

CHAPTER 3 — “Dead Data”

South Tucson, Arizona — 7:15 AM

The storage room behind Desert Star Dental smelled like dust, latex gloves, and something faintly sweet that never fully left the air no matter how often the place was cleaned. The dentist called it “sterile.” Julian Vane called it “old.”

He sat on an upside-down bucket with a laptop balanced on his knees, a tangle of cables pooling at his feet like shed skin. Around him, cardboard boxes held the fossil record of a small business that had survived by never throwing anything away: routers with missing antennas, external drives labeled in Sharpie, a tower PC so yellowed at the vents it looked sunburned.

On the folding table beside him, a portable hard drive blinked in a steady rhythm—one light, then two, then a pause. It was the closest thing in the room to a heartbeat.

The office manager had described the problem in the language people used when they didn’t want to admit they didn’t understand something.

We lost the files.

They were there. Now they aren’t.

It happened overnight.

Can you fix it?

Julian had nodded, asked for the admin password, and watched her face shift—minutely, defensively—before she handed him a sticky note she’d kept in her wallet.

He’d seen that shift in a thousand places. People loved data until it reminded them it existed.

He pulled up the backup index again and scrolled, not because the missing entries had changed, but because the act of scrolling calmed him. Systems did not heal themselves. They did not confess. They only did what they were built to do.

The index file showed a clean run until 2:14 AM. Then a gap. Then the next entry at 2:17 AM, as if nothing had happened.

Gaps were stories. That was the rule.

He opened the logs.

A single line repeated three times:

AUTH FAIL — TOKEN EXPIRED

Julian stared at it until the words stopped being words and became shape. Expired token. One of those failures that wasn't dramatic enough to trigger alarms, just quiet enough to rot a process from the inside.

He started a note in a plain text file—his habit, his discipline.

KNOWN: token expired at 02:14

UNKNOWN: why expiration event not escalated

INFERRED: automated retry loop suppressed alert

He typed INFERRED in all caps, then added a dash, the small mark he used to remind himself later what he'd guessed and what he'd proven.

He had learned to do that the hard way.

Once, at Helix, he had been certain. Certain enough to tell a superior that a particular retrieval pathway—quiet, undocumented—could be misused. Certain enough to pull a live trace to demonstrate it. Certain enough to do it without the final sign-off because he believed the risk justified the breach.

They hadn't argued with the risk.

They'd argued with the access.

"Unauthorized," the termination letter had said, as if the word itself could erase the fact that he'd been trying to keep something from being stolen.

Eighteen months later, he still didn't know which part made him angrier: that they were wrong, or that they had been afraid of the right thing for the wrong reason.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

Unknown number.

He let it buzz once, twice, a small insect insistence. Most unknown numbers wanted something from him that wasn't worth giving. Sales calls. Scams. Collections. People pretending to be institutions.

On the third buzz, he answered anyway. Not out of trust. Out of irritation.

"Yeah."

A pause. Controlled breathing on the other end, the sound of someone who had practiced how to sound calm.

“Mr. Vane?”

Julian didn’t correct the formal address. People always assumed “Mister” carried authority. He’d stopped fighting that fight.

“Who’s this?”

“My name is Maren Kline. I’m an attorney with Kline, Wexler, and Hsu. I’m calling on behalf of a client. This call may be recorded—by me, not by you.” A beat, as if she’d allowed herself one small joke and immediately regretted it. “Are you alone?”

Julian looked around the storage room. The portable drive blinked. A moth knocked itself softly against a fluorescent fixture.

“I’m at a dental office,” he said. “There’s a dead router in here and a very judgmental box of nitrile gloves. That’s it.”

“I’m asking because I need to confirm you have privacy.”

Julian almost laughed. In 2026, privacy was an emotion people tried to summon by saying the word out loud.

“I’m alone,” he said.

“Thank you. Mr. Vane, my client is Sloane Vance.”

