

Chapter 1

Beret kissed Lucy's throat where her neck met her collarbone. The tenderness of his touch and the ferocity of his desire sent a charge through her. She rested her elbows on his shoulders and ran her fingers across the stubble of his shaved head. Normally he kept it smooth, but the frenzied pace of the last few days had been merciless. Practical or not, a couple of hours alone was a luxury she was unwilling to sacrifice; she wasn't about to have him waste any of their brief respite shaving his head.

His hand trailed up her spine raising goose bumps; she arched her back slightly, presenting an upturned breast. Beret wrapped his arms around Lucy's waist, pulling her tight to him, and his kisses descended.

As his lips trailed across her skin, she allowed a low groan of pleasure to escape from deep in her throat. She lowered her hands to his shoulders and ground her hips. His attention changed from sucking to a gentle flick of the tongue as she felt him grow harder inside her. Her voice was a labored whisper. "Do we have enough time to go another round?"

She watched his electric green eyes dart to the clock on the bed stand and then back to her. "She'll deal with it. If it's a problem, I'll drop another five hundred."

Lucy drew her arms tightly around Beret's neck. Their gaze met and the hunger in his new eyes threatened to consume her whole. She'd liked the all gold ones. They contrasted with his dark skin and the inhuman appearance made him seem even more dangerous. She lifted his face and kissed him roughly, her gaze never leaving his. There was something about his new eyes that made him seem savage, even catlike.

Lucy sighed. Unwrapping her legs from around his waist, she pushed Beret down onto the bed. "I don't get to see you enough through my own eyes, so I'm keeping you here for as long as I can." Her hands traced across his well-muscled chest, marveling at the richness of his skin tone. Beret was the color where black meets red — a dark, bittersweet chocolate she could taste with her eyes.

He smirked. "Sorry, babe. I know it's been crazy."

Beret closed his eyes, placed his hands on her hips, and started moving her in rhythm with his breathing. She noticed the change in sensation. *Sneaky bastard*. The light fingertips on his chest turned to raking nails. She began to twist and turn, forcing him as deep within her as she could. His hands rose, coming to rest in a firm grip around her waist. He suddenly arched his back and Lucy cried out as she felt him shudder from deep within.

Beret's body went slack and Lucy collapsed onto his chest. Her breathing was still labored and her voice came out as a husky whisper. "Why can't we stay like this forever, lover?"

He sighed in disappointment. "Cause I got work to do, and the trancer charges us three hundred an hour."

"Do you have to bring that up?" Lucy got up from the bed, her voice choked with pain and frustration. "You think I don't know? You think I don't hate the way things have to be?"

Beret rose from the bed. "Trust me, I know. I'm gonna grab a shower."

Lucy towed off Beret's shoulders as he finished buckling his boots. She hadn't bothered to get dressed yet, and was just wrapped in the bedsheet. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to start a fight."

Beret shook his head. "You didn't." He got up, turned around, and cradled the sides of her neck in his hands. He hated this part of it. "The fantasy is a lot better than

the reality.” He touched the contact on the back of her neck, turning off the transmitter. The image overlay of Lucy faded from his optics. Her figure melted back into Xian, an Asian prostitute he and Lucy had been using for nearly a year. He turned her head and opened the small panel that had been surgically installed behind her right ear. Beret removed the familiar data chip and closed the panel.

The prostitute blinked her eyes, took a deep, shuddering breath, and shook her head as if clearing a fog. “Trancing” was dangerous. When a PerSim was in control, the host mind was forced back into a comatose, dreamlike state. If the john went aggro, the trancer would be helpless to defend herself. A good pimp or madam supplied sims with defensive subroutines, but even those were limited. A trick would need Grade A references to bring in their own PerSim, and even then they could expect to pay extra.

Xian’s eyes danced wildly. Beret rubbed his lower lip, waiting for her reaction. She was checking her internal clock and he could see her face tighten in anger. “Beret, you’re a good customer, and with you I can be forgiving of a couple minutes,” she wagged a finger at him, “but you ran nearly forty-five minutes over.”

Beret dug in a pocket and then dropped a handful of certified credchits on the bed. “Sam said you didn’t have another appointment lined up. Three hundred for the scheduled hour, plus another three for the second and another two for the inconvenience.” His eyes narrowed. “We straight?”

Xian fingered through the chits before turning back to him. “It’s all good this time. Next time you ask me, not him.”

Beret pulled on his charcoal gray, Lycra turtleneck and tucked it into his khakis. He grabbed the leather waistcoat and shoulder holster from the hook on the back of the door and slipped them both on. The light patter of rain on the window would have given him reason to zip the black coat up if he wasn’t already doing so to conceal the pistol. “I’ll give ya a call in a couple of days.” Looking in the mirror over the vanity, he adjusted his signature dark green beret, then rotated the crossed lighting bolts he wore in his left ear so they matched the insignia on his cap. “How much would it cost me to take her out to dinner?”

Xian shook her head. “You know we don’t leave the rooms tranced, Beret. Not even for a good customer like you. Too many things could go wrong.”

Beret sighed as he fingered the small diamond stud in his right ear. “Yeah, I know, but I had to ask.” He smoothed the lines of the jacket and then tugged lightly on the waistband. “Like I said, I’ll call you in a couple of days.” Beret exited the room and he heard Xian close and lock the door behind him. “Damn.” Lucy would be disappointed. As he walked down the grimy hallway, he watched a saggy older suit knock on a door. The balding man held a cheap bouquet of flowers behind his back. The caramel skinned girl who answered the door greeted the old man exuberantly, eyeing Beret with suspicion as he walked by.

