

Seven

Evening, June 2029

“It’s absolutely criminal that you’re not behind bars for the mass genocide of the Central American people. I sent your girlfriend everything she needed to put you away, and yet here you are.”

Although it wasn’t a voice he heard often, he instantly recognized his enemy’s voice. Without turning, he placed his cognac and cigar down, and casually leaned back, reaching for his coat pockets.

“That’s not a good idea.” Gary warned. “Keep those hands where I can see them.”

Zachary cursed and placed his hands over his knees.

“Atta boy.” Gary said, as he came around from behind and took the lounge chair next to him. “Nice view.” It came off as condescending, but Gary meant it. They were on the rooftop of The One building, where the wealthiest one percent of the global population kept their residence.

“This is supposed to be the most secure building on the planet, and yet here you are.” Zachary said, taking his cognac and cigar back from the table. “Tell me, how is it that you are able to track me and bypass my security, and *my imbecile* security can’t get within a mile of you without you knowing?”

He made a mental note to fire the engineers who developed the building's security system and replace them with competent ones.

“Don't bother replacing your security, you're wasting your time and money. I'll just get passed it again.”

It Irked Zachary that Gary knew him so well. Instead of responding he took a swig of his cognac and washed down his ire. If he hadn't spotted the gun in Gary's pocket he would have already walked away and let his security deal with him, but he knew that Gary, an ex-FBI field agent, would not hesitate to pull the trigger on him.

As Zachary contemplated his predicament, Gary focused on the idle wait staff who lined the wall like ball boys at a tennis tournament. There was something off about them. They didn't blink or seem to breathe. Then, as Zachary tilted the glass and the last bit of its content fell into his mouth, the nearest one literally came to life. Within the span of twenty seconds, it had replaced Zachary's empty glass with a fresh one, before it ever touched the table.

“You're a conundrum, you know. You build robots to replace the humans, and yet you make them look like the very thing you eliminated. Why not just keep the real deal?”

Zachary smirked. “I don't build robots. I build artificially intelligent droids. They're better than humans *and* they don't come with the hassle of unions, employee benefits, overtime, or disability leave.” Leaning forward in his chair he said, “I've made my investors billions in profits.”

“At the expense of everyone else.”

They sat quietly appraising each other for a moment, until Gary broke spoke again. “If people have no jobs, then they can’t buy your products. And then what? You can’t make a profit if you don’t have an income.”

“That’s when we go full circle and we become a feudal society. Hell, we’re nearly there.”

“A feudal society? Let me guess, you’d be the land holding lord.”

“Of course not. I’d be the King.” Sitting back into his chair, he stared Gary in the eye and reiterated, “I would be King.”

In the context of the times they were living in, with high unemployment, high poverty, and high government bankruptcy rates, it was hard not to take Zachary seriously. Gary smirked and looked around the rooftop, impressed that the other usually entitled and implacable billionaires knew their place in the hierarchy, which placed every one of them somewhere below Zachary.

“*This* SunSafe is sort of a practice go for you... it’s like your own little fiefdom.”

Close, but not quite, Zachary thought. There were still too many potential threats in the SunSafes who wanted nothing more than to wrestle his power away.

“Why are you here?” Zachary demanded, tired of the game.

“I’m here to take you down.”

Zachary gave a boisterous laugh and cried, “You can’t touch me.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You look as if you bleed red, just like the rest of us.”

Zachary shrugged and said, “You can’t harm me. Not physically, not politically, and certainly not economically. *I am*, by all definitions, *too big to fail*. Do you know what happens when you’re too big to fail?”

“You lose your moral integrity? Oh, wait, you never had any to begin with.”

Ignoring his dig, he explained, “People like you have no choice but to get out of my way and ensure my success. If I go down, the whole ship goes down.”

Anger shot through Gary like a bolt. The only people on the ship were the handful of billionaires that lived in The One building. The rest of the populations were left to pile on top of a single life jacket to keep from drowning.

“You sad sod. The only reason you’re still breathing right now is because I need to know what you’ve done with Kenneth Montes and his respiration technology. I know that you and your girlfriend shut him down and now he and his technology are missing.”

The rumor in the scientific community was that the respiration technology, if fully developed, would have produced enough oxygen to replace the disappearing trees of the Amazon. Had that occurred, global warming could have been slowed, or even reversed, costing Zarant the global contracts for the SunSafe communities.

SunSafe communities were essentially high-rise cities interconnected by skywalks, walkways, and underground shopping malls. They served two purposes: first, they provided protection for the citizenry from the deleterious effects of direct sun exposure, a benefit governments paid handsomely for. And second, he was able to leverage them and bend governments to his will.

Zachary's smile disappeared. "Kenneth Montes is gone? What a shame. I really liked him."

"Sure you did." A quick visual sweep of the perimeter reminded him that it was his first time in San Francisco since 2024, which was about the time they started replacing the two and three story detached housing on Russian Hill with the super tall high-rises that now blanket the city.

They built up and we dug down, he thought to himself.

The city was a congestion of well lit, super tall apartment buildings that were interconnected by a maze of skywalks at various floors. The buildings all looked so beautiful with their lights shining bright against the dark sky, contrast that to the daylight hours when their unattractive and poorly maintained exteriors were the prominent view. Except for The One building, of course. It was an island of beauty and plenty.

From where he sat, people could be seen milling about on skywalks, lobbies, and rooftops. And, for a minute, he forgot that the people in these communities were subjugated to the whims of those in power.

“You should come work for me,” Zachary said, interrupting Gary’s thoughts. “Take your rightful place as director of the Amalgamated Clandestine Services. You’re still the best I’ve ever seen in that role.”

