THE MOTION CLUE: A Future Tech Cyber thriller
CHAPTER ONE
by Case Lane

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BOOK DESCRIPTION
The Motion Clue: A Future Tech Cyber Thriller

Where is authority in the post control world?

TO PROVIDE FOR THE COMMON DEFENSE unknown forces created The Network to manage all human activity by linking camera, sensor and satellite surveillance to online personal data. But when an undetectable drone blows up an energy plant, humans face the horror of an unprecedented investigation into the system they thought was the front line in cyber defense.

Have we reached the end of our control over machines?

The Motion Clue is a future tech cyber thriller about a clash between a global cyber security team of individual experts and rogue technologists working as colleagues and adversaries in a battle to reverse engineer the most terrifying technological threat the world has ever encountered.

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The Motion Clue: A Future Tech Cyber Thriller
Book One in the Life Online Files

Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the Government's purposes are beneficent. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasion of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding.

Justice Louis Brandeis, United States Supreme Court, dissenting in Olmstead v. United States, 277 U.S. 438 (1928)

CHAPTER ONE - THE BROKEN SILENCE

An intense burst of energy surged through a plain plastic and copper data cord. Internally, the physical piece of hardware succumbed to the overload pressure created by an unexpected wave of digital code. Externally, the cord burned until the wire split in half, and the pieces fell into the organized rows of connectors hanging, u-shaped like jump rope, between the server racks. No human saw the break happen, and no human intervened. On monitor screens from twenty feet to eight thousand miles away, an error message appeared. Error messages occurred from time to time, then disappeared after a Network fix. By design, The Network functioned on a continuous, seamless, unyielding schedule programmed to direct all electronically-managed activity. But to The Network's surprise, this error message was not reacting to the design.

Louis Santino, a burly, 43 year old former professional football player from down south in Fargo, North Dakota, was the technician in charge, the only human located at the 148-acre hydroelectric power facility on the craggy lakeside in northern Manitoba. Inside the fiberglass walls of the main Control Room, Santino could not see the error message displayed on a monitor two feet above his line-of-sight. He was lying across his chair watching a football game. Enraptured by the competition, Santino kept his eyes on the screen, his ears tuned to the loud volume, and his body balanced across the industrial furniture. Like many humans, he relished viewing a spectacle of men engaged in dangerous, physical hand-to-hand competition. To keep the game at levels of continuous brutal contact, professional football players wore body armor shields. Fans logged on to watch hulking men of swift athletic skill tangle with skilled players with lightening hands, directed by coaches using thought strategies to outwit their opponents. Eagerly anticipating trick plays, spectators waited for the novelty of witnessing humans execute unpredictable options by using only their brains and bodily strength. But the coaches also used The Network. They had computer applications, called apps for short, running pattern simulations on completed games, and analyzing player moves and statistics over his lifetime. Still, most fans ignored the programmed assistance in favor of the thrilling live play.

Santino focused on the intensifying game action until, without warning, the words 'Alert Signal' displaying in 64-point red block letters, flashed, like the bullet from a firing gun, directly in front of his eyes. Shocked into a swiftness that recalled his own playing days, Santino jumped straight up and out of his chair. Having never previously seen the alert message projection function used, he stood stock still in the center of the room. Without prompting, the game

volume on the viewing monitor decreased, and The Network switched his viewing preference from 'live' to 'record.' The Network knew Santino would continue watching the game at a later time, and its automatic behavior prediction feature reacted by saving the broadcast for him.

As his shaking legs settled into an upright place, Santino slowly lifted his handheld com to eye level. All of the facility's operations, the signals, reports and alert data, could be tracked through his com, a palm-sized, flat-screen, black-rimmed, plastic electronic device he had strapped to his belt. All communication devices, or electronic tools with similar features, were called a com even though the equipment had a range of fading names like phone, radio, television, camera, personal electronic device, or palm, because most literally fit into a hand. Some were branded after fruits including berry, apple, cherry or orange, but those were favored by children. The choice of size, shape and materiel used to manufacture coms was almost limitless, but all had one shared function, all were wirelessly connected to The Network.

People in cities usually kept the com functionality attached to a part of the body like the wrist, or to clothing like a flap on a shirt pocket, but Santino preferred holding the physical device, and the feel of identifiable material between his fingers. The display screen fit snuggly into his large hand tightly grasping the edges as he guardedly read the message The Network was displaying - Employee Intervention Required - for an error, an electrical shortage on the grid in Sector 2G. In sixteen years on the job, Santino had never received an alert requiring him to personally engage in an error repair action. Puzzled, he took a deep breath and began to feel slightly anxious.

Within the minute passing by, a transport silently rolled into the Control Room, and the sight of the driverless vehicle prompted Santino to jump again. The transport, an IO Rider for indoor-outdoor, was sized and shaped like an old snowmobile, with a closed, clear fiberglass box cab on top, and space for two passengers sitting one behind the other. With functionality to hover forward, backward and sideways, or move on bare floors, carpet, gravel, grass, cement, ice, snow and heated terrain, the Rider automatically adjusted to the ground beneath its wheels. Santino stared at the transport and his anxiety deepened.

The Network had processed Santino's transport preference against the intended destination, detected his com location, cross-referenced his image from the surveillance camera in the Control Room, and sent the Rider directly to where he stood. Knowing Santino had little history of leisure walking, certainly not to the distance of Sector 2G, and almost never in winter temperatures, The Network calculated he would not walk to the error location. With his profile, even if Santino had preferred to walk, the transport would follow him, and his com screen would not change instructions until he accepted the ride. He had no override code for the transport's operations. Without another option, he climbed into the Rider, and as The Network registered the pressure of his buttocks on the seat, the cab door slowly closed. Santino did not want, or have to, look at the dashboard screen in front of him as the data updated to display the destination. Although all of his next required actions were automatically uploaded to his com, he was too confused to view the information.

The Rider departed the Control Room, but as the vehicle approached the facility's garage style exit doors, the wheels rolled to a stop at a walk-in closet lining one of the walls, and waited next to a table holding a set of clothing neatly separated from other varying sizes hanging inside. Using Santino's already stored measurements, The Network had selected a coat, snow pants, hat, scarf, gloves and boots, and arranged the items, distributed by conveyor belt, at the closet entrance. Santino stepped out of the transport and walked up to the table. He did not examine the clothing, which was not only his size, but also his color. Putting the items on, he would not

normally question why he was dressing warmly, but a flash in his memory considered that if the transport had stopped for winter clothing, The Network not only wanted him to go outside of the facility, but also to step out of the vehicle. The building temperature was a comfortable 71 degrees Fahrenheit, and Santino was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Outdoors the atmosphere was minus 20, but now in January, the biting air would feel like minus 36. The vast, empty expanse of semi-permafrost and razor thin trees encircling the complex was an occupied home dominated by black bears and gray wolves. The facility at Grand Rapids, the westernmost outpost of Canada's Hudson Bay Hydroelectric and Water Reservoir Complex, was on the 53rd latitudinal parallel, north. In winter, the terrain was surrounded by ice and snow as far as the eyes could see, and there was no cover from the elements. Humans rarely ventured into the open air as part of their daily functioning. The outdoors was for adventurers, sportspeople, environmentalists, and the occasional daring family with children who wanted to ensure the next generation knew about natural trees and flowers. In cities, both icy and tropical weather populated areas had connected most buildings through tunnels, underground shopping centers, transport stations, subways, overhead crosswalks, and covered people movers. Designated industry employees, like agricultural managers, occasionally worked outside, but only when The Network signaled a problem that could not be remotely fixed, which did not happen often.

