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THE BLIND FRAME

YOU DON'T SEE IT HAPPEN.
YOU SEE WHAT'S MISSING.



A MILES LONG & NYRA JONES THRILLER

KAMARY PHILLIPS

A Miles Long & Nyra Jones Thriller

USSS: THE BLIND FRAME

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Imprint
USSS: The Blind Frame
A Miles Long & Nyra Jones Thriller

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For the ones who don't flinch.

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PROLOGUE

The room was too quiet for a meeting this important.
No flags.
No press.
No official record.
Just a table. Four seats. Three occupied.
“Timeline?” the man at the head asked.
“Accelerated,” came the reply. “We’re ahead of projection.”
“That’s not what I asked.”
A pause.
Then:
“We’re ready.”
The man leaned back slightly, studying the others. No uniforms. No titles spoken. No need.
“And the Service?” he asked.
A faint smile from the woman across the table.
“Predictable.”
Another voice, lower:
“They’ll adapt.”
“They’ll react,” she corrected. “That’s different.”
Silence settled again.
Measured. Comfortable.
Controlled.
“What about the asset?” the first man asked.
A tablet slid across the table. A photo lit the screen briefly before going dark again.
“Positioned,” the second man said. “Access confirmed.”
“And exposure?”
“Contained.”
It always was—until it wasn’t.

The man at the head tapped the table once. Not impatience. Habit.

“Then we proceed.”

No one asked for clarification.

No one needed it.

A moment passed before the woman spoke again.

“Collateral?”

A beat.

Then:

“Acceptable.”

No one argued.

The meeting ended without ceremony. Chairs moved. A door opened. Closed.

No record.

No witnesses.

No trace.

Only the plan.

CHAPTER 1

EVERYTHING WAS UNDER CONTROL—UNTIL IT WASN'T.



"Advance, we're green."
"Copy. Motorcade rolling in thirty."
Agent Keller adjusted his cuff, eyes tracking the glass façade across the street. Too clean. Too reflective. He didn't like not seeing through it.
"Alpha, you good?" he said quietly.
"Alpha's set," came the reply.
Keller glanced at the second-floor balcony—empty, as expected. Wind tugged at a loose banner, snapping it once against the railing.
Crack.
He froze.
"…you hear that?" Keller said.
"Negative," Alpha replied. "Stand by."
Keller's jaw tightened.
Not a gunshot. Not quite.
"Control, confirm perimeter sweep on east building," he said.
A beat.
"East building cleared ten minutes ago," Control answered.
"You're good."
He wasn't good.

“Bravo, check that balcony again.”
“Already did,” Bravo came back. “Nothing there.”
Keller stared anyway.
The banner moved again. Slower this time.
Not wind.
“Hold motorcade,” Keller said.
Silence.
Then—
“Negative,” Control cut in. “Motorcade is committed.”
Keller’s pulse kicked.
“Then slow it down.”
“Cannot comply.”
“Alpha, adjust—”
“Wait,” Alpha said.
Something shifted in the reflection.
Not on the street.
In the glass.
Movement where there shouldn’t be movement.
Keller stepped forward, trying to change the angle—
The comms cracked.
Static.
“—lose visual—”
“Alpha, say again.”
No response.
“Alpha?”
A door slammed somewhere above.
Keller’s head snapped up—
Second floor. Left side.
“Contact—!”
The first shot wasn’t aimed at the motorcade.
It hit Bravo.
He went down hard, comm cutting mid-breath.

“Shots fired, shots fired—!”
“Where—where—?!”
“Second—no—third—”
Another shot.
Glass exploded outward.
People screamed.
“Get eyes on—!”
“I can’t see him—!”
“You said it was clear—!”
“I did—!”
Keller grabbed the mic tighter.
“Lock it down, lock it—”
The comms died completely.
Not static.
Gone.
Silence slammed into his ears.
He looked up again.
The balcony was empty.
Always had been.
Behind him, tires screeched.
The motorcade surged forward—too fast, wrong direction.
“Stop them!” Keller shouted, even though no one could hear him.
Movement in the glass again.
Different window.
Different angle.
Impossible.
He turned—
And saw the door on the street-level entrance swing open.
Unlocked.
No guard.
No callout.

Just… open.
Keller stepped toward it, instinct overriding everything else.
Something was wrong.
Not the attack.
The setup.
This wasn't breaking through.
This was—
He didn't finish the thought.
Another shot.
Closer.
Too close.
Keller staggered, breath leaving him in a hard rush. His knees hit the pavement before he felt the impact.
The world tilted.
Sound came back in pieces—sirens, shouting, fragments of commands.
He tried to push himself up.
Couldn't.
His eyes drifted back to the glass façade.
The reflections were steady now.
Clean.
Perfect.
Like nothing had ever been there.



CHAPTER 2

NAMES ARE READ. BLAME IS ASSIGNED. NOTHING IS EXPLAINED.



The room was too cold.
Not temperature. Tone.
No one spoke until they had to.
Screens lined the far wall—paused footage, satellite stills, freeze-frames from angles that didn't agree with each other. Every version of the same moment told a slightly different story.
None of them made sense.
"Time of incident, zero nine fourteen," a voice said from the front. Flat. Controlled.
No one wrote it down.
They already knew.
"Protective detail compromised within thirty-two seconds of initial contact."
A pause.
"Alpha team lead, deceased."
A name followed. No reaction.
"Bravo unit, deceased."
Another name.
Then more.
Each one landing the same way—heavy, but contained.

No one interrupted. No one asked questions.
That came later.
“Injuries?”
“Three critical. Two non-operational.”
A shift in the room. Subtle.
Not grief.
Math.
Reassignments. Gaps. Coverage.
“External target?”
Another pause. Longer this time.
“The envoy did not survive.”
Silence.
Not shock.
Something quieter.
Worse.
A chair creaked somewhere in the back. Someone adjusted posture, like that might change what they’d just heard.
It didn’t.
“Current assessment indicates coordinated attack,” the voice continued. “Multiple angles. Possible elevated position.”
Possible.
The word hung there.
Possible meant:
they didn’t know.
they should have known.
they didn’t like that they didn’t know.
“Perimeter was cleared,” someone said.
Not a challenge. Just a fact.
“Confirmed,” the voice replied.
No follow-up.
No explanation.

On the screens, the footage looped again—glass shattering outward, not inward.
That detail stayed too long in the frame.
No one commented on it.
Not yet.
The door opened.
Conversations—what little there were—died instantly.
He walked in like the room already belonged to him.
Suit too sharp. Timing too clean.
Eyes scanning, not reading.
This was his first time in front of them like this.
It showed.
“Let’s keep this focused,” he said, taking position at the front without waiting to be invited.
His voice carried confidence.
It didn’t carry weight.
“We are dealing with an isolated failure of protocol,” he continued. “We will identify breakdown points and correct them.”
No one moved.
No one agreed.
No one disagreed.
Because no one knew yet if that was true.
“We will not speculate,” he added.
Too quickly.
Like he’d practiced that line.
A screen behind him froze on a frame—Keller mid-turn, the glass reflecting something that wasn’t there anymore.
No one pointed it out.
“Questions will be handled through proper channels,” he said. “Until then, we maintain discipline.”
Discipline.

That word landed differently.
In the second row, Nyra Jones didn't move.
Didn't react.
But her eyes shifted once—toward the screen.
Then back.
"Looking ahead," he continued, "the Atlantic Security Summit remains on schedule."
There it was.
The real pressure point.
"We do not delay," he said. "We do not show weakness."
A few heads nodded. Not in agreement.
In recognition.
Orders were already decided.
"Current staffing levels are… strained," he admitted, choosing the word carefully.
Strained meant:
not enough people.
not enough time.
no room for mistakes.
"We will be reallocating resources effective immediately."
A voice from the side:
"Active personnel won't cover it."
Not confrontational. Just math again.
A beat.
Then:
"We expand the pool," the man at the front said.
Silence.
Everyone understood what that meant.
Suspended.
Inactive.
Problem cases.

“We’ll review all available agents,” he added.
Another beat.
Then, almost as an afterthought:
“Long is still on record.”
The name didn’t echo.
It didn’t need to.
It settled.
Somewhere between useful and dangerous.
“Recommendations?” he asked.
No one spoke.
Nyra didn’t look up.
But she heard it.
Of course she did.
“Agent Jones.”
Now she did.
“Yes, sir.”
“You’ll coordinate reassignment. I want options on my desk by end of day.”
A pause.
Then:
“Including Long.”
Not a request.
Nyra held his gaze for half a second longer than necessary.
Not defiance.
Assessment.
Then:
“Understood.”
The meeting ended without being dismissed.
People stood. Moved. Talked in low voices that didn’t carry.
On the screen, the footage kept looping.
The same moment.
The same angle.

The same question.
Nyra stayed seated a second longer.
Just long enough to look at the frame again.
Glass breaking outward.
She didn't say anything.
Didn't need to.
Something about it didn't fit.
She stood.
And moved.



CHAPTER 3

YOU DON'T LOSE THE INSTINCT. YOU JUST LOSE THE BADGE.



Miles Long was not watching the news.
The television was on. Sound low. Captions running.
That wasn't the same thing.
He sat in the half-light of a room that looked temporary even though it wasn't. One chair. One table. One duffel near the wall that looked packed because it usually was.
On-screen, a reporter stood in front of barricades, talking like the world had already decided what happened.
Coordinated attack. Foreign target. Ongoing investigation.
Miles muted it completely.
The room got better.
He stared at the paused image instead.
Shattered glass.
Wrong angle.
He leaned forward slightly.
Not because the footage told him much.
Because it didn't.
His phone buzzed once on the table.
Unknown number.
He let it stop.
A second later, it buzzed again.

