

# CHAPTER 1

**S**an Francisco. Right in the heart of Silicon Valley. Dalton Moore, a tall, dark-haired man dressed in a black tuxedo walked through the lobby of Loerke Technologies. The lobby was packed with guests, all dressed to the nines and mingling about, gorging themselves on the free food and open bar. Most were at the party to celebrate Loerke's sky-rocketing emergence into the technology market, with ideas and plans that promised to make a lot of waves—and that worried some very powerful people.

Dalton moved through the crowd, speaking to some of the guests and joining in with idle chit-chat as he sipped champagne. His steel eyes looked through the lenses of his dark-rimmed glasses, and a voice crackled in his ear.

“Okay, looks like we’ve got visual.” The voice belonged to Baxter, a top-of-the-line hacker and Dalton’s partner and technical support.

Dalton gave no response, just continued talking with a group of young professionals. He smiled and laughed at their jokes, but really paid very little attention to what they said. Instead, his eyes were focused on another group on

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the other side of the room.

“Right there. See that bald guy with the beard? That’s Malcolm Loerke,” said Baxter. “Now see the woman by his side?”

Dalton did. Early forties, wearing glasses and had burgundy hair that fell over her shoulders.

“Excuse me,” said Dalton to his conversation partners. He turned away from them. “What about her?”

“That’s Gabrielle Russell, Loerke’s executive assistant,” said Baxter. “You need access to Loerke’s office and she seems like the easiest way to get it.”

“Sure about that?” Dalton emptied his glass and set it on one of the many small, standing tables set up around the room. He watched as Loerke and another guest excused themselves, leaving Gabrielle Russell alone.

“Well, you *could* always try seducing Loerke himself...”

“Not my type.” Dalton stepped from the table, walking over to a passing waiter who carried a tray of freshly-filled champagne glasses. Dalton smiled at the waiter.

“Pardon me.” He took two glasses and began his approach. His target didn’t even look at him, just watched the crowd. Dalton sidled up beside her. “You look like you could use a refill.”

She jumped at the sudden appearance, then relaxed and grinned. “I’m sorry, you startled me.”

“My apologies.” Dalton held out one of the glasses. “Join me?”

She glanced down at the drink, apparently considering it for a moment before she accepted the offer. “Thank you.”

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“Kenneth Pyne,” said Dalton, now extending his hand.

“Gabrielle Russell.” They shook. “So, Mr. Pyne—”

“Please, call me Ken,” said Dalton.

She placed a hand on her chest. “Gaby.” Her gaze lingered on his eyes and finally she said, “That’s a wonderful accent. England?”

Dalton nodded. “London, as a matter of fact. And you?”

“Philadelphia. We’re not known for our sophisticated accents.”

“But you more than make up for it with your cream cheese and steak sandwiches.”

Gaby snickered. “I suppose we do.” She held up her glass. “Cheers.”

“Indeed.” Dalton clinked the side of his glass against hers and they both drank.

“What brings you all the way from London?” asked Gaby.

“I’m an investor, actually.”

“Oh?” Gaby raised her eyebrows. “I hope you’re impressed by what you’ve seen so far.”

Dalton sipped his drink, keeping his eyes locked on Gaby. When he lowered his glass, he had a small smile playing on his lips. “Quite.”

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The second Gaby led Dalton into the darkened conference room, she shut the door immediately and pinned him against it, their lips entangled and hands running freely over each other’s bodies. She broke the kiss just long

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enough to say, "I've never done anything like this!"

"Me neither," said Dalton before resuming the kiss.

Gaby pulled open his jacket and her hands fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, while Dalton tugged at the zipper on the back of her long, red dress. He pushed her from the door, laying her down on the conference table. Gaby left her handbag on the table and her hands went inside his shirt, rubbing the hair on his bare chest and wrapping her legs around his waist. Dalton's hands moved over her torso and her breasts, kissing and biting at her neck. Gaby shut her eyes and soft moans escaped her lips.

A piercing ring interrupted their tryst. Gaby froze and cast him a questioning glance. Dalton sighed and reached inside his jacket, taking out a smartphone. Gaby could see the name on the backlit display read MELISSA.

"Who's that?" she asked, unlocking her legs from his waist.

