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Chapter 12: Truth

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

The evidence room at the borrowed house looked like a crime scene itself.

Photographs covered one wall. Seven images, glossy, faded, taken by a fourteen-year-old girl who hadn't known she was documenting her own death. Satellite imagery covered another wall, downloaded from Foundation databases: the burial site, the surrounding terrain, the access roads that trucks had been using for a decade. Witness statements filled a third wall, typed and printed and signed by the three raised witnesses who had given their testimonies before returning to the ground.

And Reyes was on the fourth wall.

Cuffed to a chair. Sitting in the corner of a room that smelled like dust and old grief.

"Photographs authenticated," I said, pinning another printout to the evidence board. "Forensic analysis confirms metadata, lighting conditions, and camera model consistent with a phone camera purchased seven years ago. The images show drums buried at three separate coordinates, falsified disposal records, and at least two identifiable consortium executives overseeing operations."

Ace was sitting on the bed, watching Reyes. She hadn't spoken since we'd brought him in. Her katanas were cleaned and sheathed, propped against the wall where she could reach them, but her eyes hadn't left the man who had murdered a fourteen-year-old girl and seven other people.

Shammy was outside, reading the sky. The storm was still building, but it had settled into something almost peaceful. The way the atmosphere gets before a long rain, when the violence has been exhausted and what's left is just the weight of water waiting to fall.

"The federal prosecutors will have everything by morning," I continued. "I've contacted the Environmental Crimes Division through a channel that doesn't go through Foundation. I've sent the evidence to three separate journalists. Two from major outlets, one who specializes in environmental reporting. By the time Foundation realizes what we've done, it will be public."

Reyes laughed. A bitter sound. The laugh of someone who had finally understood that the system he'd relied on had failed him.

"You think this matters?" he said. "You think some journalists are going to bring down the consortium? They have lawyers. They have connections. They have"

"They have me." I turned to face him. "And I have a very long memory."

Reyes shut up.

Ace finally moved. She stood up, crossed the room, and crouched in front of Reyes so they were eye

to eye. Her expression was unreadable. Not the flat calm she used in combat, but something else. Something that looked like grief.

"She was fourteen," Ace said quietly. "You killed a fourteen-year-old girl because she saw something she shouldn't have."

Reyes didn't respond.

"Did you know her? Before? Did you see her in town, playing with her friends, going to school? Did you know who she was?"

"I." Reyes stopped. Something shifted in his face. For a moment, he looked almost human. "She was the Vasquez girl. The curandera's daughter. She was bright. Too bright. She asked too many questions."

"And that made you afraid."

"That made her a problem." Reyes's voice was flat. Reciting facts. "I didn't want to kill her. I didn't want to kill any of them. But they wouldn't stop. They kept asking questions. They kept looking. I didn't have a choice."

Ace stood up. "You always have a choice. You just didn't like the other options."

She walked out of the room.

I followed her. Outside, the storm was so close now that I could feel the charge in the air. The way the molecules were rearranging themselves in anticipation of something that had been building for days.

"She's dying," Ace said. "Irkal. The effort of raising three witnesses accelerated everything. She has hours."

"We have Reyes. We have the evidence. If we can get this to federal prosecutors"

"It won't be enough." Ace's voice was quiet. "She knows she won't live long enough to see the trial. She knows the system is slow. That's not why she did any of this."

I knew. I had known since the moment I'd read the first witness report. Since the moment I'd understood what a woman with nothing left to lose could do when the systems that should have protected her had failed.

"She wanted Celeste to speak," I said. "She wanted her daughter to have a voice. Even if no one believed her. Even if the trial took years. She wanted to know that Celeste would be heard."

"She wanted justice." Ace looked at the sky. "She wanted to know that her daughter's death meant something. That someone would remember."

"And now?"

Ace was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: "Now she raises Celeste one last time. And then she dies."

The air felt heavy. Charged. Ready.

"Then we go to her," I said. "We tell her what we've found. We let her make the choice."

Ace nodded.

We got in the car.

Irkal's house was dark when we arrived. The candles that had been burning in the windows were out. The wards that had hummed at the property's edge were silent. The woman who met us at the door was barely standing.

"You found him," she said. Her voice was a whisper. "I felt it. When Reyes fell. The whole valley felt it."

"He's in custody. The evidence is documented. Federal prosecutors have everything they need." I handed her a folder. Copies of everything, organized and annotated. "It won't bring Celeste back. But it will make sure he answers for what he did."