Same number.
Miles picked it up, looked at the screen, then answered without speaking.
Nothing for half a second.
Then breathing.
Not nervous.
Measured.
“Still screening calls?” Nyra asked.
Miles leaned back in the chair.
“That depends,” he said. “You still making them?”
No answer.
He looked back at the screen. Freeze-frame. Streetline. Reflections too clean. Debris pattern wrong.
“You’re watching it,” Nyra said.
“I’m watching people lie about it.”
Another pause.
He could hear noise on her end. Office noise. Movement. Voices held low because they thought volume was the problem.
“They want you back in,” she said.
Miles smiled once. No humor in it.
“No,” he said. “They want bodies.”
“That too.”
“At least somebody’s honest.”
Silence again.
It used to be easier with her.
Not friendlier. Just easier.
“What’s the ask?” he said.
“Temporary reassignment. Summit coverage. Immediate review.”
Miles let that sit.
“The Atlantic Summit.”

“Yes.”
He reached for the remote, backed up the footage ten seconds, and watched the same shaky clip reset. Motorcade. Crowd motion. Glass burst.
Not inward.
Outward.
“You people clear the east building?” he asked.
A beat too long.
“Yes.”
“Personally?”
“No.”
“Who signed off?”
“That’s not why I’m calling.”
“No,” Miles said. “That’s exactly why you’re calling. You just don’t like that version.”
On screen, a correspondent kept talking over footage that didn’t support what he was saying.
Classic.
“You coming or not?” Nyra asked.
Miles muted the television harder, as if that helped.
“Who’s running point?”
A pause.
That pause said enough.
Miles nodded to himself.
“Ah.”
“He was appointed yesterday.”
“Of course he was.”
“He’s acting director.”
“Even worse.”
He stood and crossed to the window. Third floor. Cheap blinds. Partial street view. Good enough.

Outside, two people argued over a parking space like national collapse was a scheduling inconvenience.
“Tell me I’m wrong,” he said.
Nyra didn’t.
That was answer enough too.
Miles looked back at the screen.
“Who’s dead?”
She gave him the names.
He said nothing while she did.
One of them made him close his eyes for half a second.
Not long.
Just enough.
When she finished, he asked, “And the envoy?”
“You already know.”
“Yeah.”
Another silence.
This one different.
Not awkward.
Weighted.
“Something’s wrong with the footage,” he said.
“We know that.”
“No,” Miles said. “You know it looks bad. I’m saying it’s wrong.”
He replayed the clip again.
Car accelerates. Window flashes. Crowd break too early on the left side.
Too early meant somebody moved before the panic reached them.
That meant expectation.
That meant advance knowledge.
He didn’t say it yet.

“They lost comms too clean,” he said. “Not interference. Dropout.”
“You got that from cable news footage?”
“I got that from timing.”
Nyra exhaled through her nose. Not annoyance. More like acknowledgment she didn’t want to hand him.
“The report’s not finished.”
“It won’t matter.”
“That’s cynical.”
“That’s experience.”
He heard paper shift on her end. Someone near her said something muffled. She ignored it.
“You can brief in at fourteen hundred,” she said.
“Not a chance.”
“Miles.”
“No badge, no access, no interest.”
“That’s not true.”
He smiled again. Still no humor.
“Which part?”
A few seconds passed.
Then Nyra said, “You’re already in.”
That landed because it was true.
He hated when she did that.
Miles walked back to the table and killed the television altogether.
The room went still.
Better.
“Why you?” he asked.
“What?”
“Why’d they send you?”
That pause again.
Smaller this time.

“Because I said yes.”
Miles considered that.
No, he thought.
Because you’re the one they trust to keep this clean.
Which meant it was already dirty.
He sat back down.
On the blank television screen, his reflection looked older than he felt and less tired than he was.
“What time?” he asked.
“Fourteen hundred.”
“Location?”
She gave it to him.
Federal annex. Temporary command. Secure floor.
All the usual bullshit words people used when they wanted panic to sound organized.
“I’m not promising anything,” he said.
“I know.”
“Do you?”
“Yes.”
He let that breathe a second.
Then:
“You clear your own perimeter before you call me?” he asked.
Nyra almost laughed.
Almost.
“See you at fourteen hundred,” she said.
The line went dead.
Miles lowered the phone slowly, eyes fixed on nothing.
Then he reached for the remote, turned the television back on, and froze the image one more time.
Glass.
Street.
Reflections.

There.
Left edge of frame.
A figure moving before the first shot.
Not running.
Positioning.
Miles stared at it.
Then at the timestamp.
Then back again.
“Yeah,” he said quietly to the empty room. “That’s not what this was.”
He stood, crossed to the duffel, and pulled the zipper open.
Not because he was going back.
Because some part of him had never really left.



CHAPTER 4

SOME PEOPLE DON'T COME BACK. OTHERS DON'T GET A CHOICE.



The building didn't look temporary.
That was the first tell.
Temporary facilities always tried too hard—extra signage, visible security, people moving like they had something to prove.
This one didn't.
Plain exterior. Minimal movement. No wasted energy.
Which meant it wasn't temporary.
Just repurposed.
Miles stepped through the first checkpoint without slowing. Badge flashed. Eyes scanned. No one stopped him long enough to make it worth noticing.
Inside, it was quieter than it should've been.
That was the second tell.
Rooms like this—after something like that—should hum. Phones, voices, movement layered over movement.
Instead, everything felt… contained.
Controlled.
Or trying to be.
He passed a glass-walled conference room. Two agents inside, heads bent over a tablet, speaking low. One looked up

as Miles went by, recognition flickering just long enough to register.
Then gone.
Good.
He kept moving.
Third floor. Secure access.
This time, they paused him.
“Hold.”
Miles didn’t argue. Didn’t explain. Just stood there while the agent checked something twice that didn’t need checking.
“You’re clear.”
“Appreciate the confidence,” Miles said, already moving.
The corridor beyond was different.
Less foot traffic. More eyes.
This was where decisions got made—or at least where people pretended they did.
The door at the end was already open.
Of course it was.
Miles stepped inside.
The room wasn’t large, but it didn’t need to be. Screens lined one wall. Maps, feeds, data that updated just slow enough to look deliberate.
People stood in clusters that weren’t really clusters—just distance disguised as space.
And at the front—
Him.
The new boss.
He turned as Miles entered, like he’d been waiting for the moment.
Which meant he had.
“Agent Long.”
Not a greeting.

A label.
Miles stopped just inside the room, taking it in without making it obvious he was doing it.
“Depends who’s asking,” he said.
A few heads shifted. Not toward Miles.
Toward the man at the front.
Watching how he’d handle it.
Good.
Let him.
“Acting Director Hale,” the man said. “You’re late.”
Miles checked his watch like it mattered.
“Fourteen hundred,” he said. “Looks on time from here.”
Hale didn’t smile.
Didn’t react at all, really.
That was worse.
“We run a tighter clock here,” Hale said.
Miles nodded once.
“Must be new.”
A flicker in the room. Small. Contained.
Hale let it pass.
He didn’t have a choice.
“Take a position,” Hale said.
Not sit.
Not join.
Position.
Miles stepped further into the room.
And then—
He saw her.
Nyra stood near the far side of the main table, posture straight, expression neutral. Same as always.
Not surprised to see him.
Not pleased either.

Just… ready.
Their eyes met for half a second.
That was enough.
No nod. No acknowledgment.
Didn't need one.
Miles took a spot opposite her, close enough to hear, far enough not to feel like a conversation.
Hale turned back to the screens.
"Current working assessment," he began, "is a coordinated external attack targeting a foreign envoy under U.S. protection."
Miles didn't move.
Didn't react.
Didn't agree.
"Perimeter integrity was confirmed prior to the incident," Hale continued. "Which indicates a failure in execution, not planning."
There it was.
Clean. Simple. Wrong.
"Teams are being restructured effective immediately," Hale said. "We are not waiting for a full report to act."
Of course not.
Reports complicated narratives.
"Summit security will proceed as scheduled," Hale added. "With adjusted protocols."
Adjusted how?
No one asked.
That was the problem.
Hale tapped a control, and the footage came up on the main screen.
Same clip.
Different angle.

Glass breaking.
Movement that didn't belong.
"We're reviewing all available data," Hale said. "Until then, we maintain discipline and follow chain of command."
Miles shifted his weight slightly.
Just enough.
"Chain of command didn't hold last time," he said.
He didn't raise his voice.
Didn't need to.
The room tightened anyway.
Hale turned slowly.
Eyes on Miles now.
"Excuse me?"
Miles nodded toward the screen.
"You had clearance," he said. "You had position. You had eyes."
A beat.
"And you still lost the room in under a minute."
No one breathed.
Hale took a step forward.
Measured.
"Careful, Agent Long," he said. "You're here on a conditional basis."
Miles met his gaze without moving.
"Then condition me," he said.
Silence.
Not empty.
Charged.
Hale held it a second longer than he should have.
Then let it go.
Wrong move.

“We are not speculating,” Hale said, turning back to the room. “We are responding.”
Miles glanced at Nyra.
Just once.
She didn’t look at him.
But she heard it.
Of course she did.
Hale continued, voice steady, controlled.
“Agent Jones will coordinate reassignment and integration of additional personnel.”
There it was again.
Integration.
Like Miles was a system update.
“Operational teams will be finalized within twenty-four hours,” Hale said. “We move forward.”
Forward.
Always forward.
Never back to check what broke.
“Questions?” Hale asked.
No one spoke.
Because questions implied doubt.
And doubt wasn’t welcome here.
“Good,” Hale said. “Then we’re done.”
People started moving immediately.
Chairs shifted. Conversations restarted in low tones that didn’t carry.
Controlled noise.
Miles stayed where he was.
So did Nyra.
Of course she did.
Hale watched them both for a second.
Then turned away.