Gary shook his head at his audacity. And then, he recalled that Zachary had always been the type to try and bribe his enemies into his corner. He’d known Zachary since they were boys in Santa Rosa and suspected that he was the way he was because life had made him that way: manipulative, calculating, and conniving. All traits befitting a coward who had no other means of controlling his surroundings.

Zachary came from a broken home, his father was a mean old bad man that liked to take out his aggressions on his son. Every so often, a frightened seven-year-old Zachary would knock on sixteen-year-old Gary’s bedroom window seeking shelter because his father had beaten him and locked him out.

Gary’s mother used to try and overcompensate for Zachary’s misfortunes by offering to keep him over. But after she died, that promptly stopped. Gary went off to college and the boys lost touch.

An entire decade had passed before they saw each other again. Gary was working on a case to expose a couple of congressmen who were on the take. He was in D.C. at a bar, unwinding, when the bartender placed a tumbler of whisky before him, compliments of the guy at the end of the bar. When he looked over he saw Zachary, sitting there, holding up his

glass. He was grinning from ear to ear as if he had found his long lost brother.

That was then and this is now, Gary thought to himself and said, “What’s happened to you, Zack?” Gary glanced over the million dollar watch on Zachary’s wrist. “You know, I paid your mother a visit not too long ago. Did you know that she’s living in a piss smelling trailer with a potted toilet in the front yard?” He shook his head. “She spends the hot days in a dig out under her trailer and surfaces at night.”

“Don’t care. She walked out on me and left me as my father’s punching bag.”

“She walked out under duress. Your father put a gun to her head and threatened to kill you both if she ever came back.”

He’d touched a nerve. Zachary was doing that thing with his mouth, where he bites the tip of his tongue repeatedly until it bleeds. He used to do it when he was a kid to try and hide his temper from others.

“You have no soul.”

Zachary didn’t seem bothered by it. He’d been called worse.

“Tell me something.” Gary’s eyes were lingering over Zachary’s watch again. “How does a boy who grew up dependent on welfare condemn others for needing it?”

Instinctively, Zachary took his drink and flung it at Gary. It stung when it hit his eyes, but Gary didn’t flinch. Instead, he nonchalantly took his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and dabbed his eyes and face.

“Tsk-tsk. That temper of yours. I see you still haven’t learned to control it. How’s the tongue?”

“I’ve grown tired of our conversation,” he said and stood to leave, briefly placing his hands in his pockets.

“Sit down and put your hands back where I can see them. We’ll be leaving together.”

And then he noticed it. Something had changed. The glimmer had returned in Zachary’s eyes. Gary kept his gun pointed at Zachary and, with his free hand, he reached and pulled his fisted hand towards him. Inside he found a security call button, exactly like the one the President of the United States carries.

Disgusted that he had such a privileged device in his possession, he struck Zachary across the face with the butt of his gun. As cowardly Zachary dramatically collapsed onto the floor and began pleading for mercy, he saw a mobile unit of uniformed men exiting the elevator. With one glance he counted four who were more than likely ex-military.

“I think it’s time for you to go.” Zachary said, spying the same men. Suddenly, he had more courage.

Gary debated forcing Zachary to move at gunpoint, but knew he would only resist, intentionally slowing him down until he was captured. Kicking himself for having wasted so much time, he took the gas lamp off the table and threw it into the silk curtains that partitioned Zachary off from the lesser billionaires.

The flames caught instantly and panic ensued. A blob of extremely well dressed people began to run towards the exit, creating a moving obstacle for the security team to have to cut through. Meanwhile, Gary ran in the opposite direction, across the rooftop, towards the opposite edge. He had resisted Jim and Clarence's demand that he bring backup, but had thankfully accepted their insistence on a backup exit plan.

Hanging off the side of the building, in what amounted to a window washing platform and equipment, he found a jet-suit that Steven stashed for him earlier that day.

With a silent thank you to the night's sky above, he began to strap it on. As he was finishing up, he heard a gunshot and felt a burning sensation in his right calf that took his leg from under him, dropping him to the ground with a groan.

His gun was out but he couldn't see the shooter through the panicked mob.

Dammit!

A piece of the burning silk had somehow flown onto the roof of the lounge area and was now engulfed in flames. The ensuing panic created a bottleneck of people at the sole rooftop exit while others could be seen running around, looking for alternatives. Amongst that latter group were the four very large, muscular men with their guns drawn running towards him.

Trying to avoid shooting an innocent bystander, he shot up into the air, causing the four men to scatter, and allowing him a small reprieve to quickly limp his way behind an air vent. From

there, he got a clear shot and took it. The target seemed to stop cold, mid-stride, and fell backwards—bullseye.

As the remaining three took cover, Gary shot out the light near his position, making it harder for his enemies to spot him.

More shots were fired and a couple of them whizzed by, one was so close to his head that he heard its distinctive buzz as it zipped by. As he took a couple of his own shots, he dropped onto his stomach and slowly backed away from the vent, towards the building's ledge. From there, he spotted a guy trying to conceal his position by squatting behind a tent wall. He was giving orders with hand signals, unaware that the light behind him was projecting his shadow against the blue curtain. Two shots and the guy's shadow fell deathly still.

The sound of gunshots rang out and he felt one pierce his shoulder. Suddenly short of breath, he knew that it was imperative that he make his move or risk going into shock right there. As a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body, he reached for the gun strapped to his wounded leg's ankle. Fighting the pain to stay conscious, and with both guns blazing, he stood up, sprinted and jumped off the ledge.