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Chapter 8: Reyes

POV: Mai **Word Count Target:** 4,100

The sheriff's department of Santero, New Mexico, was a single-story building with a flag out front and two patrol cars in the lot. It looked like every small-town police station in America. Which was probably the point. You didn't notice it. You didn't question it. You didn't look too closely at the man who ran it.

Mai noticed.

Mai always noticed.

She approached at 6:47 AM, wearing clothes she'd bought from the local thrift store. Denim jacket, work boots, the kind of outfit that said "outsider" without saying "threat." Her tablet was in a backpack, disguised as a personal item. Her disruptor was back at the borrowed house, because Foundation agents on official business created a different kind of attention than women asking questions.

The woman at the front desk was in her fifties. Steel-gray hair and the kind of professional expression that came from years of dealing with people who were having the worst days of their lives.

"I'm looking for Deputy Reyes," Mai said. "I'm a journalist. Albuquerque Journal. Doing a piece on rural law enforcement in New Mexico."

The woman's expression didn't change, but something in her posture shifted. "Deputy Reyes isn't in today. He's." A pause. Too long. "He's on personal leave."

"For how long?"

"Couldn't say."

Mai smiled. The kind of smile that was supposed to be disarming but probably wasn't. "I see. Well. Maybe you can help me then. I'm looking into the missing persons cases from the past decade. Seven people, I believe. I was hoping someone could give me context."

The woman's smile was the same kind Mai had perfected over years of suppressing information she didn't want to share. "That's all in the official reports. Sheriff Henderson can provide those, when he returns from conference."

"What conference?"

"Law enforcement conference. Albuquerque. He left Monday."

It was Wednesday.

Mai nodded. Wrote something in her notebook that she didn't need to write. "And Deputy Reyes's personal leave. Did that start Monday too?"

"Couldn't say."

"But it's a coincidence. That Deputy Reyes and Sheriff Henderson both left town at the same time, during what I'm sure is a busy period of missing persons investigations."

The woman's smile didn't waver.

Her eyes did.

Just slightly. Just enough.

"Ma'am, I really think you should speak with Sheriff Henderson when he returns. I'm not authorized to discuss ongoing cases."

Mai thanked her and left.

Outside, Ace was waiting by the car. Shammy was somewhere above, on the roof of the abandoned gas station across the street, reading atmospheric patterns Mai couldn't see.

"He's leaving," Ace said. "I can feel it. The pressure around him is building toward departure."

"He doesn't know we're here yet." Mai checked her tablet. The data she'd pulled from the department's public-facing systems was thin but revealing. Personnel schedules. Patrol logs. Dispatch records. Reyes had filed a vacation request three days ago. Sheriff Henderson had filed a conference registration five days ago. Both set to return next Monday.

Except Reyes's truck had been seen heading toward the Albuquerque airport on Tuesday night.

"Flight records?" Ace asked.

"Working on it." Mai pulled up the airport manifest she'd accessed through Foundation channels. Reyes wasn't on any commercial flights. But there was a charter flight that had departed for Nevada at 11 PM Tuesday. Private. No passenger manifest required for charter under current privacy laws.

"He's running," Mai said. "He knows Foundation is here. Getting out before they can question him."

"Or before Irkal raises someone who can testify."

"Both." Mai closed the tablet. "Either way, we need to move faster. If he gets to Nevada, he'll disappear into whatever hole the consortium has prepared for him. And Irkal's five-day window is collapsing."

Ace's eyes did the thing. The violet shimmer that meant Violet was paying attention. "The air here is wrong. Reyes has been in this building every day for years, and the building remembers him. It doesn't like him."

"Can you tell where he went?"

"No. But Shammy might." Ace looked up at the sky. "Shammy. Report."

Shammy's voice came through Ace's comm unit, tinny and distant: "He's been moving toward the east side of town. There's a compound, looks like an old ranch. Reyes has been there. The air is." She paused. "The air is angry. Contaminated. Something happened there that left a mark."

"The burial site?"

"Maybe. But also." Another pause. "There's a plane. On a private runway behind the ranch. Reyes's truck is there. He's prepping for departure."

Mai's blood went cold. "He's not waiting for Monday. He's leaving today."

"Today," Ace confirmed. "Which means we have hours. Maybe less."

"Then we go now." Mai started toward the car. "We get to the ranch, we document everything, and we make sure Reyes doesn't leave."

"And Irkal?"

Mai stopped.

That was the question, wasn't it. If they intercepted Reyes, they stopped his flight. But Irkal was still in Santero, still preparing for a permanent raise that would cost her life, still operating under a kill order that Foundation would execute the moment reinforcements arrived.

