

THE SANTOS CONFESSION

by

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CHAPTER 19

SEVENTEEN YEARS

The building was on Fourth Street in Boyle Heights, in a block that had been a print shop, then a union hall, then nothing official for twenty years. The kind of building that stayed standing because someone kept paying a tax bill somewhere and nobody asked why.

Trader had the key to the front door.

He did not come inside.

"He asked for you alone," he said. "Same as the note."

Reyes looked at him.

"You're alright with that."

"No," Trader said simply. "But it's not my conversation."

He stepped back from the door and put his hands in his pockets and looked at the street. Reading the movement. The parked cars. The sight lines.

Luis's mannerisms. In both of them.

She went inside alone.

The front room was empty. Fragmented light through boarded windows. Dust on the floor disturbed in a single path leading toward the back — one person, moving carefully, not hiding his footprints, almost leaving breadcrumbs.

She followed the dusty foot prints.

Through a doorway. Down a short hall. Into a back room that had been a pressroom once — the bolts where the machinery had been anchored still visible in the concrete floor, four rows of them, the ghost of something that had once made news daily but was gone now.

Her father was standing at the far window with his back to her.

She stopped in the doorway. She had prepared herself for this moment for two weeks. She had read his files and his letters and his careful handwriting on the edges of a hundred documents and she had told herself that when this moment came she would be ready for it. That she was a professional. That she could process this.

She had not.

He was thinner than the photographs. Gray at the temples. The aging of someone who had moved constantly and slept lightly for seventeen years. Thin grey and wiry, a little like a feral tomcat in an alley.

He turned around.

She saw his eyes.

They had the same eyes.

She had been looking at his eyes in the mirror her entire adult life without knowing whose they were.

Neither of them spoke.

He opened his mouth.

"Elena—"

"Don't speak, please" she said.

He stopped.

She stood in the doorway and looked at her father and felt seventeen years of questions arrive in her body all at once — not as sadness, not yet, something with more heat than that. Something that needed answers.

"I used to practice," she said. Her voice was barely steady.. "What I would say to you. When I was twelve I had a whole speech. Very organized. I had been reading your case file — the one the department had, not the real one, I didn't know about that one yet. She chuckled under her breath, a twelve year old with grievances — and I had organized my grievances into categories."and by the time I was twenty I had stopped practicing. I told myself I didn't care anymore."

Luis said nothing.

"I told myself that for seventeen years," she said. "I got very good at it."

"Elena—"

"Seventeen years." The heat was rising now. The steadiness starting to go. "Seventeen years, and you were here. You were in Los Angeles. You were in my buildings. You watched me walk into Site 1 and read your letter and you stood there saying nothing." Her voice cracked on the last word. She pushed through it. "You stood there and watched me."

"I had to know if—"If you were ready." The words came out softly." Luis said, "Trader told me. You had to know if I was ready. I was nine years old when you left, Luis. I wasn't ready then either and you didn't stay for that." "His face grimaced

She pushed off the doorframe and walked into the room because she couldn't stand still anymore, couldn't hold it in her body without moving, and the room wasn't big enough and her father was standing there looking at her with her own eyes full of of shame

"Do you know what I told people?" she said. "When they asked where my father was? I told them you were dead. I told them that for six years because dead was easier than — than whatever you were. Dead meant it wasn't a choice. Dead meant you didn't look at me one day and decide I wasn't worth staying for."

"That is not—" Luis tried to say something

"I know it wasn't that." Her voice broke again, harder this time. "I know. I figured it out. I read every file, I traced every decision, I understand exactly why you ran and why you stayed gone and the logic of all of it is completely clear to me now and it doesn't matter." She stopped two feet in front of him. "It doesn't matter because I was nine years old and you were my father and you left and the logic doesn't fix that, it doesn't fix any of it, there is no file in the world that makes that okay—"

She shoved him.

Both hands. Hard. The flat of her palms against his chest.

He took it. Didn't step back. Didn't grab her hands. Stood there and took it the way a man stood in something he knew he had deserved

She shoved him again.

"Where were you." Not a question. A wound with words around it. "Where were you when I made detective. Where were you when I buried mom's sister alone because there was nobody left but me. Where were you—"

Her voice stopped working.

She was crying now. Not the kind she could control. The ugly kind, the kind that had been waiting seventeen years for a volcano of emotion to erupt, and this was apparently the time and the place.

Luis Reyes stood in front of his daughter and did not defend himself.

His face was broken open in a way that had hidden nothing in it. Nothing calculated, nothing of the man who had built a hidden infrastructure and documented the invisible city and left breadcrumbs across seventeen years of careful architecture.

He was just a broken father.

Standing in front of what he had done to his daughter.

"I watched you," he said. His voice was wrecked. "I know that's not — I know it's not the same. I know it doesn't count. But I watched you make detective. I was across the street. You came out of the building and someone shook your hand and you looked up at the sky for a moment before you looked back down and I—" He stopped. His jaw tense. "I've missed you every day. Every single day. And I know I have no right to that. I know I gave up the right to miss you when I left. I know that."

The tears were on his face now too.

"There is no excuse," he said. "I have spent seventeen years trying to build one and I'm standing here and I can see your face and there is no excuse. There is a reason. The reason is real. But it is not an excuse."

She stood in front of him with her hands at her sides.

"You missed me," she said.

"Yes."

"You watched me grow up from a distance and you missed me."

"Yes."

"And you thought that was the same as being there."

Nobody answered right away.

Luis looked at his daughter.

"I told myself it was the only thing I could give you," he said quietly. "I told myself that so many times that I stopped being able to hear how wrong it was." A long pause. "Your mother told me once that I confused surveillance with love. That I thought watching over people was the same as being with them." He looked at the floor. "She was right." "That is what I thought."

She crossed the last two feet between them.

She didn't say anything.

She put her forehead against his shoulder the way she might have as a nine year old, if he had stayed and she just stood there and let seventeen years be what they were — not fixed, not forgiven, not resolved, just real and present and finally in the same room together.

His arms came around her.

He held on.

Outside the building Trader stood on the Fourth Street pavement in the Boyle Heights morning with his hands in his pockets and his father's way of reading a street and waited without anger, the way he always did, exactly as long as was needed and not one minute more.

*The city moved around the building the way it always moved — without waiting, without sentiment, according to its own enormous logic.

The System did not know what was happening inside the building.

It only knew that three people had converged in a warehouse in Boyle Heights and that the pattern of their movement had finally, after eleven days, gone still.

The System noted the stillness.

It did not optimize around it.

It was learning what stillness could mean