Another mistake.
When the room cleared enough, Nyra finally moved.
Not toward him.
Past him.
“Fourteen hundred,” she said quietly as she passed.
Miles almost smiled.
“Thought I was late.”
She didn’t stop.
“Don’t be tomorrow.”
Then she was gone.
Miles looked back at the screen.
Paused frame.
Glass.
Reflection.
That same edge of movement.
Still there.
Still wrong.
“Yeah,” he said under his breath.
“No shit.”
He turned and followed the room out.



CHAPTER 5

YOU DON’T FIND THE TRUTH. YOU NOTICE WHAT DOESN’T BELONG.



Miles didn’t go back to the room.
No point.
Rooms like that weren’t for answers. They were for alignment.
He took the stairs instead of the elevator.
Not for security.
For time.
Third to second. Second to first.
People moved differently on each level.
Up top—quiet, controlled.
Mid-level—movement, coordination.
Ground—noise trying to stay quiet.
He stepped out into a corridor lined with temporary workstations. Screens everywhere. Feeds, reports, loops of the same footage being watched like repetition would make it clearer.
It didn’t.
A junior agent looked up as Miles passed, hesitated like he wanted to say something, then didn’t.
Smart.
Miles kept walking.

At the far end, a smaller room—half glass, half shadow.
Unclaimed. Or at least not actively defended.
Good enough.
He stepped inside, shut the door halfway, and pulled a chair toward the nearest screen.
Same footage.
Different source.
Cleaner.
He scrubbed back five seconds.
Played it again.
Motorcade enters frame.
Crowd shifts.
Not reaction.
Preparation.
He slowed it further.
Frame by frame.
There.
Left side.
A man stepping back before the first shot.
Not running.
Not startled.
Positioning.
Miles leaned closer.
“Yeah,” he murmured. “You knew.”
He rewound again.
Watched the glass.
Impact point.
Outward burst.
That wasn’t incoming fire.
That was internal force.
Which meant—
The door.

Street-level.
Unlocked.
He pulled up another feed—entry angle, low resolution, timestamp slightly off from the main clip.
Not an accident.
Desync.
Intentional.
Miles lined the two feeds up side by side.
Close enough.
Door opens.
Half a second later—
Glass blows.
Sequence wrong.
Timeline wrong.
Setup right.
He sat back.
Slow.
Deliberate.
“Not a breach,” he said quietly.
“A handoff.”
The word stayed there.
Didn’t fit yet.
But it was closer than anything else he’d heard all day.
A soft knock on the glass.
Miles didn’t turn.
“Door’s open,” he said.
It wasn’t.
Nyra stepped in anyway.
Of course she did.
She didn’t look at the screen right away.
Looked at him.
Assessment first.

Same as always.
“You weren’t in the room,” she said.
“Didn’t miss anything.”
“You missed the part where we move forward.”
Miles nodded toward the screen.
“You missed the part where that’s not what happened.”
Nyra stepped closer now, eyes shifting to the footage.
He didn’t explain.
Didn’t need to.
She watched.
Once.
Twice.
Her posture changed almost imperceptibly.
“Crowd movement’s early,” she said.
“Yeah.”
“Glass is wrong.”
“Yeah.”
She didn’t speak for a few seconds.
Then:
“You’re pulling this from open feeds?”
“Open enough.”
“That’s a problem.”
“That’s the point.”
She crossed her arms, still watching.
“Command’s calling it a perimeter failure.”
Miles gave a small shake of his head.
“No,” he said. “Perimeter held.”
She looked at him now.
That mattered more than the screen.
“Then what failed?” she asked.
Miles met her gaze.
“Control.”

The word landed between them.
Not loud.
Heavy.
Nyra looked back at the footage.
Processing.
Not rejecting it.
Not accepting it either.
Yet.
“We deploy in two hours,” she said.
Miles stood.
“Then you’re already late.”
She exhaled once. Not frustration. Not agreement.
Something in between.
“You in?” she asked.
Miles grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair.
“Was I ever out?”
Nyra almost smiled.
Almost.
“Don’t make me regret this,” she said.
Miles headed for the door.
“Too late,” he replied.
He stepped back into the corridor without looking back.
Nyra stayed a second longer.
Watching the screen.
The same frame.
The same moment.
The same problem.
Then she turned it off.

❖

CHAPTER 6

THE STRUCTURE HOLDS—
UNTIL IT DOESN'T.



The staging area smelled like fresh paint and borrowed authority.

Temporary walls. Portable lighting. Equipment that didn't belong to the space pretending it did.

Miles clocked it all in under three seconds.

Nothing here was built to last.

Good.

Neither was the plan.

Nyra stood at the center of it, already moving pieces.

"Torres, I want comms redundancy on a separate channel. Not tied to main."

"Already building it," Torres said, fingers moving across a tablet without looking down.

"Good. Pike—perimeter sweep, full rotation. Don't trust the last report."

Pike nodded once. "Perimeter was cleared this morning."

Nyra didn't look at him.

"Do it again."

A beat.

Then:

"Yes, ma'am."

Miles leaned against a support beam, watching.
Not interfering.
Yet.
Latham stood near the far wall, eyes on a live feed, saying nothing.
That told Miles more than anything else in the room.
“Overwatch?” he asked.
Latham glanced over. Brief. Assessing.
“Partial,” she said. “Line-of-sight issues on the east side.”
Of course there were.
Miles nodded once.
“East side’s always dirty,” he said.
Nyra didn’t react, but she heard it.
Of course she did.
“Torres,” she said, “I want eyes on that gap.”
“Working it.”
Pike returned a few minutes later.
“Perimeter holds,” he said. “No anomalies.”
Miles smiled faintly.
There it was.
Nyra turned slightly.
“Anything?” she asked him.
Miles pushed off the beam.
“Yeah,” he said. “That.”
He pointed toward the east side on the feed.
Nothing obvious.
Just space.
“Looks clear,” Pike said.
“That’s the problem,” Miles replied.
Pike frowned. “Clear is good.”
“No,” Miles said. “Clear is easy.”
A small shift in the room.

Torres glanced up, interested now.
Nyra stepped closer to the screen.
“What are you seeing?” she asked.
Miles moved beside her, not touching the controls.
“Dead angle,” he said. “Too clean. No movement, no noise, no correction.”
“That’s called coverage,” Pike said.
“That’s called assumption,” Miles shot back.
Nyra held up a hand.
Enough.
She studied the feed again.
Then:
“Latham, can you reposition?”
“Not without losing west side.”
“Do it anyway,” Nyra said.
Pike shook his head slightly. “That creates exposure.”
Nyra didn’t look at him.
“We already have exposure.”
That landed.
Torres adjusted something on her tablet.
“Secondary cam coming online,” she said.
The screen flickered.
Angle shifted.
For half a second—
Movement.
Gone immediately.
Torres froze.
“Did you—?”
“Yeah,” Miles said.
Nyra didn’t speak.
Didn’t move.
Just watched.

“Run that back,” she said.
Torres did.
Frame by frame.
There.
A figure stepping into position.
Not rushing.
Not hiding.
Just… being where they needed to be.
Before anything happened.
Pike stepped closer now. Slower.
“That’s not live,” he said.
Torres shook her head. “Timestamp’s current.”
“That’s impossible.”
Miles exhaled once.
“There’s that word again.”
Nyra turned.
Decision made.
“Adjust perimeter,” she said. “Shift coverage east. Quietly.”
Pike hesitated.
Then:
“Understood.”
He moved.
Fast now.
Good.
Torres rerouted feeds, fingers flying.
Latham adjusted position, losing one angle to gain another.
Miles watched the screen.
Waiting.
Because something like this—
Didn’t just appear once.
It repeated.
Patterns always did.

“Hold comms internal,” Nyra said. “No broadcast.”
Torres nodded. “Channel isolated.”
Good.
For now.
Miles stepped back slightly, scanning the room instead of the screen.
People were moving differently now.
Less confident.
More aware.
Better.
Nyra caught his eye for a second.
Not approval.
Not agreement.
But—
alignment.
Temporary.
But real.
“Let’s see what happens,” Miles said quietly.
On the screen—
nothing.
Clean.
Still.
Perfect.
Too perfect.



CHAPTER 7

DISTRACTIONS DON'T LOOK LIKE MISTAKES—UNTIL THEY ARE.



The room had settled.
Not calm.
Just… functional.
That was the problem.
After something like this, things weren't supposed to feel functional.
They were supposed to feel broken.
Nyra stood over the central table, scanning updates that didn't change fast enough to matter.
Torres worked one station over, headset in, voice low and constant.
"…copy, I've got your feed… no, that's not live—check your timestamp…"
Latham had re-established overwatch, posture still, eyes moving in slow, deliberate patterns.
Pike stood closer than necessary.
Not enough to call out.
Enough to notice.
Nyra didn't look at him.
But she adjusted her stance half an inch anyway.
"Perimeter's holding," Pike said. "East side included."

