

# Six

## February 2029

The poof of golden locks was teased and expertly constructed to hide his much too premature retreating hairline. In an effort to deceive the eye, his hair was teased, wrapped, and held captive atop his head by an arsenal of aerosol glue that forbade the wayward hair from straying.

Facing the mirror and tilting his head from side to side, Zachary's beady blue eyes inspected the work of his barber. Everything seemed as it should be until he leaned in and turned his head just a little bit more. *There*. He strained his eyes then searched his drawer for a hand mirror. *That imbecile!* The arrogant smile that had laced his lips just a few moments ago, disappeared. His signature swoosh was flawed. The barber had clearly taken too much off the length, ending its traditional march abruptly, just above his right ear, rather than allowing it to continue on and fade towards the back.

*This is exactly why we need machines. They produce a consistent product.* He was shaking his head at the protestors protesting his efforts to automate the hair styling industry, just as they'd protested the automation of the nursing industry. At least, they protested until they realized how much cheaper it was to get their blood drawn by a

droid rather than a highly paid human who requires years of high cost education. And the best part was that the droid ran the blood analysis on the spot. No need for those expensive labs, nor their employees.

With puckered lips and a rippled forehead he thought of the paparazzi and the field day they would have with his hair. It had become a tiresome exercise of patience the way the media singled him out, accusing him of being soul-less and constantly mocking his receding hairline. They attacked his character using catchy headlines, such as: “Billionaire Needs More Toupees, Cuts Employees by Two-Thirds at Newly Acquired Banks.” “Unstoppable Hairpiece: Attorney General Okays Zarant-Zalt Merger.” “Shock Doctrine Hairpiece Privatizes Cyclone Devastated Jakarta Public School System.” and “Pariah Hairpiece Gobbling up Central American Firms.”

The articles, in his opinion, were biased and unfair, accusing him of leaving “trails of blood and tears” wherever his firms did business. Such articles poisoned his reputation abroad, emboldening foreign leaders to rebuff his efforts to do business in their markets. Some Latin American Countries, such as the Central American block, have accused him of insatiable greed and labeled him a peasant maker.

The media are his enemy. He feels they’re always mercilessly attacking him for doing what he does best—make money. And, as much as he publically denies it, they leave his ego battered and bruised. His most recent venture: acquiring, consolidating, and streamlining the failing financial industry, has made him target

number one. In order to squeeze every penny possible from the investment, he's eliminating redundancies. The best way to do that is to replace humans with Artificially Intelligent machines that are proven to be much more efficient. It's just business.

It's also smart business. No more employee taxes. No more healthcare or benefits packages. No more overtime pay. And, the best part, because his banks are creating jobs in the USA, he gets a tax break—never mind that the jobs are done by machines.

The way Zachary sees it is that he is first and foremost a CEO. And, as a CEO, he has a fiduciary responsibility to his investors, not to any specific labor market or consumer. That's the way it's always been and the way it always will be, as long as he can help it.

Now, back to his hair. Continuing on with his self-inspection, he tilted his head and refocused on his disfigured swoosh.

*That simply won't do.*

With purpose, he marched to his desk, pushed a button that called up a four-by-six holographic keypad onto the surface of his desk, and waited impatiently for two seconds, until his assistant's image appeared.

"Yes, sir?" Mark immediately sensed his boss's sour mood, took a deep breath, and forced a minimal smile.

"Mark, I want Arnold fired."

"Of course, Sir." Automatically fell out of his mouth, as he worked to maintain the smile. He knew better than to query the order. Refraining from comment, he began mentally rummaging through his mental rolodex of potential replacements—it was a short list. Zachary had a reputation for destroying, even disappearing,

employees. “Yes, sir. Right away.” He capitulated, dreading the chore of releasing poor Arnold, who was about to hit his two month anniversary, the longest anyone has ever held that position. Mark himself was on the job for only six months, and was already leery of the toll it was taking on his soul.