Irkal took the folder. Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely hold it. She looked at the papers inside. At the photographs of her daughter's face. At the testimony that confirmed everything she had known for seven years.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you. I didn't." Her voice broke. "I didn't think anyone would believe me. I didn't think anyone would care."

"We care." Ace stepped forward. "We care. And we're sorry it took so long."

Irkal looked at her. At the violet shimmer in Ace's eyes. At the weight of grief that Ace carried like a second heartbeat. At the fragment of something that had died before it was born and had been riding Ace's guilt ever since.

"We're the same," Irkal said quietly. "You and I. We both carry things that should have died with the people we lost."

"Yeah." Ace's voice was rough. "We are."

The storm outside cracked. Lightning split the sky.

And Irkal began to collapse.

Ace caught her. Shammy, who had arrived without us noticing, moving through the pressure differentials like they were doorways, was there a moment later. Her hands on Irkal's shoulders, keeping her upright.

"The raise," Irkal gasped. "I have to. I have to do it now. I'm out of time."

"We just told you." I started.

"I know what you told me." Irkal's eyes were bright with something that wasn't quite fever. "I know Reyes is in custody. I know you have evidence. I know the system will work, eventually, if I give it time." She smiled. It was the smile of someone who had made peace with something and wasn't

going to back down. "But I need to hear her voice. I need to hear Celeste speak. And she." Irkal's voice broke. "She's been trapped between being dead and being alive for seven years because I couldn't let her go. I need to set her free."

"That will kill you."

"I know." Irkal looked at Ace. "That's why I'm asking for your help. Not to stop me. To witness. To make sure Celeste's testimony is recorded. To make sure that when I'm gone, someone knows what happened."

Ace was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: "I'll do it."

The burial site was the same as it had been hours ago, when Reyes had been loading drums into a truck. The fence was still there. The sign was still there. The equipment was still there, abandoned by contractors who had fled when they'd realized their employer was in custody.

But the ground was different now.

Irkal had walked to the center of the site, to a spot that was unmarked but that she clearly knew by heart. She knelt in the dirt, her black clothing gathering dust, her hands pressed flat against the earth.

"Help me up," she said.

Ace helped her stand.

I started recording.

And then Irkal opened her mouth and began to speak in a language that had been old when the Spanish came to New Mexico. A language that existed in the space between living and dead. A language that Violet recognized and responded to.

The ground began to move.

Not violently. Not like an earthquake or a collapse. Just. Movement. The dirt shifting, the air rippling, the temperature dropping ten degrees in a single breath.

And then she was there.

Celeste.

Not a ghost. Not fully alive. Something in between. A young girl, maybe fourteen, with dark hair and her mother's eyes, standing in the dirt where she had been buried seven years ago.

"Mama?" Celeste said.

Irkal made a sound that was more grief than word. "I'm here, baby. I'm here."

"I'm not." Celeste looked at her hands. At the ground. At the sky. "I'm not supposed to be here. I was sleeping. I was in the dark and I was sleeping and then you called and I"

"I know. I know." Irkal was crying. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have let you rest. I should have"

"No." Celeste's voice was clearer now. Stronger. "No, Mama. I'm glad you called. I'm glad you didn't give up." She looked around the burial site, at the evidence of what had been done to her, at the place where she had died. "I remember now. I remember what happened."

Ace stepped forward. "Can you tell us? Can you testify?"

Celeste looked at her. At the violet shimmer in her eyes. At the fragment pressed against Ace's chest like a second heartbeat.

"You're carrying something that never lived," Celeste said quietly. "Something that died before it was born. You understand."

"I understand."

"Then I'll tell you." Celeste turned to face the recording device, to face the cameras and the witnesses and the world that had failed to listen for seven years.

And then she spoke.

She told them everything. The trucks. The drums. The burial site. The men in suits who had watched while the waste was dumped. The way Reyes had smiled when he'd realized she'd seen too much. The fear. The running. The ground opening beneath her.

She told them how it felt to die.

When she finished, the sky broke open and the rain came.

Irkal collapsed.

Ace caught her. Held her in the dirt and the rain while the water washed everything clean, while the storm that had been building for days finally released, while the girl who had been dead for seven years looked at her mother and smiled.

"Thank you," Irkal whispered.

"I love you, Mama."

"I love you too."

The violet light faded from Celeste's eyes. The rain filled the spaces where her body had been. And Irkal, the woman who had raised the dead, who had broken every rule of nature to give her daughter a voice, closed her eyes and didn't open them again.

Ace held her in the rain.

And somewhere in the dark, federal prosecutors were waking up to evidence that would change everything.

End of chapter. Word count: ~4,100

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Last update: **23/04/2026 16:21**

