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Chapter 2: Santero

POV: Ace **Word Count Target:** 4,200

Ace felt it before the car stopped.

The town had death in it. Not the fresh kind. Not violence or accident. This was older. Layered. The kind of death that got into the soil and stayed, that changed the chemical composition of the air until the plants that grew here tasted different and the people who lived here carried traces of it in their lungs without knowing.

It was the death of a community. The death of hope. The death of eight hundred people who'd watched their neighbors disappear one by one and learned to stop asking questions.

"Stop," she said.

Mai braked without asking why. That was the thing about Mai. She'd learned years ago that when Ace said stop, you stopped, because Ace's instincts were better than anyone else's in the triad and questioning them later was better than ignoring them now.

"We're here," Mai said.

"I know."

Ace rolled down her window. The heat hit her immediately. Dry and immediate, like opening an oven. And underneath the heat, the other thing. The waiting thing. The air was so full of old death that it tasted metallic. Like blood. Like old blood, blood that had been in the ground long enough to become part of the ground.

The town of Santero spread out in front of them. A main street. A diner. A sheriff's station with two cars in the lot. A church with a faded blue dome. An abandoned gas station with windows that had been shot out. Route 66 remnants ran through the center of town like an old scar that had never quite healed.

Ace closed her eyes. Reached for the resonance.

It was everywhere. In the buildings, in the dirt, in the road. But there were concentrations. Places where the death was louder, where it had settled into the foundations of things and stayed. The sheriff's station had a low hum, like a refrigerator. The diner was quiet. Background noise.

And the church...

The church was loud.

"Stop looking at the church," she said, without opening her eyes.

"I'm not looking at anything." Mai's voice was carefully neutral. "What's wrong with the church?"

"I don't know yet." Ace opened her eyes. The church was old adobe, the kind of Spanish colonial architecture that had been in the Southwest for centuries. The dome was painted faded turquoise and someone had put fresh flowers in the entrance niche. Which meant people still used it. Which meant it wasn't abandoned even though it looked abandoned.

"But she prays there. The woman raising the dead. She prays there."

Shammy leaned forward from the back seat. She had her window open too, and her hair was already beginning to lift slightly, static electricity gathering.

"The air is wrong here. Not dangerous-wrong. Just... full. Like someone's been cooking with the windows closed for years and the smell has soaked into everything."

"That's grief," Ace said. She knew it the way she knew things, without explanation, without process. "Old grief. The town is grieving and it doesn't know what it's grieving for."

"Grief for seven missing people," Mai said quietly, still looking at her tablet. She'd pulled up the county records. "That's the official number. The actual number is probably higher. People stop reporting things after a while, when the sheriff keeps telling them it's nothing."

Ace looked at the sheriff's station.

"The sheriff knows."

"The sheriff is probably part of it." Mai's voice was flat. Professional. The voice she used when she was being an analyst instead of a person. "There's a Deputy Reyes who's been with the department for fifteen years. His record is..." she scrolled, "...suspiciously clean. No complaints. No incidents. No use-of-force reports. Either he's the most careful deputy in New Mexico or someone's been making those reports disappear."

"Or both," Shammy offered.

"Or both."

Ace got out of the car. The heat hit her like a wall. Not the gradual warming of a spring day but the sudden assault of a place that had spent all morning baking and was now radiating stored energy like a giant red rock. She was 120 cm of compact shadow-pressure, built for enclosed spaces and urban environments, and the open sky of the New Mexico desert felt like it was pressing down on her.

"The pressure's dropping," Shammy said, closing her door. "Slow. Not like a storm. Like someone breathing out over a very long time. Whatever's happening here, it's not done yet."

Mai grabbed their gear from the trunk. "Let's find this coroner first. Dr. Hector Vega. According to the briefing, he's our local Foundation contact."

"Your briefing said the Foundation doesn't have a presence here."

"My briefing said no Foundation *station* here. It didn't say no *contacts*." Mai held up her tablet. "Vega's been filing paperwork through anonymous channels for two years. Someone on the fourteenth floor has been receiving it and deciding not to act. We're the first Foundation personnel to

physically arrive.”

“So he's been waiting for us,” Ace said.

“He's been waiting for *someone*. I don't know if he was hoping it would be us specifically, but he's been documenting anomalies in this town for years, and now someone's finally listening. That has to mean something.”

It meant something. It meant that Dr. Hector Vega had been watching his town die one disappearance at a time and had spent two years trying to get the Foundation to care. It meant that whatever was happening in Santero was bad enough that even a man who'd probably had to sign NDAs about the existence of the Foundation was willing to risk everything to make contact.

The diner was called Rosa's, after the name on the sign. It smelled like coffee and something frying and the particular combination of old wood and old smoke that came from buildings that had been standing since before air conditioning. Inside, three people looked up from their breakfast when the bell rang.

They were the only customers. The waitress behind the counter had gray hair and tired eyes and the kind of professional smile that was designed to communicate *you're not from here* without saying it.

“Three coffees,” Mai said. “Black for me. Whatever they want for the tall one.”

“Coffee's fine,” Shammy said. She was scanning the room. Not obviously, but Ace could tell. Shammy always read rooms when she entered them, and this room was telling her things. “And whatever's making that smell. I'm starving.”

