

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Los Angeles, with a prominent red semi-transparent overlay. The overlay is a large, irregular shape that covers most of the image, creating a sense of mystery and tension. The text is overlaid on this red area.

CARL DECKER

A VANGUARD THRILLER

REMOTE KILL

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PROLOGUE

Washington, D.C., 10:25 a.m.

“Just one more block.” He squinted. The sun was shining, but Gideon Herzog wasn’t here for the weather. On Georgetown’s M Street, amidst the throng of tourists, he walked in a daze, like he was moving through a bad dream.

Electric cars glided silently, punctuated by the occasional growl of a gas engine. An old pickup roared by, making Herzog twitch. He raked his fingers through his curly brown hair, a nervous tic he couldn’t quite shake.

"Get a grip, Gideon," he told himself under his breath.

A passerby glanced at him. "You alright, dude?"

"I'm good," Gideon snapped, quickening his pace.

He knew the security cameras were watching, feeding images into facial recognition systems that didn’t just identify but also predicted intent. An encounter with the cops or Homeland Security was the last thing he needed; he had an appointment to keep. So, he tried to keep his face relaxed. He checked the slim device in his pocket again, its cool surface soothing him.

Why was he doing this again? Was it idealism? Fame? Or just stupidity? It had sounded like a good idea when he wrote that email. Well, there was no turning back now.

Gideon paused at a coffee shop, peering into the window like a man considering a caffeine fix. But he wasn’t studying the menu’s list of coffee delights. He was scanning reflections, searching for signs of a tail. It was a crude counter-surveillance trick he’d picked up from a popular YouTube channel devoted to urban survival. Not exactly CIA-level tradecraft, but it helped him feel in control. “You’ve got this,” he told himself.

A man halted a few paces behind him, then turned toward the coffee shop. Muscular, smart glasses, casual clothes—was he watching him? Herzog tensed. The guy edged closer, eyes on the menu. It could be a cover. Gideon readied himself to bolt, cameras be damned.

“Just grab a coffee and leave,” he silently begged the stranger. As if he had heard him pleading, the man veered left and entered the shop. Gideon’s shoulders sagged in relief. He wasn’t cut out for this cloak-and-dagger shit. Once this was over, once he handed over the device, he’d vanish somewhere far-flung and offline. The thought almost made him smile.

His reprieve was short-lived. A blur in the window caught his eye—a black electric car suddenly accelerated, swerving onto the sidewalk. Panic surged as he bolted in the opposite direction, heart hammering. Too late. A robotaxi hurtled toward him. Time dilated as he watched, helpless. The collision was inevitable. The cab slammed into him with savage force.

There was no pain—only darkness, a void that swallowed him whole.

* * *

Maria Hayes reveled in the ride, eyes closed, singing loudly to her favorite song blasting from the powerful loudspeakers. The bass thumping. Whenever she took a robotaxi, she always opted for the immersive sound upgrade. The full experience was worth a few bucks. She was now near her

destination, meeting the girls in that trendy new coffee shop. Life was good.

Without warning, the car jolted violently. Her eyes widened in shock as she flailed, desperately reaching for anything to brace herself against. The bewildered look on that young man's face a few inches away was the last thing she saw before the airbags exploded. Her seatbelt yanked her back, violently, cutting into her shoulder and chest, leaving her gasping for breath.

When she opened her eyes again, disoriented from the impact, the world around her had descended into chaos. More cars crashed into each other, the tormented electric motors whining loudly and glass shattering into thousands of pieces. Metal screeched on metal.

Suddenly, everything went dead quiet, like someone had unplugged all the cars at once.

A moment later, Maria registered the screams and shouts around her. Tears started streaming down her face. She tried to wipe them off, but her hands came back red. They were slick with blood, but not her own. The realization hit her like a sucker punch to the gut, bile surging up from her stomach.

She leaned out of the shattered window, the acrid smell of smoke and burning rubber biting her nostrils. Maria heaved, her stomach convulsing, and vomited onto the asphalt. Looking up, she saw the street littered with debris and bodies, just moments before her consciousness shut down in shock.

