

# **The Scaevola Conspiracy**

**A Crime Thriller**

By

**Timo Bozsolik-Torres**

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## Chapter One

The diner smelled of stale filter coffee, fried onions and bacon, mixed with sweat and the scent of cleaning product from the freshly polished linoleum floor. The table in his booth was sticky; sugar granules congregated around the metal napkin box on its centre. What a place to decide the future of such an ingenious invention. But it provided anonymity. A disconnected island in the ocean of our hyperconnected world.

Resisting the waitress' efforts to tempt him with food, the young CEO sipped his coffee and observed the darkness outside. It reminded him that he no longer had a social life. Managing a startup was hard work, especially after his breakthrough, technology that could change life as we know it.

Despite his best efforts to keep a lid on their achievements, news of their success had leaked to the public over the last few weeks. Reporters drowned him with interview requests, other companies with acquisition offers. All he wanted was to concentrate on research, but now was the time for a decision. He was running out of funding and needed a home for his discovery, an application in the real world. And much as he hated it, that meant meeting investors and listening to their visions about the future of his work.

Which had led him to this table. He'd agreed to meet this particular outfit on such short notice out of courtesy. When one of the largest, most innovative tech companies in the world requested an urgent meeting, he at least had to show up and hear what they had to say. He didn't plan on accepting their offer, however high it may be—they'd optimize for the bottom line, not humanity.

'Your technology's very impressive,' the man on the opposite side of the table said. 'We've been tracking your progress for a while now, and we're excited to see you're finally ready.'

The proposal started as expected. Acquisition, generous payouts for all early investors, enough shares to make every employee an instant millionaire, and the promise of virtually unlimited funds for his research.

What followed was beyond his wildest imagination. With every offer came demands, the CEO had expected as much, but what they wanted was nothing short of insane. They sure had found an application for his technology, in some brutally twisted way maybe the perfect application. And it was nothing short of evil.

No. This couldn't be true.

'Sorry,' he said, looking at his watch. 'It's way too late for pranks. With all due respect, I've had a long day. This isn't funny. Whoever's hiding in the kitchen, come out already. I'll buy you a beer for trying.'

The man on the opposite side didn't laugh, didn't flinch. He gave no reaction at all.

The CEO checked his surroundings. If he hadn't been so exhausted and in such a bad mood, he'd have laughed. The whole situation was such a cliché.

'I can assure you this is no joke,' the company spokesperson said. 'Here, this is my business card. Go ahead and verify I'm for real.'

Reluctantly, the CEO took it and typed on his phone. His counterpart waited patiently. It seemed he'd gone through these motions many times before.

'OK. So you're legit,' he said after three minutes of research. 'Is this your way of making sure new acquisitions share your weird sense of humour?'

'I'm one hundred per cent serious. I'm speaking for our CEO and on behalf of the entire company.'

Could this be real?

'Think about it,' the representative said. 'You'll become insanely rich and secure the future of your company. But more importantly, you'll make history. The world will remember your name.'

*The world will remember my name.*

Reading people was one of the qualities that made him a successful leader. He wanted this to be a joke, he really did. But at the same time, he knew the person on the other end of the table was absolutely sincere. There was an aura around him, something shady and mysterious. Fanatical even.

'I don't know if there's a protocol for these meetings,' the CEO said. 'Maybe I should tell you I'll think about it, even if I don't intend to. Then I could give you a call back tomorrow and decline politely to make sure our business relationship stays friendly, yadda yadda yadda. But what you just told me is nothing short of insane.'

He chose his next words carefully. Madness was best addressed with a firm response. 'If this is your plan, then you're out of your mind. Which means I'm out. Obviously. And because you might actually have the means to go through with it, I'll go to the media tomorrow and tell them your company is employing a lunatic in a senior position. They always love a good story from crazy town, so I'm sure they'll write a nice little piece about it. Then, there'll be consequences. For your company and for you personally.'

The CEO's hands were shaking, so he kept them hidden under the table. He'd threatened an executive from one of the most prestigious companies in the country and meant every single word of it.

The other man took his time. He was European, maybe French, and built more like a soldier than an acquisition liaison. Yet he was well-dressed and mannered. His face had no discernible expression at all. No signs of distress.

‘Let me tell you something,’ he said, finally. ‘I’ve done this several times now. I’ve heard enthusiasm, scepticism and threats. In the end, your answer doesn’t matter. If you decline, we’ll simply change our strategy. But we always get what we want, one way or another. Do yourself a favour, and let’s do this the easy way.’

The CEO chuckled, a mad chuckle of resignation and disbelief. ‘You’re nuts. We’re done here.’

‘Then you leave me no choice. Have a good night.’ The man stood up, paid their bill and left the restaurant. At least he had manners.

Bewildered, the CEO took a couple of minutes to finish his coffee and check his emails. Maybe it was a prank after all. Maybe his British friends, with their famous dry humour, had set him up. He’d find out soon enough. It was late, and his tiredness ran too deep to think about it now.

Back outside, fumbling for his keys in the dark parking lot, he noticed a movement in the shadows. He turned towards the sound.

Too late.

The bullet struck his chest before he heard the soft thump of the silencer. A second bullet hit him, right next to the first. He stumbled backwards, unable to run, unable to scream. Pain flushed through his body.

The CEO hit the ground hard. He couldn’t move his arms and legs. Was that due to shock or had his body mechanics already gone? It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore. He was dying, right then and there.

His eyes and his brain worked for a few more moments. The shooter came closer and checked on his target. The same man who'd sat opposite him in the restaurant a few minutes ago. The same expression of indifference.

It was no prank.

He felt his body being dragged away, towards the trunk of a car.

Then the world disappeared.