The name landed before it was contextualized. Just syllables, clean and bright, out of place in a dusty storage room.

Julian didn’t respond.

Kline continued, as if she’d been instructed not to fill silence with explanation.

“There has been an incident involving Ms. Vance’s family. The FBI is involved. They have requested your assistance.”

Julian’s mouth went dry. The phrase FBI did that to people. It made the air in a room feel thinner.

“Why me?”

Another pause, smaller.

“Because of your former role at Helix Systems.”

There it was. The thing he didn’t speak about. The thing he tried not to carry openly because strangers mistook it for scandal, and friends mistook it for failure.

Julian’s fingers tightened around the phone.

“Who told them that?” he asked.

“My client’s counsel spoke with a federal liaison. Your name was provided as a potential technical consultant.”

Julian stared at the laptop screen. The backup logs sat there, indifferent.

“I don’t consult for the government,” he said.

“We’re not asking you to consult,” Kline said carefully. “We’re asking you to assess something. Data integrity. Recovery. Forensic—”

Julian waited.

She hesitated, then said it, as if it was a code she’d been told to use.

“Back-end recovery.”

The storage room seemed to go quieter, as if the air handler had stopped and no one had told the building.

Julian’s mind did what it always did when it heard the shape of the right words: it assembled possibilities faster than he could contain them. Back-end recovery meant cloud traces. It meant caches. It meant fragments that were never meant to be seen by end users. It meant the kind of “gap” people assumed was absence because they couldn’t imagine the machinery that lived behind the interface.

It also meant someone, somewhere, was playing with the architecture.

And if Sloane Vance was involved, it meant the story was already being written in public.

“What happened?” he asked.

Kline didn’t answer directly. “Ms. Vance’s mother is missing.”

Julian felt the sentence register in his body before his mind caught up—an old, involuntary tightening behind the ribs. Missing wasn't a word. It was a void. It meant a clock had started.

"The FBI has asked that you come to the Tucson field office this morning," Kline said. "By nine."

Julian looked at the time on his laptop. 7:26 AM. Nine was ninety-four minutes away, give or take traffic and the way federal buildings liked to make you wait at doors.

"And if I say no?" he asked.

Kline exhaled once, the smallest slip of human fatigue. "Then they will proceed without your assessment. They will do what they can. Ms. Vance will do what she can." She stopped before finishing the sentence her silence carried.

Julian stared at the log line again: TOKEN EXPIRED.

He thought about how systems failed quietly. How the most consequential breakpoints were rarely dramatic. How a missing light on a camera could be a budget choice or a doorway.

He typed one more line in his notes, hands moving without asking permission.

KNOWN: request came through legal intermediary

UNKNOWN: why FBI needs civilian back-end recovery

INFERRED: data pathway exists outside standard warrant pipeline —

He paused, then added a second dash after INFERRED, sharper than the first.

His phone was still pressed to his ear. Kline was still waiting, patient in the way attorneys were patient when they'd been told not to push.

Julian swallowed.

"I can be there," he said, and surprised himself with how steady his voice sounded.

"Thank you," Kline replied immediately, too quickly, as if relief had been waiting behind her words. "Bring identification. They'll clear you at reception. Supervisory Special Agent Thorne will meet you."

Julian caught the name and filed it the way he filed everything: as a variable, not a character.

When the call ended, the storage room returned to its ordinary sounds. The faint hum of fluorescent lights. The distant front-desk chatter filtered through drywall. The hard drive blinking its calm little pulse.

Julian closed the log window and shut the laptop halfway, as if that could put the dental office back in its place. He stood, feeling the stiffness in his knees, the mild ache that came from sitting on cheap plastic too long.

He looked at the router on the table—the one the office manager had called “dead.” Its power light was off. Its label, faded, still showed the default SSID printed in tiny letters.

A system that looked dead could still be talking. Just not to you.