Fully dressed for the temperature change, Santino returned to the Rider and, still avoiding the dashboard panel, stepped in and sat down. A few extra seconds would pass as the Rider recalibrated his weight to detect he had sufficient cover for his required pending activity. Satisfied, the transport closed its door and moved towards the garage opening. On approach, the garage door began to rise, and at exactly the spot where the entry panel was three feet over Santino's head, the transport crossed from the controlled environment of the facility into the unmanaged wilderness. The moment the transport cleared the exit, the door rolled back down. The silent descent was not unknown to Santino, but he turned back to follow its close. From his vantage point, the entryway was a gray cut in a wall of snow, unknown as the access to a billion dollar facility currently without a single human inside the walls. As the transport moved forward, he continued to watch the door shrink and fade away from sight.

Despite being inside a heated cab, Santino immediately felt the bitter cold. Living in the North did not inure him to experiencing the region's winter. As the Rider followed an expected path to Sector 2G, the wind whipped around the transport, and cut through gaps in Santino's additional clothing. Defrosters kept the cab windows from fogging and icing over, and he could see the mix of nature and human destruction all around him. The facility's land was covered in short pine trees, limping in the frozen bog of winter, black and white in every direction. But the man-made structures were gray and silver, cement and steel walls pushed up against a body of water, flowing even in the cold, as liquid rushing through the barrier with a force turning the world's largest turbines, and pushing electrons out over wires for thousands of miles. Santino did admire the engineering, and all of the details required to create the facility, but the construction operated on a relatively ancient design, vulnerable to terrorists, remote and disruptive to the natural environment. Clean air had a price, humans had learned that lesson decades ago.

The Rider traveled 50 mph, and for a minute Santino considered he had no idea where Sector 2G was located. When he had first obtained the hydro job, he had been told not to expect to know the layout of the complex, The Network would lead him to any location he was required to visit. But in his idleness with the employment's tasks, he would scroll through distraction options on his com, which led occasionally to searching The Network to view maps and blueprints for the facility. Coms had an endless array of features, but the only portal for

accessing all functions was The Network. Every business used The Network for operations, administration, sales tracking, inventory ordering, marketing and forecasting, and since employees needed the information for their work, instant access was available through their coms. The same device facilitated personal lives by displaying The Network links to data inputted into computers as text and voice communications, government records, education results, employment opportunities, sports scores, movie reviews, consultations, nutrition advice, weather warnings, and all other information stored on globally-connected servers. Recorded movements from cameras and sensors tracking the timing and changes in human activity were automatically stored on servers too. The Network continuously scanned servers, even those not exposed to the public Internet to retrieve, cross-reference, and integrate data within controlled spaces. Aggregated data was used to create and send appropriate daily life instructions, specifically prepared for each individual's com, and all other coms interacting with an individual. Avoiding The Network was considered impossible. Some people tried diminishing its role in their lives, but few completely avoided the functions. The Network managed personal lives, businesses, organizations, and government operations with efficiency and accuracy, directing individuals throughout the day, and even allotting time for relaxation and socializing. Millions of programs and apps recalculated and redefined data every second, and the data fed the human's com, and the human reacted accordingly.

But The Network did not ignore the surfing of its own files. If an unexpected search pattern was recorded, a protocol determined if the issue should be escalated. After Santino had executed several similar search requests about the facility, The Network had sent a text message asking him to define the information he was looking for, and the reasons for his search. After one warning, if an employee persisted with unexplained research, The Network would implement a punishment tailored to the employee's preferences. When Santino had tested the protocol once too often, The Network blocked his access to Internet sports and entertainment sites for 24 hours. He had been left with the silence of the Control Room. Since that day, he had not bothered to look at the facility's layout again.

Without an awareness of his current location or intended destination, Santino patiently sat as the Rider continued to fly across the terrain, automatically making speed adjustments to account for the surroundings, the activity in the area, and the presence, or lack of, other vehicles. All transports had sensors for assessing the environment around a route. If no other movement was detected along the travel path, the transport could accelerate across the snow and ice like the wolves in pursuit of prey in the forest nearby. Santino let the wind, snow and trees pass by him as a cascade of debris from a sneeze, and considered for a moment that he might be enjoying the ride. But when the vehicle began slowing down, his anxiety returned. Sector 2G arose no special memories for Santino. He was not near the main dam, but out along the high voltage electrical power lines running away from Grand Rapids to all defined destinations. The dashboard was displaying the coordinates for the area, but he was still not interested in registering detailed information. As the Rider came to a stop at the base of an electrical transmission tower, Santino leaned back against the seat, and the cab door slowly opened.

Looking out into the bleak of the fading daylight, Santino waited for his instruction. But after another minute, he realized the transport would not be in talk mode. He was one of the few employees who hated voice instructions. Transport voices could be any modulation, a soprano lady, a child, your own, but Santino preferred not to respond to electronically-spoken instructions. Other people did not mind, especially if they were around humans all day. But Santino had decided in the absence of working with humans, having a computer talk to him

seemed a little desperate. His home system had available voice commands, but since The Network already knew he had most audio turned off, the system waited for him to read his instructions from the Rider dashboard screen or his com. Choosing to ignore both options, Santino braced for the cold and stepped out of the cab. A sensation overcame him he rarely felt, surprise. He stared up at the rising extended stretch of tower steel, glanced down at his com, and back at the Rider.

The transmission tower was one of thousands of identical steel structures built to the sky on needle-like precision that minimized wind shear and maximized height. Santino could not see the top, only sensor lights illuminating in red, yellow or green, offering the same advisory as streetlights. At first glance, all he saw was green. But as he looked straight up the spine of the tower, another shockwave slowly rolled over him. Santino felt the unfamiliar sensation again, surprise, cloaked in an even more unexpected awareness of rising trepidation. In the near night sky glowed the unmistakable purple light of a hovering drone.

Unmanned aerial devices operating one hundred percent automatically on instructions from The Network, or automatically with a human override, or one hundred percent by a human with a manual remote control were, by common understanding, a drone. The machines could be any size, and had a variety of functional uses including carrying products from instruction documents to packages to emergency kits to repair tools, to assisting with construction and structural repairs or disaster rescue, and targeted surveillance. Drones could be any geometric shape even balls or triangles, or resemble miniature versions of helicopters and other flying machines. For delivering packages in a city, drones were predominately one-foot square boxes, but for military maneuvers in the desert, the machines were the size of single-passenger airplanes. Humans co-opted the name 'drone' from military aircraft used for missions in the last century’s desert wars. The military and drone manufacturers had desperately tried to encourage an independent civilian name for the machines, but the term had long ago passed into popular use, easy to say, spell and remember. With unlimited specs, drones could also be manufactured in a variety of facilities, and be equipped with weapons, legally or not. Businesses, organizations, professionals and individuals ubiquitously used civilian drones in all aspects of their daily lives and operations. Humans appreciated the conveniences provided by the machines, and most were placidly comfortable with the devices moving above them at work, in streets, parks, homes and office buildings. Drones and humans were considered completely compatible.

