

THE REBEL WITHIN

Lance Erlick

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Edited by Leah Carson

Finlee Augare Books, Chicago, IL

ISBN: 978-0-9889968-0-9 (print)

ISBN: 978-0-9889968-1-6 (e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013934668

ONE

I'm 16. Life should be fun, right? I should be meeting guys and throwing kick-ass parties with friends. Instead, the Knoxville Public Schools, the Tenn-tucky state government, and the Federal Union plan my life down to the last nanosecond. They believe they know what's best. I disagree.

Here I am, Annabelle, late again, running down the concrete corridors I've whitewashed during detention. When I get to senior civics class just in time, someone slams the door in my face. Then a pompous voice blares over the loudspeaker, "All security-tracked students report to Auditorium B to meet Commander Samantha Hernandez."

The voice is Harmony Director Surroc. *Oh, joy.* Another "hoo-rah" for the Mechanized Female Warriors. The mechs are always on my back, trying to get me to join—but I hate them so much I want to puke.

I head for the auditorium, past girls scurrying to class. The disgust in their stares is unmistakable. Yeah, yeah, you hate me because I'm a security-tracker. Well, joke's on you. I hate *being* security-tracked even more.

I hold my head high. Out of habit, I scan my surroundings and contemplate escape. My chest fills with relief at the sight of my sister. Janine's a year younger, smarter, and drop-dead gorgeous. She catches up and squeezes my hand for reassurance.

It's bad enough that Surroc tracked me to security. It's even worse that she tracked Janine at age 12. I'm determined to look out for my sister, make sure she finishes school and doesn't turn into a rebel like me.

Eleven other girls stream into Auditorium B wearing the same "approved" outfits: bland navy skorts, bleached blouses, and flats. No makeup, jewelry or accessories, 'cause those hint at status and inequality. Hair can't reach shoulder length because long hair is pretentious and thus disharmonious. So is dyeing. When my blonde curls hold their bounce, they're off my shoulders. When they sag, because I refuse to wear my hair shorter, I get to spend quality time with Harmony Director Surroc.

Janine and I enter our small, windowless auditorium—just a classroom with a stage. I find us padded seats in the middle of the whitewashed hall. Boy, this place could use decorations, paintings, something. My wrist-com, standard security-track issue so cops can monitor my activities, shows I have two hours until lunch and my cop intern training.

Janine jabs her elbow into my side and whispers, "Captain Voss is here."

Yep, our intern chief. Voss the Boss with her round cow-face. She tries to look serious in her ratty brown hair and navy uniform. But those sweat stains under her arms? And the way she paces back and forth on the stage? Nervous Nellie.

Next to Voss stands Commander Hernandez, who created the Tenn-tucky mech forces during the war. It's her first time at our school. Usually she sends gung-ho warriors.

When Hernandez marches to the podium in her crisp blue military uniform with colonel emblems on her shoulder, my stomach churns. A scar runs down her right cheek. I can't help picturing horns on her tight-cropped black hair. She's the enemy telling me and other security-trackers to join the killing machine.

“Call me Sam,” Commander Hernandez says in a low bass. Her voice echoes in the small room and silences murmurs behind me.

Call you vulture.

Janine must notice my fidgeting; she touches my hand to tell me to stay calm.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the Mechanized Female Warriors called mechs or amazons,” the commander says.

And murderers.

“I assure you we’re not a mythical force. We’re girls like you defending Federal Union values. This is your chance to reach for the sky and serve your nation in need.”

How many more families will you destroy? Having Janine next to me halts my outburst and another detention.

“We have video clips to show what you can expect. Training is rugged, but don’t be alarmed. We train recruits well before they get into the tournament or the arena. See how with mech gear, our warriors can outperform Olympians in running, jumping, and various sports.”

A wide screen to the right of the podium shows a video of three warriors encased in black titanium-polymer shields and helmets. I hear that this gear can protect against a .45 at point blank range. The commander doesn’t demo that.

“Use of advanced hydraulics gives warriors the boost.”

I watch them perform onscreen against women who competed in the last Olympics in Bangalore. Compared to the robotic black-shielded mechs, the athletes look like kindergarteners. Impressive. While I’d love to have even old-model mech gear used by the cops, Captain Voss doesn’t think much of me, or my adoptive mom. Feeling is mutual. Voss lurks in the shadows, smirking.