Nyra kept her eyes on the table.
“Good,” she said.
Pike didn’t move.
“That adjustment you called earlier,” he added. “It tightened things up.”
There it was.
Not operational.
Personal.
Nyra shifted her focus to a different feed.
“Then it was the right call.”
A beat.
“Most people wouldn’t have made it.”
She glanced at him then.
Just once.
Measured.
“You don’t know most people,” she said.
Pike almost smiled.
Almost.
Across the room—
Miles watched the reflection in the glass instead of the people themselves.
Easier that way.
Cleaner.
He saw Pike’s angle.
Nyra’s adjustment.
The space between them.
Not his problem.
Unless it became one.
“Torres,” Miles said without turning, “your secondary channel’s drifting.”
Torres frowned, checking her board.
“…no, it’s—”

Then she saw it.
“Damn,” she muttered. “Yeah. Slight delay.”
“How slight?” Nyra asked.
Torres hesitated.
“Half-second.”
Miles nodded.
“There it is.”
Pike looked over. “Half a second doesn’t compromise perimeter.”
Miles finally turned.
“No,” he said. “It compromises timing.”
That landed.
Not fully.
But enough.
Nyra stepped closer to Torres’ station.
“Fix it,” she said.
“Working.”
Torres rerouted something, fingers moving faster now.
Miles shifted his focus back to the main feed.
Everything looked clean.
Again.
Always clean.
That was the tell.
“Latham,” he said, “what’s your visual on east?”
“Clear,” she replied. “No movement.”
Miles exhaled once.
“Yeah,” he said. “That’s what I thought.”
Nyra straightened.
“What are you seeing?” she asked.
Miles didn’t answer right away.
He stepped closer to the screen.
Watched.

Waited.
Because it didn't happen when you looked for it.
It happened when you stopped.
Torres leaned back slightly.
"Channel's stabilized," she said. "Delay's gone."
"Good," Nyra said.
Miles shook his head.
"Not good."
Pike frowned. "You want the delay back?"
"I want to know why it was there."
No answer.
Because there wasn't one yet.
Miles pointed at the feed.
"Run it live and buffer," he said.
Torres blinked. "At the same time?"
"Yeah."
"That's messy."
"So is this."
A beat.
Then she did it.
Split screen.
Live feed left.
Buffered right.
Two versions of the same moment.
Almost identical.
Almost.
Nyra leaned in.
"Play it," she said.
Torres synced them.
Pressed forward.
For a few seconds—
Nothing.

Then—
There.
Right side.
Buffered.
A flicker.
A shift in shadow near the east edge.
Left side—
Nothing.
Gone.
Nyra's eyes narrowed.
"Stop."
Torres froze both frames.
They stared.
Same space.
Same angle.
Different reality.
Pike stepped in closer now.
"That's a glitch," he said.
Miles didn't look at him.
"No," he said. "That's a preview."
Silence.
Heavy this time.
Real.
Nyra didn't move.
"Explain," she said.
Miles pointed at the buffered screen.
"That's ahead," he said. "Not behind."
Torres shook her head. "That's not how buffer works."
"Then something's feeding it early."
No one spoke.
Because that meant—
Access.

Inside.
Nyra straightened slowly.
“Kill external feeds,” she said.
Torres hesitated. “That’ll blind us.”
“Do it.”
Torres did.
Screens dropped to internal only.
Cleaner.
Safer.
Or so it should have been.
Miles watched the now-simplified feed.
Waited again.
Three seconds.
Four.
Five—
There.
Same spot.
Same shift.
Now on the live feed.
Real time.
Movement where nothing should be.
Pike saw it this time.
Didn’t argue.
Didn’t explain.
Just:
“…contact?”
Nyra didn’t answer.
Because it wasn’t that simple.
Miles stepped back slightly.
Not retreating.
Positioning.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“Something like that.”
Nyra turned.
Decision already forming.
“Lock internal comms,” she said. “No one moves without confirmation.”
Torres nodded, already moving.
Pike reached for his radio—
“Don’t,” Miles said.
Pike froze.
“What?”
Miles looked at him now.
Direct.
“Not yet.”
A beat.
“Why?”
Miles held his gaze.
“Because if you see it,” he said, “it sees you.”
That hung in the room.
Not understood.
But not dismissed either.
Nyra made the call.
“Hold,” she said.
Everything stopped.
Not physically.
Mentally.
Waiting.
Watching.
The feed stayed still.
Clean.
Perfect.
Then—
The door on the east access line opened.

No alert.
No callout.
Just—
open.
Nyra didn’t hesitate.
“Now,” she said.
The room snapped back into motion.
Too late to be comfortable.
Just in time to matter.
Miles smiled once.
Cold.
There it is.



CHAPTER 8

BY THE TIME YOU REACT, IT'S ALREADY TOO LATE.



The door stayed open.
No alert.
No sound.
Just a gap where there shouldn't be one.
Nyra moved first.
Not fast.
Precise.
"Pike—east entry. Latham, maintain overwatch. Torres, keep internal locked."
No wasted words.
No repeats.
The team snapped into motion.
Good.
Miles didn't move right away.
He watched the feed.
Watched the space around the door.
Because the door wasn't the problem.
It was never the problem.
"Nyra," he said.
She didn't stop.
"What."

“That’s not entry.”
She slowed half a step.
Not enough for anyone else to notice.
“Then what is it?” she asked.
Miles stepped in behind them now, eyes still tracking angles, not bodies.
“Distraction.”
Pike glanced back.
“From what?”
Miles didn’t answer.
Because he didn’t know yet.
And that was the problem.

They reached the corridor leading to the east access point.
Clean.
Too clean.
No debris.
No forced entry.
No sign anyone had come through.
Pike checked the corner, weapon low but ready.
“Clear.”
Of course it was.
Nyra approached the door.
Still open.
Still wrong.
She didn’t touch it.
“Torres,” she said quietly, “any logs on that entry?”
A beat.
“…no,” Torres replied. “No activation. No override.”
Miles let out a slow breath.
“Yeah,” he said. “That tracks.”
Pike frowned. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Miles said. “It doesn’t.”
Nyra stepped past the threshold.
One step.
Then another.
Controlled.
Measured.
Nothing happened.
No shots.
No movement.
No anything.
Behind them, Latham’s voice came through, low but steady.
“Overwatch is clean. No external movement.”
Miles stopped just inside the doorway.
Turned.
Looked back down the corridor they’d come from.
Empty.
Perfect.
Wrong.
“Nyra,” he said.
This time she heard it.
Because of how he said it.
“What.”
“Turn around.”
She did.
Immediately.
No hesitation.
The corridor behind them—
Wasn’t empty anymore.
A figure stood at the far end.
Not running.
Not hiding.
Just…

standing.
Pike raised his weapon.
“Contact—!”
The figure moved.
Fast.
Not toward them.
Sideways.
Into a blind angle.
Gone.
“Move!” Nyra snapped.
They pivoted, pushing back into the corridor.
Pike took point now, Latham adjusting overwatch to compensate.
Miles hung back half a step.
Watching both directions.
Because—
One figure didn’t make sense.
Unless there were more.
They reached the intersection.
Nothing.
No door movement.
No sound.
No trace.
Pike cursed under his breath.
“Where the hell—”
“Hold,” Nyra said.
They froze.
Listened.
Nothing.
Even the building felt like it had stopped breathing.
Miles stepped forward slowly.
Eyes scanning.

Corners.
Reflections.
Angles.
Then—
He saw it.
Not ahead.
Behind.
In the reflection of a darkened monitor mounted on the wall.
Movement.
Close.
Too close.
“Down!” he snapped.
Nyra dropped instantly.
Pike hesitated—
Half a second.
Too long.
A suppressed shot cracked.
Pike jerked back, shoulder snapping sideways as the round caught him high and spun him into the wall.
“Contact right—!” Latham shouted over comms.
Nyra rolled, weapon up, firing once toward the blind angle.
Nothing there.
Of course not.
Miles moved fast now, dragging Pike back behind cover as Torres’ voice broke through:
“I’ve got nothing on feeds—nothing—”
“Because it’s inside,” Miles snapped. “Kill all external. Now.”
“Already did—!”
Another shot.
Closer.
Glass shattered somewhere behind them—secondary panel, not primary.

Designed.
Layered.
Nyra shifted position, back to the wall now, eyes tracking where the shooter should be.
Not where they were.
“Latham,” she said, “you see anything?”
“No—no visual—”
Miles looked at Pike.
Bleeding, but conscious.
Good.
“Stay with me,” he said.
Pike gritted his teeth. “I’m fine.”
“You’re not,” Miles said. “But you’re not dead either, so keep talking.”
Another flicker in the monitor.
Miles saw it again.
“Left side,” he said quietly.
Nyra adjusted.
Waited.
Didn’t fire.
Good.
They were learning.
Fast.
The movement came again—
And this time—
Nyra fired.
Two shots.
Tight.
Controlled.
A body hit the floor out of sight.
Silence.
Real this time.

No movement.
No follow-up.
Just—
over.
Nyra held position a few seconds longer.
Then:
“Clear,” she said.
No one believed it.
But no one argued either.
Miles exhaled slowly.
Looked back at the corridor.
Then at the door.
Then at the team.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
“That wasn’t the play.”
Nyra looked at him.
“What was it?”
Miles met her gaze.
“Timing,” he said.
A beat.
“Still is.”



CHAPTER 9

PRESSURE DOESN'T DISAPPEAR. IT CHANGES SHAPE.



Nyra didn't go home.
She never did after something like that.
Home implied stillness.
Stillness implied time.
She didn't have either.
The bar was quiet enough to disappear in.
Not empty.
Just… unimportant.
Low light. No televisions. No one looking at anyone for too long.
Perfect.
She sat at the far end, back to the wall, sightlines clear without trying.
"Whiskey," she said.
The bartender nodded. No questions.
Good.
Her phone sat face down on the bar.
She didn't touch it.
Didn't need to.
If it rang, she'd hear it.
If it didn't—

That meant something else.
The glass arrived.
She didn't drink it right away.
Just rested her fingers against it, feeling the cool before the burn.
Her mind wasn't on the drink.
It was on the hallway.
The door.
The delay.
Half a second.
That was all it took.
She lifted the glass.
Took a slow sip.
Let it sit.
Control.
Always control.
A man moved into the seat two down from her.
Not close enough to interrupt.
Close enough to notice.
She didn't look.
He didn't speak.
Good.
Another sip.
Her shoulders loosened half an inch.
Not more.
Never more.
The man shifted slightly.
Closer now.
Still not touching.
"You don't look like you're off the clock," he said.
Voice steady. Curious, not careless.
Nyra set the glass down.

