

FACTS

1 Every year in the United States, traffic congestion causes over \$450 billion in lost economic productivity.

2 93% of all fatal car accidents in the United States are caused by human error.

3 Between 30,000 and 40,000 people are killed in car accidents in the United States every year.

4 As of Spring 2019, there are at least forty major corporations working on self-driving car technologies.

MAY 6, 2023 – LOS ANGELES TIMES

STATEWIDE TRAFFIC COLLISIONS KILL NEARLY 1,800 MOTORISTS IN CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles, CA – At least 1,800 people died yesterday in traffic accidents across California in what Caltrans officials are referring to as a “technical glitch,” according to a representative from Governor Fairchild’s office.

“At approximately four o’clock yesterday afternoon, what appears to be a freak technical glitch in the Statewide Intelligent Transportation System (SITS) caused over 7,000 traffic accidents throughout the state,” the state representative added. “The timing of tens of thousands of signalized intersections throughout California, typically handled by local agencies, was taken over two months ago by the SITS. The Super Six are looking further into this unfortunate and regretful incident.”

The Super Six, led by civil engineer Dr. Jake Bendel under the direction of the US Department of Transportation, are responsible for the implementation of a separate, nationwide self-driving network known as the “Sûr System,” or SS, and are generally considered the “Top Gun” of transportation, legal, ethical, and psychological experts in the country.

Dr. Bendel, who resides in Upland, was unavailable for comment.

CHAPTER 1

JUNE 9, 2023

Los Angeles

Deep inside the Federal Building, FBI Special Agent Jose Cavanaugh huddled with several other agents around a flat screen TV, listening to the distorted ramblings of a female reporter as crackled audio came and went. The bottom of the screen displayed an ABC-7 logo and read 4:09 p.m. The Sky-7 copter, which provided the source of the feed, swerved right to avoid hitting one of the other dozen aircraft hovering above the unfolding freeway scene in West Los Angeles, mere blocks away.

“Carnage,” reporter Nicole Freemonte said. “From up here, we’re looking down at an apocalyptic scene of twisted metal, smoke, and chaos along seven miles of the 405 freeway.” Her voice, normally pleasant, comforting, and professional, had deteriorated into that choking sound people make when they experience gut-wrenching pain, trying not to break down at the sight of true terror. “Thousands of vehicles lie in a

mangled sea of destruction that is, from what I'm told by our fact-checking crew, incomparable to any traffic accident in the history of the US."

Cavanaugh shook his head. *First the statewide SITS nightmare, and now this.*

People struggled, crawling over lifeless vehicles, waving their arms to garner attention from the souls suspended above them.

Nicole continued, "To get a better sense of the magnitude of what appears to be a terrorist attack on thousands of innocent civilian drivers using the new Sûr System, let's turn it over now to our reporter on the ground, Bobby Jones. Bobby?" She sounded relieved to pass the attention to a different reporter.

The reporter stood on the shoulder of the 405 freeway, facing south, wearing a white dress shirt and blue tie with slicked-back hair and thin-rimmed glasses. The bloodbath behind him filled the majority of the frame. Sweat trickled down his brow, and he wiped his forehead. A woman cried in the background. A shriek rang out from an unseen man, "Help me!"

"Nicole, the scene down here is pure chaos. In all my years of reporting, I've never—" A truck-sized fireball exploded a few hundred yards behind the reporter, rattling the camera. Bobby ducked, turning his head. A fraction of a second later, a booming clap of thunder forced him to his knees.

"Jesus, that's the second explosion in five minutes," Cavanaugh said, leaning forward to turn up the volume on the TV.

The cloud behind Bobby mushroomed as he straightened up and looked around, smudges of charcoal on his right

shoulder and left cheek, his microphone shaking in his hand. “We, uh, sorry, I . . .” he cleared his throat, laughing under his breath. “We’re here on-site at what reminds me of”—he paused and raised his eyebrows— “a war zone. That explosion came from one of dozens of tanker trucks caught in the pileup.” He extended his trembling arm. “Miles and miles of tangled cars and trucks sit motionless here on the 405 freeway. The scene is like one giant junkyard of death and destruction. Emergency crews are skirting the perimeter, trying to tend to the wounded, but I’m told they’re having a difficult time getting to the inner lanes.”

The camera panned away from Bobby and zoomed in to an upside-down green Smart Coupe with a caved-in roof. At first, the shot appeared fuzzy, but when the cameraman focused the lens, it revealed the partially decapitated head of a woman. The camera jerked away, back to Bobby.

Cavanaugh muted the TV, shook his head. “Too late.”

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August 10, 2023

Jake designed the Sûr System to save lives, but some bastard had gone and weaponized the damned thing.

The SITS nightmare three months ago was only the beginning. The terrorists cloaked themselves well. Even the papers reported it as a glitch. Jake had a theory. SITS had been a test run. A warmup.

It made the second attack in June, the one using the Sûr System, that much worse. And, when no one had answers, they needed someone to blame. So Jake had ended up here.

Wherever ‘here’ was.

From brilliant engineer to suspected terrorist. Just like that.

The interior of his eight-by-eight room reminded Jake of a prison cell, with gray paint flakes clinging to the tops of the walls. A fly buzzed, landing on Jake’s nose, but he remained still, his mind focused on how to stop the killing. He knew the Sûr System inside and out. Someone must have set up a back door into the code.

Jake’s mind shifted focus to Cynthia, his wife of twenty-five years. He missed the way her hazel eyes sparkled when she smiled. They had never been apart longer than two days. Until now.

The fly buzzed away, then Jake sat upright on the clumpy, two-inch thick mattress and inhaled the scent of charred wood from the sooty dress shirt he’d worn since his arrival six days ago. Feeling abandoned, he assumed the FBI had forgotten to get him a change of clothes. Or they didn’t care.

Standing, his back cracked as he stroked his stubble. A sense of determination devolved into frustration, made its way down to his hand, and balled into a fist before he punched a hole through the drywall. *Pain is good*, he thought, craning his head downward to his bloodied, shaking fingers.

After closing his eyes and leaning against the wall, clouds of depression swirled inside his tired brain, mixing with distant memories of his wife dancing in her favorite yellow dress, the curls in her hair bouncing whenever she tipped her head back to laugh. With his palms pressed against his eyes, he imagined the faces of the thousands of people killed by his Sûr System.

He resumed doing calculations in his mind, imaginary code floating in front of his face, like a personal hologram, courtesy of his semi-photographic memory. A gift and a curse. As a member of the Super Six, he'd worked countless hours on the algorithm, with his memory protecting key pieces of code.

Sirens suddenly screamed throughout. With emergency strobe lights flashing, Jake hustled to the door and yanked on the handle.

"Roger that, getting him now," yelled the ex-football-playing, beer-gutted agent jogging toward Jake's room.

Jake put his hands over his ears and yelled. "Looks like I finally won the lottery."

"Bomb threat. Gotta move your ass down to the basement."

A bruise on Jake's upper arm jolted with pain as the agent clamped on, manhandling Jake down the hall. Sleep had been hard to come by, with unresolved issues colliding in his brain of the SITS nightmare, his family, the Sûr System attack and the reasons behind his pseudo-incarceration. The passageway turned right, taking both men down several flights of stairs before dead-ending at an oversized metal security door. A box near them buzzed, and the massive steel door clicked.

The agent swung open the door, but Jake hesitated, darkness staring back at him. "In you go, Dr. Bendel," the agent said, shoving Jake, who staggered into the bunker, tripped, and crashed down into a small wooden table, hitting his head.

"For your own safety." Lights flickered on before the door shrieked and slammed shut, jolting Jake's bones.