

Prologue:

The conference room at the New Mexico State Police headquarters in Santa Fe smelled faintly of burned coffee and fresh toner. It was a kind of sterile, neutral place designed to keep egos in check and conversations on tasks. It was a joint strategic fiscal meeting—state police and corrections leadership gathered to map out a new drug interdiction initiative targeting the flow of contraband into state prisons.

Daniel had been through a hundred of these before, but this one felt heavier. Not because of the content, but because of the stakes. Corrections had been stretched thin for years, and political pressure was mounting. Drugs were out of control.

Daniel wasn't just a field guy with a nose for trouble—he was the department's designated Drug Interdiction Coordinator. A title that sounded bureaucratic, but in practice meant he was the one called when drugs flowed through prison gates like water through cracks.

He'd earned that role not just through reputation, but training. A few years back, he spent two intense weeks in Colorado Springs, attending the National Institute of Corrections' Drug Task Force seminars.

It wasn't the lectures that stuck with him—it was the war stories swapped over stale, close to cold coffee, the tactics scribbled on napkins by guys who'd seen things go sideways in ways policies couldn't predict. Oh, if it had to be said, it was the donuts that were the main attraction that day in that meeting. 5

The formality had been set in structure. That certification was more than paper. It was a rite of passage. And it gave him the authority, on paper and in person, to spearhead the state's efforts to choke off the drug pipelines bleeding into its correctional facilities. 6

Now, seated across from administrators and strategists who had never smelled burnt foil or strip-searched a man shaking with withdrawal, Daniel wore that title like armor.

He wasn't here to guess. He was here to act.

He arrived early, as always, taking his place near the back. Suit and tie instead of the uniform he'd worn for a decade, but the posture hadn't changed—alert, skeptical, coiled with quiet energy. He chewed his gum like it held the meeting together.

The door opened just before the hour struck, and she walked in.

She wasn't flashy, but the room shifted anyway. There was something effortless in her stride, confidence that didn't have to announce itself. Her nameplate read *Isabella Morales – DOC Strategic Intelligence Division*. Her eyes scanned the room, locked onto the open chair across from him, and without hesitation, she sat.

She flipped open her folder, then glanced up. "You always sit in the back?"

"Easier exit," Daniel said, not missing a beat.

She smiled. "Typical DOC."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Depends which side of the fence you're on."

There it was—banter with bite. But it wasn't confrontational. It was curious, even warm in its own way. 7

The meeting droned on. PowerPoints, funding allocations, inter-agency friction disguised as diplomacy. But between line items and bullet points, Daniel found himself studying her responses, the way she listened with intent, the way her pen tapped softly only when the conversation turned political. 8

She was sharp. He could see that. But more than that, she was grounded. Like someone who had seen the inside of a cellblock and still managed to come out with her fire intact.

They didn't say much after that, but not in the meeting. But when it broke up, and the crowd started filing out, she lingered near the coffee station.

"You're Daniel, right?" she asked.

He nodded. "And you're Morales."

"Isabella."

There was a pause—not awkward, just expectant. Then she added, "I'm leading the intel task force on contraband mapping. I think we're going to be seeing more of each other."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Lucky me."

She didn't flinch. "We'll see."

Daniel walked off, folder in hand, his boots silent on the tile despite the weight of his steps. But he looked back—just once.

The conference room inside New Mexico State Police headquarters wasn't built for comfort. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting a flat white pallor on everyone's faces. The chairs were stiff, the walls sterile, and the coffee tasted like someone had boiled asphalt.

But the air? It crackled—thick with tension, with anticipation, with the unspoken acknowledgment that everyone here had skin in the game. 9

This wasn't some routine agency sit-down. This was the first full meeting of the newly minted Drug Interdiction Task Force—a joint effort between the state police and the corrections department to get ahead of a growing crisis.

Contraband. Overdoses. Corruption. All threading through the prison system like a slow-moving cancer.

Daniel sat near the back, leaning slightly forward, hands clasped. Always the observer before the actor.

He scanned the room—detectives, wardens, administrators, intel analysts—all talking shop in clipped phrases. Maps and charts were tacked to a board at the front of the room, strings of red ink connecting transportation corridors, visiting room access points, and gang affiliations.

The priorities were clear, if not ambitious:

- Dismantle supply chains.
- Identify complicit staff.
- Expand intelligence-sharing between institutions.
- Intervene before addiction turns into body counts.

But the voice that held the room wasn't the sheriff's or the assistant director's. It was Isabella Morales.

Standing in front of a dry-erase board streaked with acronyms and bullet points, she didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. Her tone had the crispness of a woman who knew exactly where she stood—and where she wanted the rest of them to go. 10

"This isn't just about stopping drugs," she said, making direct eye contact with Daniel for a half-second too long.

"It's about restoring trust—inside the walls and out.