"Irkal first," Mai said. "We tell her what we found. We give her the choice."

Ace nodded. They got in the car.

Irkal's house was quiet when they arrived. The wards around the property hummed faintly. Mai's instruments detected a complex pattern of protective magic, layered and old, the kind that came from generations of practice rather than books. Irkal was not an amateur.

Irkal was something that had been in her family for a long time.

She met them at the door. She looked worse than she had two days ago. Thinner. Grayer. Her hands trembling slightly in a way she couldn't quite hide.

"I know," she said, before they could speak. "He's leaving."

"How did you"

"The dead told me." Irkal stepped aside to let them in. "Daniel. Rosa. The others. They felt what I was feeling. They know Reyes is running. They're angry. They've been angry for years, and now they have a chance to direct it."

Ace was scanning the room. "Where are the photographs? Celeste's photographs of the burial site."

Irkal hesitated. Then she walked to a shelf above the fireplace and pulled down a wooden box. Inside, seven photographs. Glossy, faded, clearly taken on a phone camera by a fourteen-year-old girl who hadn't known she was documenting evidence.

"Daniel Acosta took these after I raised him," Irkal said. "He told me where Celeste had hidden them. She knew someone might come for her, so she hid them in a place no one would think to look."

Mai took the photographs. Her hands were steady, but inside she was reeling. These were real. Actual evidence of toxic waste burial, illegal dumping, the crimes Reyes had committed. These were what federal prosecutors needed.

"This is enough," Mai said. "This is enough to convict him. Federal prosecutors will"

"Will what? Act on testimony from the dead?" Irkal's voice was bitter. "Even if these photographs are admissible, even if Daniel's testimony is recorded and authenticated, Reyes has connections. The consortium has lawyers. Money. People in places that make problems disappear."

"Not this time." Mai held up the photographs. "I know how Foundation works. I know how federal law enforcement works. These photographs, combined with Daniel's testimony, combined with the burial site location. This is a RICO case. Conspiracy to commit environmental crimes, conspiracy to murder, obstruction of justice. Reyes isn't just a deputy who killed some people. He's part of a criminal organization."

"And when Foundation arrives? When they kill me and classify everything?"

Ace stepped forward. "We don't let that happen. We go to federal authorities first. We make this public before Foundation can bury it. We"

"You can't." Irkal's voice was quiet. Final. "Foundation has been protecting Reyes for five years. Why do you think they declined five separate reports? Why do you think every officer who filed those reports had their names redacted? Someone in Foundation command is connected to the consortium. Someone high up. Someone who makes problems like Irkal Vasquez-Montoya disappear."

The room was very quiet.

Mai thought about Collins. About the way he'd been careful, measured, about the way he'd known exactly what to say to make them feel like they were being listened to while actually being maneuvered into position. She thought about the fourteenth floor, where decisions were made about which problems mattered and which problems could wait.

She thought about a system that had declined five separate opportunities to investigate a town full of murdered people, and then sent a kill team when the situation became too visible to ignore.

"Then we take this to someone outside Foundation," Mai said. "We take this to the press. We make it so public that covering it up becomes impossible."

"That takes time." Irkal was looking at Ace. "And time is something I don't have. The raise is accelerating. I raised three witnesses in one night. It cost me more than I planned. I'm burning out faster than I expected. I have." She paused. "I have maybe a day. Maybe less."

Ace's hand went to her chest. "You're dying."

"Everyone is dying. I'm just dying faster." Irkal's smile was thin. "I've made my peace with it. The only question is whether Celeste gets her voice before I go."

Mai looked at the photographs in her hands. At the box where Irkal had kept them, hidden, waiting for someone to believe her. At the woman who had broken every rule of nature to give her daughter justice.

"There's a Pueblo settlement thirty miles east," Mai said. "Sovereign land. Foundation has no jurisdiction there. If we can get the photographs to someone who can verify them and get them to federal authorities"

"Reyes is attacking the Pueblo." Shammy's voice, from the doorway. She'd arrived without them noticing, the way she sometimes did, moving through pressure differentials like they were hallways. "He's loading trucks right now. Private security. He's not running. He's burning evidence. The burial site. The witnesses. Everything."

Ace's eyes went solid violet. "When?"

"Today. Within hours. He's not waiting for Foundation to clear him. He's cleaning house."

Ace drew her katanas. The blades hummed at a frequency that made the windows rattle.

"Then we go now," she said. "We stop Reyes. We protect the evidence. And we make sure Irkal gets her chance to say goodbye."

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,050

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