

Chapter One: Visual Distortion

The photograph sat on the nightstand beside her Glock.

Sarah held it every night at the same time, 10:39 PM, the way some people said prayers. Her parents on vacation in Santorini, the Aegean impossibly blue behind them. Her mother's hand on her father's shoulder. They were smiling. She knew this because she'd been told. The faces themselves gave her nothing. She'd been staring at this picture since she was seven years old and she still couldn't say whether her father's nose was straight or crooked. She studied the photograph the way a student studies a foreign alphabet, recognizing the shapes without grasping the meaning. Then she put it back in the drawer, between the spare magazine and the sleeping pills she never took, and tried to carry their faces through the night.

They never survived until morning.

Her phone rang. Not the FBI phone, the personal one. The Bach fugue she'd assigned to Amy looped twice before Sarah picked up. Without the ringtone, she wouldn't have known who was calling. Her sister's number was stored in her contacts but the digits meant nothing on their own, same as every other number.

"Sarah, you won't believe what we found today. The implications for memory reconstruction are,"

"Amy." Sarah sat on the edge of the bed. "It's Thursday. You call on Tuesdays."

"I know. I know, I'm breaking protocol." Amy's words came fast, tumbling over each other the way they did when she was excited. She had their mother's intonation when she was tired, that slight Bengali lilt. "But this is big. We might have cracked the pathway for rebuilding damaged recognition circuits. Sarah, we could potentially fix,"

"That's great." Sarah closed the photo album. The leather binding creaked. "I'm really proud of you."

She meant it. She also couldn't tell Amy that pride tasted like guilt, because Amy's entire career, the neural interface research at Berkeley, the midnight lab sessions, the grants, all of it had grown from Sarah's damage. Amy was trying to cure what she didn't fully understand. Sarah had spent her entire adult life making sure of that. Thanksgiving dinners navigated by scent. Christmas gatherings where she performed recognition like an actress hitting marks. Fourteen relatives catalogued by laugh. Twenty-two family friends filed by gait.

"I was thinking I should visit," Amy said. "Next month. Three days. I already blocked the time."

Sister time. Amy's word for intervention.

"I'd love that," Sarah said. "Text me the dates."

"I will. Sarah, you know I love you, right?"

"I know. Love you too. Even when I can't find you in a crowd."

It was the truest thing she'd said all day. If Amy walked into a lineup tomorrow with five strangers, Sarah would fail to pick her out. Her own sister. Gone the moment the phone call ended, reduced to a voice pattern and the memory of how she laughed.

The call disconnected with a soft chime. Sarah sat with the silence for three seconds. Just before midnight, her FBI phone went off, the emergency tone, the one that cut through everything.

All available agents. Hoover Building. Code Seven.

She dressed in ninety seconds. Charcoal suit, one of seven identical ones hanging in her closet. White shirt, same as the other fifteen in the drawer. She holstered the Glock with the muscle memory of a thousand repetitions, the grip worn to the shape of her hand. Her mother's Cartier Tank watch sat warm against her wrist, the leather strap molded to her over three years.

Work was simpler than family. Evidence didn't change its face. The dead held still long enough to study.

The drive to the Hoover Building took twenty minutes at this hour. She drove the same route she always drove, Connecticut to K Street, K to 9th, 9th to Pennsylvania. The city passed her windows in smears of streetlight and neon, and she let it. Navigation was muscle memory. Her mind was already at the crime scene, assembling the invisible frame of a case she hadn't seen yet.

Code Seven meant something bad. Code Seven at the Hoover Building meant something bad and political. She ran through the possibilities the way other people ran through playlists, assassination, terrorism, breach, hostage. Each one carried a different weight, a different set of patterns she'd need to deploy.

At the security checkpoint, she handed over her credentials and waited while the guard verified them. He said something friendly. She responded with the generic warmth she kept in reserve for encounters with people she couldn't identify, a slight smile, a nod, nothing that committed her to recognition. It worked. It always worked. People didn't notice when you didn't recognize them, as long as you were polite enough. The whole world ran on the assumption that everyone knew everyone else's face. All you had to do was not break the assumption.

The guard waved her through.

* * *

Michael Harrison had thirteen minutes left to live, and he was thinking about his wife.