Julian slipped his phone into his pocket and gathered his cables. As he did, his eyes snagged on something else in the corner—a small UPS battery backup, dusty, humming softly. A surge protector with a row of lights.

One of those lights flickered, just once, and steadied.

Julian stared at it for a moment longer than was reasonable.

Then he turned off the under-table lamp, stepped out of the storage room, and walked into the sunlight with the feeling—unwanted, familiar—that something he had built once, and tried to warn people about, had started moving again.

And this time it wasn't going to stay contained behind a server rack.

CHAPTER 4 — “The Command Center”

FBI Field Office, Tucson — 9:02 AM

The Tucson field office did not look like the movies.

It looked like a medical building that had chosen beige as a personality.

Julian surrendered his phone at reception and signed two forms without reading them, which irritated him more than it should have. The waiting area held three molded chairs and a television tuned to a muted morning show. A chyron crawled across the bottom of the screen.

BREAKING: MISSING PERSON REPORT FILED IN CATALINA FOOTHILLS

They were already behind the headline.

A door opened.

“Mr. Vane?”

The man standing there was taller than Julian expected and older than he’d hoped. Late forties. Trim haircut going silver at the edges. A suit that fit like it had been chosen by someone who disliked suits but respected their function.

“Supervisory Special Agent Elias Thorne.”

They shook hands. Thorne’s grip was firm but not performative.

“Appreciate you coming in,” Thorne said. Not warmth. Not suspicion. Something in between.

Julian followed him down a hallway lined with framed commendations and into a conference room with a whiteboard and a bank of screens along one wall.

Sloane Vance stood near the table, arms folded, posture controlled. On television she looked polished. In person she looked precise. The difference was in the eyes. On screen they scanned teleprompters. Here they held still.

“Mr. Vane,” she said.

“Julian,” he corrected automatically.

“Julian,” she repeated, as if committing it to memory.

There were two other agents in the room. A digital forensics tech Julian recognized by posture alone—the way she leaned toward the monitors even when nothing was moving.

Thorne closed the door.

“Let’s get straight to it,” he said. “We’ve recovered standard footage from neighboring properties. Nothing usable from the residence itself.”

“Subscription lapsed,” Sloane said, voice flat.

Julian nodded once. “That doesn’t mean nothing exists.”

The forensics tech looked up. Interest.

Thorne gestured to the screens. "Walk us through that."

Julian stepped closer. A still image filled the largest monitor—infrared capture from across the street. A blurred shape on a porch. Timestamp in the corner.

"What you're looking at is endpoint storage," Julian said. "What the user sees. What they pay for."

He tapped the screen lightly.

"What you're not looking at is the handshake."

Sloane's eyes shifted toward him.

"When a cloud-connected camera detects motion," Julian continued, "it doesn't decide locally whether to store that footage. It sends a packet upstream first. A buffer. A few seconds. Enough for the server to acknowledge and assign storage."

"And if the subscription's expired?" Thorne asked.

"The storage allocation fails," Julian said. "But the handshake still happens. For a moment, the data exists outside the house."

Silence in the room.

The forensics tech leaned forward. "At the ISP level?"

"Or parent server cache," Julian said. "Depends on architecture. Depends on vendor. Depends on overwrite intervals."

Thorne studied him. "You're saying there may be footage even without a paid subscription."

"I'm saying there may be fragments," Julian replied carefully. "Seconds. Partial frames. Enough to establish timing. Maybe more."

"Can we get it?" Sloane asked.

Julian hesitated. This was where tone mattered.

"If the overwrite window hasn't closed," he said. "And if the right person at the right company wants to cooperate."

Thorne's jaw shifted slightly. "We've already put in preservation requests."

“Good,” Julian said. “Then we’re racing the clock.”

The forensics tech switched feeds. Three camera angles appeared side by side. Street view. Driveway. Partial side yard.

Julian stepped closer.

“Play it back from 1:54.”

The footage rolled. Quiet street. Night static.