LECTURE

Joe Hartman's eyes scanned the red seat rows, momentarily stopping at faces to connect with his audience. Occasionally, he paused a little longer, hoping to get a smile from a pretty face. Today, he was lucky. There was this really stunning blonde student with super bright, intelligent eyes sitting right up front. Their eyes locked in a way that suggested both might be interested in some extracurricular activities.

He smirked. He just loved it—strutting in front of his students in the great lecture hall of MIT's Stata Center, stopping for effect occasionally. Hartman, in his early forties, had that annoying knack of becoming more handsome with age. It showed that he was hitting the gym regularly to stay in shape.

However, as he insisted, his good looks didn't bring students to his lectures. He was an entertaining speaker who ensured that AI and cryptography remained popular subjects at MIT's CSAIL, where he had been a tenured professor for the last few years.

Joe enjoyed his lecture and was already anticipating his favorite part, which never failed to stir emotions. He paused, opened his arms like a preacher, and raised his voice. "It's safe to say that artificial intelligence has surpassed humanity for good. Only idiots trust people more than machines! Remember this if you have to make an important decision: Trust the data, because data is the truth!"

He waited for the usual fireworks of debate. Instead, he felt a wave of unease rippling through the crowd. Something was off here.

Students pointed fingers at their screens. Others appeared genuinely surprised while wearing their smart glasses. Their vacant look, focused on the distance, was unsettling for close onlookers, even after many years of the technology being commonplace. Hartman hated such distractions, but banning smart glasses from lectures was a fight lost several years ago.

"Hey, what's going on, guys?" Joe asked while the murmurs and occasional shouts grew louder, spreading like wildfire. He was becoming increasingly irritated by the unexpected turn of events. He stepped forward while his watch started buzzing. Strange, he thought, as it was set not to disturb.

A guy sitting next to the pretty girl in the front row held his tablet for Joe to see. It was a stream of chaotic scenes—cars wreaking havoc on a busy street, like in a bad movie—with fire, smoke, and debris flying everywhere.

Joe shook his head. "So, let me get this straight: someone cooked up some AI splatter video, and now you're going crazy, or what?" He tried to appear unfazed, but his feelings started to churn.

"It's all over the news! This is happening, for real!"

Another student sobbed, "The other minute, I was chatting with my brother in Georgetown. Now he's offline. Fuck!"

This can't be. Hartman tapped on his watch. The alert had been a priority message that confirmed the death and destruction he had seen on the screens. The blood drained from his face, and he felt shaky.

Barely audible, Joe muttered, "Class dismissed," to himself as his students scrambled out of the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

The events that had derailed his lecture had a very personal meaning for him. On the surface, traffic

coordination was one of his research subjects, but the images of the killing field moved him deeply. The memory of the burned-out car where his parents had died over thirty years ago made Joe shiver.

He slowly walked back to the lectern and grabbed his daypack. Today, he wouldn't get any more work done.

* * *

Joe's apartment was modern and functional. He enjoyed clear lines and muted colors mixed with carefully curated, minimalist furniture. Visitors often quipped that it resembled more an Airbnb than a home. However, Joe enjoyed its cleanliness and detachment, finding solace in its calming atmosphere. But not today. The events in Georgetown had left him deeply unsettled. Unwelcome memories flashed before his eyes, but he tried to shake them away.

He turned to social media, his usual favorite pastime, but the absurd theories and odd opinions about Georgetown only agitated him more. Unable to bear the online ramblings, he said, "Vesta, please suggest something entertaining."

"Sure, Joe, based on your previous nights, how about I create an intriguing movie with breathtaking action scenes starring Bruce Willis, Tom Cruise, and the adorable Charlotte Hanson?"

"Thanks, but no thanks." Joe rolled his eyes at the cheerful and exaggerated response that seemed to be typical for conversational AI since its beginnings. Having a movie generated for him based on his preferences was usually a guaranteed way to spend an entertaining evening, at least if you mixed in some beers. However, this "algotrash" wasn't exactly what you would call a cinematic masterpiece. And things blowing up in 3D were the last thing he needed today.

"Vesta, connect me with David."

"Hi Joe, what brings me the pleasure of seeing you?"

"Dave, you in for a beer tonight?"

"Sure thing; our usual watering hole, then?"

"Yep, see you in thirty?"

CHAPTER 2

BEERS

David Donnelly closed the connection with a smile and a nod, grabbed his jacket, and headed out of his campus office.