"Hold that thought." Dalton answered the phone. "Yes?"

"It's Bax, just listen. We've got to get moving on this, okay? Our window might be closing."

"I understand," said Dalton, trying to avoid Gaby's inquisitive stare.

"Good, now I want you to say you'll be home soon," said Baxter.

"I'll be home soon," said Dalton.

"Nice. Now say you love me, too."

"I..." Dalton rubbed his eyes and mumbled, "I love you, too."

Baxter's laughing prompted Dalton to end the call.

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Gaby slid onto her feet and straightened her dress, her eyes closed tightly as she did.

“Wife or girlfriend?” she asked.

“Gaby, I—”

“Don’t.” She turned and faced him, hurt evident on her face. “Just...don’t.”

Dalton sighed. Gaby zipped up her dress, picked up her handbag from the table and opened the door. “I should probably get back to Mr. Loerke. Enjoy the party, Mr. Pyne.”

Dalton said nothing, just stood in the room. The door closed, leaving him in the darkness once again. He buttoned his shirt back up and straightened his tie when he heard laughter in his ear.

“Did you enjoy that?”

“Ohhh...you have no idea,” said Baxter.

“Kindly tell me the reason behind that little stunt.”

“Hey, you’re still on the clock, Romeo, and you needed a reason to get outta there.”

“And what if I hadn’t made the pull?”

“Then you’re getting slow in your old age.” Baxter paused and then added, “You *did* get it, didn’t you?”

Dalton reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a keycard with Gaby’s picture on it, the same card he’d taken from her handbag while he was kissing her. “What do you think?”

“That’s my guy. So let’s get on with this, huh?”

Dalton palmed the keycard and left the conference room. Down the left end of the corridor would take him back to the party, but right would lead to the elevators. He

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smoothed down his hair and turned right, pressing the call button on the wall. An elevator arrived instantly and he hit the button for the top floor.

Once he reached his stop, Dalton walked through the hall, reading the nameplates on the office doors. He stopped when he came to a corner office with the name M. LOERKE on the plate. Dalton held the keycard up to the door's sensor and the light flashed green. With his handkerchief, Dalton turned the handle and entered the room. A desk sat in the outer office as well as a couch. On the desk was a nameplate reading GABRIELLE RUSSELL. Behind Gaby's desk were a pair of doors without a lock. Dalton entered Loerke's office and moved behind the desk, turning on the computer. A login screen appeared.

"Are you ready?"

"Yup, plug an' play, baby," said Baxter.

Dalton took a small black plastic case from his jacket's outer pocket. Inside were two small USB drives. Dalton took one and plugged it into an open port. A small blue light began flashing.

"Let me work my magic," said Baxter.

Dalton could hear keys clacking over the earpiece. After a few seconds, the login and password fields filled in on their own and the screen changed to reveal Loerke's desktop. A window flashed on the screen, reading HARD DRIVE UPLOAD IN PROGRESS with an empty bar and 0% under it.

"Hurry it up, Bax."

"Don't rush me, man. There's a lot of stuff on here. Just think about how much money we're making off this job."

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The progress bar slowly filled. As Dalton waited, he sat in Loerke's chair, leaning back.

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Malcolm Loerke had been speaking with a group of people when he was approached by a tall, dark-skinned man in a suit. He towered over Loerke by a good foot or so and bent down to whisper in his ear. Loerke tried to hide the change in his expression by offering a smile to the people who had been hanging on his every word.

"Could you all excuse me for a minute?" he said before turning away and following the taller man to an area where they could speak just out of earshot. Still, they kept their voices low.

"Sir, we've received an alert."

"What are you talking about?" asked Loerke.

"There seems to be a breach of protocol. An unauthorized transfer off-site."

Loerke looked up at his chief of security, raising an eyebrow. "From where?"

The chief hesitated for a moment and cleared his throat before saying, "Your office, sir."

"Take a security team up through the stairwell. Don't alert anyone that there's something going on," said Loerke.

"Yes, sir." The chief of security turned away, raising his wrist to his mouth, speaking commands in a whisper.

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Once the upload finished, the computer's speakers emitted a quick alert sound. Dalton looked at the screen

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and saw UPLOAD COMPLETE. He unplugged the USB drive and put it back in the case. Then he took the second drive, but hesitated, holding the connector hovering over the port.

