected, but it came with a caveat. Even in death, he continued to manipulate her. If she married Christopher, she'd have all she could ever need. If she remained free, she lost it all. Her father had handed her over to another.

"It's only money," she whispered, squeezing her eyes tight to stave off another wave of nausea. If it hadn't been for the foundation, she would have given up the wealth. But the foundation was her penance. It was all she had any right to in this world. If she didn't have the means to help those women, then she'd rot away to nothing. Marrying Christopher meant the same, but at least she could help others.

"Becca." Her voice was hoarse. "I have to think of Becca."

If Jael gave up her own life, she'd have a chance to save Becca's and all the others that would follow. And she'd do it. It wasn't the first time she'd had to steel herself for the worst. She'd do it again. What right did she have to expect any joy when she'd been involved in taking so much from so many?

She licked her dry lips, then left the stall and rinsed out her mouth. With her chin lifted to her reflection, she set her face to a resolute determination toward the future, pinching her cheeks to bring back the color. But when she tried to shift away, a fear like she'd never known held her in place. She stared at a reflection that she struggled to recognize. Then, her perception shifted, and she noticed for the first time that her high cheek bones reminded her of her mom.

The color drained from her face again as she suddenly understood. She'd been angry at her for so many years for being absent even though she was present. Her mom had been closed off to most affection and was always sad, always drinking or taking pills. She'd wear a far-off look filtered through a glassy dullness, and now Jael understood why. Her mom had faced a life with Gregory. Jael wanted to believe that she wouldn't succumb to the same coping mechanisms while married to Christopher, but

how many years could she resist?

“Sorry, Mom. You did what you could to survive. And so will I.” And if she had a daughter one day, she could promise that she’d be a better mother, but she would only be fooling herself.

After one last long breath, she exited the bathroom, a dull ache coating her. When she spotted Christopher in the lobby, she didn’t hesitate to approach him.

“I’m fine,” she said before he could ask. “It’s a lot to take in. I wasn’t expecting it to feel so final.”

“I was worried,” he said. “I thought maybe you were disappointed. I think Gregory only added that to the will so he could be a part of what he expected to happen anyway.”

“Probably. And he always did look out of for my best interest,” she lied. “Maybe he was worried I’d get stubborn with his passing.”

“So, you’re okay with everything.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

He put his arm around her and kissed her forehead. “I’m so glad to hear it. My dad is waiting outside. He’ll want to know.”

She forced her arm to wrap around his waist. “Then we’d better go tell him the good news.”

Artus was leaning against a pole, smoking a cigarette. When he saw them come out, he flicked it to the ground and stepped on it as he walked over to them.

“A terrible habit,” he said.

“And every time, you swear it’s your last one,” Christopher said with a sly grin.

“I see no need to completely relinquish life’s pleasures. I’m a good boy most of the time.” He winked at Jael.

“That’s probably the biggest lie you’ve ever told,” Christopher said. His easy smile opened up to a laugh until he looked at Jael. “Sorry. We shouldn’t be joking around on a day like today.”

Artus sighed deeply. “I do know Gregory wouldn’t want us to mourn him for too long.”

Jael didn’t expect Artus or Christopher to mourn him at all. They got everything they wanted. Including her.

“But he will be missed,” she said dutifully.

“He will.” Artus nodded solemnly. “Very much.” Then he took both Jael’s hands in his own and pull her closer to him. “But I want you to know that we consider you family now. You don’t have your dad anymore, but you have us. You will always have us.” He lifted her hands and pressed them to his mouth.

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“We’ve known you and your dad for a long time. And while I in no way intend to take the place of a father, I do hope you’ll look on me and Christopher as very dear friends.”

“She’ll be more than that soon,” Christopher said. “I know you’ve been dying to ask

but polite in your resistance. Jael won't mind me telling you of the stipulation that Gregory added to her inheritance."

Artus's eyebrow raised. "Stipulation? He put conditions on it? This is a surprise."

"I don't know why he felt it necessary besides ensuring his daughter was in the safest hands. But she'll get everything she expected upon our marriage."

Artus looked between the two. "Well now, it sounds like we have something to celebrate. That's fantastic news. I know you two were already getting close, so I hope, Jael, that you don't find this all too forward. I, for one, am ecstatic."

But Jael saw something in his eyes that betrayed him. Perhaps he'd been looking forward to being free of the Hebers for good. At least she wasn't the only one disappointed by the news. Christopher's countenance, on the other hand, suggested he was only thrilled with the idea of her becoming his wife.

"There will be a lot to plan," Jael said, "but right now, I'm afraid I have to get going. I have some work that needs to be done, so if you'll excuse me."

"Today?" Christopher said and shook his head. "You give too much to that foundation. It is Vita Nova, I'm assuming?" He sounded an awful lot like her dad.

"No, actually. It's a personal matter." If she didn't get away to process what had happened soon, she'd likely make a mess of everything. She grit her teeth for one last platitude and leaned in to kiss Christopher's cheek. "I'll call you."

He took her hand and rubbed his thumb softly on the back of it. "I look forward to it. We'll make plans for dinner."

"Sounds good." She pulled from his grasp and bent her head to the ground. She was

exhausted from all the pretending, and all that lay before her was a black hole of despair. She had never felt so completely lost in all of her life.

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Danny watched as Jael pulled out of the parking lot. She'd looked tense coming out from the reading of the will, but her interaction with Christopher only confirmed that whatever had happened inside, her affection for the younger Sisera had not changed.

He was desperate to talk to her and make her see the mistake she was making, but that would have to wait. Today, he had to focus on the Siseras. Maybe she'd end up marrying Christopher after all, but if Danny could find another way to get to Artus, he'd prefer not to be a part of those celebrations.

He watched as Artus patted his son on the back. Both men looked not just pleased but elated. They spoke with their heads close together—a private conversation that Danny would have given anything to listen in on. Five minutes later, they shook hands, then got into different cars. Danny followed Christopher, using all his skill to ensure he wasn't spotted.

After driving through the city for ten minutes, Christopher pulled over, and Danny passed him, pulling to the curb a block away.

He watched in the rearview mirror as Christopher entered a shop.

“God, please let this be a lead.” He turned off the car and got out, hurrying down the sidewalk with his head bent low and his phone out to appear inconspicuous. When he got near to the shop, he slowed, noting that it was a large Asian grocer. After checking the entryway to confirm it was clear, he ducked inside.

Immediately, he veered left, hiding himself down an aisle full of shrink-wrapped foods. The earthy, salty tang of the dried seafood gave way to the pungent scent of

fermented pastes.

He picked up a container of doenjang, pretending to study the ingredients as he listened. Christopher's voice could be heard farther into the shop. He was speaking to someone at the counter.

Danny rounded the aisle and skipped a few, getting as close as he could until Christopher's words could be discerned.

"There's a bonus in there," Christopher said to the clerk as they stood near a display of spices.

Danny watched through a shelf of soy sauce.

"Give Mr. Sisera my thanks," the clerk said. "Although I don't know what I did to deserve his generosity."

"It's nothing you did, if I'm honest. But you've helped us effectively in the past, and this time, not only was the timing superb, but the aftermath exceeded both of our expectations."

"I told you my product would work. It always does."

"That was never in question. Everything you supply works exactly as described. You have never let us down."

"Then I don't understand."

"The bonus is a gift. It's a kindness my father is bestowing on you for being a part of what is a larger plan. A plan that is coming together beautifully. It means our business will continue to prosper, and, as a valued and reliable member of our circle,

you can expect we will continue to require your services.”

“I see. Tell him he can count on me whenever he needs me.”

“I’ll let him know.”

Danny waited until Christopher had left the store before he gathered a few random items and approached the counter.

“Hi there,” he said to the same clerk who had spoken to Christopher.

“Is this everything?” the clerk said, distracted. Probably by the large sum of money he’d just received.

“Well...I have to ask.” Danny leaned closer. “If I was to look for certain items not on the shelves, would you be the man to speak to?”

“Everything we have is displayed. If you want something else, you’ll have to come back and speak to the owner. She’s only here Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.”

Danny nodded. He wasn’t ready to interrogate this guy yet. There was too much at stake to move too quickly. “No problem. Thanks.”

He paid for his items, then left the store, throwing what he’d bought in a nearby garbage bin before pulling out his phone.

“Danny.” Deborah’s voice was bright. She must have been in a good mood.

“Afternoon, Deb.”

“You know I don’t like to be called Deb. Why would you call me that?”

“Debbie?”

“Is this phone call simply to irritate me? Or do you have something of value to offer? Because I’ve had a win on another case, and you’re ruining my high.”

“Oh yeah? What case?”

“It’s classified.”

“You’ve given me clearance.”

“Only when it comes to the Siseras.”

“I’m surprised you don’t trust me.”

“It’s not a matter of trust. If you’d like to do more work for me, I’d be happy to bring you on board.”

“You sure know how to ruin a moment.”

“You’re not too bad at it yourself,” she said. “But that’s okay. I can fix it. I’ve gotten word from my contact in Nairobi. They’ve released Adisa.”

“Already?”

“I told you I have influence.”

“Thank you.” Danny was unprepared for the surge of emotion. He did a quick swipe of his face but kept it out of his voice. He didn’t want Deborah to know how much it meant to him. “That’s one thing off my mind.”

“Good. I hope that means you’ll be completely invested in bringing the Siseras down.”

“That’s why I’m calling.”

“I hope it’s to tell me there’s been an engagement.”

“No. But there’s been a new development.”

“I’m listening.”

“Gregory Heber was murdered.”

She didn’t hesitate to respond. “You have proof?”

“I’ve got enough to convince me it wasn’t a heart attack.”

Deborah sighed heavily into the phone. “Except it’s not you I need to convince. You already know what he’s guilty of. If I can’t use it to put Artus away, what difference does it make?”

“Give me a chance, will you? I only found this out about two minutes ago.”

“This better not be wishful thinking. I spoke to Agent Barak.”

“Did you? He’s always a joy.”

“I know you guys never got along, but I’d appreciate it if you’d make an effort. It will make all our lives better.”

“I was making an effort. And yes, I mentioned to Barak that I’d prefer to come at

Artus another way. Jael's been used enough in life. If we can bring Artus down without her, wouldn't that be better for everyone?"

"By everyone, you mean you?"

"You brought me on this case because you need to take Artus down. Does it matter how we get the job done? You had your idea. I might have a better one."

"All right. I'll bite. Tell me what you've got."

"Christopher Sisera paid a guy a bonus for his services. He said the product supplied worked exactly as described."

There was a pause, then, "That's it? That's your big reveal? Was Gregory's name mentioned?"

"Not exactly. But who else could it be? Christopher said the outcome was better than anticipated, and he and Artus looked pretty smug after the will was read. With Gregory out of the way, things will run a lot smoother."

"You're talking about the argument Jael mentioned between her father and the Siseras at Heber Industries?"

"Exactly."

"It makes sense, but that's not the same thing as proof."

"Give me time."

"You have as much time as it takes to ensure Jael and Christopher get engaged. And Danny, this had better not be a distraction. I'm trusting you on this. If I need to, I'll

order you to let it go.”

“It’s not a distraction.”

“Good, then you can tell me what you’re doing regarding our original plan.”

“You can’t push a girl like Jael,” he squeezed his forehead. It was one thing to buddy up next to Gregory, but now that he was gone, it had changed everything. Getting close to Jael would mean acknowledging some uncomfortable truths. “Her dad’s just died. I was giving her space to grieve.”

“Please, that’s the weakest excuse you could have come up with. It’s no secret she wasn’t emotionally close to him. You do realize that, if Artus killed Gregory, she may have been in on it.”

“She wasn’t.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“She’s got?—”

“I don’t have time to argue about this, and it doesn’t matter. Keep your focus on Jael and Christopher. Whatever spare time you have, you can use to look into this other matter, but make sure you don’t dawdle.”

“I won’t. But I do need participation from you as well.”

“Meaning?”

“I need you to look into the clerk and see what you can find.”

“All our resources are prepping for our original plan.”

“If that’s true, then Barak shouldn’t have had the time to harass me at the grocery store. Besides, he mentioned that there’s no plan B. If this engagement party doesn’t pan out, don’t you want to have another angle ready?”

“Okay. You’re right. We’ll look into it.”

“And you’ll let me know what you find?”

“I’ll let you know. Send through whatever details you have.”

Danny kept his sigh of relief quiet. “I don’t have a name, but I can give you the shop he works in and a physical description.”

“That should be enough. Oh, and Danny?”

“Yeah?”

“I hope I don’t have to worry about your feelings interfering.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I believe you do. I didn’t mention it before, but I get the feeling there’s history there that you’re not telling me.”

“There isn’t. Nothing’s ever happened between us.”

“I hope that won’t change.”

“I know how to be professional.”

“Then I won’t have to ask again.”

“Before you go,” Danny said. “I forgot to ask what was in the will.”

“I don’t know yet. We’re working on it. It would probably be faster for you to find out.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Danny tossed the phone in the passenger’s seat and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. They weren’t expecting any surprises, but he still wondered. Jael was relying on Heber Industries for funding, but he’d expected some relief for her once she got her inheritance.

At least he knew his next stop. It wouldn’t be too hard to find out from Jael what had happened with the lawyer.

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When Danny pulled up outside the Vita Nova office, he hesitated before going inside. He didn't want her to confirm what he feared: that she intended to marry Christopher. But he also had her father's murder looming. He couldn't fathom the consequences of telling her and couldn't be sure that his main motivation wasn't simply to break up the impending marriage.

He sat in silence, turning his heart to God. "I need your wisdom in this. Make sure I say what needs to be said, and shut my mouth if it needs to be."

Before going into the office, he went to Jael's car, already parked in front of his. The hood was cool to touch. She'd been there a while, and she may have spotted him already. There was no turning back now.

He jogged across the street and entered the office feeling unprepared for what lay ahead. A thin woman with brown hair looked up at him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

He looked around the small room. The door to the kitchen at the back was partially closed. "Uh, I'm looking for Jael. Is she here?"

"No, I'm sorry. You'll have to come back later."

"She's not back there?"

The woman turned to look and shook her head. "No, I told you, she's not here."

“I thought maybe she saw me coming and retreated, but it’s important I speak to her.”

“She’s not hiding from you. I can leave her a message if you like. Or you can call her.”

“Her car’s parked outside.”

“It is, yes.”

“But she’s not here?”

“She said she needed to take a walk.” Her words were uncertain.

“A walk where?” He noticed the nameplate on her desk. “Hannah, is it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m a friend of the family. I used to work for Gregory.”

“You’re Danny?”

“Yeah.” He was surprised Jael had told Hannah about him. “I know this has been a difficult time for her. She’s been especially upset today, and I thought I’d better check and see how she’s holding up. She went to the reading of the will and?—”

“I know.”

“I’m worried about her.”

When Hannah chewed her lip, he knew she was worried too.

“Look,” Danny tried again. “You don’t know me, and I have no idea what Jael has told you about me, so if you believe that she went for a walk to clear her head, then that’s a good thing, and I can come back later. But if not. If you’re worried. I want to help. That’s all. Please, if there’s anything you need me to do, tell me now.”

Hannah pressed her lips together, considering his offer. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“It’s just that...she doesn’t drink much or at all. Normally.”

“She’s been drinking?”

“You have to keep this in complete confidence.”

“I understand. I won’t say a word.”

“I don’t know what’s happened, but something is definitely wrong. And it’s not the first time. About a year ago, I don’t know what happened then either, but back then she spent the day at a bar around the corner. The next day, she made me promise to stop her if it ever happened again.”

“But you didn’t think to stop her today?”

“I did. I recognized the look she had, and when she told me she was going out, I asked her where. She said it didn’t matter, and I said if it was to a bar, she wasn’t allowed to go.”

“She didn’t listen.”

“She said to forget what she told me the last time. She said things had changed. When

I asked her why, she said, ‘Nothing I do matters anymore.’ I begged her to stay. She looked so sad but told me not to worry. She said everything would be okay.”

“Do you know what bar she went to last time?”

“No, but I know she turned left when she walked out the door. I should have followed her. If only I had?—”

“It’s okay. I’ll find her.”

“Thank you. And can you do me a favor?”

“I can try.”

“If you— when you find her, can you let me know she’s okay? Just get her to send me a text.”

“Sure.”

Danny checked the first bar to the left, but Jael wasn’t there, so he began a grid search of every bar within a four-block radius to the left of the Vita Nova office. It was an hour before he found her hunched over the sticky counter at a dive bar after he extended his search to the right. She’d gone out of her way to make sure Hannah wouldn’t find her.

A balding guy in his forties with bulging arms and a round stomach was leaning next to Jael. A gold necklace dangled in the v-opening of his shiny shirt. Danny slid onto the stool to her other side.

She looked at him and flinched. “What do you want?” Her words weren’t slurred, but he could see in her eyes that she was either drunk or very close to it.

“Hey, pal,” the shiny-shirt guy said. “We were having a conversation here. Get lost.”

Danny stretched so he could look at the guy over Jael’s back. “She’s not interested,” he said.

“How do you know?” Jael said with a snort.

“She’s not interested in you.” The guy lifted his chin in defiance. “That’s for sure.”