“How would you like to enhance your performance to unbelievable levels?” the commander asks. “These are not toys, not video games. They’re performance aids. When you master new skills, you’ll be able to compete in our prized mech tournaments.”

Not prized by me.

Hernandez shows clips of the televised events. Onscreen, girls in blue spandex tights perform amazing jumps, spins and evasions as they fight—not as spectacular as with mech suits, yet still intimidating. The Union televises tournament finals every six months, which Mom makes me watch.

I’m not impressed with girls pounding on each other. It’s upsetting to see how excited Janine gets over this. She even ignored my protests and followed me into cop internship three afternoons a week.

A compact woman with measured movements, Commander Hernandez resembles a proud mom showing off her girls. “Imagine holding your own with any of these opponents, and turning those skills into protecting our liberties.”

While separating families, I want to add. I keep my mouth shut. Getting suspended from basketball would hurt Janine more than me. She’s our star shooter.

The commander starts a new clip: the arena. I’m ready to bolt. Onscreen, a petite redhead faces a brutish man with thick muscles. He’s souped-up on steroids to make these contests more challenging. It reminds me of my dad. He had to fight in the arena like a Roman gladiator. My birth mother helped him escape. Then the mechs Dad trained captured my parents, executed him, and imprisoned her.

If only I could close my eyes so I don’t have to relive this. Classroom cams would pick that up, though. I’d spend more detention time with Harmony Director Surroc, or worse.

“This is the final test for a mech warrior,” Hernandez says. “Stand face-to-face with any man and hold your own in hand-to-hand combat. Overcome your fears. Focus your energies to accomplish amazing things. Become a mech and be the best you can be.”

You mean the best the Union will allow me. Why not let me create? Or be an architect. Let me do something other than security. Then I’ll reach for the sky and be the best I can be. Oh, well. Are we done?

Onscreen, the redhead hits the huge muscleman across the head, neck, and back. He strikes back; hits air. It’s like watching a bullfight. The man falls to his knees. She snaps her fist, open hand, and foot across his upper body until he falls face-first into the dirt. *No, it’s an execution.*

Girls cheer the brute’s demise, those around me in the auditorium as well as the audience onscreen. When Janine grips my hand, I force myself to assume the stony face I’ve cultivated.

Why do these videos encourage girls to sign up? And they make men look like brutes. Who knows what men are really like? Most fled to the Outlands before I was born.

The commander turns off the video and steps down from the stage. She’s my height, stocky, built like a brick wall. She shakes the hands of security students and addresses us by name. She must have reviewed our files. When she reaches me, it’s all I can do to keep my breakfast down. I shouldn’t have had those eggs. I can’t just take off without embarrassing Janine. My actions reflect on her, Mom, and the rest of my adopted family.

Hernandez nods with a look that says she has her eye on me, or sees through me. “Annabelle Scott,” she says. “Such passion and drive. If only you’d let me train you to focus that energy.”

“Thanks,” I mumble. Feeling naked, I close my mouth, hang my head, and taste bile. Strangely, her smile, distorted by the scar running down her right cheek, seems genuine. She’s disarming in ways that get my guard up. *Vulture, you won’t get your claws into me.* I smile and nod. *Over my dead, cold bones.*

The commander turns to my sister. “And you, Janine Scott. The sharpest mind in the security program, and a terrific basketball player. With the right training...”

I tense. *Leave her alone,* I want to scream. She’s too sweet for your killing machine.

Janine’s pinky locks mine behind our backs. Her gracious smile lights up her innocent face. “It’s great to meet you, Commander. We all aspire to serve.”

I pray she’s just acting when she says this.

She digs her fingernail into my palm. “Thank you for coming today, Commander. It was an inspiring presentation.”

I can practically taste honey drip off Janine, and all I want to do is hold and protect her.

* * *

After cabbage-faced Surroc dismisses us, I drag Janine down whitewashed hallways away from Auditorium B. She looks up at me with worried eyes. I say “up,” though she’s only an inch shorter, because she has a way of holding her head the way she did when she was little.

We burst into steamy sunlight and I’m ready to scream. Those eggs struggle to escape. They taste foul the second time around. How can I join the mechs who killed my dad for fleeing a nation that no longer wanted him? How can I forgive them for ripping my birth mother from my arms, sending her to prison, and not letting me visit, write, or even know where? I was only three, yet I remember that tear at my gut like it was this morning.