David was Joe's mentor when he started teaching at MIT. Despite being ten years older than Joe, David became one of the few people that Joe considered a friend. As an engineering professor, David enjoyed building things with his hands. He had slightly longer gray hair, a full beard that was not always neatly trimmed, and broad shoulders from hard physical work. David broke the conventions of academic style, but he was one of the sharpest minds in his field.

Twenty minutes later he was sitting at their bar's favorite table, scratched and dented by uncounted patrons over the years. The scent of worn leather hung in the air. The room was lit by a mix of neon signs behind the bar and in the windows, large and simple lamps hanging from the ceiling, and the screens on the walls. Usually, these screens showed sports like the latest Patriots game, but not today. David averted his gaze from the videos and interviews discussing all kinds of theories about the incident in Georgetown, which had shaken up the nation. Just then, he glanced at the door and saw Joe entering the bar. He raised his hand to greet his friend.

* * *

Joe gratefully accepted the chilled Samuel Adams waiting for him at their table. "So, how did your day go, professor?" Joe asked after he had set the glass back on the wooden table.

"Actually, it was going pretty well until, you know..." David said and waved his hand at the screens. "And I imagine yours wasn't better?"

"If anything, it ruined my favorite lecture," Joe answered, sounding only half-joking.

David could feel the tension that lay beneath the answer.

"Probably felt much worse than for most of your students. I know it's hard."

"After all these years, someone would expect that it's getting easier, and it does. Until it doesn't."

"Your parents were great people. Your dad helped me figure things out when I was just getting the hang of the whole academic circus."

Joe just nodded and studied the contents of his glass.

David knew that Joe wasn't one to talk about what he tried to keep inside, under the veneer of the intelligent, slightly arrogant, but always entertaining expert. So he changed the subject: "I'm going to the cabin tomorrow, and guess what? I have a new hydro-generator already on the truck bed, so there will be enough power for comfort even if I have some spoiled visitors from the big city."

That made Joe chuckle. "You're getting old and lazy. That's the real reason, Dave!"

David smiled. His cabin in the woods was where he spent most of his free time, away from Boston, screens, and media.

"Why, you should come and visit me. There's always something to do I could use a hand with."

“The last time I visited, it was totally disconnected from the world, and I’m not the offline type.”

“Ain’t that the truth? But this won’t change anytime soon. Sitting in a valley surrounded by a magnificent forest does that for you. That’s exactly why I chose it: going off the grid and drinking my morning coffee with nothing to view but the sun rising over the lake.”

“To your little Walden, Dave!”

The air was laced with the bittersweet tang of old beer and the low rumble of conversations, punctuated by the clink of their glasses.

* * *

“One last round, I’ll buy,” Joe suggested after he checked his smartwatch.

“Getting out of bed early tomorrow?” David frowned.

“I need to go to Washington for a briefing with the FBI. Explain the basics of complex systems to the Feds,” he chuckled.

David snorted. “How do you get there? With the lockdown after Georgetown?”

“They’ll send a helicopter and pick me up at the Boston Field Office,” Joe answered, gripping his glass so tightly that David noticed his friend’s knuckles whitening. He knew that despite Joe’s calm demeanor, there was more worry under the surface than Joe let on.

David was about to congratulate Joe on the free chopper ride but paused, realizing how much stress the flight seemed to be causing his friend. Instead of commenting, he simply nodded.

Joe got up, grabbed David’s glass, and came back from the bar a few minutes later with two fresh beers.

“I wonder what Jason is up to now,” David changed the subject.

“Nothing short of world domination for Bolt and his AI chips,” snorted Joe, taking a deep gulp from his glass. David could tell that Joe’s former research assistant turned tech billionaire was a bit of a sore spot for him.

“Have you read Emily’s piece about the new research facility he’s set up? I find the idea of self-organizing AI intriguing. And that’s a lot of money going into the region.”

“You sound like a politician, Dave.”

“Seems like politicians are still throwing a lot of cash at anyone who produces AI chips in the U.S. I mean, it’s a smart move, right? I thought you’d be all in since it makes your research even more relevant.”