Danny didn’t have time for a fight, and this guy wasn’t worth the effort.

“She’s a friend of mine,” Danny said. “And she’s in trouble. Back off before someone gets hurt.”

“I’m not your friend,” Jael said. “And I’m not in trouble. My whole life is laid out perfectly before me. I have everything a girl could want. A soon-to-be fiancé who’s a horrible person. All the money I could ever need to live in luxury. My life is sweet.”

“You want me to sort out your fiancé?” The guy stood up and hiked up his pants. “I sure hope this is him.”

Danny’s eyes moved to the man, who must lift a lot of weights to have arms that big, but the rest of his physique suggested he had no stamina. Danny would only need to dodge a couple of punches, and he’d have the guy on the floor without breaking a sweat.

“No,” Jael said. “He’s not my fiancé. He’s just Danny.”

Danny hooked his hand around her arm. “Come on. I’m taking you home.”

She resisted, but when he continued to pull, she yanked out of his grasp. “Leave me

alone. Why are you even here? I'm doing everything my dad wanted. Your job is done. There's no more work for you."

"I'm not here for your dad, and you know it."

"Do I?"

"I'm worried about you."

She shook her head. "Liar. The Danny I know never cared one bit about me or what happened to me. Just leave me alone."

"The lady wants you to back off," Shiny-shirt said, putting a hand out toward Danny to warn him off.

Danny stepped around Jael, standing to his full height and getting close enough to the guy that he shrunk slightly. A little intimidation should be enough for this guy to decide Jael wasn't worth it.

"This isn't a fight you want to start," Danny said quietly. "I hope you'll trust me on that. You can leave us alone now, or we can take this outside if you'd prefer."

"You think you can take me?" Shiny-shirt stood nose to nose with Danny, but Jael jumped from her chair and pushed between them.

"Danny, don't do this," she said. "He's ignorant. You might end up killing him."

"I'm not gonna kill him."

"That's right. You won't," Shiny-shirt said, his confidence boosted by the barrier between them.

Jael pressed against Danny so he had to move back a couple steps. Then she turned to the other man.

“I appreciate your help,” she said, “but it will be safer for you to go. As much as I want him to, Danny’s not going to give in, I’m afraid to say.”

“Lady, I can take him, trust me.”

“No. You really can’t. Just go.”

The guy blew out an indignant breath. “Forget it. I don’t need this. You two are both messed up. You deserve each other.” He leaned in toward Jael and said, “And you’re not worth it.”

Danny would have swung for the guy, but Jael, even in her inebriated state, anticipated it and got in his way.

“I already know that,” Jael said. “Have a good evening.”

The guy swatted the air in one last rebuff and stumbled away.

Jael dropped back into her seat, and Danny said, “Come on. Let me take you home.”

“Or you could stay and have a drink with me.” She motioned for the bartender, then said, “Two more please and thank you.”

“Cancel the order,” Danny said. “We’re leaving.”

“Excuse me?” She gave him an offended once-over. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Bartender, keep the drinks coming.”

The bartender gave them each a look, then went to retrieve the drinks.

“I’m not that drunk,” she said to Danny. “So you can stop looking at me with that disappointed frown.”

“I’m not disappointed. I told you, I’m worried about you.”

The shots were deposited on the counter in front of Jael. She lifted one and clinked the other glass. “Here’s to the future.” She downed it in a gulp. “That one’s for you.” She pushed the waiting shot sideways.

“I don’t want it.”

She shrugged, then picked it up and tipped it back.

“Huzzah,” she said before banging it down on the counter.

Danny settled back onto his stool. It could be a long night, but he wouldn’t leave her.

As though she read his mind, she said, “I’m not going anywhere with you, so you may as well go.”

“If I go, then who’s going to take you home?”

“Car—Cam—” She scratched her head. “Maybe it was Sam.”

“Who?”

“The man who will take me home if I ask nicely.”

Danny looked over her head where he saw Shiny-shirt hitting on another woman.

“I think he’s busy.”

“Yeah, well, you still haven’t answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Why you keep following me around? And don’t give me that ‘I’m worried about you’ spiel. My dad is dead.” She laughed. “You going to stand at his grave and give him an update? Or have you changed alliances? Maybe it’s Christopher waiting for news of my whereabouts. I’m sure my fiancé would be happy for you to continue keeping tabs on me. Now there’s a guy who likes to be in control.” The smile dropped from her face, and she ordered another drink.

“I’m here because I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

She scoffed. “Too late for that. I have wounds on my wounds.”

“They can heal if you give them the chance, but you’ve got to stop picking at them.”

She swung around in her chair. “You think I’m the one picking?” She was angry now. “You think I like being this way? My father is dead, and yet, even from the grave, he continues to force me to do his bidding. My life has never been my own.”

“Is that why you’re marrying Christopher?”

“Why else would I marry a man like that?”

“He can’t force you to do anything anymore.”

“Then you don’t know my father. He’s a smart man. He knew that all he had to do was wrap up my inheritance into a marriage. Without a ring on my finger from

Christopher, I get nothing. And Vita Nova—” She brushed her hands against each other. “Gone to dust. Not to mention Becca would probably be dead within the week.”

Danny’s mouth puckered as he controlled his anger. It had never occurred to him that Jael’s friendliness with Christopher was forced upon her.

“So stop being nice to me and telling me it will all work out well in the end. It won’t.” She sipped at her next drink. “My life is over. You may as well go live yours.”

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Danny ordered a coke, and he and Jael sat in silence for a while.

“Hannah’s worried about you,” he said, remembering Hannah’s request. “She asked if you could send her a text once I found you. Let her know you’re okay.”

“I told her I was fine.”

“But you’re not.”

She took her phone out of her purse in a huff and rested it on the bar. “Life is easier when no one’s worried about you.”

“Oh, yeah? How’s that been working out for you?”

She glared at him, then punched out a text to Hannah.

Next time, don’t tell Danny where I am.

“Don’t send that,” Danny said. “She’s trying to help.”

She handed him her phone. “Then you send something.”

Danny found me. He’ll make sure I get home safe.

He handed back the phone, but she didn’t take it, so he left it on the counter.

“I’m not the same dumb kid I used to be,” he said, spinning his drink on the counter.

“No? Well, I’m still as stupid as ever.”

“That’s not true.”

“And yet here I am, falling into another trap. Seems like I don’t pick the men in my life very well.”

“You haven’t had a choice.”

“I did with you.” She looked at him for a second and then back at her drink. “Do you have any idea how much I liked you back then?”

He was startled by her admission. He hated to remember how he’d treated her. But he had had his reasons. Not that there was any excuse for his behavior. “Liked me ? Or the idea of me?”

“Is there a difference? We didn’t know each other well, but we knew enough.”

“Yeah, but you were the rich man’s daughter, and I was the kid from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“You say that like I was the one with the wrong motives. All you wanted was a trophy to show off to your friends.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry for the way I treated you. It was wrong.”

“I stewed on that for a long time. I fantasized about telling my dad what you did.”

“He would have killed me.”

“I doubt it. You were too valuable to him.”

“So were you.”

“He would have told me I got what I deserved. Then he would have given you a bonus for teaching me a lesson about my place in this world and reminded me that you weren’t to be the one by my side, no matter how I felt about you. But I’m not the best judge. I got it way wrong with you. I was convinced you felt the same.”

“I did.”

“That’s how you act when you like someone?”

“When you made your intentions clear, I had no idea which way was up. Until that point, I never thought I had a chance with you, so when I realized I did, I got scared and convinced myself that you were using me. I thought I’d better get at you before you could get at me.”

“Maybe I was. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t also like you. I knew my dad wouldn’t be happy, but you were so different from everyone else. You were confident, but even in the work you did for my dad, you never seemed to enjoy it.”

“I never really did.”

“That’s what I mean. Everyone else in my world got something from it. You were the first person I thought might actually understand me. But then you—humiliated me.”

“I know.”

He studied his hands, sick at the memory. They’d spent time together on a couple of jobs, and it was enough for him to know she was different, and it had nothing to do with her money. He ruined it and got a slap, which was less than he deserved, before she ran away to the laughs of his friends. It was one of the things he’d asked God’s

forgiveness for more than once, because it always stung to think about it.

“If I asked you to forgive me,” he said. “Would you?”

She smirked. “You want me to forgive you? Sure. You’re forgiven. Now will you leave me alone?”

“No.”

She sucked on her teeth and frowned. “You weren’t the worst, you know.”

“Worst what?”

“You weren’t the one who treated me the worst.”

He closed his eyes for a beat. “You haven’t had a lot of good men around you.”

“You knew one side of my father, but that wasn’t the man he really was.”

“He was good to me, but I knew he wasn’t a good man.”

She bit her bottom lip as she looked at him, and her frown deepened. “Did you know I almost married a prince? A guy from Saudi Arabia— Well, I say almost, but he was never interested in me like that. I threw myself at him when he visited us. My dad was doing a deal, and had asked me to keep the prince company.”

“You mean?—”

“No. How far I went was up to me. My job was to charm him. Make him feel welcome. I think this was right after you disappeared. I’d had enough of my life. My hope was that this guy could be my escape. He was nice enough. But he and my dad

both knew what I was there for, and it wasn't marriage. Once the deal was done, he left."

"He was the only one?"

"That I tried to marry? Yes."

"But there were more men you had to keep happy?"

"Sometimes. My dad always used me to his best advantage, whatever that happened to be at the moment. Sometimes that meant playing the perfect hostess."

"I remember. You were still doing it at the dinner party the other night."

She nodded. "At least that's all he's coerced me into lately...until now. I always thought that, one day, I'd escape it. But it's not all bad. Christopher will probably get bored with me eventually, and life will go on. It's far better than what it was like when I was—" She stopped abruptly and took a drink but didn't continue.

"When you were what?" Danny pressed.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Please tell me."

"You think you want to know, but you don't."

"Please."

"Fine, but you asked for it. When I was a girl. My dad knew the evils of this world and said he wanted to prepare me for it. That gave him an excuse to use me however

he wanted.” When she saw the horrified look on his face, she added, “Not like that. He never touched me. It was the things I saw. What I was a part of. Murders. Torture.”

“When you were young?”

“That’s when it started.”

“If I had known?—”

“There was nothing you could have done.” She shook her head. “It didn’t even matter at the start. I worshipped my father. Whatever he did, I wanted to be a part of it. I convinced myself it was good. It had to be. I never liked it, but I thought that was something wrong with me, not him.”

“How old were you?”

“It’s been ever since I can remember. He liked to see the fear in a man’s eyes, and he wanted me to know what that was like. It amused him, I think, to have me with him. A young girl watching while he tortured or killed a man. It messed with them. Broke them in a way he’d never seen before.”

Danny’s stomach twisted. Christopher had pulled a similar stunt with Eva at Burger’s house.

“I can’t imagine what that would have been like for you,” he said. “Did anyone else know what was happening?”

“I think maybe Artus knew. He may have told Christopher, but other than that, I have no idea. Then I reached an age where men found me beautiful. My dad thought this was even better. He would strip them naked in front of me and humiliate them.”

“Jael, I—I wish I had known what he was doing back then. It’s so wrong.”

“I shouldn’t have told you all of that. We can’t go back to the past. The damage was already done by the time you showed up anyway.”

“When did he finally stop?”

She started to laugh, but it died off, and her eyes glistened with tears that didn’t quite spill, her fury keeping them at bay. “I thought it would happen the day he died. It’s better this way.”

“How?”

“Before I had hope. Now I know how useless that was. I’ll take my punishment because I deserve it.”

“No. You never deserved any of that, and it’s not your fault. Jael, whatever you do next, you can’t marry?—”

Her body sagged onto the bar. “I don’t feel good.”

He was off his chair in an instant. “Let’s get out of here.”

She nodded, and he draped her arm over his shoulder, taking most of her weight as he led her to the door.

When they got outside, she leaned her back against the cool stone wall, tilting her head up to breathe deeply of the night air.

“Are you going to be sick?” he said with his hands on her, ready to angle her toward the wall.

“I don’t think so. It’s better now, but can we get out of here?”

“Yeah. I can take you home.”

“No. I don’t want to go home.”

“You should sleep.”

“Please. I can’t go home. I know what will meet me behind my eyelids. I’m not ready for that yet. Can we just drive?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t care. I need—” Her mouth moved like she wanted to add more but couldn’t come up with the right word.

“What do you need?”

She looked at him. “I don’t know what to do with this.”

“With what?”

“You. Danny Fletcher dragging me from a bar because I’ve lost control.”

He nodded. “You’d rather someone else came to save you.”

“No. That’s not what I mean. It’s been ten years. If you were in prison right now— If they hadn’t let you out, or if you hadn’t come back to see my dad, where would I be right now?”

“Someone else would have come.”

“No. There’s no one to look out for me. You’re here now, but you’ll go too, won’t you?”

She was right. He would go, and there wouldn’t be anyone. Hannah cared, but she couldn’t do much. Jael needed to be set free. “I’m here now.”

“What about when I marry Christopher?”

“Don’t marry him.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

“Just take me away from here, will you?”

He helped her to his car and settled her in the passenger seat. When he got in on the other side, she was resting her head on the headrest with her eyes closed.

“You sure you don’t want me to take you home?” he said.

“No.” Her hand fumbled for his with her eyes still closed, and he took it. “Just drive.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Piles of trash were blown against the edge of the weeds that bordered the parking area of the lookout, but it didn't hinder the view.

"I haven't been up here in a long time," Danny said after he turned off the car.

"I've never been up here," Jael said, releasing her seatbelt.

"It used to be cleaner."

"You used to bring girls up here?" She didn't really want to know, but she was in the mood for a fight.

"I'm not proud of the man I once was," he said. "I made a lot of mistakes."

When she looked at him, she expected to see pity. But what framed the edges of his eyes was longing. A look she'd hoped for all those years ago. She held his gaze for a moment but had to look away. He was partly right about her motivation for seeking him out back then. The danger of a man her father didn't approve of had bolstered her.

But Danny had been a young man who, even though he'd done her father's bidding, reserved something for himself. She knew there were lines her dad had crossed that Danny never would, and she had wanted a part of that for herself. He may not have treated her how he should have, but her intentions with him had been selfish. Maybe she'd gotten what she deserved. All of this was what she deserved. As much as she felt a stirring when he looked at her, he deserved better than her. She had to make him understand.

“It wasn’t all your fault,” she said. “What you did to me.”

“It absolutely was.”

She rubbed at her eyes, wishing she hadn’t drunk so much. “You were right. I was using you.”

He nodded slowly. “That doesn’t excuse my behavior.”

“Still, it was for the best. Nothing good would have come from us getting together.”

“Again, you might be right, but I refuse to let you justify what I did. I regretted it even while I was doing it.”

“Then why did you?”

He gripped the steering wheel and thought for a minute before saying, “I’d been with—a few women.”

“You think I didn’t know that? It’s pretty normal behavior for a guy.”

“If it is, it shouldn’t be. But none of those women had ever meant anything to me. It had always been about me and what I wanted. I’m ashamed to say those women served a purpose that didn’t go beyond the physical. In a way, it protected me. It’s dangerous to let people get close.”

“That’s very true.”

“But I couldn’t protect myself from you. I felt something for you that I couldn’t comprehend. If it turned out you didn’t feel the same...I wasn’t prepared to handle that.”

Her pulse raced at his words. To hear someone speak to her like that was too much. She got out of the car and walked to the railing. When she heard him follow and could sense him behind her, she begged him in her mind to wrap his arms around her and hold her close. To tell her it would all be okay because they would have each other, and it would be enough.

“I’ve upset you,” he said after a stretched silence. “I’m sorry. I don’t expect anything from you. I think— Had I known the way your dad had treated you, I probably would have handled it differently. But we can’t change the past. All we have is what’s before us.”

She licked her lips to give herself time to get up the courage to ask. When she turned to him, she kept her hands stiff by her side. “And what’s before us?”

His eyes flicked back and forth between hers like he wanted to confess something, but when he opened his mouth, he said, “I don’t know.”

“Why did you come back? Was it really for the work?”

“No.” He turned his head to stare out over the city. “I wanted to check on you. See how you were doing. Make sure you were looking after yourself.” He shook his head and smiled sadly. “I can’t tell you how happy I was to learn about the foundation.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew it would make you happy. Even back then, I knew you had something inside of you that strove for good, even though you were mixed up in the bad.”

A flush of shame warmed her cheeks. “It has nothing to do with me being a good person.”

“Do you really believe there is nothing but darkness inside of you? That there’s nothing inside of you that reaches out for more?” He was looking at her again in that same way. He wanted from her what she couldn’t give him.

She jerked her head to tear her gaze away. She was unsure what it was about him that made her want to unburden herself, but she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Vita Nova doesn’t make me happy.”

“But I thought?—”

“I do it out of desperation more than anything. But seeing the hurt other people are facing is... It’s heartbreaking.”

“Then why do you persist when it costs you so much?”

“Because at least I’m helping people now instead of hurting them.”

“Is that what it’s for? To make up for your past.”

“No.” She blinked rapidly at her tears. She hadn’t cried in a very long time and couldn’t understand why she was about to now. “Nothing will ever make up for that. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t spend the rest of my life atoning. Maybe when I go to hell, they’ll turn the heat down a little for me.”