On an industrial site, the machines were work-tools, programmed to lift heavy objects, patrol remote facilities, and ferry goods around complexes. By law, the devices emanated a unique fluorescent light created under patent through a color simulation of royal purple and aquamarine blue unavailable for use by any other aerial object. Civilian drones had to be distinguishable from every other status light or active device in the sky. All recognized nations had signed a treaty solidifying, for governments, companies, and international service organizations, the unified rules for the use of commercial drones. In most countries, individuals could own personal drones and the action lights could take on any hue. But the status light color humans and The Network saw, as the drone moved through the sky, or hovered nearby, had to be drone purple.

Santino recognized the purple light, but not the drone. His apprehension rising again, he looked at his com to search for the drone's identification record. But there was no report and no displayed coordinates for a drone in the vicinity. He hit 'Refresh,' and the screen re-emerged in less than a second. His instructions were still there, but no drone indicator. Confused, Santino knew he should not be able to see a drone's light, if there was no drone. Repair drones were

stored at locations all around the complex, and The Network could dispatch one to any location to fix an operational problem. But the system would never send a human and a drone to look at the same error at the same time. If animals or the weather had damaged a line, drones equipped with cameras, mechanical arms or industrial equipment, could make the repairs without humans. A human employee could view the repair operation from the Control Room using the fixed surveillance cameras, the repair drone's camera, or even dispatch a specific camera drone to record the action. Company management or law enforcement could also dispatch camera drones at any time to look at incidents around the site. The Network would recognize the internal instruction and update an employee's com. Occasionally a specific authorization was required to be advised if a drone was on site, but that advisory usually depended on security issues, which Grand Rapids never had.

Santino's puzzlement was quickly turning to outright fear. He desperately considered if the situation had a valid explanation. He wondered if he was looking at a camera drone a human monitor had sent to view the error. Although he was the only human at the complex, he was not exactly alone. The electronic surveillance was extensive and omnipresent. The complex's operations could be monitored from the company's operational facilities 1,100 miles to the south in Kansas City in the United States. After Kansas City, the data was continuously backed up to a server farm in Iceland, and its backup was in Liberia. Because hydroelectric power was a strategic and vital resource for millions of people, the Canadian Defense Force Command Centre near Ottawa monitored all of the connected sites, and the North American Defense Command outside Denver monitored all monitoring. Mexican officials kept their eyes on activity from their surveillance complex in Toluca, west of Mexico City. The Chinese and Europeans were also likely to be paying attention, but their surveillance was not considered official, and was politely ignored. At least one Santino-level employee, but not many more, worked at every monitoring site. The locations were responsible for continuously viewing all security at all energy plants, reservoirs, sub-stations, and along thousands of miles of transmission lines stretching across the North American continent. Santino expected the individual who sent the drone to be aware a human was at the same location, but it was also possible human operators did not have the same information. Disturbingly, he had no definitive idea which options were operational. He had never interacted with the information, equipment and protocols available to the monitoring teams around the world. He could only be almost certain, although not completely, that The Network would detect any drone at the complex, and he should be able to see the detection on his com. 'This is strange,' he considered, looking around. Grand Rapids had 10,124 cameras and sensors, all visibly on. Each networked security device could register the difference between a black bear, wind, an authorized human employee, and an unauthorized intruder. An unknown, unidentified detection would trigger an intruder protocol. After analyzing evidence from camera and sensor data, The Network would activate an investigatory drone to deploy to the incident site. Since the company had the right to be advised of all drones inside its complex, if this one was not an authorized drone, the unauthorized intrusion protocol should already be in progress. Either way The Network must be aware a drone was here and inform the human employee. Santino should have the information on his com, but he did not.

Abruptly, the sound of metal cracking ice emerged from the Rider. Santino spun around to face the sight of a ladder unfolding from the transport's side panel, and ascending like a stretching coil up the narrow steel edge of the tower. The transport remained parked alongside the base, and Santino observed the action with increasing nervousness. The ladder inched up, and at every two-foot mark automatically unrolled a clamp to attach to the tower's frame.

Although The Network could continuously measure the voltage traveling in any direction, and the chance of a miscalculation was negligible, the absorption ladder was a precaution used as a barrier to protect humans from electrical currents. If charges were unbalanced, The Network sensed and corrected the difference, by redirecting electricity across the appropriate wires to cut voltage to an overcharging section, or increasing production to one reporting a shortage. Santino eyed the ladder's resolute rise up and out of his sight. Holding his com up to eye level, he noted his next displayed instruction was to climb. He moved over to the affixed steps, but stopped and stood with one foot on the lowest rung. Sucking in a deep breath of the ice-laced air, he uncomfortably realized he had come all of the way out to Sector 2G, and did not know why. 'What was the repair work that could not be completed by a drone or The Network?' Feeling increasingly unnerved in the bitter Canadian cold, Santino finally decided he should read the entire Network error report.

Gripping his com, he scrolled the text back to the point where the error message had first appeared. All company messages were configured to a specific employee by prior education, experience and duties. If an engineer pulled up the same report, the details would contain technical language and schematics, for Santino the display was basic points explained in plain English. The report began with the surcharge, but did not state the source, next were instructions he had already witnessed, leading to the pending step for a human action to ascend the ladder. None of this information was a revelation to Santino, but the fact he was standing out in the cold did not add up. Now if he wanted to return indoors, he would have to follow The Network instructions or the transport would not process his efforts and take him back inside. The temperature felt like it was dropping by the minute, forcing his questions and concerns to be clipped at the same precipitous pace.

As sheer spots of frost began to develop on the waiting ladder, Santino realized the error must be unrecognizable by a drone or The Network, or both, and this possibility terrified him. He was a technician, not an engineer or an electrical tower designer. 'What did The Network conclude he could do?' The report on his com had stopped at action for a human, and he was the one who had been brought to the site to complete the task. 'Maybe this was some new, unknown type of damage.' Although The Network could assess any error, and determine a repair protocol, an unforeseen problem may have intervened with the process. Suddenly, Santino felt better. 'Yes,' he decided. 'It's an unknown type of damage The Network cannot interpret, that's why a human is required.' But as he began to climb the ladder steps, apprehension swept over him again. 'What could be an issue he would encounter that The Network could not detect, analyze and manage on its own?' All information was in The Network, all of the data humans knew. The entire hydro complex - the electrical systems, transmission towers and programming for the servers - had been designed and built by computers. As Santino climbed the ladder, he ached to imagine the problem he would find, and failed to process any potential scene.