The concrete courtyard, surrounded by concrete classrooms, concentrates the morning heat. Sweat soaks my thin blouse. Or is it that this reminds me of a prison? Across the way, I spot chubby-faced Emily Battani. As the governor’s daughter, she manages to dress a sliver better

than the rest of us despite strict dress codes. Today it's a hint of eye shadow, makeup to cover her zit-marred face, and new clothes.

I guide Janine away. I don't need reminding how we're all equal except I'm stuck with security while Emily has options. I bump into pinched-face Daphne and her giggly friends, probably the ones who slammed the door in my face. She gets to go into biology, probably medicine. She's wearing the same blah clothes as me, yet hers are spotless and fresh each morning. She probably wears each outfit only once.

"Poor little security girls get grubby in the mud?" is the best Daphne can manage. Her mousy friends giggle.

Janine nudges me: be good.

I'd rather squirm in mud than believe blah is beautiful. I'd hate for any of these worm-brains to operate on me.

Cabbage-face watches us from the steps outside the auditorium. I don't need another lecture on the importance of harmony. Mom has a phrase for people like Surroc: a True Believer. It's from a banned book by Eric Hoffer in Mom's private library.

"Tell your mom we're watching her," Daphne says.

Janine tugs me away and whispers, "Don't mind her."

I do mind. Mom, my adoptive mom, is a Tenn-tucky state senator. She's one of the few sane people opposing Governor Battani. She fights for more opportunities for girls like Janine and me, but people are afraid. Janine is, I see. "Why don't you go to class and let me walk this off."

"I know you don't like mechs, Belle. Why can't you talk to me about it? I don't like secrets between us."

"I need fresh air. Promise me you'll never join. If you want to be a cop, that's okay." I stop by her building.

"I'm not leaving you all wound up. Don't skip school today. I know you want to."

She knows me so well. "I'll be okay, Babe."

My wrist-com vibrates. Pictures flash of me caught skipping school last week. I "borrowed" an electric cycle to head up into the hills. I didn't get to use it. Next is a doctored picture of me hanging from the clock tower over the administration building, with its broken dials. Surroc leaves them as a reminder of my disharmony. I don't need reminding.

Janine views the images, turns off my wrist-com, and heads inside. "We've got a game tonight, Belle. Don't get detention. I need you. Their captain's Dara the Terror. They say she can play center, forward, and guard all at once."

"Hype," I say, though I've heard rumors the big ox punched another player.

My sister leads me up a narrow flight of stairs to the tarred roof to get my fresh air. I need to bust loose and get out of this prison. My baby sister is holding me back. Yet not a cell in my body can hate her for it. She's no goody-goody. She never rats on me when I skip school or wander into restricted areas. That counts for a lot.

Janine stops at the roof panel. "Belle, don't be mad at me for being nice to the commander."

"I'm not, Babe, but I don't want you to turn into one of those animals. You're much too sweet for that."

Grinning, Janine forces the panel. "That's because I have you to protect me."

Mom didn't ask me to take that responsibility. No, I took it upon myself the moment I moved in. To get her to sleep with lights out, I let her sleep next to me. She's followed me ever since, like my Siamese twin.

She doesn't say anything when I move to the ledge to look over the Knoxville cityscape and wonder. What would it be like to go wherever I want? Instead, I depend on crowded city-buses with restrictions based on my student and cop intern IDs. Glancing toward mountains I can't see—the Outlands—I tell myself someday, but how? Travel outside Knoxville is restricted even for cops.

With warm wind blowing through my hair, I imagine floating out there. At least the rah-rah video excused me from civics class. I couldn't handle another lecture on the history of the Second American Civil War: how the year before I was born, our nation split into the Federal Union and the Outlands. Our Union promotes harmony—blah, blah, blah. If I taught, I'd spice it up with how harmony took my birth parents. I'd follow with how Mom's husband had to flee with their son George. I've never met my adopted brother.

The only good part of security and being a cop intern is I skip school in the afternoon, though that further limits my options. Afternoons I go through cop training, which makes me wish I was in school.

Emily Battani joins us, and the world closes in around me.

TWO

“Daphne’s such a bitch,” chunky Emily says over my shoulder.