Our staff deserve to work in safe environments. Our offenders deserve a real chance at recovery. And the public deserves to know we're not turning a blind eye while their tax dollars fund chaos."

A few heads nodded. Others scribbled notes.

Daniel didn't move.

He'd heard speeches before. He'd given a few. But this wasn't rehearsed. It wasn't political. It was personal.

Her conviction wasn't just for show—it pulsed through every word. It made Daniel sit up straighter, even if he'd never admit it out loud.

She didn't sound like a bureaucrat. She sounded like someone who had seen the damage firsthand—and wasn't about to let it spread on her watch.

And for the first time in a long while, Daniel felt something stir beneath the armor.

Not an attraction, though that was undeniable.

Respect.

Real, reluctant, unsettling respect.

Isabella was speaking to someone from the State Police now, half-turned, her expression unreadable. But he wasn't looking for signals. He just... liked what 11

he saw. Not just her face or the way she carried herself, but the presence. Calm. Certain. Grounded.

Romance, though? That wasn't his strong suit.

In fact, it was his weakness.

Too many past relationships had soured—burned out by jealousy, mistrust, and the grind of his profession. And now, with a separation hanging in the air like a bad storm, Daniel had all he could do to keep his focus at work, to stay sharp, to stay standing.

Still... as he stepped into the Santa Fe sun, the image of Isabella Morales stayed with him. Uninvited. Unshaken.

He told himself it was nothing. Just another meeting. Just another name on another task force.

But some lines, once crossed, aren't so easy to uncross.

Daniel eased the Crown Vic down Cerrillos Road, the wide tires humming low against the asphalt. Santa Fe was caught between heat and altitude that time of year—dry enough to crack your lips, cool enough in the shade to make you forget. He wasn't looking for anything fancy. Just a hole-in-the-wall place, somewhere quiet. Somewhere to clear his head.

But it wasn't clearing.

The meeting had been what he expected—numbers, logistics, thinly veiled turf battles—but the woman sitting across from him wasn't. Isabella Morales. His 12

new coordinator. Technically a planner, tactically his temporary boss. And for the foreseeable future, his partner in drug interdiction strategy.

Hell of a setup.

He smirked without humor. Of all the people to share intel tables with, they gave him someone with a spine and a mouth that didn't flinch. The kind of woman who didn't ask to be taken seriously—she just was.

He'd seen her type before. The problem was, he usually fell for her type, too.

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Still... she lingered in his mind.

What unsettled him most wasn't the chemistry—it was the partnership. Daniel had spent most of his career working solo, by instinct, by grit. Now he was being 13

paired with someone smart, articulate, sharp as a scalpel—and more than that, she was good-looking, with a confidence that didn't need polishing.

He wasn't sure what he feared more: being challenged or being seen too clearly.

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But some lines, once crossed, aren't so easy to uncross.

The meeting wrapped with the usual shuffle of chairs and murmured goodbyes, but Daniel didn't linger. He gave Isabella a nod—neutral, unreadable—and headed for the exit before anyone could rope him into a hallway recap.

The corridor buzzed with flickering fluorescent light, casting a pale wash over scuffed tile and bulletin boards littered with outdated memos. His boots hit the floor with practiced purpose, each step carrying the weight of his thoughts and the pull of his solitude.

Outside, the late afternoon sun beat down on the government lot. The black Crown Vic waited near the far edge, parked with intention but inconspicuously designed, just as the warden had promised.

Not a patrol car—no garish decals or bold markings. Just a sleek, state-issued unit with subdued lighting tucked into the grill and rear window, antennas barely visible unless you knew what to look for. An undercover ride, built for discretion and authority all at once.

It fit Daniel.

Quiet. Efficient. A little detached from the rest of the pack. 14

He slid behind the wheel and shut the door with a solid *thunk*. The interior was cool, untouched by conversation, and just the way he liked it. As the engine turned over, the low rumble beneath him sounded more comforting than anything he'd heard in weeks.

He stared ahead, hands resting on the wheel, jaw clenched with habit. Behind him was a meeting, a partner he didn't ask for, and a set of problems waiting to resurface.

Ahead?

Just the road.

An admitted adrenaline junkie from day one, Daniel thrived on action—the kind that made others pause. He didn't just walk into the fire; he usually lit it. Controversy didn't scare him. It energized him. And challenges that pushed beyond the bounds of rational thinking? Those were his playgrounds.

He wasn't reckless. He was deliberate. Calculated. A tactician in chaos.

That was why the department tapped him to be their change agent.

The guy who could go from tactical gear to a tailored suit without losing credibility. Who could speak both languages—the straight-talking street cop who turned prison cop and then the polished administrator—and be heard in both rooms, operational and administratively. Uniform off, tie on, same mission: get the job done.

But beneath the veneer of civility, the edge never dulled.