Rising up the transmission tower were sensors placed at two-foot intervals. The tower stood at 216 feet, and his com indicated a red light flashing at marker 56, 112 feet up, high enough that as Santino began to climb, he would not be able to see the sensor above him until he drew nearer. As he continued to ascend, another confusion wave rolled over him. Part of The Network's standard error assessment was to send photos or video of the problem for review prior to transporting the employee to the site. Yet he was climbing without any diagnostic or repair tools. After only visually noting the error, he would have to input findings into his com, and wait for The Network to determine his next action, including if necessary, delivering required

tools. With each step Santino's incomprehension soared. The lack of visuals, he realized, must be an error within the error.

A minute later, reaching the 100-foot mark, he emerged into the unidentified drone's defined purple glow illuminating the flat black sky around him. By silently hovering, the drone complied with laws protecting birds and other flying creatures from audio disruption to their natural rhythms by man-made airborne devices. But the accommodation ended there. The machine was a two-foot square box coated black except for one side featuring a clear plastic viewing window, a popular feature Santino enjoyed because a human could see directly in to the electronics. Despite the ease with which drones fit into human life, an interior view reminded humans, the drones were machines. Unlike flying creatures, drones did not require wings, but many people, the opposite of the interior-view types, added the feature as if to reassure themselves the machines were more ecological, members of the bird family, and not an output from a gadget factory. The movement of the box reflected its gravity-defying support. The device made an almost imperceptible rocking motion, adjusting up and down and side-to-side, which aided in remaining steady in the blowing air. Seeing the drone waiting with balanced calm, Santino stared and offered, under his breath, a slight moaning "hmm" as a greeting when his eyes and hands reached level with marker 56, 112 feet above the ground on the transmission tower in Sector 2G.

"Good evening," the machine greeted him in a clear, steady news announcer's voice.

The drone's verbal reaction locked Santino into a reflexive shock. His hair stood up at the back of his neck, and his hands gripped the ladder frame as he thwarted an instinct to jump. Drones did not talk. Not only could a human turn off all talk instructions from Network-connected electronics, but also by law and common practice, company drones, law enforcement, military, all standard, work-related drones, did not talk. Emergency rescue drones had a speaker function humans used for communicating in disaster areas when drones were used to look for survivors. And many civilians had personal talking drones. But flying a talking drone in public airspace with the talk function turned on was illegal. Under no normal circumstances would a drone dispatched to an industrial work site talk, no circumstances at all. Drones were not robots, robots could talk, and everyone knew that. But governments, and most citizens, did not want to hear talking from boxes or bags with wings. Public spaces were already disturbed by the miniaturization of coms, making humans always appear to be talking to themselves. But the confusion would escalate if tens of thousands of inanimate objects also spoke randomly and simultaneously aloud. Part of the ease felt with the flying devices humans had come to tolerate was awareness that the machines did not talk. "A talking drone," Santino whispered under his breath, while glancing at the box. The machine did not reply. Santino could now hear his own heart beating loud and fast beneath the layers of winter clothing. 'A talking drone,' he silently repeated, staring at the machine. For the first time in the evening, he was absolutely certain the incident was not routine, but forced outside of his experience, education, training and knowledge of human life. Drones did not talk. Humans and drones were not sent to repair the same error at the same time. And the error at marker 56 was not an error that had ever been seen before.

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Khadrian Laltanca could not believe she and Roman Francon had managed to be in the same place, at the same time, for more than one night, for the first time in two months. She stared at his naked back as he lay face down beside her in bed. Over his torso, she could see the peaks of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado breaking through the horizon as snow sprinkled the frozen

ground, and crystal snowflakes formed on the window. 'The best way to enjoy winter is indoors,' she thought slipping deeper beneath the down blanket, and closer to Roman's warm body.

Their relationship had begun exactly where prohibited, at a top secret international conference where they were not only representing different countries, but were also on opposite sides of the issue. Every time she had made a point in counterclaim to his delegation's argument, he would look at her from across the meeting table and grin. If his action had been a negotiating tactic designed to attract her attention, he had been right on track.

At the time, she was one of her country's top strategists, working behind the scenes to allow private companies to build technology infrastructure projects in other countries, without revealing the nation's research and development secrets. A diplomat and a lawyer, Kadie interacted with every interest group, balancing their demands against one another in search of a viable solution. Within the past year, the United Nations had asked her to take on the same role for the world, Commander of the U.N. Security Council Special Command for Cyber Security, the unit within the global security organization authorized to address and settle cross-border cyber conflicts. The U.N. role was her official post. But an obscure global group called The Alliance had solidified her professional future by reaching out, quietly as they always did, to place her among those who showed notable promise as unfaultable global leaders. Working outside official channels, The Alliance preferred to encourage people who had multiple ties to countries around the world, transitional language skills, and the ability to blend in among individuals as diverse as a medic in a refugee camp, or a donor at a ten-star charity dinner. The unseen organization was even more specifically impressed that she had independently built her skills, a natural was always an unfailing bet over the groomed. The naturals knew the life they wanted and pursued their objectives without regard to obstacles falling onto their paths. The groomed always needed a little handholding. Kadie had grown up on the flat dry lands of the upper Midwest, and worked her way through increasing levels of education, with one clear objective in mind, independence. She preferred to be her own boss, but if she had to answer to a higher ranked official, then that person had to be a broader thinker than she was, an individual from whom she could still learn. Kadie traded jobs when people failed to live up to her expectations, resigning was her way of not settling, of always extending to achieve more than the envisaged.

Roman knew the profile, and had noticed her attributes the moment he had seen her at the conference. Having studied the biographies of the participants, he had memorized her picture and resume. And once he saw her at work, he finalized his assessment. Kadie was intelligent, attentive, precise, fair, and fun, in his analysis, a female version of Roman Francon. But she was a natural, making her singularly more attractive on every level.

In contrast, Roman was the definition of the groomed, he had been born into The Alliance. His British father, Landon Francon founded one of the largest financial investment firms in the world, Francon Global, and he was The Alliance before the group was invented. Although the organization did not encourage nepotism, members did take recommendations from their own, and when Roman independently showed his promise, he was accepted into the organization soon after earning a commission with British Intelligence. Landon had married a Colombian hedge fund owner, Camilia Fernandez, who was richer than he was. They raised Roman and his five siblings, all over the world. But New York City was usually home, and the entrenched preparatory schools lining the U.S. Northeast coast were the setting for their education, at least part of the year. The rest of the time, they were learning in Europe or China or Colombia, living in the cultures and languages their parents determined were important for their future. The

Francons did not shy away from relentless ambition. Landon and Camilia had no intention of allowing their offspring to fall into the middle class, or even upper middle class. They insisted the children fill their brains with knowledge, even while owning the technology allowing them to bypass memorization. They had to learn to construct with their hands, fluently translate, and solve mathematical equations without a computer. Roman had hated his parents' insistence on human brain-captured data and information, until he began to understand the life they were trying to maintain, and the separation that had come upon the world between those who paid attention, and those who did not.