I hold my gaze toward distant mountains. What does the governor’s lucky egg want from me now?

I shrug and glance down at the street below. A blue and gray city-bus lurches forward; bikes scramble out of its way. It reminds me of pictures I’ve seen in Mom’s study, showing China before they opened their economy and replaced bikes with cars. This is progress?

While she says hi to Emily, Janine nudges me: be nice. I get it, though I want to be alone. I’m tempted to take my chances by jumping off the roof to escape.

Looking past the city-bus, I stare at Michael’s School for Boys. It’s one of a handful of boarding schools for the few boys who remain in Knoxville. The state keeps them hidden behind high walls topped with barbed wire and patrolled by mech cops.

Will I ever meet a boy?

Mom says women stopped having boys because of high rates of autism, violence, and social disruption, and they didn’t read. That made it hard for them to adjust to our knowledge-based economy. After the war, most of the males fled. Then the city zoned our neighborhood and school to exclude them. Harmony Director Surroc and Captain Voss say liberated women don’t need men. Governor Battani says the only way to make females safe is to eliminate the source, meaning men.

The only other times I see the boys’ school is out the window of Harmony Director Surroc’s office while she lectures me. No class windows face this street. School buses bypass Michael’s, as if passing near them would pollute us.

Leaning over the concrete ledge, I spot a tall, lean redheaded boy in jeans. My breath catches. He glides along the outside of the concrete wall that surrounds the boys’ school. I try not to act startled as I wonder how he got past the school’s electronic surveillance.

To avoid alerting Emily, I look away and watch him from the corner of my eye.

Why am I drawn toward this boy I’ve never met?

For months I’ve noticed him on the roof of his school behind barbed wire. He looks out at the world like I do. He’s only a few years younger than my dad was when they threw him into the arena. I hunger to meet the redhead, to be with a boy and see what happens. Maybe he won’t be the brute shown in televised arena fights and news-vids.

While Mom doesn’t talk about it, I’ve seen dogs. It doesn’t seem as much fun for the bitch as for the horny bastard. Yet curiosity burns within me that I can’t share with Janine or Mom. I dare not trust anyone else. No telling who might post my thoughts. Soc-net police are on the lookout for any backlash against the Federal Union.

The boy glances around as he edges his way toward the alley. Like he can fool a zillion cams! Must be desperate. *I’m with you, Red.*

“There’s a boy,” Janine whispers. Worry lines crease her tanned forehead. I don’t think she remembers her brother George. He left for the Outland before Mom adopted me.

“A small boy,” I say, aware Emily’s watching. *Hurry!* I send him mind-waves to get moving, as if that ever works.

“Not a threat,” I say. “See mech cops out front and...” I start to mention his green student collar, but it’s masked or missing. It’s horrible to have to wear a choker like a dog, which is how cops I work with track males.

Emily leans over the ledge to look and calls it in. She has to get her goody points for the day. She gives the call center the location and description of the fugitive. “If there’s one, there could be more. They’re like cockroaches.”

Since there’s no point educating the devoutly ignorant, I shake my head. The boy disappears into an alley behind the school as mech cops out front receive the call. This gives me an idea.

Sirens blare at the boy’s school. Uniformed cops on electric cycles appear at nearby intersections. It pays to be the governor’s offspring. I’m sure her mom will reward her tonight. Mech cops in faded black exoskeletons split up and circle the school at mech-enhanced speed. They hold up remotes that zap collars within range, intended to immobilize males until cops can round them up. This is what cop and mech training leads to, one of many security jobs I don’t want.

I turn to Janine, who shows too much enthusiasm for the manhunt. *That could be your brother, Babe.* “You need to get to class. You don’t want detention.”

“What about you?”

“My class is nearby. Go on.”

After Janine leaves, I take a deep breath and head down narrow stairs.

Emily follows. “If you cut class today, take me with you. I hate this place.”

I reach the bottom of the stairs and hesitate. I’m tempted to take her. If we’re caught, she could lessen my punishment. I can’t trust her, though.

“Sorry, no plans today.”

She withdraws into herself. At times I feel sorry for Emily. She’s an early product of EggFusion Fertilization, the fertilization in the lab of one woman’s egg by another, meaning she has no dad but two moms. Living alone with the governor, Emily may not know who the other mom is. Maybe that’s why she acts angry and depressed.