“No one is,” she replied.
A beat.
“You always sit where you can see everything?” he asked.
Now she glanced at him.
Measured.
“You always ask questions that don’t matter?” she said.
He smiled faintly.
“Depends who I’m asking.”
There it was.
Not bad.
Not good either.
Just… there.
Nyra held his gaze a second longer.
Then looked away.
Decision made.
“Not tonight,” she said.
No apology.
No explanation.
The man nodded once.
Understood.
Better than most.
He stood, left without another word.
Nyra took another sip.
The burn hit differently this time.
Sharper.
Her phone buzzed.
She didn’t hesitate.
Turned it over.
One message.
TORRES:
Command wants full report now. Hale’s pushing hard.
Of course he was.

Nyra stared at the screen a second longer.
Then:
Another buzz.
UNKNOWN LINE ACTIVE
She didn't like that.
Didn't ignore it either.
She answered.
"Jones."
Silence.
Then—
A voice she didn't recognize.
Low. Calm.
"You're looking in the wrong direction."
Nyra didn't move.
Didn't react.
"Who is this?" she asked.
The line clicked dead.
She stared at the phone.
Then at the glass.
Then back at the phone.
The room felt smaller now.
Not because anything changed.
Because something had.
Nyra stood.
Left cash on the bar without looking.
And walked out.

Miles didn't go anywhere.
He didn't need to.
The room was the same—quiet, controlled, predictable.
The only thing that wasn't?
The footage.

He had it paused again.
Different frame this time.
Same problem.
He zoomed in slowly, not expecting it to reveal anything new —
But expecting it to confirm what didn't belong.
The phone buzzed.
He glanced at it.
EVIE.
He let it ring once.
Twice.
Then answered.
"You're staring at something you shouldn't be staring at," she said.
Miles didn't react.
"You hacking me now?" he asked.
"Please," Evie said. "If I were, you wouldn't know."
A beat.
Then:
"You're back on something," she added.
Not a question.
Miles leaned back slightly.
"What makes you say that."
"You get quiet when you're off," she said. "You get still when you're in."
He glanced at the screen again.
"Observation noted."
"Translation: I'm right."
He didn't answer.
She filled the silence like she always did.
"What is it?" she asked.
Miles hesitated.

Not because he didn't trust her.
Because once he said it out loud, it got real.
"Footage," he said. "Something's off."
"Off how?"
"Clean."
A pause.
"That's not a problem," she said.
"It is when it shouldn't be."
Another pause.
Longer.
Then:
"Send it."
Miles didn't move for a second.
Then he tapped the file over.
Watched the upload complete.
He didn't tell her what to look for.
Didn't need to.
She'd find it or she wouldn't.
The line stayed open.
He could hear her breathing, faint keyboard taps, the small shifts she made when she was actually thinking.
Not scrolling.
Thinking.
"Okay," she said finally.
That tone.
Different.
Miles straightened slightly.
"What."
"Yeah… that's not natural."
He stood, pacing once without realizing it.
"Where."
"Right edge, mid-frame," she said. "You see that distortion?"

“I see something missing.”
“Exactly,” Evie said. “It’s not lag. It’s not compression.”
A beat.
“That’s a patch.”
Miles stopped.
“A what.”
“Frame correction,” she said. “Somebody smoothed it. Cleaned an artifact.”
He looked back at the screen.
That same edge.
That same absence.
“Why?” he asked.
Evie let out a quiet breath.
“Because something was there.”
The room got smaller.
Miles nodded once, slow.
“Yeah,” he said. “That tracks.”
The door opened behind him.
Evie walked in mid-sentence, phone still to her ear, a laptop bag slung over her shoulder like she’d never left it anywhere in her life.
“You didn’t tell me it was that kind of wrong,” she said, ending the call without waiting for a response.
Miles turned.
She dropped the bag on the table, already pulling her laptop out.
“Move,” she said, nudging his chair with her knee.
Miles stepped aside.
She slid in, fingers moving fast, pulling the footage up on her own system now.
“Okay,” she said. “If they patched one section, they patched more.”

“You sure?”
Evie didn’t look up.
“I’m never sure,” she said. “I’m just usually right.”
Miles almost smiled.
Almost.
She froze the frame again.
Zoomed.
Enhanced.
“Yeah,” she said quietly. “This is deliberate.”
Miles crossed his arms.
“Someone cleaned the scene.”
Evie nodded.
“Yeah.”
A beat.
“Which means whatever actually happened…”
She didn’t finish it.
Didn’t need to.
Miles looked at the screen.
Then at her.
Then back again.
“…we didn’t see it,” he said.
Evie exhaled slowly.
“Not even close.”
She leaned back, just enough to look at him.
“You’re not walking away from this, are you.”
Miles didn’t answer.
Didn’t have to.
Evie nodded once.
“Cool,” she said. “Then I’m staying.”



CHAPTER 10

THE STORY YOU'RE TOLD ISN'T THE ONE THAT MATTERS.



Hale didn't wait.
He never did.
"Agent Jones," he said as she stepped into the room, "close the door."
No greeting.
No buffer.
Nyra did.
The office was smaller than it should have been for the title on the door. Temporary space trying to pass for authority.
Clean desk. No clutter. No history.
Hale stayed standing.
That told her everything.
"You made a call in the field," he said. "Off-channel."
Nyra didn't sit.
"Internal channel," she replied. "Contained."
"That's not the point."
"It is if it worked."
A flicker.
Gone.
Hale folded his hands behind his back like he'd practiced it.

“We have a narrative to maintain,” he said. “Coordinated external threat. Clean perimeter. Isolated breakdown.”
There it was.
Neat.
Packaged.
Wrong.
Nyra held his gaze.
“The perimeter wasn’t clean,” she said.
Hale didn’t blink.
“It was certified.”
“Certification isn’t reality.”
“Reality is what we can prove,” Hale shot back. “And right now, what we can prove is that your team responded within acceptable parameters.”
My team.
Interesting.
Nyra didn’t take the bait.
“We had internal movement,” she said. “No logs. No alerts.”
“Glitches,” Hale said. Too fast.
“Patterns,” Nyra corrected.
Silence.
Hale walked to the window that didn’t open and looked out at nothing in particular.
“Do you understand what’s at stake?” he asked.
“Yes.”
“I don’t think you do.”
He turned.
“The Atlantic Summit goes forward,” he said. “We show stability. Control. Confidence.”
Words.
Always words.
“And if the system isn’t stable?” Nyra asked.

Hale smiled.
Not warm.
Not friendly.
Practiced.
“Then we make it look that way,” he said.
There it was.
Not incompetence.
Not entirely.
Something else.
“Your job,” Hale continued, “is to execute. Not reinterpret.”
Nyra didn’t move.
Didn’t speak.
Didn’t agree.
Hale let it sit.
Then:
“Keep Long in line,” he said.
A beat.
“If he steps outside structure again, he’s done.”
Nyra’s expression didn’t change.
But something behind it did.
“Understood,” she said.
Hale nodded once.
Conversation over.
Dismissed without saying it.
Nyra opened the door.
Paused.
“Sir.”
He looked up.
“You want control,” she said. “Then stop ignoring what’s already out of it.”
Hale’s jaw tightened just enough to register.
Then it was gone.

“Close the door on your way out,” he said.

Miles didn’t wait for permission.
He never had.
Evie’s laptop lit the room with a cold glow that made everything else look unnecessary.
Good.
Necessary things got in the way.
“Run it again,” Miles said.
Evie didn’t look up.
“Already did.”
“Different pass.”
“I’m on my third.”
Miles paced once.
Twice.
Stopped.
“What are we missing?”
Evie leaned back, eyes still on the screen.
“Not what,” she said. “Where.”
Miles looked at her.
“Explain.”
She tapped the screen.
“You’re focused on the patch,” she said. “Which is correct. But patches don’t exist in isolation.”
He stepped closer.
“Then what do they connect to?”
Evie smiled slightly.
“Exactly.”
She split the footage again.
Not two frames this time.
Four.
Different angles.

Different sources.
All slightly out of sync.
“Watch the edges,” she said.
Miles did.
Not the center.
Not the obvious.
The edges.
Where mistakes lived.
Frame one—clean.
Frame two—clean.
Frame three—
There.
A shadow that didn’t belong.
Gone in the next frame.
Frame four—
Nothing.
Miles leaned in.
“That’s not the same feed,” he said.
“No,” Evie replied. “It’s not.”
“Where’d you get it?”
Evie hesitated.
Just a fraction.
Then:
“Don’t worry about it.”
Miles nodded once.
That meant she shouldn’t have it.
Which meant it mattered.
“Play it forward,” he said.
She did.
The sequence ran.
Motorcade.
Movement.

Glass.
But now—
There was a gap.
Not visible.
Felt.
Like a breath missing between words.
“Pause,” Miles said.
She did.
He pointed.
“There.”
Evie squinted.
“…yeah.”
“That’s not a cut,” he said.
“No,” she replied slowly. “That’s a skip.”
Miles looked at her.
“Meaning?”
Evie turned to him fully now.
“Meaning whatever was there didn’t get removed,” she said.
A beat.
“It got bypassed.”
The room got quiet again.
Not empty.
Focused.
Miles exhaled slowly.
“Someone didn’t just clean the footage,” he said.
Evie nodded.
“They controlled what it showed.”
Miles looked back at the screen.
Then at the timestamp.
Then back again.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
“That’s worse.”