“Is that what you think?”

She huffed a cynical laugh. “Of course not. I’ll burn just as hot as my father.”

She flinched when his hand touched her arm. “You don’t have to.”

“I don’t have to what?”

“Burn in hell.”

Her eyes slid up to meet his, and they looked at each other for a long minute. “It’s what I deserve.”

“It’s what we all deserve. But there’s a way out.”

She was suddenly sober, seeing Danny for the first time. She knew exactly what he was talking about. She had sensed something different about him, and now she understood.

“You remind me of someone,” she said.

She wasn’t quite sure if she’d said the words out loud until Danny said, “Who?”

There was a man her dad had used her to humiliate. It hadn’t worked. Through the torture and threat of death, as she’d stood before him while he hung naked from a chain connected to the ceiling, he’d remained steady and unflinching.

“A man my father murdered. His name was Lucas McGregor. I was there when he told my dad that he forgave him. Then, naked and bleeding, he looked me right in the eye, and he told me he forgave me too.” Her last word came out choked, and she stared past Danny’s head, picturing the scene. It sent a chill down her spine. “He said Jesus could set us free if we’d reach out to him. All we had to do was ask for forgiveness. He said that right before my dad put a bullet in his head.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I went to my room after that and trembled for hours. I don’t even know why. When I looked it up online, I only got as far as ‘sinners deserve death,’ and I couldn’t go farther. How could I stand before my maker and ask him for my life after what I’ve

done?”

“But you can.”

“Maybe. I guess some souls are worth saving. I watched my dad murder men who were. But I’m beyond the reach of any god. No matter what price he paid.”

Danny’s eyes dropped, and he pulled his hand from her arm.

“I wish I knew how to change your mind,” he said.

“I’m not your responsibility.” But she wanted so much to be.

“You know what my life was like, and Jesus set me free. I want you to know that freedom.”

She could see that he really did. It made her ache. That someone actually cared what happened to her soul. It was too much to resist any longer. She moved toward him and reached up to rest her hand softly on his face. His jaw was rough with stubble. She ventured closer, and his hand came up to rest on hers. He held it there for a moment before wrapping his fingers around hers and pulling her hand away.

“I can’t,” he said. But the roughness of his voice said the opposite.

She stepped back, knowing he was right to resist, but she still felt the sting of his rejection. “It’s my fault this time. I’m sorry.” She cleared her throat. “I’ve had too much to drink. You should probably take me home now.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I think I do. I misread your concern. You don’t have to explain.”

“You didn’t misread anything. But I won’t take advantage of you.”

“It’s not taking advantage when I practically throw myself at you. You’d think I would learn the first time.”

“Your dad’s just died, and—it’s bad timing.” He shook his head and looked away, leaving a lot unsaid. She understood then, even through the haze of everything that had happened, there was more he wasn’t telling her. Maybe his return wasn’t a surprise to everyone the way it had appeared. Maybe her dad had found him and invited him back, knowing that his time was close and that Danny would be the one to make sure his wishes were carried out. But then why would he tell her she didn’t have to marry Christopher? Nothing about the night made sense, but it didn’t have to. Danny had made himself clear.

“Take me home,” she said. “To my dad’s place. I’ll be staying there while I’m sorting through his things.”

“I’m really sorry?—”

“It’s been a long day. I just want to go home.”

They got into the car. “Jael, I?—”

“Please don’t. It won’t help. You do what you have to do. And I’ll do what I have to do.”

Neither one of them said another word, even after they pulled up outside her dad’s big, dark house.

“Is Sofia still there?” Danny said.

“Everyone that my father employed is still employed. Christopher and I will discuss how we can find places for them all. Artus has a large estate. He may be able to take on more employees.”

“And Sofia?”

“I’m hoping Christopher will be open to hiring Sofia for our house.”

“I don’t want this to be goodbye,” Danny said.

She had to look him in the eyes. Had to pretend like none of it mattered. Steeling herself, she turned to him. “I don’t know what to tell you, Danny. I have a lot of work to do with Vita Nova and with this house. Not to mention I’ll have a wedding to plan. If you want to continue following me for some reason, I won’t stop you. You need to finish what you started, and I have no intention of denying you that, but there’s no reason to say goodbye when you go.”

“You’re mad at me for the wrong reasons.”

She didn’t know which emotion was stronger, her fear, anxiety, desperation, or hopelessness. A deep anger won in the end. It wasn’t for Danny, but he bore the brunt of it.

“All I know is that every time I make myself vulnerable to you, you throw it back in my face. I have a life to live, and you’re not in it. Goodbye.”

She slammed her shoulder into the door as she opened it, then heaved it closed with a satisfying bang. She didn’t stop the tears that came as she marched to the front door, because they were tears of outrage. She was furious with everyone, but especially herself. She knew better than to let hope back into her life, but she’d let it in anyway. She deserved the misery she felt now and would let it swallow her whole like it had

her mother. She'd spent a lot of years angry at those who'd caused her death, but Jael hadn't understood what a mercy it had been. A mercy she would likely one day hope for herself.

Everyone around her already thought she was cold and hard, but they had no idea. If Christopher wanted a wife, she'd give him one, but inside she'd shrivel until there was nothing left. She could live out her empty life giving warmth only to those she could help through Vita Nova and nothing more.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Jael woke groggy and lifeless. She'd taken sleeping pills so she wouldn't have to dream, but now she was paying for it.

The buzz of her phone roused her, and she rolled on her side, groping on her bedside table to stop the noise.

"Yeah, who is it?" she answered, not bothering to look at the screen.

"You sound like you just woke up," Christopher said.

"I did." She grunted. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

She rubbed her eyes. "I had a rough night."

"Sounds like it. What happened? Things at work not going well?"

She ran her tongue across her teeth, preparing herself for what she'd already decided.

"It's nothing to worry about. Just the regular difficulties surrounding what I do."

"You need me to come over?"

"No." She pushed herself up and pressed her feet into the plush carpet, wiggling her toes before she stood. She wasn't ready for that yet. "I've got to get moving. I overslept. I'll be out of the house before you get here."

“Do you have five minutes for a chat now?”

“Sure. What’s up?” She staggered out of her room.

“I’ve been going through the reports regarding the funding for Vita Nova. I see there’s some unfinished business.”

She stumbled, and her shoulder caught the corner of the wall. She scrunched up her face, not making a sound in her pain. “What business?”

“The house that’s going to be repossessed.”

“You said you’d take care of it. Or—I thought you did.”

“It’s in progress. The house is still in our possession for now.”

“For now?”

“Before your dad passed, I was having trouble getting anything done with the foundation. Your dad was making things difficult, and I had a lot of other matters I was busy with. I’ve been wanting to talk to you further about the house before we put any money into it.”

“And I completely understand that.”

“I sense there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“But I don’t think keeping the house on hold is a good place to begin.” She’d milk their relationship for all it was worth. “I would feel more comfortable if we could get the house settled and start from there. With all the other responsibilities that will be taking up my time, I would really appreciate if you could help relieve that stress.”

“It bothers you that much?”

“It does.”

“Okay. I can hear it in your voice that this concerns you. Why don’t you give me a quick overview of what it’s being used for? It wouldn’t be fair to our shareholders if I didn’t at least do my duty of care just because I want to do my fiancée a favor.”

“Uh, yeah sure. Um, I’ve got a woman living there right now with her kids. Two of them. We’re still working at getting them all the help they need through the appropriate channels, but it takes time. Everywhere is understaffed, so we keep Becca and the kids safe while we wait.”

“But the wheels are in motion?”

“Yes. Everything’s in progress.”

“Why does she have to wait in that house?”

“Because she has nowhere else to go.”

“She has no other home?”

“She’s left a domestic violence situation. She has no friends or family she can stay with, so the faster we get this sorted, the better. I want her to know she’s secure where she is.”

“Of course. And I want you to know that I am completely in favor of a fair outcome here.”

“Fair is a strange choice of words.”

“What I mean is, we want what’s best for everyone. There must be a lot of hurt. A lot of baggage.”

“There is.”

“And this woman, Becca, you said her name was?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me more about her. Her situation. I looked, but I can’t find anything here at the office.”

“I don’t keep any of that information there. As you can imagine, it’s highly confidential.”

“That’s fine. Can you have her file sent over to me as soon as possible? Like you said, time is of the essence. And I will keep the information confidential.”

“Why do you want to see that?”

“Is there a problem?”

“Her file will tell you exactly what I told you. We’re helping a woman and her children escape from a domestic violence situation.”

“And?”

“And what? What else do you need to know besides that?”

“Well, for one thing, what’s the evidence? How do we know she’s telling the truth?”

“The evidence is for the court system to sort through.” She gritted her teeth to keep her anger at bay.

“So, as of right now, she could be making the whole thing up?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“The bruises were pretty telling. And I’m organizing for the daughter to see a psychologist because I have a suspicion that she was being abused in other ways.”

“I’d like to approve the psychologist you use.”

“Why?” Jael braced herself against the wall. She should have told him to call back later. She wasn’t prepared to handle this right now. Not with the remnants of the sleeping pills fogging her mind.

“Because I don’t want some quack influencing what the daughter remembers.”

“I don’t follow.”

“If the psychologist you choose wants the husband to be guilty, she’ll make sure of it.”

“Are you saying I’d choose someone who would put ideas in the girl’s head?”

“It’s happened before.”

“I only want the truth.”

“I know you do, but I also believe you’ve made up your mind.”

“That doesn’t matter. This will all go to court. My purpose in this is to protect the victim.”

“What if the victim is the husband?”

“If he’s innocent, the court will see that.”

“They don’t always get it right,” Christopher said.

“What exactly are you saying?”

“There’s no need to get defensive. We’re on the same side here. We both want what’s best, right? Don’t you want to do whatever it takes to make sure justice is done?”

“Of course I do.”

“Good. The earlier you can send that file through, the better.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give it to you.”

“Then I won’t approve the payment for the house.”

“Why are you doing this?” Her voice shook.

“I’m sorry.” His voice softened. “I should have seen it. I came at this from the wrong angle. I didn’t realize how emotionally attached you were to Becca. You can’t be impartial, and that’s okay. You can leave that to me. I don’t mean to add more pressure to your life right now.”

“You can help by paying for the house. We have plenty of time to sort out the rest later. If you want regular updates on how the case is progressing, I’m more than happy to do that minus the confidential information. My dad never wanted to hear about it, so I’m used to keeping it to myself, but that doesn’t mean that’s how we have to move forward.”

“I’m glad to hear that. But you should know that I expect you to show me the respect I deserve. It’s the foundation of any good marriage.”

“We’re not even engaged yet.”

“Are you worried I’ve skipped over a romantic proposal?” She could hear the smirk in his voice. “Don’t worry. I’ve got something special planned. But I wanted to give you the space you needed after the funeral.”

“I don’t need a romantic proposal. In fact, I wouldn’t like one.”

“Then I’ll keep it simple.”

“I’ve got to get going. I’m way behind, and I haven’t even had a shower.”

“That’s fine, just make sure you get me that file.”

“I thought we agreed to let it go.”

“No, we agreed that this is all too much for you. In fact, why don’t you let me book you in for a spa retreat? You are way overstressed right now. I’ve got a friend who can probably fit you in today. You can put Vita Nova out of your head. I’ll make sure everything keeps running smoothly. You can leave Becca in my hands.”

“I’m not comfortable with that. She’s very vulnerable at the moment.”

“I had hoped for your cooperation, but Heber Industries is listed as a trustee. I can get those files with a court order if I have to. Or I can go see Becca myself. I have the address right in front of me.”

“No. Please don’t do that. Okay. Fine. I’ll send you the file, but you have to promise me you won’t go visit her without getting permission from me first.”

“Permission?”

“Please, Christopher. This is really important. And you can’t tell her husband where she is either.”

“You don’t need to tell me how to do my job. I’m not heartless.”

“He’s a really bad man.”

“So she says.”

Jael squeezed her eyes closed. “I’ll get Hannah to send you the file as soon as she can.”

“Wonderful. I’ll be watching my inbox. And you take care today, okay? Call if you need anything.”

“I will.” She hung up and took several deep breaths. There were doctor’s reports in Becca’s file. And affidavits. It would be enough to convince most people, but would it convince Christopher? It only had to be enough to satisfy him that they were headed in the right direction. He had to see what a monster Becca’s husband was.

She clutched her hands to her chest to stop the trembling. She’d endured worse than Christopher in the past, but the flitting image of Danny that surfaced shook her

deeper. She wanted to tell him everything. To have him tell her it would be okay and say he'd take care of her, but she was on her own. The same as always.

"It's a fairytale you don't deserve," she reminded herself. "You deserve nothing."

She called Hannah.

"Jael! It's so good to hear from you. I'm sorry I told Danny where to find you, but I was really worried. You looked so upset."

"It's okay. You were right to tell him. I'm sure I'd have regrets this morning if you hadn't."

"Does that mean things are better?"

"Yeah. Everything's great."

"You're sure? I just—I worry about you. You carry a lot of weight on your shoulders, and after your dad— It's a lot to handle all at once."

"It was a lot. But I'm fine."

"Good. I mean. Sorry. I look forward to seeing you in the office whenever you're ready."

"I'll be in when I can, but can you do me a favor and send Christopher Sisera the file on Bec? I'll text you his email address."

"Christopher? Why?"

"Because as the new CEO, he wants to know what he's getting involved in."

“Are we allowed to send it to him? Aren’t there confidentiality requirements?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But as CEO of Heber industries, he has the power over our funding, and he knows where Becca is. He said he’ll stop the mortgage payments, and I don’t know what else to do.” She swallowed the emotion that pricked at her voice and made it wobble. “I want him to get the full picture of what Becca has faced over the years, so include all the doctor’s reports and her daughter’s preliminary assessment. If there’s anything you feel is not appropriate for him to see, leave it out. He won’t know.”

“Got it. Not a problem. Leave it with me.”

“Thanks Hannah. I really appreciate your help. All of it.”

“You know you can count on me.”

“I know I can.”

But one thing Jael had learned over the years was that you couldn’t count on anyone. No matter how good their intentions were.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

The hot water ran out before Jael turned off the shower. Her head was still fuzzy, but she went through the familiar motions of drying herself off and wrapping her hair in the towel.

In the kitchen, she leaned heavily against the counter, twisting the bathrobe belt around her fingers while she waited for her coffee to finish.

When her phone rang, it showed an unknown number. "Hello, this is Jael."

"Hi, my names Patricia Sanchez. You don't know me, but I was given your number by a friend of yours, Melissa Richardson?"

Melissa was a social worker Jael had contact with since opening Vita Nova. "Are you calling about the foundation?"

"Yes. She told me you help women caught in domestic violence."

"I do. Are you calling for yourself?"

"No, it's for my sister. She doesn't know I'm calling. I didn't want to say anything to her until I knew if there was anything you can do."

Jael shook her head, wishing she had a better answer. She'd been hoping to secure a second home, but with the way things were... She'd thought it was still a long way off, but now it felt impossible.

"You can give her my contact details, and I can connect her with the right people,"

Jael said. “Normally I’d offer accommodation if she needed it, but I don’t have anywhere right now. There are other organizations that could help. If she’s currently in danger, she really needs to call the police.”

“She tried that, but she’s not being physically abused, so there isn’t much the police have been able to do. And I think she was too embarrassed to follow through on it because there was nothing to show.”

“There are people she can speak to. They can help her figure out the best way forward and explain to her how to protect herself. There will be evidence she can gather, like writing down timelines of what’s happening. Things like that. I wish I could do more.”

“That’s okay. I have a lot of names and numbers. I’m trying them all, but I’d appreciate it if you could send through what you have. You might know of someone I don’t.”

“Text me your email, and I’ll send through what I can. And Patricia, your sister is lucky to have you. If she decides to leave her partner, she’ll need your support.”

“She knows she has it.”

“Good. And if you need anything, even if it’s just to talk, you can call me.”

“Thanks.”

After they hung up, Jael waited for the email address to come through, then forwarded it to Hannah before moving to the living room, but she stopped at the door. She wasn’t ready to face the room where her father had died yet. She’d call the planner her dad used and ask them to change the furniture in the room. That would help.

In the sunroom, her body sunk into the couch as she sipped at her coffee. She had a lot to do but would rather sit where she was and stare at the wall. Then she noticed a magazine on the coffee table. Bride.

She moved it to the shelf under the table top so she didn't have to look at it. Sofia had probably bought it thinking she was helping, but the last thing Jael wanted to be reminded of was that she'd soon marry a man she didn't respect. Not only that, but she hadn't really considered the other expectations of married life. Or even before that. Neither one of them held to traditional values of any kind. She could say she'd converted to Christianity, pretend that Danny had converted her and it was now her position that they abstain, but that excuse would only last until the wedding night.

She pushed the dread away. Whatever happened would happen. She'd simply ignore the tide as it washed over her. Like all those times when her dad had made her watch another man be tortured and murdered. Somehow, she'd resisted it soaking too deep. She'd known that what she had watched was wrong. She'd understood, even as a girl wanting to please her dad, that it wasn't a place she should ever be. But somehow she'd been protected from the worst of it. It had damaged her, and she continued to feel the weight of responsibility for it, but the horror of what she'd witnessed had somehow passed over her. Was it because her heart was so hardened? Or was it something more?