In the five-star suite at the Silver Deer Lodge in Aspen the flames from the fireplace were down, but the room remained at a comfortable room temperature, 'probably too warm for Roman,' Kadie thought, pulling the blankets down to their waists. She was naked too, lying face up. As she rolled over on her side to run her fingers through Roman's hair, she caught a glimpse of his com, flashing. Grinning, she whispered, "Nice boy, you turned off the sound." But her contentment quickly faded, the com was persistently flashing, firing in red, and she of all people knew exactly the implications of the color of danger. Carefully she reached over him to pick-up the com from his side of the bed. Looking at the screen, she turned towards him with shrinking joy, and crawled on top of his body. She placed the com at his closed eyes, kissed his lips, and whispered into his ear, "Somebody wants you."

*

"Sunlight," Santino spoke aloud, holding his voice steady, trying not to tremble in response to the persistent cold nor the waiting drone. He carefully watched as the drone slowly turned over its light, the purple beam faded to the back of the box and a glowing yellow-white light emerged in front. Like transports with headlights, drones were typically built with illumination capabilities from the straight-line beam of a flashlight, to the unraveled cone shaped rays mimicking a child's drawing of the sun. Around Santino, the intense darkness was sliced off at the edges, brightening marker 56, the tower, the ladder, his clothes, the trees, and even the stars shining in the night sky above. Santino adjusted his eyes, blinking repeatedly. Slowly the brightness broke his fear, and made him feel as if the sense of abnormality of the last hour had only been a flare of ignorance. Drones, he knew, responded to specific voice commands. But when he dared to look back over his shoulder, he saw darkness again, and stillness. The simulated sunlight he was receiving was only the limited offering the box was programmed to deliver. Restricted to the instructions on his com, Santino had no choice but to accept the words and carry on. Instinctively, he held his com to the light even though the added brightness to read the screen was unnecessary. The device continued to display an error message for marker 56, but provided no further pinpoint location accuracy. As steadily as his senses stabilized, Santino felt nervous feelings returning. If the drone had been dispatched to check the error, a pointed light should have been directly aimed at the reported problem, instead the machine hovered, waiting. Santino held his com up over the marker, and selected the 'Locate' icon for the error. The device narrowed its light, Santino stared in the direction of the beam, looking up and down and around, but the entire frame appeared exactly as he had already observed.

"This is ridiculous," he declared, abruptly pulling back his com and shutting off its light. No updated instructions appeared on the screen, and no further report was generated. "Okay..." he continued aloud, "...this is the error." The idea made him shudder, but he could not imagine another explanation. No visible problem could be seen, and neither the drone nor the com was pointing to an exact location he should review. Even the tower's status lights, illuminating only in green, confirmed his assessment. Santino looked in all directions for red or yellow warnings,

but none were visible. Sinking further into distress, he considered that if his suspicions were correct, he had another problem. 'How could he tell The Network, the error message was wrong?' The Network had sent for human intervention and was stuck on an instruction. Without a human taking action to repair the reported error, The Network would not react. If Santino tried to leave Sector 2G without fixing the error, he would need manual control of the Rider. But with no override code for the transport, if he wanted to return to the Control Room, he would be forced to claim an emergency.

On the average workday at an industrial site, there was no human emergency that could not first be analyzed by The Network. The Network had to view or detect incidents, and review the data to determine whether to authorize an override code. Emergencies had to be specific, a human had to be in physical danger or be suffering from a sudden ailment requiring human intervention. But at this point in the 22nd century, most diseases were rapidly eradicated. When unknown illness symptoms manifested, blood samples could be extracted at an automated biolab, located in shopping malls, large office buildings, on university campuses, at residential high-rises, or even the hydro complex, and sent for analysis to World Health Organization certified labs. Data about every reported ailment was being collected and processed every second, and global health labs produced antidotes, vaccines or other cures based on collated information from around the world. A broken bone would not help either. A com could detect the status of bones in the body, and an onsite medical drone could perform a laser-soldering stabilization procedure before ambulance transport arrived at the facility. Failed internal organs were typically the only option left for obtaining immediate medical contact with another human, but he would actually need an organ to fail, the diagnosis had to come first from The Network.

An employee at the largest hydroelectric complex in the middle of North America could not use the excuse of a medical emergency to obtain an override code for transport to take him back inside, because he was cold and confused, and unable to find an error The Network had been reporting for over an hour. Other types of emergencies would have to be verified with video from a camera feed or sensor data on The Network. If he tried external help, no employee at any monitoring station would understand a disruption instigated by a human, and not The Network.

Desperately he tried to imagine other statements he could make or ask The Network that would trigger an override or response to, at least, allow him to go back to the Control Room. If The Network had detected an unfixable error, and the detection was actually also an error, maybe reporting, 'no visible issue,' would prompt The Network to recognize a human action, and change its instruction. Deciding the possibility was worth a try, Santino held up his screen and entered the code for a human action resolution. The detail screen appeared and he stared at the features. Using a drop-down selection for previously used standard reasons for required human intervention actions, he searched for the simplest option, 'Unable to fix.' Although he doubted his attempt would be successful, he added 'no specific location for error indicated, no problem visible,' in the comments box, and touched, 'Submit.' The screen read 'Resetting,' but a second later the message returned to, 'Error - Employee Intervention Required.' Sadly, Santino conceded his idea, as he suspected, had not worked. He wondered if a human monitor on the other end would see his message, maybe he should have entered more information. Quivering in the brisk air, he contemplated his options again. If he contacted a monitoring station, he assumed the other end could view only the same instructions, and probably tell him he had to find the error. He thought about walking back to the facility, but he was on the opposite side of the complex, maybe ten miles or more from a human entry point. Humans could only use their com, face or hand scan to enter doors on the south or west side of the building, he was to the

northeast with only transmission towers around him. He would not be able to use the Rider entrance on that side either, because the garage doors were only programmed to open for transports with entry instructions.

Santino struggled in the sinking cold, 'what to do?' he wondered. He kept looking at the com hoping the screen would suddenly display another instruction. He hit the manual 'Refresh' icon again to see if the information would change, but it was the same. After another minute, he began to speculate about touching the wire and casings at marker 56, to determine if there was an issue he could feel, even if he could not see an obvious problem. Or he could simulate a fix to trigger a Network reaction. In his subconscious, he knew the idea was ridiculous. The Network was precise. If he reached out to shake the wire, sensors would register the movement had taken place at the touch of human fingers or a tool. But the system would not register a fix unless the error was genuinely fixed. Still he was out of ideas and getting colder. If his approach did not work, he would brace for questions he could not answer and contact a monitoring station. He turned back to marker 56, looked again at the area where the error had been detected, and shined the com light back over the spot. Since all of the wires were high voltage, he would not directly touch a line. Instead, he would shake the edges of the frame connected to the wire. Although the action seemed trivial, sometimes there really was only a hair out of place. Slowly removing the glove from his right hand, he decided to use his bare fingers to initiate The Network's cross-reference of his fingerprints with the authorization records. If an unauthorized person touched the equipment with bare hands, sensors would trigger an alarm and the pre-determined security response, dispatching camera drones to the site. But his prints should only create an authorized notation.