Mark knew exactly how the sequence of events would unfold: Arnold would be shocked. He’d have no clue as to what he’d done to deserve dismissal and would plead for a second chance, forcing him to explain that a second chance was out of the question; Zachary would march him out to the sun before he gave him, or anyone, a second chance. At which point, Arnold’s emotions would morph from insulted to incensed and become belligerent. This was the worst part for Mark. If he couldn’t calm him down, Zachary would most likely have him cast out of the SunSafe.

“Sir.” Mark cleared his throat. “Congresswoman Duarte just sent a message. She’d like to speak with you.” He added as the text appeared before him. “She says it’s urgent.”

Zachary contemplated ignoring Lila’s message before changing his mind. The last time he’d ignored her he paid dearly. She delayed a contract ratification by the Senate Appropriations Committee and it cost him a few million dollars in delays.

“Get her on the line.” Zachary ordered and disengaged the call without waiting for a confirmation.

Subconscious about his appearance, he went back to the mirror, adjusted his tie, and gave himself another onceover in the mirror before he took his seat and answered the call.

“Lila.” He said, the instant her hologram appeared.

“Zack.” She said with a tone and a scowl on her forehead that conveyed strong disapproval. “I’m on my way up to your office, now.” Zachary could see her in his lobby, walking into the elevator. “This is very important and I don’t want to discuss it over the phone.”

Zachary’s heart seemed to stall and his mind’s neurons began blasting about, trying to ascertain the reason for her unannounced visit. It could be anything: the diluted AIDS treatments, Central American Ebola, the intentional omission of certain income spectrums into the SF SunSafe... it could be several things, really. He began getting hot around the collar.

“Lila, I’m in the middle of—”

“I don’t care. You will see me.”

Annoyed by her verbal slap-down, he clenched his jaw and acquiesced, showing her his submission with a simple nod of his head.

Their relationship had evolved into a combative love-hate relationship. Lila resented him for marrying Elizabeth, but couldn’t overcome her addiction to him. Zachary, on the other hand, was both in love and afraid of her. She knew every intimate detail about his dubious business practices which made it dangerous to jilt her.

“Stop your pouting, Zach. The Ebola outbreak... how could you!”

Venom seemed to be seeping from her eyes, sending a chill running down his spine.

“I’ll let Mark know to let you right in.”

“No need. I’m here and he’s already on his feet walking me to your office.”

The line cut, the door swung open, and Lila stormed in.

“Can I get you something to drink, Congresswoman?”

“No, Mark. Thank you.” It was taking every bit of her effort to govern her temper in Mark’s present.

Mark gave a slight head motion to acknowledge and chanced a glance at Zachary, who had fear in his eyes, the spectacle of which brightened his day.

As he turned to leave, Lila said, “Please close the door on your way out.” With a few strides she covered the room and sat in the chair opposite Zachary. Her jet black eyes were fixed on him. Piercing. As if he were unable to control himself, he made the mistake of allowing his eyes to travel over her, from legs, to breasts, to face. When his eyes arrived to hers he realized he’d made a grave error.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“What do you mean *what the fuck am I doing?* I’m in my fucking office getting ready for a meeting with the Secretary of Defense.” Zachary placed his clasped hands in his lap and leaned back, fully aware that his calm disposition was causing her heartburn.

Lila took two deep breaths to calm herself and keep from reaching across the desk and castrating him right then and there. Instead, she too sat back, regarding him, with a matching calmness, until he began to squirm in his seat.

“Lila—”

“Stop. I don’t need you to say it.” They both knew she had to maintain *some* degree of deniability. “I was hoping to see some remorse in your eyes.” Disappointed, she pursed her lips and shook her head.

Zachary couldn’t confirm he had just committed mass genocide in Central America because she could be hauled in to testify against him if it ever got out—call it willful blindness or cognitive dissonance, either way, it’s the politician’s long standing hall pass and she was hanging on to it.