Not really. 15

It hummed in his veins even now as he pulled out of the parking lot, the Crown Vic blending in with traffic like a shadow. His thoughts weren't on the paperwork or the policies, they just hashed out in that too-bright room.

They were on the woman who had caught him off guard.

Isabella.

She wasn't just smart. She was precise. The kind of presence that made a man like Daniel rethink his own footing.

And that unsettled him more than he wanted to admit.

He caught his reflection in the rearview mirror—a sharp jaw, a lined brow, and eyes that had seen too much for thirty-six.

“Get a grip,” he muttered.

He needed food. A diner. Something greasy and reliable. Somewhere he could think without noise, without performance.

Just himself and the next move.

The light turned red. He stopped, leaned an elbow out the window, and looked up at the jagged skyline. Adobe buildings, power lines, and a sky so blue it looked painted. The city had changed. Or maybe he had.

Separation papers were still sitting unsigned on his kitchen counter, next to the half-empty bottle of rye he wasn't supposed to be drinking. Cynthia—his soon-to-be-ex-had—had accused him of everything from infidelity to career obsession, and some days, Daniel couldn't tell where the lies ended and the truth began. 16

She hated his long hours, hated the silence when he came home, hated the way he seemed to live in two worlds and belonged to neither.

And now he had Isabella.

Not in any real way. Not yet. Maybe never. But her presence was already too loud in his thoughts for a woman he'd just met. That meant something. Maybe danger. Maybe distraction.

Maybe both.

The light turned green. Daniel rolled forward. a few minutes later he spotted a ma and pa looking diner tucked between a pawn shop and an empty storefront.

The kind of diner we often refer to as a “hole in the wall” place to eat. Santa Fe had many of these, and Daniel had frequented them often during his five years at the Santa Fe prison. 17

Neon sign flickering, a handful of trucks in the lot. Perfect. He’d been here before when he worked at the Penitentiary south of Santa Fe.

He pulled in, shut off the engine, and sat there for a moment. Thinking.

Not about food.

About the kind of line, you didn’t mean to cross, until it was behind you.

Feeling a bit frustrated, he slammed the Crown Vic door and walked into the diner to get something to eat before heading home to an apartment in the western part of the state. Isolated and alone, he preferred it that way. Some men were built for company. Others built fences.

Daniel had always been more comfortable with the latter.

Inside, the diner smelled like grease, coffee, and something fried—exactly what he was hoping for. Red vinyl booths lined the walls, a few truckers hunched over their plates, and a jukebox in the corner played something low and twangy that reminded Daniel of easier years.

He slid into a corner booth, nodding at the waitress who knew to bring coffee without asking.

He didn’t need a menu. He never did.

“Chicken fried steak,” he said. “Extra gravy. Hash browns. Eggs over medium.”

Breakfast for dinner. It wasn’t gourmet, but it was ritual.

Daniel's culinary world was narrow but comforting: huevos rancheros smothered in green chili for mornings he ate out, a burger at lunch—greasy, no lettuce—and when he had the appetite for dinner, it was always between steak 18

and baked potatoes or the same southern-fried chicken steak swimming in white gravy.

Food was like a routine. Predictable. Steady. Unlike people.

He leaned back, arms crossed, eyes flicking to the window where dusk was settling over the streets.

The Crown Vic sat out front, the engine cooling with a soft tick. It was a long drive back to his place in the western part of the state bare-bones apartment near a laundromat and a Lotaburger joint. It was quiet there. Too quiet for most. Just right for him.

Another bite of silence before everything changed.

The waitress brought his plate with a smile, set it down, and topped off his coffee. He thanked her with a nod, already cutting into the chicken fried steak, steam rising with the scent of peppered gravy.

As he chewed, his mind drifted—uninvited, as it often did these days.

The irony hit hard.

That apartment? That distant place tucked upstairs from a main street hamburger joint, with peeling paint on the balcony and a view of neon lights flickering through the blinds. That was Cynthia's idea. Her *solution*.

She had picked it out. Said upstairs would be safer as nobody could enter it from the street and break in. Said it would save him the long backroad drives to the house. Said it would be easier. Safer. "A weekday crash pad," she called it—something temporary. 19

Now it was permanent. 20

The house was gone—or at least, out of reach. What was once their escape into the foothills now felt like a shadow of something he couldn't touch anymore. Her name was still on the paperwork. His presence was not welcome.

Now he lived next to a laundromat and a hamburger joint, lulled to sleep by the hum of fryers and the occasionally drunk yelling at a drive-thru speaker after midnight. God, he wished the joint would close earlier but it was what it was, an annoyance.

He scraped gravy with a biscuit and swallowed hard.

It wasn't the food that made him sick to his stomach.

He took another bite, but the food turned heavy in his mouth. It wasn't the grease. It wasn't the gravy.