As Santino's skin came into contact with the frame in front of him, a whirring sound of a slowly revving jet engine rose from the drone. His hand stuck to the tower, Santino froze again. Civilian drones operated silently, gliding through the air without engine or machine noise. 'But this sound…' he questioned, '…first talking and now…noise? Who operated civilian drones that made noise?'

*

"Yeah she's a hot chick and she's been fooling around with me all night," Roman light-heartedly moaned into his pillow. His eyes were still closed as he spoke, and Kadie pressed her weight against his back.

"Sorry my love," she said with melancholy. "Open your eyes."

Roman opened his eyes prepared to roll her underneath him, but the first visual he saw was the glowing red screen of his own com. "What?" he proclaimed taking the device from her hand, and holding it at eye level. Kadie rolled off and lay beside him.

"It has probably been flashing for a couple of minutes."

"Yep," Roman responded, entering text into the device. He rolled over onto his back, hand on his forehead to hold back his hair as he read. After a minute, he stopped and looked at his girlfriend.

"Problem?" Kadie asked, knowing that was all a flashing red message could be.

He leaned over to her face, the com and his hand brushing against her breasts. "Sorry my love," he entreated, kissing her. "Good morning." He moved to sit up with his hand still holding the com, and continued to text. When he finished, he stood up. "Electricity has gone out."

"What?" Kadie instinctively looked out the window where streetlights twinkled in the darkened Aspen streets.

Roman followed her gaze. "Not here. From Canada, moving down the center grid towards Kansas City."

"What's moving?"

"I do not know, my love," Roman replied, as he walked towards the bathroom.

"But what are you talking about?" Kadie theoretically knew electricity could go out, since there was always a miniscule but possible chance of simultaneous catastrophic failure in all active and back-up distribution locations at the same time. But redundancies in the inter-locking grid maximized resources. No blackout of any length had disrupted a developed country for decades.

"I'm talking about an electricity shortage," he shouted back to her over the sound of running water. "They are re-routing from James Bay, but people are without electricity."

Kadie could not believe the news she was hearing. "But why are they contacting you?" she shouted back. Several minutes passed before he reappeared, wrapped in a towel, water droplets dripping off his skin. "Why are they contacting you?" she repeated.

"Security issues, baby," he replied, slightly exasperated as he began to dress.

Kadie rolled her eyes at him. She had a higher security clearance level than he did. "I know it's security," she retorted. "But what?"

"I don't know, but I've got to go." Roman had swiftly shaved, groomed, dressed, and holstered his gun. She always marveled at how rapidly he could prepare for the day. Catching her anxiously watching him, his demeanor shifted. Walking towards her, he leaned down to kiss her lips, before politely adding, "I'm unbelievably sorry, but I have to leave you to go and deal with an international emergency." He stared into her softening eyes. "I love you, and I'll let you know the moment I know what is going on."

"Security permitting," she warned as she kissed him back.

"Yes of course, security permitting."

"I love you too. Be safe."

He smiled, kissed her again and turned to leave. As the door closed behind him, Kadie picked up her com and began looking at overnight messages. Neither Kadie nor Roman were officially in Aspen, and they certainly were not known to be sleeping together. Kadie had no reason to know there was an emergency on the North American electricity grid. But she looked for a search route to the details of Roman's alert notification message that would not be uncovered by The Network.

As government monitoring of free public Internet activity had grown increasingly intrusive, technologists from around the world, highly skilled engineers and computer programmers declaring no affiliation to a government or business or non-governmental organization, had built a separate internet. Initially, they had only known how to hide their server farm physical infrastructure, but not digital signal transmission equipment permitting instant global access. The situation dramatically changed when the acceleration of personal travel to outer space, expanded into personal cargo shipping, and people with resources launched their own satellites faster than any government could legislate against the practice. Since shooting down satellites could lead to war, the private civilian launches created a crisis. Almost all commercial satellites had been controlled by public companies, not wealthy individuals operating behind shell corporations. Governments tried to outlaw private, individual satellites, but lost all of the court battles. The technology was too advanced to claim interference with national security, and the territory of the earth's orbit was too substantial to demand more than limited control over its

expanse. If individuals adhered to the operational treaty agreements of their home governments, the satellites were legal.

Although governments could use their own satellites to monitor all others in the sky, on the ground the rogue techs, as the independent technologists came to be known, had sliced the electromagnetic spectrum to carve out private lanes in the virtual cloud to untraceably carry their data. They called these electronic roads off the public information superhighway, off-ramps. The governments knew the off-ramps existed, but whenever their official technologists reached an identified entry point, they could not find a way in. Rogue techs had built impenetrable firewalls, coded multi-level encryption keys, created redundancies around the world, and most importantly, attracted the support of billionaires who had wanted a secret, but accessible internet for their personal use. The work was a volatile risk that changed every day. Rogues, with deep-pocketed friends, managed to build and re-build their off-ramps and private networks, faster than governments and law enforcement could find and infiltrate them. The rogues considered the challenge of creating virtual construction projects the greatest videogame ever played, and a battle they had to win. When they had uncovered the most efficient means for traveling back and forth between their servers and the worldwide Internet, while virtually masking the access to their off-ramps, the separate, secret networks proliferated. Although conspiracy theorists warned that people were delusional if they thought governments did not have control over every bit of data, those who could afford rogue tech assistance bought access to an off-ramp, and the software to use their coms while masking the activity from The Network. The switching was seamless from a Networked com, Global Intelligence rarely knew who was on private off-ramps around the world. And although technically, government officials were not permitted to access the unofficial entry points using their high security level coms, unlike most people who were monitored for the activity by The Network, presiding officials like Kadie, were not.

She projected a screen in front of her eyes, and using an off-ramp, accessed a private global news forum for government and industry officials who cared about sharing non-public information. The site had been built and populated through virtual word of mouth, as a portal for invited members to anonymously post information they could use in negotiations and international discussions. The contributors saw the confidential bulletins as efficient diplomacy, their governments would likely have another word for the practice, disloyalty. But claiming disloyalty was an overreaction, a threat to limit the actions of thinking people. True disloyalty put millions of lives in danger, their knowledge sharing, saved millions.

Kadie navigated to a forum site. Users entered information in their own languages and had developed their own coded terms. If a user were serious about staying up-to-date, she would have to master the ability to read other people's coded comments. Quickly Kadie wrote, 'Driving into dark near Kansas today, looking for divergences on the road?' Expecting the wait for a reply would not be long, she hit 'post.'

*

Louis Santino and the box drone were at a standstill. The whirring sound had been brief. From the moment Santino had expressed alarm and stopped moving, the noise had halted. Staring at the drone, the human literally felt the drone staring back. The air around him had ceased to be cold, instead Santino felt the heat permeating from his body as he sweated from head to toe. His fingers were gripped to the tower frame, not attached by frostbite, but by his own terror of not knowing if movement would trigger a drone action he was not prepared to manage. As he considered the position of his hand, the simulated sunlight he had nonchalantly requested minutes before, began to fade.