I walk with her as far as her class. After she goes inside, I turn on my heels.

No plans except escape and find that boy.

* * *

Taking whitewashed corridors down the wing where obedient freshmen are already in class, I reach our large auditorium without bumping into anyone. The broad stage is set up for another pep talk on social harmony. *Yippee.* Behind the stage, stairs rise up into rafters where stagehands handle drops and lights. I snatch a hoodie from wardrobe and cover myself despite steamy heat for early April. I relish the adrenaline rush.

I place a makeshift aluminum patch over my wrist-com. It’s a trick I learned from cop intern training to mask GPS tracking. Gotta love cops and their toys. Then I wrap my student ID chip in aluminum. That’s to fool the school tracking system, which logs us on and off campus like store products. I’m the toilet-bowl cleaner getting crap jobs.

I crawl through dust-covered windows onto a ledge over the stage’s loading dock. It’s the only gap I’ve found in school security. This act of disobedience brings me closer to my parents. Plus I feel electricity I’ve never felt in class, with my boring cop internship, or even on the basketball court.

Cycle cops swarm the boys’ school while mech cops covered in dull black shields move south toward the river. It’s hot and clear, too hot to be outdoors. Swooshing mosquitoes from my

neck, I pull the hoodie over my face. Then I dart across the empty street and head east. That's where I'd go if I was a boy.

I want to meet him and make sure he's safe. I need to understand this obsession: to know boys despite the horror drilled into me at school and online. This one doesn't appear dangerous. No, he looks innocent, like Janine, in need of protection. I imagine catching the boy. *Would you take me with you?* Sounds stupid to trust a stranger who might be a brute.

I don't slow down.

Wishing I had my basketball shoes instead of junky flats, I jog down an alley between Union Burgers & Subs and Federal Clothiers. They carry bland, government-approved food and attire to ensure health and harmony. Someday I'll open my own shop and design variety as an alternative to becoming a security cog. *As if they'd let me.*

Seeing cops in the woods behind the boys' school, I stop, catch my breath, and savor the excitement of blood pounding in my ears. I feel alive and certain I can catch the redheaded boy. Mom says I have a nose for finding people, like when I have to hunt down one of my eight adopted sisters—a long story.

Cops and mechs fan out. Feeling the pressure of the hunted, I head toward the river where vegetation is thicker. I like to sit there and watch the world pass. The water originates in the forbidden Outland, where there are plenty of boys who escaped my world. I say a prayer this one makes it.

When I reach the broad, rippling river, I spot among tall grass and thick weeds a tuft of red hair and a boyish face. I duck behind thick brambles and struggle to breathe. My heart pounds in my throat. I've never been this close to a boy who wasn't wearing handcuffs. Close enough to count the freckles on his sweet masculine face.

I should flee. Instead, I study his eyes studying me, eyes as blue as a summer sky. My throat dries. I feel like a fawn. Yet I sense no danger except from cops. They swarm like mosquitoes from the direction of his school. Voss must have called the entire force for one boy. Cops thrash through the underbrush grid by grid, evidently without infrared. It must be too hot.

Sweat trickles down my neck. I remove the hoodie and prepare myself to approach Red. Bushes rustle nearby. I look up to see Janine's adorable face. "What are you doing here?"

She plops next to me. "I saw too many sparks flying after the mech video. Whenever you get this way, it scares me."

"I'm sorry, Babe. You can't be here." I look over at Red and no longer see his eyes. *You wouldn't hurt my sister, would you?*

Janine squeezes my shoulder to get my attention. "I knew you'd run again."

"This isn't a game. We need to get you back before they catch you." I pull Janine down behind thick bushes.

"I know you're hurting, Belle. You talk in your sleep. Don't keep things from me. I can handle it. Is this because of me?"

I study worry lines on her pretty face. "No, Babe. You've done nothing wrong, but you need to stop following me." I pull her away from the boy into tall river grasses.

Janine smiles; acts oblivious to the dangers. "I want to help, Belle. Don't shut me out. Is this about George?"

"Who?"

"You call his name in your sleep."

I tug Janine down lower behind bushes. "You're mistaken."

"Is that who you're meeting?"

“No!” I take Janine’s hand, gaze into her big brown eyes, and will her to stop digging.

“Are you in love with him?”