“If that’s even possible,” Joe laughed, and David noted the slight buzz of their beers in his friend’s voice. “But really, Bolt is the last one who needs public funding. The guy is backed by venture capital that seems to be endless and has so many personal funds that he’s buying every promising startup he comes across. It’s not good to allow one guy to build a de facto monopoly that depends on his personal whims.”

“Look who is now sounding like a politician,” David chuckled.

“No, really, I know this guy. He’s seriously deranged.”

“Well, that’s why you kicked him off your team, alright. But it seems it served him well.”

“Whatever,” Joe grumbled, his face clearly showing signs of disgust.

David was absentmindedly rotating the half-full glass in his hand. “Emily made it quite clear that the person in question is not the digital savior he believes he is. It’s nice to hear a genuine human voice amidst all the AI pseudo-journalism masquerading as news these days.” He looked up to Joe. “Have you spoken to her ever since?”

“No, no, I haven’t. I’m sure that she’s not too keen on that either.”

“It’s a shame. She was the only woman who showed promise to handle you.” David smiled sadly and silently added, “And that was exactly why you ruined it.”

NEWSROOM

The Washington Herald's open-plan newsroom buzzed with energy. Quirky decorative elements—a small basketball hoop here, a toy tiger there—added a touch of playfulness to the otherwise serious and minimalist environment.

Emily Stone sat at her desk facing the Herald's iconic logo on the dark wooden wall. The yellow earplugs she used to block out the constant noise were barely visible. She went through the notes scribbled in her small black notebook, a bit of an anachronism that helped her develop thoughts without being sucked into the ever-present stream of digital media. And honestly, her job was an anachronism itself in times of robot journalism.

She looked up at the screens on her desk, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear. The day was full of social media, fake media, and conspiracy theories, all in the wake of the autonomous cars wreaking havoc in Georgetown, killing at least two dozen people and leaving many more injured. Emily rubbed her temples, feeling the beginning of a headache as she scanned through the endless stream of posts. She leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling for a moment, trying to gather her thoughts.

As if sensing her frustration, her editor, Julia Sanchez, appeared behind her screen, pointing at her ears. Emily hurriedly plucked the pieces of noise-canceling foam from her own. Julia's serious expression didn't bode well.

"How's the story coming along, Emily?"

"Well, it's not easy to cut through all the bullshit," Emily replied, a little too defensively for her own taste.

"But that's exactly our job, cutting through the bullshit, isn't it? So, any ideas?"

Emily felt uncomfortable in her chair as she noticed her colleague Mark Peterson looking in their direction with a hint of a smile, raising his coffee mug in a mock toast. "Need some help, Stone?" Mark's voice was annoyingly cheerful as he leaned over his desk in her direction.

Emily shot him a look, her lips pressing into a thin line. "What a dick," she muttered, causing Julia to raise her brows.

"So, you got something solid, or I'll pass the story to Mark. He's just waiting for his chance."

Emily looked wearily at Julia. "The whole thing is much too complex for Mark. We're talking about a tragedy, not a games convention. There are chatbots out there that are much more sensible than him."

Julia scrutinized her for a long moment and finally asked the question Emily was half expecting and fully dreading. "Are you still not talking to Hartman?"

Emily hadn't spoken with Joe since she left his apartment eight weeks, two days, and two hours ago. She didn't turn around then and wasn't planning to do so ever again. But it was also a question of professionalism. He was one of the leading experts in the field, and she couldn't ignore him if she wanted to get the full picture. His research led to the creation of the Flexible Logistics Optimization and Wayfinding System, which controlled the flow of cars in major U.S. cities, as its acronym FLOWS aptly suggested. It added an additional layer of coordination to the autonomous cars traveling the cities' streets, avoiding congestion and improving safety by enforcing an adaptable set of

rules for how the cars were allowed to drive through the streets, built on a powerful self-learning AI. And the idea that the network might have caused the deadly chaos still wasn't off the table at the moment.

So it boiled down to whether she could ignore her personal feelings and grab all the information she needed to write what promised to be the biggest story of her career or become a bystander and watch Mark get ahead of her. "Not going to happen," she thought.

"I'll call him," Emily said with newfound resolve.

"There's a good girl!" Julia looked surprised but eventually smiled and left Emily alone.

She opened her messenger app, scrolled down, and tapped Joe's name.

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