The twentieth floor of the Hoover Building was empty except for Harrison and his case files. Ristorante Luna would have given away their anniversary table by now. Katherine had stopped

calling at nine. Her last voicemail carried that tone she'd developed two years ago, not anger anymore, just a flat resignation that was somehow worse.

Seventy-one hours until *United States v. Morrison* went to trial. Six months of depositions, classified testimony, encrypted files. Project Prometheus. Project Looking Glass. Code names that revealed nothing. Harrison had given a hundred and eighty-three days to this case, each one carved from an eighteen-hour shift. His coffee had gone cold in the mug Jessica had given him for Father's Day, "World's Okayest Dad," a Georgetown joke he'd earned.

He forced another sip. Bitter enough to cut through the exhaustion.

He thought about calling Katherine. The phone was right there, charging on the corner of his desk between the evidence binders and a framed photo of Jessica's college graduation. He could hear the conversation before it happened, the tired hello, the pause where the apology should go, the silence that had replaced their fighting the way scar tissue replaces skin. Functional, but numb. She'd stopped complaining about his hours three years ago, the day Jessica left for Georgetown. The anger had calcified into something quieter and more permanent. He missed the arguments. At least anger meant she still cared.

He didn't call. He turned back to the brief.

The air pressure in the room changed.

It was subtle, a shift you'd feel in your sinuses before you could name it. The hair on his forearms lifted. He smelled ozone, sharp and wrong, threaded with something synthetic, like heated plastic.

Harrison looked up, his primitive brain screaming danger before his conscious mind could process why.

The office door was closed. The hallway beyond the glass partition was empty, lit by the green wash of emergency lighting. Security wouldn't come for another thirteen minutes. But the temperature had dropped three degrees in as many seconds, and his breath was visible now, small clouds of condensation that had no business existing in a building where the climate was controlled to a tenth of a degree.

He pushed back from his desk. His spine popped from four hours of sitting. The Venetian blinds rattled against the window, but the twentieth floor was hermetically sealed. Climate-controlled. They couldn't open.

The blinds swayed again, aluminum slats clicking like skeletal fingers tapping for attention.

"Hello?"

The word came out thin. The fluorescents hummed their steady sixty-hertz note, but underneath, there was something else. He felt a vibration just below perception, like standing next to a massive subwoofer playing notes too low to hear.

The security footage, reviewed later, would show Harrison turning in a slow circle. Hands rising, palms out. Mouth shaping a word three forensic lip-readers would independently identify as *impossible*.

Then the footage warped.

No power surge. No equipment failure. The timestamp ticked forward with normal precision, but Harrison's image rippled as if viewed through water.

The air around him bent, light folding around a man-shaped absence where his outline should have been.

His hands flew to his throat. His fingers clawed at empty air that somehow left bruises spreading across his trachea, blooming purple and black. Legal briefs exploded off his desk. The Georgetown mug hit the marble floor and shattered, coffee spreading in a pattern forensics would later map, no footprints, no knee impressions, no DNA. Nothing to show what was crushing his windpipe.

Harrison fought for forty-seven seconds. His nails tore at his own neck trying to pry away fingers that weren't visible. His face went crimson, then violet. His knees hit the marble hard enough to crack it.

At 10:47:38, his hands dropped.

At 10:47:47, the convulsions stopped.

The distortion lingered three seconds more, a shimmer, a wrongness in the air, then nothing. Just a dead man on the marble floor, his eyes fixed on the empty air where the thing that killed him had been standing.

The room looked exactly as it had two minutes ago, minus one living person.

The security guard who found Harrison was a twenty-three-year-old named Davis who'd been on the job for seven months. He would later tell investigators that the first thing he noticed was the cold. The room was fifteen degrees below the rest of the building. The second thing was the smell, ozone and something else, something synthetic he couldn't place. The third thing was Harrison's eyes, wide open and locked on a spot in the middle of the room where there was nothing at all.

Davis had seen dead people before. He'd grown up in Southeast D.C. and death was part of the landscape. But he'd never seen anyone who looked like they'd died staring at something that scared them more than dying did.

He called it in at 11:31 PM.