She was analyzing him, perhaps hoping she’d see a glimpse of a soul within him, but deep down, inside her soul, she knew. She knew she was facilitating a sociopath who was so driven that he’d railroad his own mother if she got in his way. Of course, Lila didn’t know that he’d forsaken her many years ago.

*My daughter’s father is a monster.*

After a few seconds of the poker face staring game she dared to ask, “What were you thinking?”

Right there. She recognized it. Fear had temporarily made an entrance and cracked his stoic expression.

“Lila.” He paused, thinking before he spoke. After all, she was a sitting congresswoman and could be hauled in to testify against him if things took an unexpected turn.

The key in this situation was to tread carefully. Although he absolutely loved and adored the woman, he knew that she could be volatile and erratic.

“Lila, what are you accusing me of?” Feigning confusion, he added, “So I accepted a government contract that employed Zarant

Industry's military to isolate the Central American block of countries. So what? It's a binding legal contract from multiple legitimate governments. Would you prefer they sit back and let that Ebola virus spread beyond the region? It's a super-virus and could wipe out the global population if left unchecked."

Incredulous, she shook her head.

"Why? Why must you treat me as if I'm one of your incompetent boot lickers?" She stood and paced the length of his office. Her shaky hands were at her temples, trying to rub out the contempt she felt for him at that moment. Half a million people were dead and more were dying because of him, and he was acting as if the world were right. "I would have preferred it if you hadn't introduced your super virus into the region." She could see that he hadn't expected her to know that. "You're actually going to profit for infecting your opposition with your very own genetically engineered, highly contagious, highly deadly strain of Ebola!"

It took a hard swallow for Zachary to regain his composure. He was truly afraid.

"Where did you hear such a ridiculous rumor?" His voice was shaky. When she didn't respond, he got to his feet and went to sooth her, but she rebuffed him by taking a step back.

"End this massacre. End it now!"

"Lila, be reasonable. How could I—"

"Enough! I know you have the antidote." Her hands were still shaking. The look on Zachary's face confirmed everything.

Unsteady from the shock, she turned her back to him, closed her eyes, and tilted her head upwards, wondering what kind of monster



she had created. If it weren't for that anonymous package she'd received, she'd be helping him benefit from his crime. But what was most worrisome for her, was that she wasn't prepared to take meaningful action against him.

Usually, Zachary knew how to deny any allegations waged against him, true or false, believing it was always better to keep them guessing. But he always played the game by different rules when it came to Lila. She was sharp and vindictive and she would sanction revenge by destruction if she ever believed she was being undermined.

“Lila—”

She put her hand up to stop him, preferring not to have to listen to another self-serving lie.

“Two years ago, during the financial crisis, when the banks were failing, I handed you the golden key... Abaya Solvent. *I* made it so that you could not only acquire them, but merge with other banks, while making you look like a glorified Robin Hood.” She began pacing his office. “Abaya Solvent now controls close to eighty percent of the global financial industry.” She placed her palms on his desk and leaned in. “Through mergers and acquisitions you’re cornering the financial industry. That’s a record ascent to power.” Her hands were at her waist now and she was practically yelling at him as she spoke. “Zachary, who cares if the Central Americans blocked your expansion into their backyard! How much more wealth and power could you possibly need?”

A slight, upward curl at the corners of his lips showed her that he meant to have it all.

Her voice went from anger to pleading. “End it!”

Zachary didn’t respond. He couldn’t. She would see through any lie he told. Instead, he sat back in his cushy leather seat and crossed his arms in contemplation.

*How did she find out?*

He knew that Lila wouldn’t just let this slide. She was going to leverage it. How? He wasn’t quite sure yet, but he knew her well enough to know that it was only a matter of time before she demanded something from him.

Lila was leaning over his desk, returning his glare.”

“Lila, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Leering at him, she sneered, “Fix this now or I will sink your ship.” She went to the door and reached for the knob. Without looking back she said, “You have forty-eight hours.” Then walked out of his office.

As she got into her car, she reached for the whisky decanter and with a shaking hand poured herself a tumbler and swigged it down.