

CHAPTER ONE

OPPORTUNITY

“Where the heck were you?” A sleepy-eyed Arianne, her flannel pajama pants dragging on the wood floor, shuffled out of the bedroom when she noticed Chandler tiptoe into his Manhattan apartment. The apartment sat near the corner of West Street and Battery Place, within walking distance of Battery Park, or The Battery, as the park near the southernmost tip was known to locals.

Chandler stammered though he responded quickly. “Ahh, um, I was, was just out for a morning walk, no big deal.” The morning walk included another chance encounter with the mysterious Habakk. He’d told Arianne about his previous encounters with Habakk, but now was not the time to get into that. The weighty subject matter just discussed in The Battery with the mysterious one, required more time for contemplation. Habakk told him he needed to work on the little things. Intellectually he knew and understood this, though how he sowed those seeds remained unclear.

They’d enjoyed a quiet dinner the night before on New Year’s Eve, though without the ball drop in Times Square. With the country being very much on edge, law enforcement could not guarantee everyone’s safety. It was a different country now. The 2020 presidential election produced no winner—no candidate had the required number of electoral votes. The Constitution mandated that the House of Representatives cast votes for President with the Senate doing the same for Vice President. Since those votes would be largely contentious, President Benjamin Jefferson froze the election results. He and others in

the administration feared the country would spiral into another economic abyss during the bitter debate in the legislative bodies of government. There were already legal challenges to his freeze by the opposition parties, the Independent American Party (IAP) and the Theocracy Party (TP). Talk of impeachment swallowed the oxygen in the Capitol.

Ariane hoped her forthcoming conversation wouldn't suffocate her man.

She folded her arms behind his neck, tiptoeing to reach his lips. "We should do something today."

"And what would you have us do?" he asked with a Cheshire smile, pulling her in tightly.

"Okay, get that look off your face. I thought last night would be plenty for you," she grinned. "Honestly, I want us to sit down and do some relationship planning."

"Huh?" he furrowed his brow and walked toward the kitchen to start the morning brew. She followed.

"Yeah, Chan. We need to talk about our future. I'm not sure how long I want to stay at State, and you're ready for a career change anyway. I just think we need to talk about this. Living apart most of the time is not easy for me. We both love each other and there's no reason we shouldn't be together."

Journalist Chandler Scott's life had always swirled around significant political or financial events. Born on October 19, 1987, Black Monday in the stock market, to a single mother, he'd spent his professional life working for an international TV news organization based out of Argentina, known as El Mundo. That would be his employer until just prior to the presidential election of 2020. Chandler had spent the better part of a year working to uncover an economic plan known as the Global Financial Union (GFU), which would have profound effects on governance in the

U.S. and abroad. The infamous hacker group, Omni, released a rogue video, unsanctioned by El Mundo, where Chandler detailed the GFU. The video's release led to his ouster from El Mundo. The United States felt the initial impact of the GFU on governance with the President's historic decision in December of 2020 to freeze the presidential election results. The President's action would unleash a new instability for which the nation was unprepared.

Arianne served as legal counsel at the State Department. Unlike Chandler, she enjoyed stability and wealth during her upbringing. After a chance meeting at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner in the spring of 2019, their relationship blossomed. She was ready to take the next step in their relationship, which her biological clock suggested lay close at hand.

On this morning, her voice expressed a frustration that had been building for several months. The previous year had strained her career primarily due to her desire to help him in his journalistic adventures. Her time for adventure had come to an end.

Chandler directed his personal assistant, the digitally-minded Venus, to begin brewing the morning's java. "Venus, brew coffee." The coffee machine began percolating.

"Chan?" she tried to get his attention by tugging on his shirt.

"Okay! Okay! Let me take care of this." He grabbed a couple of coffee cups.

Emotionally, he knew she was right. Intellectually, he felt a professional void. Fired last year from his dream job, he had to figure out what to do next. The El Mundo television network had a non-compete agreement in his contract, prohibiting him from working for a national or international network. Even

without the non-compete, he might be challenged to find work with the big networks. His rogue video filmed shortly before his ouster revealed the Global Financial Union (GFU) that would be the blueprint for managing the U.S. and world economy. The big networks considered him a tad radioactive at the moment. His revelation about the GFU did not have a material effect on the election's outcome given the public's exhaustion from years of financial suffering, political corruption, and cyber mischief. While many were bothered by another layer of financial controls imposed by the GFU, just as many wanted everything fixed.

When Venus finished her task, Chandler poured two cups and moved to the living room with Arianne in tow. They sat on the sofa in front of the large video screen and he commanded Venus to turn on the large video monitor. The New Year's headlines were troubling.

The FBI is reporting that they have uncovered an extensive effort by an unidentified criminal hacker organization that compromised thousands of cell phones. In the sophisticated attack, the criminal group targeted users of the popular application known as 'My Pix' that allows members to instantly share photos and videos publicly or privately. In the attack, fake personas bombarded phones with so many pictures that the receiving user had to reboot to restore operation. The reboot allowed the criminal group to be able to use the attacked phones in a botnet attack planned against the Financial Stability Board.

“A botnet? We can't get through a day without something about a hacker. Great way to start the year!” she exclaimed. She would know after she became the unwitting target of a serious attack against her and her father's company last year.

“The Financial Stability Board, I’m sure, has a bunch of people who hate them. They’re really weighing businesses down with all the regulation and paperwork,” Chandler added. The Financial Stability Board or FSB, was a cabinet level entity responsible for the implementation of the Global Financial Union in the United States.

She placed her legs across his lap. “Ok, so can we talk about us now? Tell your girlfriend Venus that it’s my turn.”

He gave the command to shut down the monitor.

They spent the rest of the day in his apartment discussing their relationship plan, she more interested in the topic than he. He periodically got distracted, contemplating six months of idleness.

Later, he achieved the ultimate distraction when the Cheshire cat indulged in his mischief. They both slept well.

He walked, barefoot, from the bedroom towards the kitchen, giving a quick glance towards the coffee maker.

“Venus, time and temperature.”

“January 2, 2021. The time is 7:32am. The indoor temperature is 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Outdoor temperature is 29 degrees Fahrenheit.”

He was so happy she didn’t give him a Celsius reading too. *Maybe I’m getting better at programming her?*

“Venus, brew coffee.” The coffee machine, awakened from its overnight slumber, percolated. Venus controlled more than just the coffee maker. She had control of other appliances as well as climate control. Chandler could give Venus commands from anywhere in the world he had connectivity. The brave new world of the Internet of Things (IoT) sought to eliminate domestic effort. Chandler had a nagging fear that one day the machines