“Are we sure about this?” he asked.

“Part of the job, buddy.”

Dalton nodded and plugged the drive in. Another window appeared on the screen, this one reading INITIATE UPLOAD? Dalton hit the OK button and watched as another progress bar appeared.

The door opened without warning and Dalton looked up from the monitor. He saw two men in suits raise their silenced guns. Dalton immediately dropped to the floor and slid under the desk as they opened fire.

“Got a bit of a situation here, Bax!” said Dalton.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“Seems Loerke’s security found me in something of a compromising situation.” A string of expletives exploded through Dalton’s earpiece. He waited for Baxter to quiet down and then added, “Are you quite through?”

“Get the hell outta there now, Dalton!”

The two guards stopped firing, but kept their guns ready as they slowly approached the desk. One of them moved a step or two ahead of the other, holding out his gun as he circled around the desk.

Dalton grabbed the man’s forearms and the gun went off, firing a shot into the hardwood floor. Dalton swung his leg out, dropping his enemy to the floor and twisting the gun away from him, tossing it aside.

“Hey!” The second guard came around the other side

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of the desk and Dalton rolled across the floor to avoid the bullets. He sprung to his feet and lunged at the chair, delivering a swift kick. The chair's wheels took it across the floor and into the guard.

Dalton charged towards the chair, slamming the guard between it and the wall. The thief grabbed the guard's neck and delivered a few swift punches until he fell unconscious. Dalton picked up the discarded weapon by the barrel and approached the first guard, who started to rise. With a quick motion, Dalton slammed the butt against the man's head, knocking him down. He looked at the gun and tossed it into Loerke's wastebasket. Dalton went to the computer and, once he saw `UPLOAD COMPLETE` on the screen, removed the USB drive.

He knew the likelihood of more guards being outside was high. Dalton pressed his back to the wall, holding the door in front of him. He slowly pushed it forward, staying behind it and peering around the edge. Another guard was in Gaby's office and as soon as he caught sight of the target, he squeezed off a few shots. Dalton ducked behind the door and the bullets slammed futilely into its surface.

Dalton reached inside his suit coat for the shoulder-holster hidden beneath. He drew a gun quite a bit different from the ones wielded by security. Dalton swung around the door and pulled the trigger, firing a small dart that struck the guard's neck. The guard seized up then dropped to his knees before falling unconscious.

Dalton took that man's gun as well and exited into the corridor. Coming down from one corridor were several additional guards and they started shooting. Dalton ducked

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and ran down the opposite corridor.

“Bax, I need extraction fast!” he shouted into the comm. Dalton charged into the stairwell, but heard the sound of footsteps racing up the steps. “Dammit! Get Colin up there now!”

There was one flight of stairs leading to the roof and Dalton bounded up them. The only door had ROOF ACCESS stamped on its surface and he ran through it.

Dalton ran out onto the roof, the lights of the San Francisco skyline blinking against the darkness of the night. He reached the edge when he heard the door slam open and then the words, “Don’t move!”

He hesitated but slowly raised his arms.

“Turn around!”

Dalton followed the order and slowly turned, facing the chief of security and about a dozen other guards in suits. The chief walked towards him, keeping his gun raised. Dalton just smiled at him.

“I don’t suppose we could talk this out like gentlemen, eh?”

“Should’ve thought of that before you broke into our system,” said the chief. “What’s your purpose here?”

“What, and spoil the surprise? Where’s the fun in that?”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“Pity.”

Both Dalton and the chief could hear a sound in the night. A *thwp-thwp-thwp* that seemed to cause the chief to pause, while Dalton’s grin widened. “Dreadfully sorry, mate, but I’m afraid I’ll have to take a raincheck on our little chat.”

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The chief was stunned into silence when a small helicopter rose up above the roof, hovering there. Dalton swung out a fist and struck the chief, not enough force to knock him down, but definitely enough to distract him just long enough. Dalton turned and planted a foot on the ledge, springing up just high enough to grab hold of the helicopter's landing skids.

The guards fired at Dalton and the departing helicopter, but they struck nothing as it flew off into the distance.