She leaned her head back, still fuzzy from the pills and her conversation with Christopher, and the world slipped away.

It was the ringing that woke her. She couldn't remember falling asleep, but now she lurched up, jinking her neck in the process.

She squeezed her shoulder as she lifted the phone and saw it was Becca calling.

“Hey, Bec. I'm so sorry I haven't been by after I promised you?—”

“Jael?” Bec’s voice was quiet and shaking. “I’m so sorry for everything. I told you I was a burden to you. With your dad and everything, I knew it must have been too much. But why didn’t you just tell me?”

“No, Bec, stop. You have never been a burden. I know Hannah told you about my dad, and I’ve been meaning to talk to you. Yes, a lot has happened, but that’s life. I can handle it. You’re not the one making things difficult.”

“Then I don’t understand. It would have been easier if I went back to him myself. He’s so angry now.”

“Are you talking about Martin? Bec, we’ve talked about this. We already knew he’d be angry. That’s not a good reason for you to go back to him. Did you call him?”

“I would have if I’d known.”

“Known what?”

“That he knew where I was.”

Jael jumped to her feet. “What are you saying? Martin’s there?”

“He’s so angry, Jael. The kids are scared, but I’ll get them packed. I’d tell him myself, but I’m scared.”

“No, Bec, I didn’t tell him—” Her breath caught, then came out strained. “He’s outside now?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he alone?”

“No. There’s a guy with him.”

“In his thirties? Blonde hair? Nice suit?”

“Yeah.”

“Becca, you need to listen very carefully to me. I did not tell Martin where you live. He shouldn’t be there right now. Don’t pack your bags. Keep the door locked, and call the police.”

“I can’t call the police.”

“Then I will.”

“No! Please. I don’t want that. Not today. I don’t know what he’d do if they showed up.”

“And maybe that’s a good thing,” Jael almost yelled, then took a breath. “Sorry. I know you don’t want him to get hurt. I’ll hold off calling the police for now, but if he tries to break in, you’ll have to.”

“How many times do I have to say it!” Jael could hear Martin shouting in the background. “I love you, babe. I screwed up. What else do you want me to say?”

“Whatever you do,” Jael said. “You promise me you won’t open that door. I’ll be there soon. Just hang in there.”

“I’ll try.”

“No. You have to promise. Tell me right now you won’t open the door to him. All I need is some time to take care of it. I know the man he’s with. I can talk him down,

but you have to give me time.”

“Okay. I promise.”

Jael ran to her room to get dressed, praying as she went. Her petitions started as murmurs to herself, but soon, her heart lifted higher. She didn’t know if God existed, but she felt something. Real or not, she felt like someone was listening.

“It can’t end like this. You can’t let it end like this,” she said as she dragged a shirt over her head. “I don’t care about me, but please protect Becca, whatever you need to do. Keep her safe.”

Christopher and Martin were talking on the lawn when Jael pulled to the curb in front of the house. She took it as a good sign that everything appeared calm.

After a deep breath, she got out and walked cautiously toward the two men. Christopher was a reasonable man, for the most part. He’d done his fair share of violence, and he’d most likely killed multiple people in his life, but this was different. She couldn’t imagine he would resort to violence in a situation like this. It would undermine his position in the company, and that was his reason for being here, as a representative for Heber Industries, doing what he felt was the best for his shareholders.

“Jael,” Christopher said as she approached. “I can’t say I’m surprised to see you here, but I had hoped you’d let me handle it. You’re not emotionally prepared to deal with this situation.”

“Becca called me,” Jael said.

“There was no need.”

“She’s terrified.”

Martin took a step toward her. “Because of you.” His cheek pulsed as he ground his teeth.

Jael, not unaccustomed to intimidation, refused to back down. “I’m not the one who hits her.”

When Martin took another step, Christopher grabbed him and pulled him back. “Let’s all settle down. We can sort this out like grownups. Right Jael?”

“This was being dealt with through the proper channels until you brought Martin here. I’m not the one making everything more complicated.”

“Your problem,” Christopher said, “is that you’re completely one-sided on this. I’m here to talk Becca down to earth where she belongs. You being here won’t help. You’re too caught up in this need to make a difference, so you’re creating problems where they don’t exist.”

“Did Hannah send you the file?” Jael said.

“She did.”

“Did you look at it?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t see anything in there that couldn’t be explained away,” Christopher said. “It’s all conjecture, and you’re going to drag that poor woman through the court

system only to come out the other side more broken than when she went in. If she keeps following you on your ridiculous crusade, she could end up losing her kids.”

Jael held her tongue. He was baiting her. “You shouldn’t have told Martin where she is. I’m putting it in the report.”

“I have every right to know where my wife and kids are,” Martin shouted.

“Christopher,” Jael said. “I’d appreciate it if you would take Martin away from here right now before I call the police. If he wants to settle this, he can do it in court.”

Martin scoffed, and Christopher said, “I’m afraid that won’t work. I made a promise to Martin that Heber Industries wouldn’t be involved in tearing families apart. If Becca doesn’t come to him now, willingly, she’ll end up on the street because Vita Nova will no longer have the use of this house.”

Jael held her breath while her mind fought for an answer. She would lose everything. “Why are you doing this?”

“Me? You’re the one keeping this man’s family from him. And we aren’t leaving without them.”

She looked at the house, hoping Becca couldn’t hear what was being said. The threat of her kids being taken from her could be enough for her to crumble.

“Please.” Jael hated herself for pleading, but she was unsteady, not knowing whether or not Christopher was bluffing. She hadn’t considered before that he had a few connections with the police. With him here, things could go badly for Becca if the wrong cops turned up.

“Why don’t you go home,” Christopher said.

She pulled out her phone. There was one possibility, but involving Danny might not be a good move either. He may not want anything to do with this. If she had any other choice... She put the phone to her ear.

“You calling the police?” Christopher said, not looking worried.

“No.”

Danny’s phone went through to his voice mail. She hung up and sent a text instead. If she could stall long enough for him to arrive, there may still be a chance.

“I’d like to go inside and speak to Becca,” Jael said. “But I don’t want anyone following me in.”

“If you go in, I’m going in,” Martin said.

Jael sighed and looked at Christopher like she wanted him to discipline a puppy.

“He has more right to go in there than you do,” Christopher said.

Her phone rang, and she turned away to answer it.

“I’m sorry,” Becca said. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Yes, you can.” Jael took several steps away to keep the conversation private. “It’s Martin who’s causing the trouble, not you.”

“Is that my Becca?” Martin said, stomping toward her. “I want to talk to her.”

Jael moved toward her car. “No.” She angled around so he couldn’t reach her phone. “She doesn’t want to talk to you. She wants you to leave.”

“Give him the phone,” Christopher said.

Jael pressed her finger to end the call and locked her phone before Martin snatched it from her hand.

“Unlock it,” he roared in her face.

She stood up to him, preparing herself for the pain. The only way to save Becca was if Martin hit her. Then she could be the one to press charges—if he didn’t kill her first.

“Give me my phone back.” She held out her hand, and he batted it away.

“That’s my property,” she said.

“You can have it back once you unlock it.”

She crossed her arms without saying a word.

“Jael,” Christopher said, “this side of you is very disappointing. I’m going to see to it that your funding is removed if you don’t start cooperating.”

She pressed her lips together. God, if you’re there... but she didn’t know what to ask for and figured he wasn’t listening anyway.

Martin paced the lawn, stalking one way, then the next. He had the phone in his hand, probably waiting for her to call back.

“Don’t call,” Jael said under her breath.

This went on for almost twenty minutes before Martin marched back over to her.

“Unlock the phone now!” he yelled again.

“No.” She kept her voice calm, and that infuriated him. He threw the phone, and it hit her head, bouncing off her temple. She jerked in reflex but ignored the sharp pain that had shaken her vision. “If it’s broken, you’ll pay for it,” she said. When she bent to retrieve it off the ground, he jumped for her.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Danny walked casually up to the counter at Pan's Asian Groceries. "Hey," he said to the clerk, who was now wearing a name tag that read Bo.

Bo glanced at Danny's empty hands. "Can I help you find something?" His tone suggested that he didn't want to help.

"I sure hope so." Danny looked around to confirm they were alone. "I've got a problem, and a friend of mine said you might be able to help."

"A friend, huh? Does this friend have a name?"

"Artus Sisera."

Bo frowned. "He doesn't have friends."

"Perhaps friend was too strong a word. But a man I did call friend was Gregory Heber." Bo jerked back from the counter, but Danny put a hand up to sooth him. "Not like that. I mean, he called me his friend, and he paid me well, but that's as far as my loyalties ranged. I understand why he had to go."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I have a delicate situation I need to deal with. Like with Gregory Heber, I need it to look natural."

"How do I know you're not a cop?"

“If I was a cop, wouldn’t I have arrested you by now?”

“Not if you don’t have evidence.” Bo smirked.

“I just told you I know that it was your product that killed Gregory Heber, and I know who you provided it to. I’d call that evidence.” He leaned on the counter. “If I was a cop, I would have you arrested you and then persuaded you to turn on the bigger fish. Why trap Bo from Pan’s Asian Groceries when there are men like Artus Sisera to be had? So, either I’m a bad excuse for a cop, or Mr. Sisera gave me your name.”

“Fine, but if I agree, don’t expect me to give you the same rate I give Mr. Sisera. It’ll cost you. A lot.”

“He didn’t tell me how much he paid, and it doesn’t matter. I’ve got cash.”

“You’ll have to get close to the target. Mix it into a drink in exactly the measurement I give you. You overdo it, forensics could find traces.”

“Got it.”

“Come back four weeks from today after ten p.m.”

“Why does it take so long?”

“I’ll have to do a background check. Confirm your affiliation with Mr. Sisera. And I have limited resources. You have to plan these things carefully.”

“Four weeks it is.” Hopefully the background check wouldn’t be a problem. There was nothing Artus could tell Bo that wouldn’t work in Danny’s favor.

“I’ll need five thousand in cash upon pick up,” Bo said.

“Five K? That’s more than I expected.”

“You could find someone to shoot him for cheaper. If you want what I have, it will cost you.”

“You make a convincing argument. Five K it is.”

“And another two when the deed is done.”

“Two more after the fact? That’s unusually trusting for someone in your line of work. How do you know I’ll come back?”

“Because my product is so good, you’ll want to have access to it in the future. Also, Mr. Sisera knows who you are. If you don’t pay, he’ll find out.”

“Ouch. That’s good incentive. I’ll see you in four weeks.”

“Four weeks it is.”

Danny’s phone chimed with a text. He pulled it out as he left the store and read Jael’s message, then sprinted for his car.

The first thing Danny saw when he turned the corner was Christopher standing with his arms crossed, watching something Danny couldn’t see until he drove a little farther and spotted Jael on the ground with another man standing over her. The man reached down and swatted at her. The obscenities he was screaming could be heard even from within the cabin.

Danny put his foot down, jumping the curb before he slammed to a halt on the sidewalk. He fumbled out of his car and ran for them, almost hurled himself at the man. But Jael beat him to it. She launched her foot in the air, catching the guy in the

crotch.

The man dropped where he was, and Jael jumped to her feet, brushing herself off as she walked toward Danny.

Christopher moved in then. “What are you doing here?”

“I asked him to come,” Jael said.

“This is none of his business.”

“I’m making it my business,” Danny said, stepping up to him. In four weeks, he’d have the evidence he needed to put pressure on Bo and turn him against Artus. He didn’t need to keep Christopher happy.

“You should get back in your car and go,” Christopher said.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, and I’m sure you can understand why.”

The man on the ground had gotten to his feet slowly, but when the pain had subsided enough for him to react, he went for Danny, fist first. Danny dodged, then threw a punch, catching the guy on the jaw and sending him to the ground again.

Christopher shook his head. “You know, Danny, for someone trying to get into my father’s good books, you’re doing a poor job of it.”

“Two grown men against one woman?” Danny said. “That’s how your dad wants to operate? I can’t help but feel like he’d object. I know his morals are corrupt, but this is low, even for him.”

“He does what’s necessary under the circumstances. But this was never meant to be a

fight. That's on you two. I told Jael to leave, and she refused. She only has herself to blame for Martin's behavior."

"Martin?" Becca said from the door. "What's happened?"

"Becca," Martin's voice was muffled from his face being planted in the ground. He was still dazed from the punch and was struggling to get onto his hands and knees.

"Get back inside," Jael said. "It's not safe out here. I'll be in in a minute and explain everything."

Becca shifted but didn't close the door.

"Becca," Jael shouted. "Get inside. Now."

Becca jumped back and closed the door.

"I'm gonna kill you," Martin said as he got unsteadily to his feet.

Christopher spun around and took him by the arm, directing him away. He spoke quietly to him as he led him to the car. After shoving him inside, he rejoined Danny and Jael. "You're going to regret interfering," he said to Danny.

"I doubt it."

"And you." He turned to Jael. "We'll talk about this later."

"Becca and the kids are terrified of Martin, and you know it," she said. "I told you to let the courts handle it."

"Oh, don't worry. They will."

“You do know you’re helping someone who not only abuses his wife but also his child. I know Hannah sent you the report.”

“Wait,” Danny said. “Are you saying?—”

“It’s all conjecture,” Christopher said. “But if this is how you want to do this, Jael. Fine, I’m going to personally set him up with the best lawyer I can find. That woman in there is going down.”

“And if Becca’s not lying?”

Christopher’s jaw worked before he said, “Trust me. I’ve seen this all before. I’ll tell you right now, you picked the wrong side to be on. There will be consequences.”

“I think you should worry about the consequences coming your way,” Danny said, knowing he should keep his mouth shut.

“You’re full of a lot of bravado,” Christopher said, stepping up to him. “If you’re not careful, it will get you killed.”

“We’ll see.”

Christopher smirked and walked back to the car, but Martin had gotten out. “I’m not leaving without my wife and kids. You said I’d get them back today.”

“Don’t worry.” Christopher looked at Jael. “There are other ways we can get them back. And we’ll make sure that those who’ve kept her from you have to pay for the emotional abuse you’ve suffered.”

“Emotional abuse,” Jael spat and took a step forward, but Danny stopped her.

“Let them go.”

They watched as Christopher and Martin drove away. Then, Danny turned to her.

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“Because that could have complicated things.”

“More complicated than now?”

“I’ve been pressing Becca to call the police, but Christopher knows people... I should have made her act sooner. Before he got involved.” She scrubbed a hand down her face. “I’ve made a mess of everything. I should never have started Vita Nova. If Becca dies, it will be my fault.”

“We won’t let that happen. I’ve got contacts—I might know someone who can help.”

“You know someone with the police?”

“Uh, yeah. Sort of. It’s...complicated.” He looked at the front window and saw a woman peering out. Then the curtain was dropped back into place. “She’s going to need a new place to stay.”

“Yeah.” Jael pinched the bridge of her nose. When her phone rang, she looked at it and answered. “I’ll be there in a minute,” she said into the phone, then listened for a couple of seconds before adding, “He won’t come back for a while, but we’ll have to find somewhere else for you now. I’m sorry. I’ll explain when I come inside.” She hung up. “She was hiding from her husband here.”

“I gathered. How did Christopher find out?”

“Heber Industries pays the mortgage. He has the address. He asked me what I was

using the house for, and I told him. I'm an idiot."

"I'm sure he could have worked it out on his own."

She bit her lip, and he could see her fighting with her emotions. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"One thing at a time. Let's figure out what to do with Becca first."

"You're right. We need to get her safe before we do anything else." She started toward the house with a limp.

"He hurt you?"

"Not too bad. My ankle is sore from when I kicked him."

"You handled yourself well." He allowed a small smirk and was rewarded when she smiled back.

"I did what I could, but I don't think he would have backed down if you hadn't turned up." A police cruiser pulled to the curb. "Great. Looks like the neighbors called the police anyway."

Danny let Jael lead as they changed direction and headed toward the police car.

The driver was a tall red-headed cop, but it was a shorter man from the passenger side who spoke first.

"Hi there," he said. "We got a call about a disturbance at this residence?"

"Yes," Jael said. "Sorry about that. It's all sorted now. There's a woman staying here

who's been hiding from her husband, but he found out where she was."

"Why didn't you call us sooner?"

"We should have. Do you mind if I check on her? She'll see you out here and be worried."

"I'll come with you," the red-head said.

"I don't suppose I can say no?"

"You can, but it would be better for all of us if you say yes."

"Okay."

Danny waited until they were inside before turning back to the cop. "I'll need you to contact Deputy Director Deborah Mills."

"This is connected to an FBI case?"

"Yes, but no one else knows besides you and me, and it needs to stay that way."

"Sounded like a domestic violence issue."

"It is, but it goes beyond that. I need you to be discreet."

"I'll call it in. Do you need me to get my partner?"

"No. I'd rather Becca knows the police are looking out for her."

The officer nodded and then returned to the vehicle to make the call.

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“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Jael said to Becca after the police left.