At 1:57:43, a faint distortion flickered across the infrared field on Camera Two.

Julian leaned in.

“Pause.”

The image froze.

“There,” he said.

Thorne frowned. “That’s noise.”

“No,” Julian said softly. “That’s a micro-strobe.”

The room tightened.

“Infrared interference,” Julian continued. “Consistent pulse. Not environmental.”

The tech zoomed in. A faint rhythmic flicker along the porch line.

“Military?” Thorne asked.

Julian shook his head slightly. “Or close enough.”

He moved to the whiteboard and wrote:

01:57:43 — IR ANOMALY

02:14 — TOKEN EXPIRE (Dental case) — He stopped himself, erased the second line. Wrong case. Wrong room.

He rewrote:

02:28 — TELEMETRY DROP

Sloane looked up sharply. "You've seen the pacemaker log?"

Thorne nodded once. "Court order went through at six."

Julian turned back to the screen.

"Elevated heart rate starting 1:58," he said. "Sustained stress pattern. Then a clean disconnect from her phone at 2:28."

"Which means?" Sloane asked.

"Which means she moved," Julian said. "Bluetooth range is short. Ten meters, give or take. Her phone stayed inside."

Sloane's composure held. Barely.

Thorne folded his arms. "We've canvassed. No vehicles reported."

Julian pointed to Camera Three. "Rewind ten seconds before the anomaly."

The footage rolled back.

At 1:57:31, something subtle shifted at the edge of the frame—light bending, as if heat shimmered where there was no heat.

"Pause."

Julian exhaled slowly.

"That's not a person," Thorne said.

"No," Julian agreed. "That's a signal."

He turned toward them.

"You're looking at a portable IMSI catcher. Stingray-class. It's broadcasting a spoofed tower handshake. Phones in range think they're already communicating with their server."

Sloane's voice was steady. "Which means?"

"It means local recording indicators can be suppressed," Julian said. "It means metadata can be scraped. It means the house thought it was connected when it wasn't."

The forensics tech spoke quietly. "Collateral collection."

Julian nodded.

Thorne was watching him now with something that wasn't skepticism anymore.

"You sound very certain," Thorne said.

Julian held his gaze.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm describing a pattern that matches the anomaly."

He pointed to the flicker.

"That pulse wasn't random. Someone wanted a clean entry. No visible disturbance. Minimal digital trace."

Sloane spoke again. "And they left this."

Julian looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "They left this."

Thorne's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why would someone careful enough to run a Stingray leave an infrared artifact?"

Julian studied the frozen frame.

"Because," he said slowly, "they didn't need it to be invisible. They needed it to be interpreted."

The room went very quiet.

"Interpret it how?" Thorne asked.

Julian met his eyes.

"As an amateur."

The implication settled like dust.

Someone had used sophisticated tools to produce just enough visible noise to suggest something cruder.

Sloane stepped back from the table. "You're saying whoever took my mother wanted the FBI looking at the wrong level."

"I'm saying," Julian replied, careful again, "the data is telling you where to look. That doesn't mean it's telling you the truth."

Thorne nodded once.

"We'll expand the search grid," he said. "Check for van rentals. Portable cell-site simulators."

Julian didn't move.

"There's something else," he said.

Thorne waited.

"If they ran a Stingray within that radius," Julian continued, "they collected every device handshake in range. Not just hers."

The forensics tech's eyes widened slightly.

"Meaning?" Thorne prompted.

"Meaning you don't just have a kidnapping," Julian said. "You have a temporary map of every phone on that street at 1:57 AM."

Silence again.

Outside the conference room, a printer started up somewhere down the hall.

Sloane's phone buzzed on the table. She didn't look at it.

Thorne exhaled slowly.

"All right," he said. "Let's assume you're right."

Julian didn't respond.

He was staring at the flicker on the screen.

Because something about its rhythm felt familiar.

Not the interference itself.

The pattern.

A signal profile he had seen before.

And helped design around.