Evie tilted her head.
“How much worse?”
Miles didn’t answer right away.
Because now—
It wasn’t just about the incident.
It was about access.
Control.
Inside.
“They’re not covering something up,” he said.
Evie waited.
Miles met her eyes.
“They’re running it.”
Silence.
Real this time.
Evie leaned back slowly.
“Cool,” she said.
Not cool at all.
Miles almost smiled.
Almost.
“Yeah,” he said.
“Real cool.”



CHAPTER 11

WHEN SEPARATE PROBLEMS START MATCHING, THEY'RE NOT SEPARATE.



Nyra didn't go back to the team.
Not immediately.
She took the longer route—two corridors, one stairwell, a loop that didn't save time but bought her something else.
Perspective.
Hale wasn't wrong about one thing.
There was a narrative.
And right now, it was winning.
Her phone buzzed once.
TORRES:
We're patched. Pike's stable. Wants back in.
Of course he did.
Nyra typed back:
Not yet.
Sent.
Another message followed almost immediately:
We've got another anomaly.
Nyra stopped walking.
That word again.
Show me.
She didn't wait for the reply.

Turned and headed back.

The room felt different when she re-entered.
Less control.
More awareness.
Good.
Torres had the main screen split again.
Different feeds this time.
Not just the incident.
Perimeter logs.
Access points.
Movement tracking.
“Talk to me,” Nyra said.
Torres didn’t turn.
“Door activity,” she said. “East access again.”
Nyra’s eyes flicked to the data.
“Now?”
Torres shook her head.
“Earlier,” she said. “Right before we engaged.”
Nyra stepped closer.
“Why wasn’t it flagged?”
Torres didn’t answer right away.
Didn’t need to.
Nyra saw it.
Timestamp mismatch.
Again.
“Log’s delayed,” Torres said finally. “Same half-second issue.”
Nyra exhaled once.
“Thought we fixed that.”
“We did.”
A beat.
“Which means?”

Torres glanced at her.
“Which means it’s not ours.”
There it was.
Not a glitch.
Not local.
Nyra straightened.
“Show me the pattern.”
Torres pulled it up.
Sequence of door events.
Micro-delays.
Staggered timing.
Individually—nothing.
Together—
Intent.
Nyra felt it click.
Not fully.
But enough.
“Run it against the incident timeline,” she said.
Torres did.
Overlay.
Match.
Every anomaly aligned with something else.
Movement.
Shift.
Access.
Not random.
Never random.
Nyra nodded once.
“Who else sees this?” she asked.
“Just us,” Torres said.
“Keep it that way.”
Torres hesitated.

“Command’s already asking for updates.”
“I’ll handle command.”
Torres nodded.
Relieved.
Good.
Nyra turned.
“Get me Long.”

Miles didn’t wait to be called.
He walked in mid-sentence.
“…you don’t bypass a frame unless you’re—”
He stopped when he saw the screen.
Then looked at Nyra.
Then back again.
“…yeah,” he said. “That.”
Nyra stepped aside.
“Door logs,” she said. “Same delay. Same pattern.”
Miles moved closer.
Didn’t touch anything.
Just watched.
Tracked.
Connected.
“How far back?” he asked.
“Just this operation,” Torres said.
Miles shook his head.
“No,” he said. “Not this operation.”
He pointed at the sequence.
“This isn’t reactive,” he said. “It’s staged.”
Nyra crossed her arms.
“Agreed.”
Miles glanced at her.
That was new.

Agreement.
Didn't last long.
"Then we've got a bigger problem," Torres said.
Miles almost smiled.
"We already had a bigger problem," he said. "Now we can see it."
Nyra turned to him.
"Say it."
Miles met her eyes.
"Someone's controlling timing inside the system," he said.
Not loud.
Clear.
"And not just feeds," he added. "Access. Movement. Response."
Torres shifted slightly.
"You're saying internal compromise."
Miles didn't look at her.
"I'm saying internal control."
Different word.
Worse meaning.
Silence settled.
Heavy.
Real.
Nyra broke it.
"Then we isolate," she said. "Lock everything internal. No external sync."
Torres nodded.
"Already started."
"Good."
Miles shook his head.
"Won't hold."
Nyra looked at him.

“Why.”
“Because they’re not outside,” he said.
A beat.
“They’re already in.”
That landed.
Hard.
Nyra stepped closer.
Lowered her voice.
“Then we find where.”
Miles nodded once.
“Already working on it.”
Torres looked between them.
“So what’s the move?”
Nyra answered first.
“We keep this contained.”
Miles answered second.
“We make it visible.”
They looked at each other.
There it was again.
Friction.
Alignment.
Same goal.
Different method.
Nyra held his gaze.
“Not yet,” she said.
Miles didn’t argue.
Didn’t agree either.
“Fine,” he said.
For now.
Torres cleared her throat.
“There’s one more thing.”
Nyra turned.

“What.”
Torres pulled up a new feed.
Not incident.
Not perimeter.
Internal camera.
Low resolution.
Hallway.
Empty.
At first.
Then—
A figure crossed the frame.
Fast.
Too fast to identify.
Gone in less than a second.
Torres froze it.
Enhanced.
Still nothing clear.
“Badge?” Nyra asked.
Torres shook her head.
“No ping.”
Miles leaned in.
Watched.
Replayed.
Again.
Again.
Then—
He saw it.
Not the face.
Not the movement.
The absence.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
“What,” Nyra asked.

Miles didn’t look at her.
“He’s not on the system,” he said.
Torres frowned.
“That’s not possible.”
Miles finally turned.
“It is if he doesn’t need to be,” he said.
Silence.
Again.
But now—
Different.
Because this time, they all saw it.
Not clearly.
Not fully.
But enough.
Nyra straightened.
Decision made.
“We lock this down,” she said. “No leaks. No assumptions.”
Miles nodded once.
But his eyes were already back on the screen.
Following something none of them could fully see yet.
“Yeah,” he said.
“Good luck with that.”



CHAPTER 12

THEY DON'T CHASE THE PROBLEM. THEY WATCH WHO FINDS IT.



The first report came in without sound.
Just text.
Clean. Efficient.
No signature.
No trace.
SUBJECT LONG — MOBILE
CONTACT CONFIRMED (UNREGISTERED ASSET)
PATTERN DEVIATION: CONSISTENT
A pause.
Not hesitation.
Processing.
The second report followed thirty seconds later.
SUBJECT JONES — STATIC/CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT
COMMAND PRESSURE INCREASING
RESPONSE: WITHIN EXPECTED RANGE
Two feeds.
Two paths.
Running parallel.
As designed.
The screen didn't show video.
Didn't need to.

Patterns were enough.
Movement.
Timing.
Response curves.
The system adjusted quietly in the background.
Not visible.
Not logged.
Not questioned.
A hand rested near the console.
Didn't touch it.
Not yet.
Another update.
Faster this time.
Less clean.
INTERNAL ANOMALY DETECTED — EAST ACCESS / FEED DELAY
A beat.
Then:
SUBJECT LONG — INTERPRETATION ACCURATE
Silence.
That mattered.
Not the anomaly.
Not the breach.
The interpretation.
The hand moved once.
Tapped the surface lightly.
A response queued.
Not sent.
Adjusted.
Refined.
Then—
MAINTAIN DISTANCE

A moment.
Then a second line.
Added without hesitation.
NO INTERFERENCE
The system processed the instruction.
Routes recalculated.
Visibility reduced.
Not eliminated.
Never eliminated.
Another update flickered in.
This one shorter.
More direct.
FIELD CONTACT LOST (TEMPORARY)
Expected.
Acceptable.
Replaceable.
The screen dimmed slightly as the feed stabilized again.
Two subjects.
Still active.
Still moving.
Still inside the boundaries.
For now.
The hand withdrew.
Not because it was done.
Because nothing more was required.
Not yet.



CHAPTER 13

CONTROL ISN'T WHAT YOU HAVE. IT'S WHAT YOU CAN KEEP.



Pike was already on his feet when Nyra walked in.
Too soon.
Too stiff.
Shoulder wrapped tight under a clean field bandage that said he'd been cleared faster than he should've been.
"Thought I told you to stay down," Nyra said.
Pike didn't sit.
"I can still work."
"That wasn't the question."
A beat.
"I'm not compromised," he said.
Miles, leaning against the far console, didn't look up.
"Everyone's compromised," he said. "Some of us just haven't figured out how yet."
Pike's jaw tightened.
Nyra stepped between them before it became a thing.
"Status," she said.
Torres pulled up the board.
"Internal lock is holding," she said. "For now. No external sync, no bleed."
"For now," Miles echoed.

Torres ignored him.
“Door anomalies have stopped,” she added. “No repeat on east access.”
Nyra nodded once.
“Which means?” she asked.
Torres hesitated.
Then:
“Which means we’re not seeing it.”
Better.
Honest.
Latham’s voice cut in from overwatch.
“Hallway’s clear. All lanes.”
Miles finally looked up.
“Of course they are.”
Nyra didn’t react.
“Keep running rotation,” she said. “Short intervals. No patterns.”
“Copy.”
Pike stepped closer to the table, slower this time.
Measured.
Learning.
“I want back on point,” he said.
Nyra didn’t look at him.
“No.”
“I hesitated once,” Pike said. “Not twice.”
Miles gave a faint nod.
Fair.
Nyra turned now.
Studied Pike properly.
“You hesitated because you were trusting the structure,” she said. “That’s not your fault.”
A beat.