“I didn’t want it to come to this,” Becca said.

“I know. But now Martin knows it’s serious.”

“The room is booked,” Danny said from the doorway.

“It’s only a motel,” Jael said. “But there’s a pool for the kids. I’ll find more suitable accommodation as soon as I can.”

“Anywhere is fine as long as... Martin won’t know?”

“I’m paying for this one out of my own pocket, so I won’t be telling anyone.”

“You shouldn’t do that.”

“I’ve got more than enough. And you’ll sleep better knowing you’re one hundred percent safe. Why don’t you and the kids get packed?”

After Becca left the living room, Jael took Danny’s arm and led him outside. “Thanks again for coming. But you can go now.”

“You’re that desperate to get rid of me?”

“Becca will feel safer with you gone. I know you’re on our side, but she doesn’t trust many people, as I’m sure you can understand.”

“I can, but I don’t trust Christopher. I’d like to follow behind so I can make sure no one’s tailing you.”

“I’m perfectly capable of spotting a tail.”

“A second pair of eyes would help.”

“I can handle it.”

Danny rested his hands on his hips. “If you don’t trust me, why did you call me?”

“Honestly? I don’t know what to believe about you. I knew I couldn’t get Christopher to leave without help, and you were the only one I could think of that could step in. I had thought for a fleeting moment that you’d followed me here. But of course, you always pick the most inopportune times to give me a break.”

“I haven’t been following you. Not recently. But I can start again if you want.”

“Is that a threat?” She smiled despite herself.

“I’m only here to help. Let me make sure Christopher’s not following you.”

Before she could reply, Becca and the kids came out the door. “We’re ready.”

Jael looked at Danny and nodded.

After a detour through the McDonald’s drive-thru, they arrived at the motel.

Becca kept looking over her shoulder as Jael led her and the kids to the room.

“Martin didn’t follow,” Jael said. “Danny was watching for anyone.”

“I know. I can’t help it.”

“You’ll feel better once you’re settled in.”

While Becca unpacked the bags, Jael tucked a few hundred dollars under the lamp by the bed.

“I’ll find better accommodation as soon as I can,” she said. “In the meantime, we’ll continue moving forward. Everything will be back on track in no time.”

Becca hugged Jael and thanked her, then looked at Danny, who had remained at the door. “Thanks for your help too,” she said. “I—I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t turned up.” She looked at Jael. “I wanted to come out and save you when he attacked you, but I froze.”

“Good,” Jael said. “There’s nothing you could have done. The best thing you did was freeze, even if it wasn’t on purpose.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe now,” Danny said. “If you want my number, you can call me anytime. Or send a text. If you see someone suspicious outside, I can stop by and check it out for you.”

“That’s too much to ask,” Becca said.

“No, it’s not.”

“I’ll text you his number,” Jael said. “You should take him up on the offer.”

“Okay, but only if it’s an emergency.”

“Even if it’s not,” Danny said. “I don’t mind if only to set your mind at ease. It’s the

least I can do.”

Jael looked at Danny, thankful and confused, but afraid to trust him.

She took her time with Becca, hoping Danny would get the hint and leave. She sat beside Kaitlin to look at the pictures she’d been drawing, but Danny remained at his post until Jael had run out of things to do.

“You call me if you need anything, okay?” she told Becca as they said goodbye. “Anything at all. And you have Hannah’s number.”

“I do.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow if I don’t see you.”

Jael shooed Danny out the door ahead of her, pulling the door closed as they went.

“You didn’t have to stay,” she said as they made their way back to the parking lot.

“It’s not only Becca I’m worried about.”

She stopped to look at him, then continued walking. “I’m fine.”

“You’ve been through a lot.”

She stopped again and turned to him. She was so tired of the charade.

“Can you please stop?” she said. Her plan had been to ignore him until he went away, but that turned out to be impossible. Maybe it was the fight with Martin still coursing through her that made her want to confront the issue instead of leaving it.

“Stop what?” Danny said. “Caring?”

“Please. That’s not what this is.”

“You think I’m pretending to care?”

“I don’t know why you’re still hanging around, but I do know it’s not because you care.”

Danny coughed out a laugh. “That’s what you’ve been thinking this whole time? That I have some ulterior motive?” But the incredulous look on his face didn’t last, and he averted his eyes. “I really do want to help you.”

“I don’t need your help, and my father is dead. So what’s left?”

“What would you have done today if I wasn’t around?”

“You want me to say thanks? ’Cause I truly am grateful. But now we’re done. Got it?”

She turned in a huff and continued toward her car, but Danny ran to catch up, and he put a hand on her car door to keep it closed when she reached for it.

“Wait,” he said.

“Why?”

It was clear he had more to say but didn’t want to say it. She was curious enough to give him time to respond. She wanted the truth. With Danny more than anyone.

“Okay,” he finally said. “You’re partly right.”

“Which part?”

“I’m not still here because— I mean, I do care. I do want to help you. That’s why I’m here. That’s what I’m trying to—” He grunted and walked in a small circle.

“Just say it. Whatever it is. Stop trying to find the right words and spit it out. I can take it. I’m a big girl.”

“There’s something else going on.”

“Big surprise.”

“I was never in prison.”

She nodded. “So all this time, you never got out of the game. Is it a con, or did my dad call you for one last job together?”

“Neither.”

“Then where have you been for the last ten years?”

“Mostly living in Kenya.”

“Doing what? Drugs? Guns?” She paused before saying the last, “Trafficking kids?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Nothing like that. Nothing illegal.”

“I don’t believe you, but it doesn’t matter. All I want to know is why you’re here.”

His cheek twitched several times before he spoke. “I’m here because of the FBI.”

It felt as though she'd been dipped in an ice bath. "You mean running from them, right? You wouldn't be working for them. Even you wouldn't stoop that low."

"I'm working with them. It's not the first time."

She slapped him hard. Her hand stung, but he barely flinched, and it made her more angry. When she tried to wrench open the car door, it wouldn't budge. It had relocked itself. She pushed on the fob again, but he leaned against it.

"Will you wait? Please," he said. "This is important."

"You were here to spy on me and my dad for the FBI, and you want me to wait? They are the reason my mom is dead. Did you know that?"

"Jael."

"And you work for those—those murdering?—"

"It's not what you think."

"It's exactly what I think. You turned up at my dad's door, pretending to be his friend so you could get dirt on him? And you did it for them. "

"It isn't about him or you. It's about the Siseras."

"I don't care who it's about— Wait, is that why you rejected me? Because I wasn't part of the strategy? Is that why you rejected me all those years ago?"

"I'm not an agent, and I only started working with them after I left your dad."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

“Partly to reduce my prison sentence and partly because there were bad men in the world that needed to be locked up.”

“Bad men like my dad. Why wasn’t he arrested?”

“They weren’t interested in him. They had bigger issues at the time.”

“But you would have?”

“I—I don’t know. I never had to make that choice.”

She scoffed. “This just gets better and better.”

“If you take time to cool down, you’ll understand. You’re helping people to make up for what you did in the past. I was doing the same. I was doing what I could to stop more people from getting hurt.”

“And what about you? Weren’t you one of those people? Why did you deserve to get off easy?”

“I didn’t. I would have taken the prison sentence if that’s what was on offer. But I got the chance to make a difference.”

She would have screamed if there wasn’t so much at stake. But she couldn’t afford to lose her head. She turned away from him to catch her breath. It was a shocking revelation, but one that she could use to her advantage. She had to.

“You said the FBI is after Artus and Christopher?” she said.

“Yes. No one can get close to Artus. They needed another way in, so they asked me to get close to you and your dad as an entry point.”

“My dad considered Artus a friend, but he couldn’t have helped you get close to Artus. You only got as far as that job with Christopher, which didn’t go well from what I understand.”

“That was never the plan. I had hoped it was a better opening, but I underestimated what a terrible person Christopher is.”

“I can’t believe this.” Jael barked a laugh. “So you say you had another plan? What was that?”

“The woman who asked me to come back?—”

“What woman?”

“Deborah Mills.”

“She works for the FBI?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s her role?”

When he hesitated, she braced herself.

“She’s the deputy director.”

“Wow,” she mocked. “You know people in high places. I’m impressed.”

“She’s the one I worked with before. She wasn’t in that position then.”

“So tell me, what did the deputy director want you to do?”

“She’d heard you’d soon be engaged to Christopher. I was supposed to get close enough to exert influence over the venue for the party.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

She tested his confession by going back over everything that had happened, but he came up short. “Nope. I don’t buy it.”

“It’s the truth.”

“When you turned up at my dad’s place, I wasn’t engaged. And I had no intention at that time of marrying Christopher.”

“Whoever gave her that information obviously knew what a convincing man your dad was. It’s what everyone was expecting. You may not have had it in mind, but your dad definitely did.”

“Okay, let’s say for a moment that I had intended to marry Christopher back then. What makes you think I would turn on my own fiancé?”

“You didn’t need to. All I needed to do was get you in the venue for the engagement party where the FBI could listen in. You wouldn’t have known anything about it.”

Jael stared at the ground as she put the pieces together, trying to make sense of what Danny was saying.

“That’s all you came here to do? Make sure I got engaged and tell me where I should have a party?”

“Basically.”

“But you told me not to marry him.”

“I know. I’ve been trying to find another way.”

“But I still don’t understand how a certain venue gets Artus and Christopher arrested. What if they didn’t talk business?”

“There are other operations in play that would have put pressure on them the night of the party. It was supposed to get them talking so they’d give up incriminating information.”

“Sounds like a long shot.”

“It is. But Artus is so careful, this was the only way they could see of getting to him.”

“So all this ‘caring’ for me that you’ve been doing has all been to get me to choose the right venue to celebrate my engagement?”

“No.” Danny took a step toward her. “I didn’t want to do the job at all. When Deborah came to me, I fully intended to turn her down. That’s not my life anymore. But part of the reason I finally agreed was because I was worried about you. The last thing I wanted was for you to marry Christopher. I’ve been doing everything I can to find a way at Artus that doesn’t involve you.”

“Why? What difference does it make to you?”

“I never stopped caring about you. I know I didn’t act like it, but...that’s the truth. All of it.”

She sagged against her car. Nothing in her life made sense, and even after Danny's confession, she still couldn't see a way forward for herself.

"I guess you're out of luck," she said. "Not only are you well and truly out of Artus's circle after what you did to Christopher today, but how can I marry him after what happened? Which means there will be no engagement party, and Vita Nova comes to an end. I have nothing left. Nothing."

"Then let me help you."

She wanted to be mad at him for lying to her, but she had to choose her enemies carefully right now.

"You think you can still bring them down?" she said.

"I've got another plan in motion, yes."

"What is it?"

"I can't talk about it yet."

"No. That's not how this is going to work. You have to stop keeping secrets." She noticed a change come over him. He looked suddenly pained. "What is it?" she said, bracing for more bad news. "Just tell me."

"For the past couple of days, I've been following a lead. It's a crime I'm confident I can pin on Artus. I'm certain he's guilty. I'm working at putting together the evidence the FBI needs to arrest him for it."

"Just one crime?" She lifted an eyebrow, but her face deadpanned at the look he gave her. "What? What has he done?"

“Murder.”

“Anyone I know?” she said. But she knew. And with the revelation, her legs gave way.

Danny caught her and held her steady. “I’m sorry.”

“My dad? You’re sure? How can you be sure?”

“I found the man who gave them the drug to make it look like a natural death.”

“How?”

“I followed Christopher. Saw him pay the man. I heard them talking. Christopher said Artus gave him a bonus because it worked out so well.”

“But I don’t understand. Why kill my dad? He’d given them everything they wanted.”

“Almost everything. I can’t say for certain, but I’m guessing he was interfering with the plans they had for Heber Industries.”

“He was old. They could have waited.”

“Artus isn’t a patient man. You know that.”

“It’s not even— I didn’t like my dad. He was horrible to me and difficult, but—I should be thanking them, shouldn’t I?”

“He was still your dad.”

“I didn’t like him, but I never wanted him dead.”

“I know.”

It took her a few minutes to compose herself. “You believe you could pin this murder on them?”

“I do.”

“Will it be enough? How long can they put him away for one murder?”

“If they can get him for this, that would give them the opportunity to look into his other activities. It’s a better plan than hoping he’ll say something at an engagement party.”

“Okay.” She pressed a hand against her forehead. “I need to go home.”

“Can you drive yourself?”

“Yeah. I need to be alone right now.”

“I understand. And I’m sorry for deceiving you. We’ll get the Siseras, and then you have the rest of your life to look forward to.”

But she wouldn’t put her hope in that. Not yet. Not when she still stood on a razor’s edge.

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“You did what?” Deborah shouted at Danny, who stood before her desk with his arms crossed.

“She was questioning my continued presence in her life.”

“And you decided to handle it by telling her the truth?”

“The assignment would have been over otherwise. There was no way she would let me near her, let alone have any influence over her engagement party.”

“You should have made something up. Telling her you work for the FBI was not the right move.”

“Why? Because of her mother?”

Deborah rested the arm of her glasses against her lip. “She told you about that?”

“She thought I already knew.”

“It was an accident.”

“That’s not what she thinks,” Danny said.

“She wasn’t there.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Was the FBI responsible or not?”

“Natalie was carrying drugs for a drop. We were surveilling, but we were made. Our team chased her. Over the course of the pursuit, she fell and died. From what I understand, Jael does not believe the fall was an accident.”

“But you’re saying it is.”

“We don’t kill people for the fun of it.”

“That’s not a no.”

“None of our guys laid a finger on her. The autopsy showed she had drugs in her system at the time, so that wouldn’t have helped.”

“But she was being pursued?”

“Should we not have chased a criminal because something bad might happen?”

“I’m just trying to get my head around it.”

“What you think doesn’t matter. Now that Jael knows you work for the FBI, that changes things.”

“No, it doesn’t. Whether I work for the FBI or not is irrelevant. The engagement is not going ahead, and that’s got nothing to do with me.”

Deborah lowered her voice. “Oh, it absolutely does. Now she knows who you work for, you can make her cooperate.”

“She’s not going to marry Christopher at the behest of the FBI.”

“She better, or we’ll find a dozen charges to bring against her.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will. Not only that, either you convince her to follow through for us, or I’m taking away everything I’ve given to you. Including Adisa’s freedom.”

Danny’s mouth hardened into a thin line. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to come back. You haven’t changed one bit.”

“I do what I have to in order to get the job done. If you weren’t so busy placating Jael, you’d understand that a happy ending doesn’t exist for her. It never has. And I refuse to give up the opportunity to put a terrible man behind bars because of your crush.”

“I told you, there’s nothing going on.”

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem following through.”

“What if there’s another way? Other charges we can bring against Artus?”

“Like the murder of Gregory Heber? We don’t have enough to move on that. I already told you, without a better option, we’re sticking to our original plan.”

“Have you even looked into it?”

“We have.” She smiled. “And so have you.”

“You’re following me?”

“Keeping tabs. That’s all.”

“I’ve set up everything. I’ve organized to buy the same drug Artus used to kill Gregory. All I need is four weeks.”

“That not enough to guarantee we can put Artus behind bars. Leave the clerk to us. Focus on Jael. If she’s on our side, that makes everything easier. She can guarantee the venue for the party?—”

“She’s not marrying Christopher.”

“She doesn’t need to marry him. She just needs to be engaged to him. And who knows, if she plays the part well enough, she may even get Christopher to open up herself while onsite. If she hates him, she can work with us and be rid of him for good.”

“She can’t stand to be in the same room as him. How is she supposed to convince him she’s in love with him? Especially after everything that’s happened.”

“You mean the domestic issue I had to resolve? That was an interesting phone call.”

“He may not want to marry her after that.”

“I know men like Christopher. If Jael goes to him full of remorse for her actions, he’ll take her back. There’s nothing he would want more.”

“That’s disgusting.”

Deborah shrugged. “We all do what we have to. I’m sure it’s not the first time Jael has had to follow through on something revolting.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to. But I bet she’ll agree to it. I’d say she wants to bring Christopher down more than we do. She’s got what it takes to do what’s necessary. I hope you do too.”

Danny pinched his bottom lip in thought. “If we do this,” he said. “You have to make sure it counts. And he can’t get wind that she was involved. Even from prison, he can have her killed.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. And we’re already getting everything in place to make a move. We’ve got specific information relating to the Siseras’s new activities with Heber Industries. I’d say it’s connected to the reason they killed Gregory. And if we can get the clerk on the drug, we’ll have enough to pressure him as extra leverage.”

“Okay, but if I get other information?—”

“No,” Deborah said. “I’ve had enough of this back and forth. We’ll use everything we have on the night of the party. From now on, we’re sticking to the plan. And that’s final.”

Danny was surprised when Jael answered the door at Gregory’s house instead of the housekeeper. She was wearing a baggy T-shirt and tights. Her hair was piled on top of her head and gave her a look of innocence that made it hard to speak.

“Hey,” she said. “Did you come to give me an update? Because you could have called.”

“This isn’t something I can do over the phone.”

“More bad news?”

“Can I come in?”

“So it is bad news.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

She stepped back to let him in. “Coffee?”

“No. I’m fine. Is it strange being back here?” he said, following her to the living room.