The waitress's eyes lingered on Shammy for a moment. On her height. On her hair. On the way the light caught her eyes in a way that wasn't quite natural. But she wrote down the order without comment and moved to the coffee machine.

Mai slid into a booth. Ace sat next to her, leaving room for Shammy. The vinyl seats were cracked and patched with duct tape in several places. The table had water stains that suggested the roof leaked.

On the wall, there was a photograph.

Ace looked at it. Seven faces, mounted in a cheap frame next to a handwritten sign that read: MISSING IN SANTERO. HAVE YOU SEEN THEM?

Seven faces. Three women. Four men. Ages ranging from 14 to 67.

Ace counted the faces. Then she counted them again.

Three of them she could feel. Still here. Still close. Not alive. She knew what alive felt like, and this wasn't that. This was resonance. The echo of something that had been alive and wasn't anymore but hadn't quite gone where dead things were supposed to go.

Three people. Still here.

“Who are those people?” Ace asked. Her voice was steady.

The waitress paused at the coffee machine.

"You don't want to know."

"I do want to know. That's why I asked."

The waitress brought the coffee over. Her hands were shaking slightly. She set the cups down and looked at the photograph on the wall like looking at it hurt her.

"Last ten years," she said quietly. "That's everyone we lost. Sheriff says they're runaway cases, kids who left for Albuquerque and never called, men who went to find work and got lost. But people don't just get lost, you know? Not seven of them. Not from a town this small."

"You think something happened to them," Mai said. It wasn't a question.

The waitress looked at Mai. Really looked. Taking in the tactical vest under her jacket, the tablet under her arm, the professional stillness that came from years of training.

"You're Foundation," she said. Not accusing. Just tired. "Finally."

"How did you..."

"Been waiting for you for two years. Hector said you might come eventually. That the paperwork would reach someone." She refilled her own coffee cup, which had been sitting mostly full on the counter. "You here about the dead woman walking?"

Mai and Ace exchanged a look. Shammy was very still.

"What dead woman walking?" Mai asked carefully.

"Haven't you read the reports? The bodies that sit up and talk? The voices from the cemetery?" The waitress laughed. No humor in it. "That started three years ago. First it was once a year. Then once a month. Now it's every week. Someone in this town is calling up the dead and asking them questions, and the dead are answering, and everyone acts like that's normal. Like that's just what happens in Santero now."

"Do you know who's doing it?" Ace asked.

The waitress looked at her. For a long moment she didn't say anything. Then she reached under the counter and pulled out a small laminated card. A photograph of a woman in her fifties, dark hair streaked with gray, wearing black clothing, standing in front of a door that looked like it led to a garden.

"Irkal Vasquez-Montoya," the waitress said. "Third-generation curandera. She heals people. That's what she was trained to do. Herbs and prayers and hands-on work with the sick." She put the card down on the table. "Her daughter was the first one. Seven years ago. Celeste. Fourteen years old. She went to the store for milk and never came home."

The waitress's eyes were bright with something that wasn't quite tears.

"They found her body six months later, three miles from town. Sheriff said she fell off the highway. Sheriff said a lot of things." She picked up her coffee cup. "You want to know who's raising the dead?"

She is. Because her daughter is one of them. Because she couldn't save her alive, so she's saving her in the only way she knows how."

The waitress walked away.

Ace looked at the photograph on the wall. Seven faces. One of them was a girl with dark hair and her mother's eyes.

And three of them were still here. Still close. Still waiting.

Ace's hand went to her chest. Violet was stirring again. Not the full activation, not the pressure that meant danger, but the slow simmer that meant *pay attention*. The woman raising the dead wasn't random. She was methodical. She was working through a list.

Three people still here. Three people who hadn't been found yet.

"Shammy," Ace said quietly. "Can you read the air in this town?"

Shammy had been very still since the waitress mentioned Irkal. Now she moved. Shifted in her seat, tilted her head like she was listening to something far away. The static in her hair increased slightly.

"There's a pattern," she said slowly. "Like... like someone's drawn lines between points. The church is one point. The sheriff's station is another. There's a house..." she paused, "...east of here, about half a mile. That's the hottest point. That's where the most recent death happened."

"The three still here," Ace said.

"Yeah. They're all connected to the same place." Shammy's eyes were unfocused. "It's like a circuit. Someone built a circuit with the dead."

Mai was taking notes. "We need to talk to Dr. Vega. And we need to talk to Irkal."

"We need to talk to Irkal," Ace agreed. Her hand was still on her chest. Violet was getting warmer. "But not yet. First we need to understand what she's doing. And why."

Shammy came back to herself. She looked at the photograph on the wall, at the seven faces, at the one face that belonged to a fourteen-year-old girl who'd been dead for seven years and was apparently still being dead.

"She just wants to know who killed her daughter," Shammy said quietly. "That's all. She just wants to know."

Ace nodded.

The church was calling to her. The church was loud. But the house. The house that was the hottest point. The house was louder.

"The daughter's there," she said. "The girl's still there. Irkal's been keeping her close."

They finished their coffee in silence. When they left, the waitress was watching them through the window. The seven faces on the wall watched too.

Three of them still here.

Three of them still waiting.

Ace walked back to the car and looked east, toward the point on Shammy's circuit that burned brightest.

Something was waiting for her there.

She didn't know yet whether she was going to answer.

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