"No, no, don't!" Santino proclaimed aloud as the sky encircling him transformed from the comforting soft white glow to the background of a seamless black night. If a human had sensitive eyes, The Network would have the drone slowly adjust the light. But Santino did not have sensitive eyes, this drone should have instantly switched the light off only on his command. With growing awareness, Santino determined he would not be providing any more instructions to a box acting on its own. He desperately wanted to look at his com, to see if updated information had appeared, but the slowly setting simulated sun told him an action would probably come too late for official or unofficial word to reach him. As the light faded completely out, a red laser beam flashed on and aimed its pointer directly at the spot where Santino's hand grasped the frame at marker 56.

"No, no, *Santa Maria*, no!" Santino shouted. He had seen the work of red laser beams on news programs. "No, no, no, off, off!" he cried as the drone once more increased the volume of its whirring sound. "No, please no!" Santino begged the box. With his screams reverberating in the empty dark forest where bears, wolves and deer had long ago been frightened away, and chased deep into the trees by the construction of the hydroelectricity complex, Santino expected no response. Launching reflexive actions to prevent capitulation to the waiting darkness, he moved to lift his hand off the frame, and direct his feet down the ladder. But the drone stopped prepping. Before the human could make his retreat, the machine revved up the force and intensity of the beam, and the whirring sound mimicked the extraction of a firing mechanism. The red laser reconfigured as a singular heat source directing its trajectory towards Santino's hand, through to a green-lit sensor on the tower, and at impact, set off an explosion bringing down the transmission tower in Sector 2G.

Alert signals lit up monitoring stations all over the world.

*

When Roman arrived onsite in response to the earlier text alert, more than one person in the meeting room was completely startled to see him. He was equally disconcerted. For the past several weeks, he had been working inside a military complex in the mountains between Aspen and Denver, Colorado, with an officially non-existent Western Hemisphere Defense Command strategy team. A digital security mask overrode the global position indicator on his com, and broadcast his location as Dallas, Texas, his status read 'On Business.' The gathered attendees he now viewed, representatives of eleven countries and organizations, were not the same people he had been seeing every day at WestCom to negotiate a revised security agreement for Central American countries. Instead, this group was military and industrial officials, contacted by various organizations to assemble and hear specific information.

In a room containing a long oblong table, short at one end, wider at the other, and built on a slight rise, every person could clearly view the rest of the seated attendees. At each chair, translation sensors were embedded into the armrests. An individual's com would detect the spoken language and, if necessary, feed a simultaneous translation into an earpiece. On one wall 90-inch video conferencing screens were positioned to project as if the displayed individuals, who were in other locations, were sitting in the room. Another wall broadcast news and satellite images. The last supported a refreshments table with the preferred beverages and snacks of every participant ordered and available based on a Network predicted calculation of the amount each person would consume, within the scheduled time they would be meeting. Roman was hungry, but he would not have time to reach the food table.

"What's going on?" were the first words Roman heard upon entering.

"I'm sorry General, I received the same message you did," he politely replied to U.S. Army General Patrick Wheeler. "I have no other intel." Wheeler inattentively looked at him, and Roman quickly moved to take his place among the representatives.

On a video screen, Slater James, an agent at British Intelligence in London began speaking, "We have been monitoring a situation at the Grand Rapids hydro dam in Canada."

"What kind of situation?" Roman asked.

"The incident was a glitch," answered the hydro company's representative Corey Miller, a senior executive with military clearance for the meeting. "A fried or split line led to an outage. But we cannot get a complete report."

"You do not know the problem?" questioned Eduardo Juarez, the ranking Mexican military officer based at WestCom.

"It's a big facility, could be any issue. But the real problem is, we have no credible Network report," Miller glumly stated. The complete hydroelectric complex provided zero carbon emission, always on electricity, to the populated areas of central North America, north to the mining and military towns in the Arctic, and south down the Pan American highway from Winnipeg to Minneapolis to Kansas City to Dallas to Monterrey and to Mexico City on through Tegucigalpa to San Jose and ending a few miles south of Panama City. Each of those centers transmitted electricity in a hundred directions to the skyscrapers of the big cities, factories in commercial zones, acres of agricultural production sites, and small forgotten towns along the routes. The towering transmission lines rolled out from sites like Grand Rapids at high voltage across empty plains, and upon reaching populated areas, the lines went underground, or where necessary, disappeared to continue transmitting virtually, through the air. Most humans had never seen a power line. As a stable, reliable energy source managed through a treaty, almost all military installations within range also connected to the complex. Despite its limited use of human employees on the ground, Grand Rapids was a vital location affecting millions who obtained at least part of their living from its existence. The center of North America was the crucial infrastructure reinforcement for the mega-populations and ports on the coasts. The strategic inhabited centers in the Pacific Northwest, around the Great Lakes, New York City, in Northern and Southern California, Texas, South Florida and Mexico City contained nearly three-quarters of the continent's people. Those regions had self-contained networks, energy, and water supplies, but almost all back-ups were in the center, on the Hudson Bay grid.

Miller continued, "We have a lot of data being analyzed, cross-ref—" He halted as an alert signal sounded, and the room fell completely silent.

"Please look at the monitors everyone," Slater directed. "We have now been advised the incident was extended."

The video screens switched to scenes of the disaster at Grand Rapids, smoke drifted over a crumpled heap of steel where the transmission tower in Sector 2G had once stood. The entire room gasped. At the destroyed site, a dozen wheelbarrow-sized drones acted as water cannons, and dosed the embers from the explosion fire, while a camera drone, programmed to detect body parts, scanned for Santino. Human investigators had been dispatched to the scene, but all of the initial information to be analyzed was already captured in The Network. The meeting room participants rapidly activated personal screens from their coms and simultaneously read The Network's report.

"This is your glitch?" shouted Wheeler. "What is this?"

"No, no, this happened..." Miller frantically clarified, reading the report on his com, "...this happened after. The security camera pictures show a drone—"

"But this is unbelievable! There is no drone on this report, only the man."

"What brought down the tower?" Roman asked.

"The situation was all routine," responded Jayna Luongo, another security cleared corporate executive. "An error was detected and an employee was sent to look."

"But why a human? The report does not say what went wrong." Roman was also quickly looking at the details on the report.

"There was an error."

"But what does that mean? There's no diagnostic for the error."

"Did the employee make a mistake?" Miller asked.

"Doesn't say," Luongo replied. "There was an error, an employee was sent to look, and a drone—"

"What drone?" Roman asked.

"Whose drone?" Wheeler demanded. "Report does not say that either."

"The Network recorded the transmission tower had an error, but there is no confirmation as to what or why," Luongo continued. "We only have surveillance pictures of a drone...umm...attack. That's all we know. But those pictures cannot give us any more details."

"But what kind of drone was it?" Wheeler asked again. "Was there military activity in the area?" Military and law enforcement drones could be weaponized with the ability to deliver a range of disabling impacts from the effects of stun guns to missiles. But operating a legal, weaponized drone required adherence to laws, regulations and protocols, sanctioned and used almost exclusively by governments. If the rules had been followed, a few of the people in the room would have the details available on their coms, but they did not.