“I’ve been sleeping in one of the guest rooms to distance myself from it all, but yes. It’s strange.”

He looked around the living room when they entered. She’d changed it. Most of the furniture had been replaced.

When he sat on a plush cream-colored sofa, he rubbed his hand over the silky leather. “This is new.”

“This is the room where I found my dad. I couldn’t stand having it the same. It was like a memorial to his death.”

“You plan on staying here long?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. Even if I sell it all, I can’t have anything unless I marry Christopher. Maybe I’ll give it all away. I still haven’t come to terms with everything. Probably the easiest thing to get my head around is that fact that Artus was responsible for my dad’s death. It makes so much sense. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.”

Danny looked at the floor, unsure how to proceed. The opportunities for pain in her life seemed to abound. “There’s something else.”

She laughed softly. “There always is.”

“It’s about your mom. When I spoke to the deputy director, I asked her about what happened.”

Jael didn’t flinch. “Why?”

“I thought you might like to know the truth. With so much uncertainty in your life, I wanted you to know.”

“You think it matters how she died?”

“Doesn’t it?”

She shrugged. “You’re going to tell me it was an accident?”

“It was. She was carrying drugs, and they chased her. While on the run, she fell.”

“I know.”

“But I thought?—”

“That I hold them responsible? I was angry. At my mom more than anyone, but she was dead, and I needed someone to blame. The FBI was an easy target. It suited my life the way it was. Gave me an outlet for the rage that was always just below the surface. Vita Nova changed that for me, and I guess that’s why I hang onto it so tightly. I know what my life would be like without it. In a way, the fear of what the future looks like has helped me understand better what her life must have been like.”

How could he ask her to help him now? She was so sad and broken. She'd likely say yes to his request, but he wasn't sure he was willing to ask it of her.

"Is that why you're here?" she said. "To tell me about my mom?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." When he didn't say more, she scooted forward in her seat. "The FBI still wants the engagement party, don't they?"

"How did you know?"

"I know how they work. How everyone works. They're as hungry for control as my dad was. And I'm always the one in the middle doing the bidding of whoever has the most leverage."

"I don't like it, but all they want is an engagement party. That's it. There doesn't have to be a marriage."

"What if they don't get what they're after?"

"Then we'll get him another way."

"And if you don't? Where does that leave me?"

"He won't know you're involved," Danny said.

"He will if I don't follow through on the marriage."

"I'll do whatever it takes to make sure we bring both Artus and Christopher down. If the engagement doesn't work, then we'll find a way for you to disappear for a while."

That will give the FBI room to work without you in the picture.”

“If I refuse to go along with your plan, you’re supposed to bring me in, right?”

“They’re prepared to do whatever it takes to get you to cooperate.”

“Like they threatened you with prison.”

“They didn’t threaten me. I gave myself up.”

“Why?”

Danny took a breath. “Because I needed to face the consequences of my actions.”

“What did you get for helping them now?”

“It was someone else they helped this time.”

“And if I refuse to do what they ask, what happens?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

She nodded. “They’ll revoke their help. I know how these things go. The threats. I’ll call Christopher today and make amends. The engagement will be back on.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do. This has never been about me anyway. At first it was about keeping the doors of Vita Nova open, but I can’t do that with Christopher. Allow me to help in what little way I can.”

“Don’t give up on your foundation.”

“I was prepared to give up everything for Vita Nova. Taking down the Siseras will be the same. I’ll do whatever it takes to stop them.”

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Christopher nuzzled against Jael's neck as he pressed her against the door. She held her breath and pushed back. He resisted.

"You have to let me come in." His voice was muffled against her shoulder.

"Not tonight."

When he pulled back to look at her, his eyes were glassy with desire. "You say that every time."

"I'm not ready yet. This has all moved really fast."

"You said that's what you wanted."

"I do, but that doesn't mean I'm not feeling overwhelmed by everything."

"You're still mad at me."

"No. I mean—" She could only take the lie so far. "I'm frustrated at how the situation turned out, yes. And when Martin attacked me, you did nothing to stop him."

"I didn't have time. If you remember, Danny turned up and took over. Besides, I knew Martin wasn't going to actually hurt you. He just needed to let off steam."

"I know what you think, but there is no doubt in my mind that he's hurt Becca."

Christopher shoved her lightly as he stepped back. "Here we go again. I thought we

were done with this. You said you'd moved past it."

"I'm trying." If he was angry with her, at least he'd leave her alone. "But it's hard when you aren't willing to see it from my perspective."

"What if I promise that next time I'll defend your honor? Will that help?"

"That's a start."

"Good." He moved in close again. "Now can I come in?"

She put her hand against his chest and shoved him back. "Not tonight."

He grunted. "You sure know how to ruin a moment, you know that? If this is a taste of things to come... There are expectations I have of married life. Don't think I'll put up with the same resistance."

She waited a beat to control herself. "I don't expect you to."

"I have needs. You can't get mad if I fulfill them somewhere else when you're not willing."

"While I'd appreciate it if you could hold back, I understand how hard this is for you. You won't have to wait forever, but I'm not ready yet."

"I'll do my best, but I won't make any promises. I'm not accustomed to waiting."

"I know. Thank you for dinner. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He kissed her before he left, hard and hungrily. His hands roaming over her body as she groped for the door handle, retreating inside once the door gave way behind her.

“Goodnight,” she said hastily as she stood halfway behind the open door.

Christopher sighed. “Yeah. See ya.”

She shut the door and locked it quietly, then watched through the window as he retreated. They were still a week away from the engagement party, and the more she refused him, the harder he pushed. She’d have to come down with the flu or something if she was going to survive unscathed.

Her phone rang. She ignored it, worried it was Christopher, but finally checked it and answered.

“Danny, hey.”

“Hey, I’m just checking in. How was your night?”

“After a scalding shower, I’ll be better. He can’t keep his hands off me. It’s all I can do to keep from throwing up. But he’s gone now, thankfully.”

“I know. I saw him leave.”

“You’re here?”

“Parked on the street. Do you have pepper spray?”

“You want me to pepper spray my fiancé?”

“If necessary.”

“That’s not helpful. You don’t need to babysit me, you know. I can handle myself.”

“The last couple times you needed my help, you wished I was closer. So here I am. Just in case Christopher decides not to take no for an answer.”

“I don’t think I have to worry about that. He threatened to find his sugar elsewhere if I didn’t give in soon.”

“He didn’t actually say that.”

“Pretty much.”

“You should have slapped him.”

“I should have. Instead, I pretended to be hurt and asked him to abstain if he could manage it.”

“That’s very gracious of you,” Danny said.

“I would encourage him to do what he liked if I didn’t think it would make him suspicious.”

“I’m sorry you have to do this.”

“You know my story. You know I’ve suffered through worse. I’ll get through this too. And, you know, it’s the first time in my life I’ve actually felt like I’m the one in control.”

“But it’s a gem you have to dig deep for.”

“At least it’s something.”

“Okay, well, I was just making sure you were safe. You can go have that scalding

shower now.”

“You want to come in?” she said too fast.

“Right now?”

“I act tough, but I wouldn’t mind some company to get my mind off what just happened.”

“I don’t think I should.”

“Why not? We’re both adults, and it’s not like anything’s going to happen.”

“Uh, yeah. Okay. Just for a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

She hung up but caught herself smiling and shook it off. She’d invited him in to get Christopher out of her head. That was all. They’d talk for a bit, then he’d leave.

But when she opened the door, and he was standing there with a dopy grin on his face, her stomach jumped anyway.

“Come in,” she said and then led him to the kitchen.

“Why was Cinderella so bad at soccer?” he said as he followed.

“What?”

“Cinderella. Why was she so bad at soccer?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re supposed to say, ‘Why?’”

She huffed, then said, “Why?”

“Because she kept running away from the ball.” He raised his eyebrows, but when she didn’t laugh, he frowned. “Not funny?”

“That was supposed to be a joke?”

“Ouch. Okay, what about this? What do you call a snowman in the spring?”

“Why are you telling me jokes?”

“To make you laugh after a rotten night. What do you call a snowman in the spring?”

“What?”

“A puddle.”

She did laugh at that one, although she couldn’t be sure if it was because of the joke or the earnest look on his face.

“There we go,” he said.

“What does a nosey pepper do?” she said.

“Oh, what? You’re getting in on the action? I don’t know. What does a nosey pepper do?”

“It gets jalapeño business.”

“Wow.”

She hugged her shoulders to her ears. “You’re jealous. I can tell. My jokes are better than yours.”

“I guess I’ll need to train Siri to tell me better jokes.”

“I wouldn’t bother. I’d say it’s hopeless.”

“Man, so much hostility.”

“Can you blame me after the night I had?” She laughed. “You want anything to drink?”

“No. I’m fine. I won’t stay long.” He sat at the small dining table, maintaining his distance.

She turned on the kettle and dropped a teabag into a mug. “Thank you for coming in.”

“If only I could tell better jokes.”

“Anything is good after spending time with Christopher. I think I’ll lie low for the next few days. Tell him I’m not well. I’ll stick my finger down my throat if I have to.”

“Drastic times call for drastic measures. He won’t believe you unless you sell it.”

“I can make an appointment to see the doctor for a regular checkup,” she said. “His guy will see me and report so I don’t have to.”

“He’s put a tail on you?”

“Yeah. Not a very good one. But it’s meant I can’t visit Becca.”

“How’s she doing? She hasn’t contacted me. I hope that means she’s not scared.”

“She’s doing okay. She has a lawyer now, so they’re putting everything together. We’re hoping to have a restraining order in place soon.”

“Good. I’m glad you convinced her.”

“Martin did that himself when he turned up on her doorstep. I don’t think she understood before how afraid she was of him. And the kids too. She said her daughter’s been having nightmares.”

“If he’s touched her, he’ll go to prison.”

“I know.”

Danny shook his head. “This might not mean a lot to you, but I’ll be praying for her.”

“That means a lot, actually. Thank you. Believe it or not, I found myself praying for them when I heard Martin was at the house.”

“And God came through.”

“ You came through because I texted you.”

“God can do miracles, but He also works through human action and common sense.”

“Maybe.” She poured hot water into the mug and carried it over to the table. “I might

not be able to help any more women, but I really hope it goes well for Becca. If I know she's safe, that will help me face an uncertain future."

"There must be others you've helped."

"Yes and no. More than half the women I've worked with have gone back. That's hard. And I won't be there if they reach out again."

"You don't think Heber will continue with the funding if Christopher's out of the picture."

"Maybe. I don't know."

She rested her hand on the table, hoping he'd take it. She needed the touch of someone she trusted so she could erase the feel of Christopher on her, but he kept his hands where they were.

"Don't give up yet," he said. "You never know what could happen."

"I know you want me to be happy, but you shouldn't try so hard. I'll be happy to see Christopher and Artus behind bars. Other than that, it's like trying to hold a handful of water."

He shifted in his seat, and they looked at each other for a long moment, neither of them speaking.

Then Danny cleared his throat. "I should go." But his voice was uncertain, and it made her brave.

"I don't want you to," she said.

He nodded and looked at the floor. "I know. That's why I have to go."

"Right."

"That's not what I mean." He tugged his chair closer to her. "You think I'm rejecting you, but you've got it all wrong. If I don't go..." His hand went to her face. "Every time I've pushed you away, it's never been for lack of want. But I can't. It won't work, and it's taking every ounce of self-control to make sure I don't cross that line."

"Maybe I want you to cross that line. Maybe I don't care about the consequences."

He tucked her hair behind her ear. "But you would after. And so would I. This isn't the way I'd want to do things with you anyway."

She pressed her lips together when they trembled. "How would you want to do it?"

He smiled then. A soft, lopsided grin. "I'd flirt with you a whole lot more. That's for sure."

"That sounds nice. Normal."

"Then I'd casually ask you if you wanted to go out some time. And when you said yes?—"

"How do you know I'd say yes?"

"When you said yes, I'd take you somewhere unexpected."

"Like where?"

The smile dropped off his face, and the intensity of his gaze surged. "I'd take you to

Nairobi so you could meet my boys.”

“You have kids?”

“No.” He laughed, breaking the fervency of the moment. “The work I do over there.”

“What work?”

“Helping kids from the slums.”

“You—” She couldn’t say more. She didn’t know how to put into words the overwhelming sensation this revelation gave her, so she leaned forward, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him before he could protest.

He kissed her back, his hands pulling her closer, but it only lasted a moment before he stopped it.

They stared at each other, a breath away from giving in.

“I have to go,” he whispered, releasing her as he stood. After one last long look, he was gone.

Jael stared at nothing, still smelling him so close. Still feeling the tingling on her back where his hands had been.

Slowly, she rested her chin on her hand. It was impossible to guess what would happen from there. But maybe there was still room for hope. Maybe she could even pray for the outcome she wanted so badly it hurt.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

“I hope you’re feeling better,” Christopher whispered into Jael’s ear as he led her into the ballroom. “Because you are looking ravishing. I could eat you up. I hope you’re ready to celebrate tonight.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder so she wouldn’t have to look at him. “I’m much better, but a little shaky on my feet, I’m afraid. It wouldn’t be pleasant for either of us.”

“How about I slip something into your drink?” He laughed, but she wasn’t sure if he was kidding.

“You’d prefer me passed out?” she teased back, but her tone was sharp.

“You’ve been keeping me at bay for so long, I’d take anything at this point—Vivek,” he said when a board member from Heber Industries stepped up to them. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Vivek said. “Jael, you look lovely tonight. I’m so glad you have something to celebrate after your grief.”

“Thank you,” Jael said.

“Christopher would have told you we’ve approved another round of payments for Vita Nova?”

“Yes. Very generous.”

“I know it’s less than we have given in the past, but with Gregory’s passing, the shares took a hit.”

“Heber Industries has always been more than charitable.” Her cheeks twitched as she continued to force a smile. “I appreciate any and all support.”

“I was sorry to hear what happened with your latest client. Christopher said she’s disappeared.”

“She was very upset after the incident at the house. I expect she left the state,” Jael lied.

Vivek nodded. “I’m going to grab a drink. Can I bring either of you anything?”

Jael declined, and Christopher lifted the glass that was still half full in his hand.

“It’s unfortunate that things had to turn out the way they did,” Christopher said after Vivek left them. “I know it’s not the outcome either of us hoped for. Martin’s devastated.”

“I bet.”

“But if she doesn’t attend the hearing that’s coming up, the courts will be after her.”

Jael nodded. “I’m sure she’ll come to her senses.”

“He really loves her, you know. Whatever you think about him, he cares for her.”

“I’m sure he believes he does. But just because someone says they’re in love doesn’t mean they do what’s best.”

“Well, no one’s perfect— What’s he doing here?”

“Who?” Jael looked across the room. But she already knew who it was. “Danny? I invited him.”

“Why?”

“He’s a longstanding friend of the family.”

“I wish you wouldn’t have.”

She pressed a comforting hand against his chest. “I know you don’t like him, but he and my father were close, and I’m sure if Dad was here, he would want Danny to come. It would have been rude to leave him off the guest list.”

“Who cares about being rude to a guy like that?”

“I do. Please don’t make a scene.”

“I’m not going to do anything, but I can’t promise the same if I find him in the parking lot. He’s not planning on staying in town, is he?”

“I have no idea what his plans are. I haven’t really talked to him about it.”

“What do you two talk about?”

“Nothing,” Jael said. “I’ve barely spoken to him.”

“And yet you saw fit to invite him?”

“I told you?—”

“I know. I know. We all have to make concessions.”

“Thank you for understanding.” She noticed Hannah arrive. “Oh, look. Hannah’s here.”

“Hannah?”

“Yeah, you’ve met her. She works for the foundation.”

“More concessions.”

“She’s a good friend of mine.”

“But she’ll be a fish out of water in this company. It will be the highlight of her year, I imagine. Being around all of this opulence.”

“I doubt it. But if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll go say hi.”

“Drop her on Danny. He can look after her, and it will keep him preoccupied. I don’t want him mingling too much.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t belong here.”

“And neither does Hannah, according to you.”

“Exactly.”

She didn’t want to rise to the bait but couldn’t help it. “Then maybe neither do I.”

“Jael, my dear.” He ran his hand down her back and pulled her close. “You’re one of us, whether you like it or not. You always have been.”

All she could see was the black in his eyes. She swallowed. “I better find Hannah.”

When she pulled away, he kissed her, then slapped her butt before she could get out of reach.

“It’s almost over,” she muttered to herself.

Danny checked the time, then scratched his cheek so he could speak into his earpiece. “Give me the heads up when you’re ready to make your move.”

“You get him to say what we need, and we’ll move,” Barak replied.

Danny made his way around the room until he spotted Artus.

“Nice party,” he said, and Artus turned, looking only slightly annoyed.

“Danny, are you still here? I thought you would be long gone now that Gregory’s dead.”

“Unfinished business.”

“Anything I can help with?” Artus said with a wolfish grin.

If Danny went for broke here, it could get him kicked out, or it could get the result he needed. He could see Jael talking to Hannah, but he didn’t know where Christopher had disappeared to.

“Maybe. I’m still looking for a decent job.”