“But it is your problem.”
Pike absorbed that.
Didn’t argue.
“Give me something,” he said.
Nyra considered it.
Then:
“Secondary rotation,” she said. “No solo coverage. You move when I say.”
Pike nodded.
“Understood.”
He didn’t thank her.
Good.
He turned to go—
Paused.
Looked back at her.
Not flirty.
Not anymore.
Something else now.
“Won’t happen again,” he said.
Nyra held his gaze for a second.
“Make sure it doesn’t,” she replied.
He moved.
Miles watched the exchange without watching it.
Of course he did.

“Talk,” Nyra said, turning to him.
Miles pushed off the console.
“They’re gone,” he said.
“No,” Nyra replied. “They stopped.”
“Same thing,” Miles said.
“No,” she said again. “Different problem.”
A beat.

He nodded once.
Fair.
“They’re adjusting,” he said.
“Based on what?”
Miles looked at the screen.
Then at her.
“Us.”
That sat there.
Torres shifted slightly.
“Meaning what?” she asked.
Miles pointed at the timeline.
“Everything we did—every move, every correction—it lined up against the anomalies,” he said. “Not random. Responsive.”
Nyra’s eyes narrowed slightly.
“They’re learning,” she said.
Miles shook his head.
“No,” he said. “They already know.”
A pause.
“They’re just letting us catch up.”
Silence.
Not disbelief.
Recognition.

Nyra’s phone buzzed.
She didn’t need to check it.
Hale.
Of course.
She answered anyway.
“Jones.”
“You’re behind,” Hale said immediately.
Nyra didn’t move.

“We stabilized internal,” she replied. “No further breaches.”
“That’s not what I’m seeing.”
Of course it wasn’t.
“What are you seeing?” she asked.
A pause.
Then:
“Movement,” Hale said. “Unaccounted.”
Nyra’s eyes flicked to Miles.
He didn’t react.
“Location?” she asked.
“Sending now.”
Her phone pinged.
New feed.
Different angle.
Different floor.
Nyra stepped toward the main screen.
“Torres, pull this.”
Torres patched it in.
The image resolved.
Grainy.
Compressed.
Late.
But there—
A figure.
Standing still.
Middle of a corridor.
Facing the camera.
Not moving.
Not hiding.
Just—
there.
Pike stepped closer.

“That’s him,” he said.
No one corrected him.
Because it didn’t matter if it was the same one.
It was the same type.
Nyra leaned in.
“Zoom.”
Torres tried.
The image broke apart.
Pixelated.
Useless.
“Enhancement’s not holding,” she said.
Miles stepped closer.
Didn’t look at the face.
Looked at the posture.
The stillness.
The timing.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
Nyra didn’t look at him.
“What.”
Miles took a breath.
Then:
“He wants us to see him.”
That landed.
Harder than anything else.
Because it flipped everything.
Pike shook his head.
“That doesn’t make sense.”
Miles didn’t look at him.
“It doesn’t have to,” he said. “It just has to work.”
Nyra straightened.
Decision made.
“Lock that feed,” she said. “No redistribution.”

Torres nodded.
“Already contained.”
Good.
Nyra turned.
“To me,” she said.
The room shifted.
Focus snapped.
“New rule,” she continued. “We don’t chase movement. We track behavior.”
Pike frowned slightly.
“Difference?”
Nyra held his gaze.
“Movement lies,” she said. “Behavior doesn’t.”
Miles almost smiled.
Almost.

The feed flickered once.
Just once.
Barely noticeable.
But Miles saw it.
Of course he did.
Frame shift.
Micro-delay.
There.
Again.
He didn’t say anything.
Not yet.
He just watched.
And waited.
Because now—
It wasn’t about finding them.
It was about figuring out:

why they wanted to be found



CHAPTER 14

WHAT YOU SEE DEPENDS ON WHEN YOU LOOK.



They didn’t rush it.
That was the difference this time.
No one broke formation. No one chased movement.
Nyra moved them forward in controlled increments—two steps, stop, assess, adjust.
“Latham, keep the angle,” she said. “No drift.”
“Copy.”
“Torres, hold internal. No external sync.”
“Locked.”
Pike stayed just behind Nyra’s right shoulder.
Closer than before.
Not crowding.
Covering.
Miles hung back half a step.
Watching everything that didn’t move.

The corridor on Hale’s feed was three floors down.
Different wing.
Same layout.
Same clean lines.
Same problem.

They reached the stairwell.
Paused.
Nyra looked at Miles.
“Same pattern?” she asked.
Miles didn’t answer right away.
He watched the landing.
The rail.
The reflection on the brushed metal panel near the door.
“Could be,” he said.
Not confirmation.
Not denial.
Good.
Nyra nodded once.
“Move.”

They took the stairs.
Quiet.
Measured.
No wasted motion.
At the next landing, Pike stopped first.
Checked left.
Right.
Clear.
“Continue.”
They moved again.
Down one more level.
Then—
They felt it.
Not movement.
Not sound.
Absence.

The kind that sat wrong in your chest before your brain caught up.
Nyra slowed.
“Hold,” she said.
The team froze.
Latham’s voice came through low.
“Overwatch is clean.”
Of course it was.
Miles looked at the wall opposite the stairwell exit.
Polished surface.
Faint reflection.
Nothing in it.
That was the problem.
“Nyra,” he said quietly.
She didn’t turn.
“What.”
“Something’s off.”
Pike shifted.
“Everything’s off.”
Miles didn’t respond to that.
He stepped forward.
One step.
Then another.
Toward the corridor Hale had flagged.
Nyra moved with him.
“On me,” she said.

The hallway opened up ahead.
Long.
Straight.
Empty.
Exactly like the feed.

Nyra stopped at the threshold.
Didn't cross.
"Torres," she said, "confirm live."
A beat.
"Feed's active," Torres replied. "You're looking at it."
Nyra glanced at the wall-mounted camera.
Then back at the corridor.
Same angle.
Same view.
Same—
Nothing.
Pike frowned.
"This is it?" he said.
Miles didn't answer.
He stepped into the hallway.
Slow.
Measured.
Watched the floor.
The walls.
The ceiling seams.
Anything that might break pattern.
Nothing did.
Behind him, Nyra followed.
Pike held rear.
Latham adjusted position.
Everything clean.
Too clean.

"Where's the subject?" Pike asked.
Nyra didn't respond.
Because the question didn't matter.
The answer already felt wrong.

Miles stopped halfway down the hall.
Looked back.
Then forward again.
“Run it back,” he said.
“Running,” Torres replied.
“Frame match.”
“Stand by…”
A pause.
Then:
“…you’re in the same position as the earlier frame.”
Miles nodded.
“Yeah.”
He turned slowly.
Scanning.
Same space.
Same light.
Same empty.
Except—
“Nyra,” he said.
She saw it.
Not clearly.
Not fully.
But enough.
A faint mark on the wall.
Midway down.
Smudge.
Out of place.
She stepped closer.
“Hold,” she said.
Pike stopped behind her.
Miles moved to the side.
Gave her the angle.

Nyra leaned in.
Didn't touch it.
Just looked.
"Torres," she said, "zoom previous feed."
A beat.
"…stand by."
The feed adjusted.
Pixelated.
Blurred.
Then—
The same wall.
Same position.
No mark.
Nyra exhaled once.
"Not there before," she said.
Miles nodded.
"Or not visible."
Pike stepped closer.
"Could've been missed."
"No," Nyra said. "We would've seen it."
Miles crouched slightly.
Changed angle.
Light hit it differently now.
The mark shifted.
Not a smear.
Not damage.
Something else.
"Reflection," he said.
Nyra straightened.
"From what?"
Miles looked up.
At the ceiling line.

At the recessed panel above.
Then back at the wall.
“Something was here,” he said.
Past tense.
Nyra felt it.
The gap.
The missing piece.
“Torres,” she said, “any thermal?”
“Negative. No residual.”
“Sound?”
“Nothing logged.”
Of course not.
Pike shook his head.
“So what are we looking at?”
Miles stood.
Looked down the hallway again.
Then back at them.
“We’re looking at where something was,” he said.
A beat.
“And where it isn’t anymore.”
Silence.
Heavy.
Frustrating.
Incomplete.

Nyra stepped back.
Decision made.
“We’re done here,” she said.
Pike blinked.
“That’s it?”
Nyra met his eyes.
“That’s all we’ve got.”

He didn’t like it.
Didn’t have to.
“Pull back,” she said.
No argument this time.
They moved.
Same formation.
Same control.
But different now.
Because this time—
They’d seen something.
And it hadn’t stayed.

Miles paused at the stairwell before stepping through.
Looked back once more.
The hallway was empty.
Perfect.
Like it had never been touched.
He nodded to himself.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
“Not an accident.”

Nyra didn’t hear him.
Or didn’t respond.
Same difference.
They went back up.
Back to structure.
Back to reports.
Back to explanations that wouldn’t fit.

On the screen upstairs—
The earlier feed looped again.
Same frame.

Same corridor.
No mark on the wall.
No sign of anything.
Just—
empty.



CHAPTER 15

IF YOU CAN'T PROVE IT, IT DIDN'T HAPPEN.



They were already waiting when Nyra walked in.
Not her team.
Not yet.
Command.
Different posture. Different silence.
Hale stood at the front again, hands behind his back like the room belonged to him.
This time, it almost did.
"Agent Jones," he said. "Report."
No preamble.
Nyra didn't sit.
"Response team deployed to flagged corridor," she said. "No active threat on arrival."
"Evidence?"
"Residual anomaly. Non-persistent."
Hale's expression didn't change.
"Meaning," he said.
Nyra held his gaze.
"Meaning we observed a condition that could not be verified after the fact."
A few people shifted in their seats.