“How? I’ve never met any boys.” I pull Janine deeper into tall grass.

Cops move closer. My heart’s ready to burst for Red and for my sister. I’ve been dying to tell her how she has a brother and I’m adopted: all my baggage. Yet Mom made me swear to keep this to myself. That’s hard because I love Janine more than if she was my blood. My need to protect her is an open wound that can’t heal. I still see her on her first day of school picked on by two older girls until I stepped in and sent the girls packing.

Janine grips my hand to say it’s okay. My guilt explodes. If she knew we weren’t bio-sisters, would she stop looking up to me? Will she think less of me because I lost my parents as enemies of the state? I savor the unquestioned love in her eyes. I can’t let anything sour it.

I whisper, “I need time alone to think.”

“Why won’t you tell me what’s troubling you?” Janine’s most convincing pouty look tugs at me. But this isn’t the time for her to get her way.

Surrounded, I see no way out unless the cops leave. They linger, scan, and tighten the circle. I push Janine down among reeds. “Stay put. No point both of us getting caught. I’ll draw the cops away. You get to school before I tan your hide.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I’m serious. They’ll hunt until they find something.”

“Sisters stick together.”

“Not this time,” I say. “It won’t help me if you get caught. Hide until the cops leave and be careful.”

“Belle, I’m sorry I got you into trouble.”

“You didn’t, Babe. Do this for me.” I steal a glance in the direction of Red. *Don’t you dare hurt Janine.*

He looks more frightened than she does.

“Stay low, Babe. You don’t want to bump into that boy.” I see a flash of worry in her eyes and raise my voice. “If I were him, I’d slip upstream about 100 yards and find me a nice shallow cave until sundown. Then I’d make my way upstream to the Outland. So you wait here until the cops leave and head back behind Union Burgers up there.”

She nods and sinks low in the weeds. Satisfied I’ve done what I can, I scoot out from the cover of tall grass in a crouched position. I don’t see Captain Voss, though she wouldn’t miss this. I spot my intern partner Lieutenant Brooks. Her coarse, wrinkled face makes her look older than her years and carries the weight of one who had to fight all her life.

After removing the aluminum shield over my wrist-com, I stand, raise my hands, and march toward Brooks. “I surrender.”

“Halt!” A frightened brunette in uniform tenses her slender body and aims her zapper at me. I recognize the thin-faced recruit as new to the intern program.

I freeze. “I saw a boy on the run. I thought I could catch him.”

“Nice try.” It’s Captain Voss, the stupid cow. Her round face twists into a scowl as she marches toward me. “Truancy is a serious crime.”

“I saw a boy from Michael’s School.”

“You should have called it in.”

“We did.” I regret the “we” bit.

“Who’s with you?”

“She chickened out.” I should have brought Emily—not.

“Get your sorry ass to school. I’ll deal with you this afternoon.”

I’m sure you will. Forcing myself not to glance back and check on Janine, I hitch a ride with a cycle cop.

Back at school, I hide in the rafters over the loading dock. When I see Janine sneak in by the cafeteria, I head for class. I’m ready to slip into boring advanced algebra when cabbage-face Surroc grabs my arm.

“Annabelle, you should consider it a privilege to be in security so you can serve your community. Yet you risk it all for silly stunts.”

“What have I done this time?” I inch toward Surroc’s office and away from my sister’s classroom.

“You know very well.” Surroc follows. “I got a call from Captain Voss. You want off the intern program?”

I smile inwardly. If this visit is because of Voss, maybe Janine’s safe.

“Look at me while I’m talking to you. I’d give you detention, but you seem to like that. Besides, we’re out of paint.” Surroc shakes her head, sending her ratty brown hair bouncing. “So, I’m suspending you from basketball for four weeks.”

I don’t mind until I recall promising Janine I wouldn’t miss tonight’s game. There’s no point pleading with Surroc. That only gives her pleasure. I hold my stony-face instead.

Surroc wags her stubby finger at me. “If the governor wasn’t coming to watch her daughter play, I’d suspend you tonight.” She seems disappointed that my punishment hasn’t upset me more. “If you keep acting disharmonious, who will take you? Not the police, not the mechs, and not security guards. Do you want environmental cleanup?”

Thinking about the nearby nuclear power plant shutdown and radioactive cleanup, I shake my head and act with such contrition I hope it releases me. I still have to face Voss and Mom.