Artus looked him up and down. “You’ve got some nerve. After the way you behaved, I can’t believe you think you’re welcome here.”

“Jael invited me.”

“Enjoy the last of her warmth. Because your friendship will come to an end once she’s married. Christopher will make sure of it.”

“Honestly, Artus, I don’t know what you have against me. Your boy isn’t the shining light you think he is.”

Artus leaned a fraction closer. “What did you just say to me?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to spell it out for you. Christopher makes messes. I bet you’ve cleaned up a few by now. I was attempting to keep things clean and sharp. I thought that was the type of business you ran. We get the job done and get out. But maybe I was wrong.”

“You’re lucky Christopher didn’t shoot you.”

“For what?”

“Does it matter? He’s a grown man. I let him decide what’s best in the moment.”

“Heads up, ladies and gentlemen,” Barak said into the earpiece. “We’ve picked up Bo Feng, the clerk who sold the drug to kill Gregory. He’s already agreed to confess about both Artus and Christopher’s involvement. We’ll leak the information to Artus and see if we can’t get him to confess before we move.”

Danny smiled at the news while nodding at what Artus was saying.

“...When the ends justify the means, you know you’ve got the right combination. I hope we can at least agree on that.”

“Absolutely,” Danny said. “But I don’t believe that was the case with Burger or with Martin.”

“If you like, we can see what Christopher has to say for himself.”

Artus nodded to Danny’s left, where Christopher was on the phone. He’d seen his dad’s summons but held up a finger for him to wait.

Danny would only be in the way if Christopher was getting the expected news. Father and son would talk more freely without him there.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” Danny said. “While he’s on the phone, I’ll go grab a drink.”

“Sounds to me like you’re running away.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back.”

He threaded through the crowd and walked past Jael and Hannah.

“You ladies are both looking stunning tonight,” he said when he reached them.

“Thanks,” Hannah said with an innocent smile.

Jael’s smile was tight. “How are you this evening?” she said.

“Fantastic. I’m headed to the bar to grab a drink. You want to join me?”

“Yeah, sure. Hannah, I’ll be right back.”

Danny wanted to take her hand but couldn’t risk drawing unnecessary attention.

“We’ve got him,” he whispered.

“Artus?”

“The man who gave him the poison agreed to confess. Christopher is on the phone right now with one of his contacts, who’s filling him in.”

She pulled Danny to a halt. “Christopher knows? Why aren’t the FBI storming the place?”

“They leaked it early on purpose. If Artus and Christopher talk, we’ll have their own words to use against them.”

“I wish they’d arrest them and get it over with. Is it worth waiting?”

“The more the FBI gets, the better.” Danny looked over his shoulder. “And it looks like it’s working. Why don’t you feign a headache and go home? You don’t need to be here when it all goes down.”

“Are you sure?”

“It would make me feel better knowing you were out of here.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“I’ll call you when it’s over.”

“Promise you won’t disappear?”

It would be easier if he did. His life wasn't here, and it couldn't be with her. But he wouldn't leave without saying goodbye this time. "I won't. But you know where to find me if I do."

"That's true." She pressed her fingers to her temple. "My head suddenly hurts."

"You don't look too well. You should go home and get some rest."

"I think I'm still sick. I'll tell Hannah she's off the hook for the night too."

He smiled as she walked away, then faced the Siseras, who were still talking with their heads close together.

Artus looked up and waved him over.

Danny squeezed the back of his neck to move his mouth closer to the mic. "You guys get anything juicy?"

"We've got a lot," Barak said. "But I can give you more time if you think you can get more."

"Give me a minute, and I'll see what I can do."

"Sorry, I got sidetracked," he said to Artus.

"Sidetracked with my fiancée," Christopher said.

"She had a dizzy spell. I don't think she's feeling well."

"She's been sick."

“I’m sorry to hear that. Now, where were we?”

Christopher grinned. “Maybe we should have a word in private.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is,” Artus said, touching Danny’s elbow to lead him toward an exit.

“Look, if you have a problem with me talking to Jael, I can assure you, my intentions were all good. I wanted to tell her I got a lead on Becca.”

“That’s nice,” Christopher said. And Danny knew he was in trouble. He’d have to warn Barak they’d run out of time.

“Have I done something wrong?” Danny said.

“I don’t know. Have you?” Christopher gave him a shove when they were out the door. “You don’t know how happy you’ve made me. I’ve been hoping for an opportunity like this.”

“Like what?” Danny said as Artus opened a door off the lobby to find a room that was unoccupied.

“This should do the trick,” Artus said, giving Christopher room to force Danny through before closing and locking the door behind them.

“Lotus room,” Danny said. “Nice name, but if you want to kill me, it would be tidier to take me outside. These carpets really soak up the blood— Oof.”

He collapsed in half when Christopher punched him, but had no time to recover before Artus locked his arms and jerked him upright. Danny fought back, but

Christopher took another swing at him, knocking out all his breath.

“I got a call,” Christopher said. “Sounds to me like you’ve been snooping. I wonder why you’d go and do something like that— What have we got here?” He’d spotted Danny’s gun and retrieved it. “You planning on shooting someone tonight?”

“I always have that on me,” Danny coughed, still working on taking full breaths. “I don’t know what anyone’s been saying about me, but I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“No offense,” Artus said. “But we don’t believe you. Tell me who you’re working for. Is it Gregory? Did he hire you after we had our disagreement at the office? Because I hate to tell you this, but the old man is dead. Heart gave out on him, like yours will if we don’t like your answers.”

“What can I say,” Danny said. “I always had a soft spot for him.”

“For him?” Christopher said. “Or his little girl?” He punched Danny again.

Danny hung limp for a second from Artus’s grip before he had the strength to stand. “You gonna let me answer before you take a cheap shot?”

“I know you’ve been following her,” Christopher said.

“That was before. It’s what Gregory hired me to do.”

“I’ve got that covered now, which means you’re of no real use to us or to anyone.”

“Probably not, but I’d like to say that I don’t think Gregory appreciates the fact that you two conspired to murder him.”

Christopher took another swing, this time punching Danny in the jaw, almost knocking him out.

“That’s unfair.” Danny spit blood. “Why don’t you tell your dad to release me, and we’ll see what you’re really made of?”

“You know I don’t play fair.”

“True.” He licked at his stinging lip. “But I still don’t understand what your problem is. We haven’t always seen eye to eye, but it would be a waste to kill me.”

“You think so? Then explain to me why I got a call from Bo about you wanting to order a certain product.”

“I need it to take care of a problem.”

“Uh-huh. Then why, after the allotted time set for receiving said product was this same employee arrested? I can’t help but feel like you’re involved.”

“That’s got nothing to do with me. I will confess I’ve been snooping around.”

“For who?”

“No one. Gregory was a friend of mine, and I had my suspicions. I wanted to know for sure.”

“That’s a stupid thing to die for.”

“You don’t have to kill me.”

“I’m afraid we do.”

“Then at least tell me why you did it. Gregory was old. How could he interfere?”

“He was a bigger problem than you’d think,” Artus said. “Gregory took our friendship for granted and felt it was his place to step in where he wasn’t invited. We needed Heber Industries to carry some of the load that Jabin Enterprises has been carrying. My business profile has expanded, and there’s been too much money to filter through one company. Gregory told me in no uncertain terms that he wouldn’t allow us to use his business for that. He had the gall to threaten me. Me of all people.” Artus shook his head as though he were hurt. “He deserved what he got. No one threatens me.”

“What would you do if I did?” Danny said.

“You?” He shoved Danny to the floor and took a gun from Christopher. “You want to see what I would do?”

There was a loud bang and a crack. Artus turned his weapon on the door as Christopher pulled another gun.

As the door splintered, Danny jumped on Christopher, who was closest, wrestling him to the floor. Christopher elbowed him in the face, then got free and jumped to his feet as agents shouted for him to drop his weapon, but he fired instead.

Danny crawled for cover as the agents returned fire and Christopher dropped to the ground, riddled with bullet holes.

His eyes drifted to meet Danny’s, and a sneer lifted his lip as the life drained from his face.

Danny stared for another second before drawing himself up.

“Where is he?” Danny said, searching the room. When no one responded, he grabbed the nearest agent. “Where’s Artus?”

“Went through that door.” The agent pointed across the room. “We’re on him.”

Danny didn’t wait to hear more. He sprinted toward Artus’s escape route. He wouldn’t let him get away.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Jael leaned forward in her chair and cradled her head in her hands, allowing relief to wash over her. Her future remained uncertain, but the hard part was over. It was difficult to comprehend what it meant.

She looked out the window into the dark. She'd dared to hope and pray. Was it possible that God was not only real but listening? She'd tested Him, asked Him for the strength to turn down Christopher's advances, and she'd made it through. When Becca had hit a roadblock and they hadn't known the best way to move forward, Jael had asked Him to show the way, and they'd found it. But what did that mean for her? Lucas McGregor had told her the way, but she still felt she didn't deserve it.

She squeezed her eyes against the shame of her past until she heard the front door open, and she shot up out of her seat. Her heart was racing in expectation of what Danny's arrival meant. She didn't want to let him go, but everything he'd said made it clear they wouldn't be together no matter how they both felt. But even as those thoughts flooded her mind, a silent warning sent goosebumps up her arms. She'd locked the door, and Danny didn't have a key.

In the silence of the house, she heard heavy footsteps hurrying across the tiled entryway. She backed against the fireplace and wrapped her fingers around the poker.

"Jael?" Artus said when he opened the door. He looked down at her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

She looked at the poker, then set it back into place, keeping her hand close. He should be in custody by now.

“Is everything okay?” Jael said. “What are you doing here?”

He dropped into a chair. “Sorry. I didn’t know where else to go.”

She kept her focus on him but made note of her phone on the coffee table in her peripheral vision. She’d have to remain calm and act normal until she could send a text to Danny.

“That’s okay,” she said. “You know you’re always welcome here. I’m just surprised to see you is all. I didn’t know you had a key.”

“Gregory gave me one a long time ago. It was more a token of our friendship back then, but today, I’ve found a use for it.”

“Has something happened? Where’s Christopher?”

He stared at her for a moment. “I heard you weren’t feeling well.”

“No. I felt dizzy. I think I’m still sick.”

“Turned out to be a good thing. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Safe from what? What’s happened?”

“The FBI were watching,” he said.

“Watching what?”

“Your engagement party. They were there. You must have left right before they stormed the place.”

“Why would they be at my engagement party?”

“Why do you think? They’ve been after me for years.” He shook his head. “I think they took Christopher in. Danny got to him. It gave me time to escape, but I doubt Christopher got out.”

“That’s— I’m so sorry. Do you think they’ll be able to hold him for long?”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard a few whispers, but to make a bold move like that, they must have something.”

She walked to the couch and sat, glancing briefly at her phone. “They haven’t gotten you before. But I hope he’ll be okay.”

“You don’t have to pretend to be sad.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know you were only marrying him because you had to.”

“I—”

Artus raised his hand. “It’s okay. He’s my son, and I love him, but his credentials as a husband aren’t the best. And I’ve known you a long time. You’re a good liar, but not good enough to fool me.”

She nodded. Artus was practical enough she could be honest with him in this. If she could get him to trust her and relax, she’d have a chance of alerting Danny. “You know I’ve always done what I’ve needed to in order to survive.”

“I know. You’re a remarkable woman. I’ve thought so for a long time. I’ve never

known your equal.”

“That’s more praise than I deserve.”

“It’s only appropriate that you say that. But I don’t agree. Gregory and I may not have always seen eye to eye, but I’ve gotta say, he raised a hell of a daughter.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

He walked over to the couch and sat beside her, resting his hand on her knee. “I’ve been privileged to know you a long time. I think I’ve earned the right to speak into your life.” He was too close, but she didn’t dare move away.

“You’ve been a good friend to our family,” she said. “You’ve also given my dad and me wise advice.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.” He rubbed his thumb across her knee. “You’re a beautiful woman. But when your father made it clear that he had Christopher in his sights to marry you, I was willing to go along with it. I care for you very much, and I only want what’s best for you. But I always thought he got it wrong. My son is no match for you.”

Jael’s throat was so tight, she had to clear it to speak. “Christopher and I don’t have a lot in common. But in these types of situations, you give up your expectations to fulfill your duty.”

“What if you could do both?”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I see the way you look at me.”

“You’re my father’s friend.” She was tempted to tell him she knew about the murder. She wanted to throw it in his face, but she didn’t.

“His much younger friend. You and I, we aren’t that different in age. And shouldn’t my friendship with your dad only strengthen what’s possible between us?”

She scooted away from his touch. “Over twenty years is not a small gap.”

“I’m not an old man. And I’ve been with women younger than you. I can protect you. Look after you. I understand you weren’t expecting this. I’ve hidden my love for you well.”

“Love?”

“As close to it as I’ve ever been. I put it from my mind for the sake of my son. But there’s nothing holding us back anymore. You can’t possibly consider marrying Christopher now. And if you don’t, you’ll lose everything.”

“This is a lot to take in.”

“I’m handing you your best option, but you have to make a decision. I don’t have long. I’ll have to leave before morning, but you can come with me. We can live in luxury beyond even what you’re accustomed to. I can give you everything your heart desires.”

“What about my foundation?” She was clutching at straws, but Artus was not a man you could turn down.

“I have enough money to cover the costs. You won’t need your inheritance or Heber Industries. I’ll fund it myself. And I’ll make sure you have as many houses as you need to look after those women. You can run it from paradise. And I have contacts. I

can help. We can build something greater together. Help more women find the freedom they want so desperately. You know about wanting freedom, don't you?"

It would be so easy to give in. Artus was offering her everything she thought she wanted, but deep inside her soul, she knew it was a facade. She wanted truth more.

She looked at her phone again when she shouldn't have. He saw it.

After snatching it off the table, he quickly tucked it in his jacket pocket. "You're not convinced. It's a shame."

"You talk about giving women their freedom, but no one wants to let me have my own."

"But don't you see? That's exactly what I'm offering you. You can have anything you want. The world will bow at your feet."

"What if I don't want to get married?"

"Who said anything about marriage?" He laughed. "I have no interest in being tied to anyone. I will live to please you, and you can live to please me. Everyone wins."

"I like my life here." Her voice barely made it over a whisper.

Artus shook his head. "I don't know what to say." He stood and walked to the door.

She let out a silent breath, her body tingling in relief. She didn't dare move, but silently rejoiced. Thank you Jesus.

But when he reached the door, he shut them both in and turned the elaborate key in the lock. It had been a decorative piece, left in the lock for the look of it, but now she

was a prisoner.

After a couple of cranks, he pulled it out and tucked it in the same pocket as her phone.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Protecting you. You’ve walked through life with your father by your side. He’s directed you and helped you understand the best way to navigate the intricacies of your position. You don’t have that anymore, but I’m offering you something better.”

“By locking me in here?”

“I want to give you the benefit of the doubt. A lot has happened in your life recently. I realize my declaration is unexpected. I want you to have the opportunity to change your mind.”

She crossed her arms against the chill that ran through her. “And if I don’t?”

“That would be truly unfortunate. Do you know what happens to a puppy if they lose their mother before they’re weaned?”

“You’re comparing me to a puppy?”

“Because that’s what you are. You won’t survive without help. You’re not ready for the world.”

“I’m a grown woman.”

“If I can’t convince you to come away with me, then I won’t let you suffer.”

“You’re going to kill me?”

“It’s for your own protection. I own all the skeletons in your dad’s closet. And I know that you share some of them. I won’t leave you to a fate worse than death. I know how your mother suffered. I tried to help her, but in the end... I don’t want you to suffer like she did.”

He walked up and reached for her, but she balked. His face hardened, and he grabbed her arm, dragging her close. His breath was hot on her cheek.

“I want you. Jael. I’ve spent too many years holding myself at bay. You need to let me have you.”

“You’re sick.” She ripped out of his grasp, and he backhanded her, knocking her to the floor.

Danny paced the ballroom, his focus on the swirling patterns covering the floor. The guests were being questioned and processed, but it was taking too long. He pulled out his phone and sent a text to Jael, telling her to sit tight. He couldn’t quite bring himself to tell her Artus had escaped.

The FBI were watching for him everywhere, but he was a man with a lot of resources and connections that could get him out of the country without anyone knowing.

A door banged, and he looked up to see a body bag being carted away.

Barak appeared at the door and watched the path of the gurney as they crossed the floor. Then he spotted Danny and walked over. “That was good work. I know we’ve had our differences, but I’m not too proud to say that Deborah was right about bringing you in. You got the job done.”

“I’ll thank you for your kind words once Artus is behind bars.”

“We’re doing everything we can to find him, but even if the best we can do is get him out of the country, I’d call that a win. He’ll lie low for a long time.”

“You don’t care if he lives free for the rest of his life?”

“I care, but it’s bringing down his empire that I’m interested in now. And with all the evidence we’ve got, we’ll easily get a warrant to comb through everything he’s ever touched. We’ll unravel a lot of what he’s built. Even if we don’t get the man, tonight was a big win for the bureau.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’ll take your foot off the pedal to find him.”

“Of course not. Deborah’s given me full authority to do what I have to do. We’re already getting phone calls from the public with possible sightings.”