* * *

Sarah badged through security at the Hoover Building forty minutes later. The crime scene was already crowded, evidence techs in nitrile gloves, photographers, investigators she'd worked with for three years and couldn't identify on sight. She navigated by voice and movement, the way she always did.

"Agent Chen?"

The voice arrived before she turned. Virginia accent worn smooth by federal service, words rationed like they cost something. Six-two, weight favoring his right leg, old injury, probably shrapnel. Tactical watch on the left wrist, not dress.

"Agent Stone," she said. "Task force leader."

"Thanks for coming." He didn't offer a handshake or waste time on pleasantries. She liked that immediately. "Michael Harrison. Assistant U.S. Attorney, Eastern District. Security found him at 11:31 during routine rounds. Door was locked from the inside. No forced entry. Three hundred cameras in this building. No witnesses."

"Cause of death?"

"Manual strangulation. Except there's no DNA on his throat. No fibers. No prints. No evidence anyone else was in the room." Stone paused. "Security footage shows him being killed by nothing."

Sarah knelt beside the body. Harrison's eyes were still open, pupils blown wide. The bruising around his throat was unmistakable, finger-width marks, consistent pressure, someone who knew what they were doing. But the skin between the bruises was clean. No transfer evidence at all.

"Show me the footage."

Stone led her to the monitor bank. Six screens, six angles. She watched Harrison die from each one. The ripple in the air. Light bending around something that wasn't there. Her mind did what it always did, stripped away the expected and focused on the gaps. She'd spent her whole life reading the spaces where information should be but wasn't. Missing faces. Missing features. And now, missing people.

"Impossible," she said.

"That's what Harrison said. Right before it killed him." Stone's jaw tightened. "There's something else."

He handed her a tablet. An email, encrypted, routed through seven proxies, timestamped thirty seconds after Harrison's heart stopped:

Agent Chen, By now you've seen what I can do. Harrison is the overture. I know you see patterns others miss. It's why Mumbai broke you so perfectly. I look forward to our game. MW

Sarah read it twice. The sender knew her name, her method, her history. Mumbai was in classified medical files.

"MW," she said. "Mean anything?"

"Not yet. We're running it."

She looked at the footage again. The shimmer. The void. Physics didn't allow this. But physics left evidence, even when it was being broken. Light bent. Air displaced. Temperature changed. She'd felt the wrongness in the room the moment she walked in, that residual cold, that faint chemical smell.

"It's not magic," she said. "It's technology. Something bending light around a person. And technology has seams."

Stone studied her. She could feel the assessment, the slight shift in posture, the way his breathing changed. She waited.

"Good," he said. "Because we just got word of a second body. Same method. Same impossible crime scene. Albuquerque, eight days ago. We missed it because nobody believed the first responding officers."

"Who was the victim?"

"Dr. Peter Wong. Biomedical researcher. No apparent connection to Harrison except one thing, they both served on the same classified DARPA oversight committee six years ago."

Sarah looked back at Harrison on the marble floor. A prosecutor and a researcher. A committee. Someone killing them invisibly, one by one.

"How many people were on that committee?"

"Five."

Five people who made a decision. Two dead. Three walking around with targets they couldn't see, being hunted by a man they couldn't see either. Sarah felt the shape of the case assembling itself, not the details yet, but the shape. A revenge killing with a classified weapon. A dead man who wasn't dead. A technology that the government had tried to bury and that had clawed its way back out of the ground.

"I want everything on that committee," Sarah said. "Members, mandate, what they reviewed, why it was classified. And I want the Wong crime scene files by morning."

"Already requested." Stone tapped three times on the table beside her, quick, rhythmic, deliberate. Their shorthand. He'd started it without being asked, and she hadn't had to explain why it mattered. Some people required the conversation, *I have this condition, I can't recognize faces, here's what helps*. Stone had just observed, adapted, and acted. Military instinct, maybe. Or maybe just the intelligence of someone who paid attention to the people around him.

"Chen. Whoever this is, they know who you are. They chose you."

“I know.”

She didn't say what she was thinking: that in her world, everyone was already invisible. She'd spent her whole life identifying people without seeing their faces. Now she needed to identify someone without seeing them at all.

It was the same problem. Just bigger.