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REGINA SHEN: DEFIANCE (Regina Shen book 3)

Outcast Regina Shen has DNA the Federation believes can reverse a global fertility collapse. Rival Federation agents fight over capturing Regina to gain power amidst turmoil over who will become the new World Premier. Regina has to flee from Virginia through desert and wilderness to Alaska to hunt a treasure big enough to barter for her freedom and that of her sister.

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THE REBEL WITHIN (Rebel Series book 1)

Annabelle Scott lives under the iron rule of a female-dominated régime that forces males to fight to the death to train the military elite. When pressed into service as a mechanized warrior to capture escaped boys, Annabelle stays true to herself by helping some escape. Her defiance endangers everyone she loves and thrusts her to a place of impossible life and death decisions.

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THE REBEL TRAP (Rebel Series book 2)

Despite being a military recruit, Annabelle Scott rebels against her female-dominated régime by refusing to kill a handsome boy she fancies and helping him escape. Auditory implants and cameras allow her commander to watch her 24-7. Can she help the boy free his brother from a heavily guarded geek institute without destroying her family or getting killed?

Written as a standalone story, *The Rebel Trap* follows Annabelle's adventures from *The Rebel Within*.

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REBELS DIVIDED (Rebel Series book 3)

The first time Geo sees Annabelle, they meet as enemies and she doesn't kill him, which mystifies them both. It's after the 2nd Civil War with the nation divided into an all-female Federal Union and a warlord controlled Outland. The Outland warlord kidnaps Annabelle's sister and kills Geo's pa. Can Annabelle and Geo overcome mutual distrust and work together to rescue her sister and gain justice for his pa's murder? Will their feelings for each other derail or further their goals?

Written as a standalone story, *Rebels Divided* is also part of the Rebel series, three years later.

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ULTIMATE HACK (novelette)

Hercules considered himself an ordinary anonymous geek with a special reason to remain in his mom's basement. Ignoring warnings from his best friend and his girlfriend, he pursues the hack of a lifetime into a top secret security system. What could possibly go wrong when he meets his match?

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SHE-DEVIL ROCKS (novelette)

Inspired by *Lord of the Flies*.

Bullied as the smallest of thirteen boys in his class, Bradley is on a plane that crashes on a remote island with a bully who is out of control. Bradley meets a mysterious tomboy who shouldn't be there. He has to learn to survive on the hostile island, deal with the tomboy, and come to terms with the bully.

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REGINA SHEN: SALVAGE (novelette)

Living on the seaward side of barrier walls built to protect against rising seas, the only means of survival for Regina Shen is underwater salvage, which is banned by the World Federation. After a storm takes a friend's family and home, Regina is determined to help by defying the Federation

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MAIDEN VOYAGE (short story)

Security Chief Nina Rekovic keeps the peace on the all-female Maiden's Ark that left Earth five years before. Distress signals say Earth is lost, stranding lunar colonists. While balancing Returners she sympathizes with, a dictatorial captain, and an estranged lover who betrays her, can Rekovic solve the conspiracy before she's imprisoned or killed?

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WATCHING YOU (short story)

At the intersection of pervasive networks and the Patriot Act, we have the ability and some say the obligation to know everything about everyone. Can privacy survive? Can the individual endure?

Harold is a second-class citizen and a low-level worker in a government surveillance system charged with reviewing "criminal activity." He has private thoughts about a woman he's forbidden from approaching. He will not be deterred.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lance Erlick writes science fiction thrillers for young adult and adult readers. He is the author of *The Rebel Within*, *The Rebel Trap*, and *Rebels Divided*, three books in the Rebel series. In those stories, he explores the consequences of Annabelle Scott following her conscience. He authored the Regina Shen series—*Regina Shen: Resilience*, *Regina Shen: Vigilance*, *Regina Shen: Defiance*, and *Regina Shen: Endurance*. This series takes place after abrupt climate change leads to the Great Collapse and a new society under the World Federation. A related short story is *Regina Shen: Salvage*. His latest novel is *Xenogeneic: First Contact* about encounters with an alien race aiming to take over Earth. Lance is also the author of unrelated short stories.

Find out more about the author and his work at LanceErlick.com. Go to the website or sign up [here](#) to receive occasional email newsletters with links to free short stories, and updates on new releases and other writing developments.