Translation landed.
Hale nodded once.
“Then we’re aligned.”
Nyra didn’t move.
“We’re not,” she said.
A pause.
Longer than it should’ve been.
Hale stepped forward.
“You have no physical confirmation,” he said. “No logged breach. No identifiable subject.”
“Because the system isn’t capturing it,” Nyra replied.
“Or because there’s nothing to capture.”
There it was.
Clean.
Dismissive.
Safe.
Wrong.
Nyra didn’t argue.
Not directly.
“We had visual discrepancy,” she said. “Multiple feeds.”
“Unverified,” Hale said.
“Correlated.”
“Unproven.”
The room went still.
Not tense.
Resolved.
Decision already made.
Hale turned slightly, addressing the room now.
“Current position stands,” he said. “Coordinated external threat. Initial breakdown contained. No ongoing internal compromise.”
The words settled like concrete.

Final.
Finished.
Nyra felt it close around her.
Not the truth.
The version of it that would survive.

“Summit security remains priority,” Hale continued. “All resources reallocated accordingly.”
A screen lit behind him.
Updated deployment map.
Clean lines.
Clean coverage.
Clean lies.
“Agent Jones will continue as operational lead,” he said.
“Under revised parameters.”
Nyra’s eyes stayed on him.
“What parameters,” she asked.
Hale met her gaze.
“No deviation from approved channels,” he said. “No independent interpretation of incomplete data.”
A beat.
“No escalation without confirmation.”
There it was.
The cage.
Nyra nodded once.
Understood.
Not accepted.

“Agent Long.”
Miles didn’t move.
Didn’t step forward.
Didn’t need to.

“That includes you,” Hale said.
Miles leaned against the wall, arms loose, expression unreadable.
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said.
No one believed that.
Least of all Hale.
“See that you don’t,” Hale replied.

The meeting ended without dismissal.
Again.
People moved.
Quiet.
Contained.
Already rewriting what they’d just heard into something cleaner.
Safer.
Easier to file.

Nyra didn’t leave right away.
Neither did Miles.
Of course they didn’t.
When the room thinned enough, she spoke.
“They shut it down,” she said.
Miles nodded.
“Yeah.”
“No escalation. No deviation.”
“Yeah.”
She looked at him.
“So what do we do.”
Miles didn’t answer immediately.
He looked at the board.
At the clean map.

At the perfect coverage.
Then back at her.
“We do it their way,” he said.
A beat.
Nyra frowned slightly.
“That doesn’t sound like you.”
“It’s not,” Miles said.
Another beat.
“Which is why it’ll work.”
Nyra held his gaze.
Longer this time.
Measuring.
Then:
“Off-book,” she said quietly.
Miles almost smiled.
“Not even a little,” he replied.

Pike entered as the last of command filtered out.
Moving better.
Still stiff.
But present.
“Status?” he asked.
Nyra didn’t look at him.
“Officially?” she said.
Pike nodded.
“Nothing happened,” she replied.
He absorbed that.
Didn’t like it.
Didn’t argue.
“And unofficially?” he asked.
Nyra glanced at Miles.
Then back at Pike.

“We’re watching,” she said.
Pike nodded once.
That, he could work with.

Torres approached, slower this time.
More careful.
“Logs are clean,” she said. “Like it never triggered.”
Miles exhaled through his nose.
“Yeah,” he said. “That’s the point.”
Nyra turned.
“Lock everything,” she said. “Internal only.”
“Already there,” Torres replied.
“Then keep it that way.”

The room settled again.
Controlled.
Contained.
Managed.
Everything exactly how Hale wanted it.
Miles looked at the screen one last time.
Perfect lines.
Perfect coverage.
Perfect story.
He nodded slightly.
“Yeah,” he said.
“Let’s see how long that holds.”



CHAPTER 16

THE TRUTH DOESN'T SHOUT. IT SLIPS THROUGH WHAT DOESN'T FIT.



They didn't call it an incident anymore.
Not officially.
It was a contained disruption.
A resolved breach.
Language cleaned it.
Filed it.
Buried it.

Nyra signed off on the last report without reading it twice.
Didn't need to.
She already knew what it said.
What it didn't say mattered more.
Torres had packaged the logs.
Latham had filed overwatch.
Pike had cleared medical and re-entered rotation.
Everything was back where it belonged.
On paper.

The room was quieter now.
Not calm.
Just… finished.

That was the lie.
Nyra stood at the central table, hands resting lightly on the edge.
Still.
Watching nothing in particular.
Miles stepped in without announcing it.
He didn't need to.
"You sign it?" he asked.
Nyra didn't turn.
"Had to," she said.
"Yeah."
A beat.
"That how it ends?" he asked.
Nyra finally looked at him.
"That's how it gets written," she said.
Not the same thing.

Miles nodded once.
Then:
"I've got something."
Nyra didn't move.
"Not a theory," he added. "Not a pattern."
That got her.
She turned fully now.
"What."
Miles held her gaze for a second.
Then stepped to the side console.
Plugged in a drive.
Torres looked up immediately.
"What is that?" she asked.
"Something small," Miles said.
The screen flickered.

New footage.
Same incident.
Different source.
Lower resolution.
Off-angle.
Nyra stepped closer.
“Where’d you get this,” she asked.
Miles didn’t answer.
Didn’t need to.
The clip rolled.
Motorcade.
Crowd.
Same sequence.
Nothing new—
Until—
“Pause,” Nyra said.
Miles already had.
There.
Mid-frame.
A fraction of a second.
Easy to miss.
Impossible to explain.
Torres leaned in.
“What am I looking at?”
Nyra didn’t answer.
She stepped closer.
Closer.
Like proximity would make it clearer.
It didn’t.
But it made it real.
“Run it back,” she said.
Miles did.

Frame by frame.
There it was again.
Not movement.
Not absence.
Something else.
A distortion that didn't behave like video.
Didn't behave like anything.
Torres frowned.
"That's compression," she said.
"No," Nyra replied quietly.
"It's not."
Miles watched her.
Let her get there.
Nyra pointed.
"Right there," she said. "That edge."
Torres squinted.
"…yeah."
"Watch the next frame," Nyra said.
Miles advanced it.
The distortion—
Didn't move.
The world around it did.
Torres blinked.
"…what?"
Nyra exhaled slowly.
"Run it again."
Miles did.
Same result.
Same frame.
Same impossible behavior.
Pike stepped in behind them.
"What am I missing?"

No one answered him.
Because they were all seeing it now.
Or trying to.
Nyra straightened.
“Freeze it.”
Miles did.
She stared at it.
Not long.
Just long enough.
Then:
“Overlay the timestamp.”
Torres pulled it up.
Numbers locked in.
Clean.
Official.
Wrong.
Nyra pointed again.
“Advance one frame.”
Miles did.
Timestamp ticked forward.
Normal.
Expected.
Except—
The distortion didn’t.
Torres felt it before she said it.
“…that’s not updating.”
Nyra nodded once.
“Because it’s not in the frame,” she said.
A beat.
“It’s between them.”
Silence.
Heavy.

Unavoidable.
Pike shook his head.
“That’s not possible.”
Miles didn’t look at him.
“Yeah,” he said quietly.
“Seems to be the theme.”

No one moved.
No one spoke.
Because for the first time—
This wasn’t a glitch.
Wasn’t a delay.
Wasn’t something that disappeared when you looked again.
It held.
Right there.
In the space the system didn’t know how to measure.

Nyra stepped back.
Slow.
Controlled.
“Can you isolate it?” she asked.
Torres hesitated.
Then:
“…no.”
“Can you remove it?”
Another beat.
“…no.”
Nyra nodded.
“Good.”
Torres blinked.
“Good?”
Nyra met her eyes.

“If we can’t remove it,” she said, “neither can they.”
That landed.
Different kind of weight.

Miles shut the clip down.
Just like that.
Nyra looked at him.
“That’s it?” she asked.
Miles nodded.
“That’s enough.”
A beat.
Nyra held his gaze.
Then:
“Yeah,” she said.
“It is.”

The room settled again.
But not the same way.
Not controlled.
Not contained.
Something else now.
Something that didn’t fit the report.
Didn’t fit the narrative.
Didn’t fit anything.

Miles turned to leave.
Nyra didn’t stop him.
Didn’t need to.
At the door, he paused.
Just for a second.
Then:
“They’re not perfect,” he said.

Nyra didn't respond right away.
Then:
"No," she said.
"They're not."

Miles left.
The door closed.
Quiet.
Clean.
Normal.

On the darkened screen—
For a fraction of a second—
That same distortion flickered back.
Unprompted.
Untracked.
Unlogged.
Then—
Gone.



CONTINUE THE STORY

You saw it.
Not the attack.
Not the report.
The part that didn't fit.
The moment between frames.

The system says it was contained.
The data says it was resolved.
But something slipped through.
Something that doesn't follow the rules.

This is only the beginning.
The pattern isn't random.
And the next time—
you'll know where to look.

USSS: THE PATTERN LOCK (Working title)

Coming Soon...

NEW TO THE SERIES?
You can start here.
Or go back to where it began.

Miles Long Trilogy
- The Bullet Line
- The Ghost Detail
- The Fault Line

Nyra Jones Trilogy

- Dead Zone
- Kill Box
- Clean Exit

Now they're both inside the same system.
And it's already breaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kamary Phillips is a writer, producer, and storyteller whose work spans fiction, audio, and screen-based narratives. His writing often explores power, loyalty, identity, and the moral fractures that emerge inside institutions meant to protect.

He is the founder of **Audible Publishers**, an independent imprint dedicated to original, creator-owned stories designed for cross-media adaptation. *USSS: The Blind Frame* is book seven of an ongoing narrative universe developed under the USSS Secret Service banner.
Phillips lives and works between Baltimore and the Carolina coast.