It was the weight of failure.

Not professional failure—no, in the job, Daniel thrived. He was the guy they called when things got messy. The fixer. The one who knew the rules, bent them when he had to, but always got results. His record was clean, his promotions steady, his respect among peers undisputed.

But the more he gave to that world, the less he had for the other one.

The personal one.

That's what made him sick.

It wasn't Cynthia's jealousy, or the endless fights about hours, about loyalty, about trust. It was the realization that he had poured everything into being good 21

at his job, too much, and left nothing behind for the relationship that once gave him a reason to come home.

He'd never figured out how to balance it. He couldn't hold both, so one always slipped away. He wasn't absent on purpose. Not at first.

He tried. God, he tried. He'd wake up early to make pancakes shaped like dinosaurs or Mickey Mouse, even if they came out lopsided and half-burned. He'd buy tickets to the county fair, tell himself he'd be back in time, and then not be.

The pager always buzzed.

The job always pulled. And the time he thought he'd make up later just... evaporated.

He told himself the accolades, the commendations, the moves he made to clean up broken systems, would mean something. That one day his daughters and sons would understand he was out there making the world safer, maybe even safer for her.

But the bedtime stories became phone calls. The calls turned to texts. And eventually, there was just silence on the other end. Not angry silence. Worse. The kind that settles when disappointment becomes routine.

He carried pictures in his wallet. He hadn't taken new ones in years. Not because he didn't want to. Because he didn't know if he'd be welcome. An estrangement has formed between the father and his kids. 22

The uniform had fit like armor, but it never taught him how to protect the things that truly mattered. And now, with the suit and tie, with the rank and title, the man in the mirror still didn't look like a dad.

He looked like someone who tried and failed, and kept showing up too late.

One success had carved out the failure of the other.

Now all he had were the hours between shift changes, the silence in his apartment, and the echo of someone else's voice in a place that used to be his.

He set down his fork. His appetite was gone.

He didn't want it to turn out this way.

Not really.

In his heart, Daniel had wanted harmony. A warm house that felt like a home. A place with lights on at night, dinner on the stove, the smell of fresh coffee in the morning and a woman who wasn't just proud of what he did, but present in what they were building.

But wanting and *being* were two different things.

He didn't do well with domesticity. The kind of man who remembers anniversaries but not to take out the trash. He was more at ease loading mags into his favorite firearm, a state-issued Glock semi-auto pistol, than loading dishwashers. He tried—God knows he tried—but his rhythm was wrong for that kind of life.

He was an adventurer at heart.

Always had been. 23

It showed in his career: ten years in the thick of it, a prison officer turned tactical coordinator, who made a name for himself by volunteering for the worst shifts and signing up for the kinds of details most men tried to dodge.

Risk wasn't something he avoided. It was something he understood, maybe even needed.

He loved the sharp focus of SWAT movements. The cold click of steel. The smell of oil on a weapon he knew better than some of his friends. Shooting range scores were the one place where he still beat time.

At work, he was sharp. Fast. Respected.

At home, he was a silhouette in a picture frame that no one bothered to dust.

He looked at his half-eaten plate, the steam now fading fast.

That was the truth of it.

He wanted warmth but chased adrenaline. And you can't hold both without losing your grip.

The weight of failure pressed against his chest like body armor—too tight, too heavy. He shook his head, blinked the guilt away, and shifted in the booth as his coffee cooled untouched.

That's when it hit him—the memory. The kind that crashes in uninvited, unfiltered.

It was three years ago. Central. A prison yard gone sideways in seconds. Inmates charging a CO, with homemade shanks in hand. 24

Radio static screamed for backup, but he was already moving before the words registered. Just instinct. Just heat.

Daniel didn't hesitate.

He leapt the railing, boots hitting the pale concrete, closing the distance like a missile. One guy went down with a shoulder hit that left him breathless. The second caught Daniel's baton across the wrist, blade clattering to the asphalt. The third turned and ran, and Daniel let him.

Not because he couldn't take him, but because the real threat was down, and the roar in his ears was louder than the crowd. Louder than the sirens. Louder than everything. Afterward, blood on his forearm—not his. Adrenaline is still peaking. He remembered the look the warden gave him. A mix of admiration and disbelief.

"You're not wired like the rest of us," the woman had said.

Maybe he wasn't. Maybe that was the problem. Or maybe it was the only thing that kept him from unraveling completely.

Back in the present, he exhaled. Long. Steady. This was the part he understood. Action. Chaos. Control.

Not the quiet spaces. Not the words that couldn't fix years. He sipped the cold coffee, let the burn settle behind his eyes.

Tomorrow, he'd meet Isabella again. A new kind of challenge. One that didn't require a baton or backup. One that might, if he wasn't careful, ask for more than he was used to giving. And that? That scared him more than any yard riot ever could.