The questions flew across the table as Roman stood up, and walked up to a 50-inch screen displaying a live camera feed of the smoldering scene at Grand Rapids. 'What an extraordinary explosion,' he thought. 'Enough to bring down the tower, an entire transmission tower, but how?' He looked closely at the images. The tower had collapsed straight down, straining adjacent transmission lines, but not creating a domino effect. The wire casings were set to automatically snap, and avoid pulling another tower down if one fell. In fact, the attack, as the incident was now being referred to, seemed to have been neatly organized only to collapse the one tower with poor Louis Santino. 'But was Santino necessary?' Roman wondered. 'Why didn't the attacker isolate the tower? Why kill one human too? What was this? What kind of terrorist organization or anarchist was after them now?'

"Listen everyone, please listen!" Slater shouted to restore calm. "We have been watching this site since the outage was first reported. Consider this next information confidential and the reason we called you here. This information has not been widely disseminated but...the attack drone...this is the third incident worldwide that we know. But this is the first one to knock out power. Whoever this is, he is getting bolder. And whatever technology they have, we cannot identify the capabilities. Every time an incident has occurred, we have had to find the drone visually, using satellite pictures, there was no detection on The Network."

"What do you mean no detection?" Wheeler asked. "Network cameras and sensors are always checking the entire space around—"

"No, excuse me but we do not have continuous checking, as you say," Slater corrected him. "If the intruder drone is emitting an electronic signal, The Network would detect the disturbance through the complex's sensors. For most security protocols, if the detected signal is within camera range, we'll immediately get a picture or video record. The system analyzes the picture and identifies the object in the captured image. The protocol only looks for detected signals.

Only objects with a detectable signal can be detected unless the known object has a previously identified distinct sound like a buzzing bee, or a particular feel, like the touch of a human hand. If no object is detected, the picture will not be analyzed, a human would have to launch a manual request, if the human even knew to look for the problem in the first place. Whatever that box is, it has no detectable signal."

"But that's impossible!" Luongo cried. "How can a drone fly around without a signal? A human must be in control."

"Maybe this is an advancement in drone operation, Ms. Luongo," Slater countered, slightly annoyed. "Some of our enemies have technology we do not have."

"Or we do not officially have," Roman said.

The room fell silent. "And the destruction? We have not heard about that before, what a mess," Wheeler added. "Humans will have to clean up."

"Drones can do the heavy lifting," Miller assured the group.

"Not before we've examined every inch of the place."

"I am afraid we are only likely to find dead wolves," Slater ruefully commented. "We will not find evidence of any use to us."

Roman tried to concentrate. 'We won't find any evidence,' he thought. 'We have to catch him, whoever he is. We have to figure out the pattern, what he's doing and why.' He looked around the room. 'We'll never move forward with these people.' Holding his com under the table to avoid appearing distracted, Roman sent a text message to Slater.

"Listen up!" Wheeler shouted over the clamor. "Our analysts will look for clues in the data, but in the meantime, what do we think is going on here? Terrorists? Industrial sabotage? Who?" The room went silent.

"We have had three attacks, three completely different locations," Slater added. "There's been a solar farm in Botswana, a wind farm in the North Sea, and now hydro power in Canada. The only connection among the sites is renewable energy. But for the first two, the facilities did not really lose power...or a life."

"And this time, kaboom." The General dramatically flung his arms into the air.

"Yes this saboteur has escalated the attacks."

The people in the room looked at each other. They were political appointees, friends of leaders, and business people with money, in general, not the people with the experience and patience to strategically think through the incident, and make implementable decisions. Roman moved towards General Wheeler.

"We should ask for an emergency U.N. Security Council meeting," Wheeler commented. The clamor of simultaneous shouting began again.

"And tell them what?" Juarez demanded.

"To be careful, to change security protocols."

"But for what? What explanation can we give?"

As Roman approached, he spoke clearly and directly, "General, we do not need a U.N. meeting. We immediately need to bring in the right people to get to work on this. This is an ongoing international problem, not one incident. We need a team that can think this through, figure out what's going on and take action."

The General stared at him. "Of course people," he said pointing to the room as if to indicate he knew what people were, and he had them right in front of him. "What are you talking about?"

"With all due respect General, not people who talk," Roman continued. "People who think. People who would have a better understanding of the issues we could be dealing with."

"People who think?"

"I agree, General," Slater interjected. "A different type of group is required to manage these incidents."

"Whoever did this has access to some amazing technology," Roman stated. "We need people who have experience in these areas. We also need to be ahead of this perpetrator, to be on top of his potential next target. We need to identify the right people, get them collaborating, and let them figure this out."

"The right people?" Wheeler asked puzzled. "What people? Who?"

"I know who," Roman confidently replied.

*

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About Case Lane
Case Lane is a global writer, traveler and observer to the future. Educated in communications, political science, business, law and economics, she has lived and worked all over the world as a reporter, diplomat and digital media corporate executive. Building from her interests in international relations and technology, Case envisions a next century world where the essential battle is between the advancement of technology and the instincts of our basic humanity. The majority of people will be non-technologists who have to learn to live and manage in a technology-controlled world that they do not understand.

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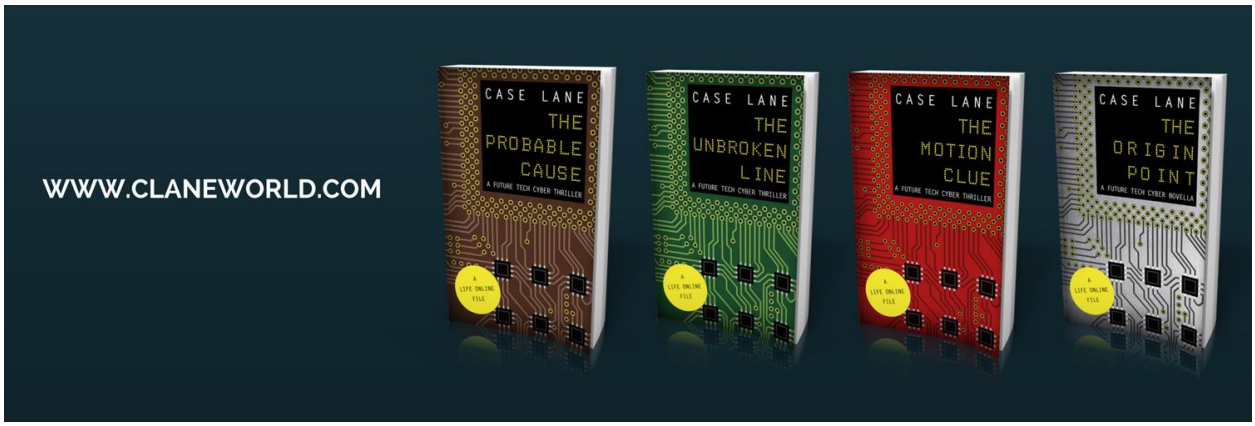

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