“You’ve made it public?”

“Like I said, we’re doing everything in our power to hunt him down. We have no time to waste. If he’s not in custody in the next twelve hours, we’ve lost him.”

“You’re going to waste a lot of resources following leads that go nowhere.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

Danny ran his hands through his hair. “No.”

“Don’t worry. We’re pretty good at sifting through the garbage calls. A neighbor of Gregory Heber’s called to say they’d seen a prowler that fits Artus’s description. Can you believe it? Like he’d go back to the scene of the crime.”

Every muscle in Danny's body flexed. "Jael's staying there."

"Yeah, but Artus won't go there. He may as well hand himself over to us."

"Have you sent someone to check it out?"

"A second ago you were worried about wasting time, but yes, a police cruiser is headed that way now to have a look, but we're putting our biggest energy into the tightest leads. Artus will be getting as far away from here as possible. He hasn't survived this long by making stupid moves."

Danny pulled out his phone. "Still." He dialed Jael's number, and it went through to voicemail. He hung up. "I'm going to go check myself."

"Do whatever you want. You're off the clock."

Danny ran to his car as icy fingers snaked deep into his heart. Barak was right. It made no sense for Artus to retreat to Gregory's house. But he couldn't let it go.

God, please let me be a fool when I turn up and everything is as it should be. He knew he was letting his emotions rule him, but he couldn't help it.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Artus dropped onto the couch after he helped Jael to her feet. “Bring me a drink,” he said, rubbing his head like he had a headache.

She touched her finger to her mouth, dabbing at the blood.

“You want me to be your servant now?” she said. “What happened to looking after me?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. I want you to learn some manners. What happened to the hostess who was always pleasant at her father’s dinners?”

“I did that because he made me. And now you want to control me. That’s all any of you ever want.”

“You need to be controlled, Jael.” His voice was flat. “You thrive on it.”

She clenched her teeth and took a deep breath before moving to the dark wood cabinet at the wall where her dad had always kept his liquor. If she could get Artus drunk enough, she might have a chance. She’d always known Artus was a bad man, but she hadn’t realized the depth of the darkness inside of him. She also knew it was rare for him to drink himself into a stupor. It was only a slim thread of hope she held on to.

God. Now more than ever, I need your help. I know I don’t deserve one thing from you. But I’m asking anyway. Please. If you care about me as much as Danny believes you do, please save me.

She pulled a crystal decanter from the cabinet, and a strange thing happened. The fear that had encrusted her limbs with a heavy tingling, abated, and another sensation took its place—one she recognized but had always been afraid to embrace.

She pulled the stopper and poured the drink.

“Do you remember a man named Lucas McGregor?” she said with her back still to Artus.

“You’ll have to be more specific. I’ve come across a lot of men in my time.”

“He was a man my father killed for you years ago. He had bushy black hair and striking green eyes.”

“Lucas...Lucas...McGregor did you say?”

She carried the glass over. “Yes.”

“The eyes, yes, I remember. Funny I can recall him. But yes, he caused me a lot of trouble.”

She handed him his drink, and he grabbed hold of her wrist, pulling her to sit beside him. She didn’t resist.

“Is it just me, or are you coming around?” he said, reaching for her face. He rubbed his thumb along her lip where it had bled. “I’m sorry that had to happen.”

“My father never told me what Lucas had done.”

Artus’s hand drifted from her face to her shoulder where the tips of his well-manicured fingers traced lines down her arm. “This is what you want to talk about

right now?”

She didn't move as his hand continued down her body and stopped on her thigh.

“I've always wondered,” she said, “because there was something unusual about him.”

“Nothing unusual.” He retracted his hand and took a sip of the tawny liquor. “He was interfering with my trade.”

“He was dealing drugs on your turf?”

“I didn't say he was dealing. I had a profitable business running in what I called 'Yellow District.' It's a more undesirable part of the city. But the prostitution, drugs, guns, you name it, was a booming business. Then Lucas turned up and began proselytizing everyone. I sent Christopher to look into it, and he brushed it off. Said the guy wasn't worth my time.”

“Lucas was converting people?” A picture formed in her mind of the man she'd watched die. She could imagine him on the street talking to the broken and hurting. They would have listened. He'd had no fear of death. He'd carried no shame or regret. He would have been the same on the street as he held the hand of a dirty beggar or encouraged a prostitute to hope for more. What she had felt in his presence was what she'd suspected all along but was never brave enough to admit.

What did it mean that the same presence was with her now? After everything she'd done. After watching Lucas die without lifting a finger to save him. Why would God want to be with her now, unless it was all true? Unless God really did want her the way He wanted every other broken soul.

“Cults can be very persuasive,” Artus said, breaking her from her thoughts. “And the people in Yellow District were desperate.”

“He must have had quite an impact.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time Christopher got it wrong. Sometimes he’s too full of his own self-importance for his own good. Maybe because I was so young when he was born, I didn’t raise him as well as I could have, but every parent has regrets, I suppose.”

“So because Lucas stopped people from wanting what you had on offer, you had him killed?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I know you like to help people, but there has to be a balance. If it makes you feel any better, you can think of him as a martyr.” He leaned back against the couch, having discarded his glass on the coffee table.

She wouldn’t be able to get him drunk, and her time was running out, but she could feel a strength rising from within. She wouldn’t leave the room with him. He’d have to kill her. He would kill her, but she could be brave like Lucas.

God, I don’t know how this works, but I want to go where Lucas went and where Danny will one day go. I want to be with you. If it’s really true that you can overlook and maybe even forgive all the things I’ve done, then I’m asking you for that. I want my life to be in your hands.

Artus squeezed her leg. “You look a million miles away.”

She lifted his hand and stood. “I can’t do this. I won’t.” She drifted away from the couch, wondering where would be the best place to fall when he shot her dead. She imagined Danny finding her body. It would hurt him. He’d think he should have saved her. How could she tell him she was already saved? That he’d done his work?

“That can’t be your final answer,” Artus said.

She reached the fireplace and turned to face him. “It is.” Artus would get away with everything he’d done, but only until his death. Then he’d face his creator. But she would be free. Death had always been an eternal punishment for her, equal almost to how life had felt on earth, but now it was her freedom. Finally.

Artus looked weary as he considered her refusal. “You do understand what that means,” he said, resting his hand near his hip where she figured the gun was concealed. “This is what you really want? To die this way? As trash?”

His words meant nothing. She couldn’t be shamed anymore. “Do what you have to do.” Her only regret was that Artus would remain alive to continue to hurt people.

God, if there’s any way for you to stop him. Do it. It’s beyond the reach of anyone else now, but not for you.

She clasped her hands behind her back, and her finger brushed against cold metal.

“This is your last chance,” Artus said. “Is there nothing I can say or do to convince you otherwise?”

“My soul is not my own anymore. But even if it were, you are the last person I would ever give myself to.”

His features hardened, but his eyes drifted to the ceiling in what might have been resignation. He’d expected this meeting to go differently. No one ever said no to Artus. “I could have given you the world,” he said with a shake of the head.

“I already have everything I’ve ever wanted.” A warm ball of joy swelled deep inside her chest, and she guessed it was similar to what Lucas must have felt as he faced death. In her last moments, it was a precious gift to finally understand what had given Lucas courage. “There is nothing you could offer me that could compete with what I

have.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“If I have, I’m okay with that. You helped me, Artus. If it wasn’t for you, I may have been lost forever.”

There was a bang at the front door. “Jael?” Came the muffled shout.

Artus pulled his gun and pointed it at Jael but focused on the locked door. “Looks like I have a bonus tonight.”

The bang came again. “I have to speak to you. It’s important.”

“I think our time has come,” Artus said.

With barely a thought, Jael’s fingers wrapped around the cold iron. Artus turned to her, ready to finish the deed, but her arm swung up, releasing the poker. As it flew across the room, she saw that her aim was remarkably on target, and so did Artus. His eyes widened in surprise, and Jael ducked away as he fired off a round before the metal found its mark.

Danny heard the shot and knew. He should have realized already, but his mind was overpowered with emotion that made his thoughts sticky.

He pulled his gun and shot at the door lock, then kicked it in. The entryway was dark, but he could see a dim light coming from the living room. He approached silently and tried the handle, but it was locked.

After pressing his back against the wall beside the door, he called out. “Jael?” He expected Artus to respond. His body was pumped so full of adrenaline, he felt like he

could take a hundred bullets and still break down the door, but he wouldn't let Artus get away.

A muffled, "I'm here," came through the door. It was Jael's voice.

"Is Artus with you?"

"Yes—well, kind of. I'm safe. Give me a second."

He waited until finally there was a scraping at the door, then a click, and the door opened. Jael had blood on her face and arm.

"You're hurt," he said.

She shook her head, then hiccupped a cry and launched toward him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his neck.

He held her, focusing on nothing but the fact that she was alive, then looked over the top of her head, where he could see Artus on the couch.

"Oh," he said, holding her closer when he processed the full picture. "He's dead."

"I should be dead now too."

"I heard the gunshot. I thought you were." He pulled her away from him so he could check her over. Her lip was swollen, and her arm was bleeding.

"The bullet grazed my arm," she said.

"Was that before or after you impaled him?"

“I don’t know how that happened. I don’t even remember picking up the poker, but then I threw it. I needed to stop him. I was okay with dying, but I couldn’t let him get away.”

He pushed her hair away from her face. “I wouldn’t have been okay with you dying.”

“I know.” She touched his face and smiled. “I thought of you coming in and finding me dead. I hated to think about how that would hurt you. How you’d blame yourself.” She shook her head with a laugh. “I wanted you to know I’d see you again one day.”

“I don’t think that’s how death works.”

“But it is. I figured it out. What you said about being free. I didn’t want to die without knowing where I was going.”

He couldn’t move for a moment. Even his lungs stopped working. That God would use a time like this to bring her into the light. He had been afraid for her that she could never accept the gift that was available to her. But not only had God found a way to open her eyes, but He’d saved her so she could be standing in front of Danny right now, smiling with a fat lip.

“I don’t know what to say,” Danny said.

“It might be a good idea to call someone and tell them where they can find Artus’s body. I’d rather get it out of the house as soon as possible.”

“Yeah.” He could still see into the room from his position, so he pulled her away where the light spilled into the darkness. “I want to say I’m happy for you, but this is such a horrible situation. I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner. I seem to be late every time you need help.”

“You turned up at the right time. God had it under control. But I guess Christopher will have to answer for himself now.”

“He’s dead too.”

“What? Artus said they took him into custody.”

“He ran from the room before he saw what happened. Christopher fired at the agents. They fired back.”

“Then it’s over.”

“It’s over.”

It was hours before Danny could take Jael away from the house. She’d called Hannah to arrange to stay so she wouldn’t be alone.

He pulled up outside of a small townhouse as the sky warmed with the first faint rays of the sun approaching the horizon.

“I hope this isn’t the last time I see you,” Jael said, looking at her fingers while she picked at her nails. “I know you must be eager to get back to your boys. I’m sure they miss you.”

“I do miss them, but I have some loose ends to tie up first. The FBI will want me to write extensive reports. It will be painful, but I won’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“But you’re definitely leaving.”

He took a deep breath and shifted in his seat, anchoring his arm on the headrest of her seat. Everything had changed for them. It was hard to shift gears after resisting for so

long, and he was still worried about moving in a direction God didn't have for either of them.

"I have to go back," he said. "But..."

"But?"

"Like I said, I've got loose ends to tie up." The corner of his mouth lifted.

"FBI reports and..."

"I wanted to take in some sights," he said, his eyes remaining engaged with hers.

"Definitely taking in some sights."

She laughed. "Danny Fletcher, are you flirting with me?"

"Maybe."

"Does that mean you're going to ask me out and then take me somewhere unexpected?"

"You were paying attention. And then?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You never told me."

His eyes dropped to her lips, and he couldn't help but touch the edge of the puffiness there. "Does it hurt?"

Her tongue ran across the injured flesh. "A little."

"That's too bad."

“Why?”

“Because I was going to skip ahead a few steps and kiss you.”

“A few steps?” She inhaled softly. “Come to think of it, it doesn’t hurt at all.”

“No? Well then.” He leaned forward and kissed the uninjured side of her mouth, but when she responded, deepening the kiss, she let out a small gasp of pain and pulled away. “I lied. It still hurts,” she pouted.

“It’s probably for the best,” he whispered.

“That makes no sense at all.”

“After a night like we’ve had, emotions are high. My self-control isn’t what it should be.”

“I’m okay with that.”

He lifted his head and groaned. “Don’t say things like that to me. I want you bad enough as it is, but I want to do this right. We’ve both messed up enough in life. Now that I get my chance with Jael Heber, I won’t screw it up.”

She reached for his hand and wound her fingers through his. “That’s what I want too. But it will take some getting used to this new life. I hope making hard decisions like tonight gets easier.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Great. So, if this is going to go anywhere, we’re in for some tough times together.”

“I’m hoping for a lot of them.”

“Me too.” She reached for him, ran her hand through his hair above his ear, and pulled him in for another small kiss that held a promise for something more into the future.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:39 am

Jael's legs and arms pumped as she pushed herself harder, but it wasn't enough. She couldn't get the ball, and Ekele ran it in for a goal.

"Too slow!" he called to her as he ran a victory lap, shaking his fist in the air.

She laughed and slowed to a stop, propping her hands on her knees so she could catch her breath. She was a fast runner, but she couldn't match these boys.

Across the field, she saw Danny and Adisa talking to a woman.

"I'm taking a break," she called to the team and jogged to the sideline.

"Giving up already?" Ekele yelled back.

She waved him off and sidled up next to Danny. "Your boys wiped the floor with me. They're good."

Danny put his arm around her. "I told them to go easy on you."

"They probably did. Hi," she said to the woman. "I'm Jael."

The two women shook, and Danny said, "I forgot you two haven't met formally. Jael, this is Deputy Director Deborah Mills."

"We don't know each other," Deborah said. "But I'm a great admirer of yours. I'm sorry I wasn't able to interview you, but we had another incident come up that required my immediate attention."

“That’s okay.”

“You did what the rest of us could not. And I’d like to formally thank you for your service.”

“I would say it was my pleasure, but it was very unpleasant.”

“Still.” Deborah looked between the two. “Also, I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Who told you that?” Danny asked. Not many people knew about the engagement yet.

“Come on, Danny. You know I’ve got eyes everywhere. When’s the wedding?”

“Next week,” Jael said. When Deborah balked, she laughed. “We’ve had enough time in life to know what we want, so there’s no point waiting. And I’d like to say thank you to you as well because, with your help, Danny has a best man.” She smiled at Adisa.

“My pleasure,” Deborah said, then slapped her hands together. “So, when are you going to show me through the building I spent a lot of money on?”

“ You spent money on?” Danny said.

“You know what I mean.”

“I could have had it done at half the cost.”

Deborah shrugged as she looked out to the team on the field running drills. “The government’s always looking for new ways to waste money. May as well waste it on a worthy cause. You don’t need any help with your foundation, Jael? I’m sure I can find some more cash lying around.”

“No thanks,” Jael said. “You may have money to throw around, but the red tape’s a killer. I’d prefer to keep things privately funded so I can get things done.”

“Good call.”

“We’ll let the boys finish their drills,” Danny said. “Then we’ll go through the building. They won’t be long.”

“Uh, I don’t suppose there’s a ladies’ room anywhere around here?” Deborah said.

“You’re in luck,” Jael said. “In the shed over there.”

“Great. I’ll be back.”

“Adisa,” Danny said. “Why don’t you go round up the boys? I know they’re excited to show Deborah around.”

Adisa nodded and jogged into the field.

“He never says much,” Jael noted, then laughed when he whooped at the boys as he ran over. “Or maybe it’s just me.”

“Trust me, once you get to know him, you can’t shut him up. You’ve only been here a few days, but I can tell that they like you.”

“That’s good, ’cause I’ll be hanging around for a bit.”

“When you said you wanted to get married over here, I didn’t think you really meant it.”

“There isn’t a lot left for me back home. All my friends aren’t my friends. Not really. Everything’s connected to my dad or the Siseras in some way. Being here is a fresh

start I never knew I could have.”

“When I first came here, it was a way to escape. I never would have imagined being here with my wife and maybe kids one day. I’d accepted my life as it was and had given up on the idea.”

“I know. You’ve said that.”

He jerked her closer. “And I’ll say it again and again and again because God is so good. And to be with you, no less. It’s hard to believe.”

“I bet I can make you believe it.”

“Oh, yeah?” He turned to her. “How?”

She moved close, her lips touching his as she spoke. “I’d show you, but the boys are headed over, and I’d hate to embarrass you.”

“That’s too bad.” He wrapped his arm around her and tipped her backward, kissing her as he went to cheers and whoops.

“You two need us to come back later?” Deborah said, returning as Danny righted Jael.

“Just fitting them in when we can,” Danny said, sliding his hand down Jael’s arm and taking her hand. “Ready to go?”

“Ready when you are.” Deborah looked at Jael, and the two women shared a smile that Jael found odd. It was as though none of what had happened had surprised Deborah. Like she knew more than any of them gave her credit for and that things had turned out exactly as she’d known they would.