At the end of the hall, he opened the grate of the ancient elevator and entered. Closing it behind him, he pressed “L” and it rumbled to life. Muttering, Beret reached up and lifted the flap in synthflesh that covered the I/O jack and chip port in his head. “Home again, home again, jiggidy jig.” He inserted the chip and gritted his teeth. Using the interface built into his optics, he initialized his tactical control module.

Lucy came back online. “*Back to business again?*”

The metallic tone of the internal audio interface was clear; but synthesized, Lucy’s voice sounded like she was on a cheap cell phone. Beret grimaced. “Nulls live and die by how well they react and fight.”

The elevator came to a stop and he opened the grate. Crosshairs appeared in the center of Beret’s visual field. Small blue circles began identifying the people, weapons, and security systems in the lobby. A trio of cameras covered the room from every

possible angle. The man feigning sleep on the bench had a sawed-off shotgun under his filthy coat. The trick coming in the door had a small pistol in his coat pocket. The girl negotiating fees with two sailors had a pair of knives concealed in the hip boots she wore. Sammy, the guy who ran this place, sat behind the front counter. He wore a pair of pistols openly, but also had another longarm under the counter. Beret assumed it was another shotgun. "You're tied to my tailgunner," he continued to Lucy. "It keeps me safe, and you keep me happy."

"What did Xian say about next week?" Lucy's voice jumped a half octave in excitement.

He stepped into the warm night air. The drizzle continued, but it did nothing to break the heat. The air was oppressive. Therm readers in his optics registered the ambient temperature as being twenty-seven degrees. "She won't leave the room with you loaded." Beret shrugged but kept his voice upbeat. "I know you wanted to go to Maxie's. Maybe I can get some take-out. Maxie would hook us up."

"Don't worry about it. It's not like it's a real anniversary or anything."

Beret huffed angrily, "Lucy, why you gotta be like that?" He scowled at the passers-by, scaring them. A skinny kid jammed his hands in his pockets and moved on quickly. Beret hated arguing with Lucy, not so much for the sake of the argument but because he was the only one that could hear her. To the average civilian, he'd look like a lunatic if he responded.

"What? We didn't get married. You can't have a wedding anniversary without a wedding."

The woman was infuriating. "Lucy!"

"Hey, I'm not bitter about it; I'm just being a realist. I died." The AI's voice softened and Beret felt a twinge of pain in his heart. *"I'm thankful for the time I do have with you, in your head and out of it."*

Beret chuckled as he opened the door to his black Lincoln and got in. "You telling me you don't have a preference?" Lucy waited while he plugged the car into his IO jack. He watched the HUD as she quickly did a systems check and then caressed the ignition, bringing the car to life.

"When I'm in your head, I may not be able to read your thoughts but I can pick up every nuance in your body language. I can feel your adrenaline. I can tell when you are angry or happy. I can even get readings for certain chemicals in your bloodstream, and tell when you're ready for another 'out of body experience'." Beret's groin tightened. *"Like now. If we didn't have to meet with Trevor, I'm betting we could turn around and go right back. I know I'm still hungry."*

Beret adjusted his pants before he became too uncomfortable. "Stop it, woman; I got work to do."

Lucy giggled playfully. *"Who's driving, you or me?"*

"You can, but use the car's optics and internal controls. I don't like that detached feeling."

"No problem, lover." The car shifted into gear and pulled into the evening traffic.

The sleek sedan turned left onto Lake Street and headed east towards the river. Every few decades Chicago changed its identity, but at its heart, Chicago would always be Chicago. Even in the mid 21st century, the city was not that much different. People debated the comparable worth of the Sox and the Cubs. The Bears still fought it out every year in the Black and Blue Division. Summer heat waves still made you feel like you were breathing soap, and people still slogged their way to work through winter blizzards. Nightlife was hot, the blues were cool, and everyone still complained about the El.

If the fire of 1871 had been the cause of the city having to rebuild, the food riots of 2017 and 2018 were an apocalypse. The Grain Blight destroyed the agricultural heart of the United States. Food shortages worsened as winter became imminent. By October of 2017, full-blown panic swept the nation.

Winter came hard and early in the Midwest that year. Record snowfalls for November had been recorded in eleven states. When stores ran out of food and government reserves couldn't be delivered, hysteria struck the country. Chicago had been one of the worst hit.

The first violence erupted on the third of December. A large group of demonstrators clashed with police on the steps of Chicago's City Hall, demanding the government do something. Conflicting reports pointed diverse fingers of blame, but in the end, the protest turned into a full scale riot, killing several hundred and destroying tens of millions of dollars worth of property and real estate. The riot was just the beginning.

Large scale violence ripped through the city. Students and the lower class were hit the hardest as cheap housing and apartment buildings were destroyed by fires. Small businesses were pulled apart by looters. Larger corporations quickly pieced together private security forces which, in many instances, took the law into their own hands. The police were virtually helpless against the throngs of rioters. After three and a half months, the governor was finally able to reestablish order with the use of the National Guard and an infusion of a large supply of food and water.

The violence was over, but the damage was already done. Similar violence had broken out in major population centers all across the country. Chicago had lost nearly a third of its population as a result of starvation, exposure, disease, and relocation. The damage to the city was estimated to be in the billions, but no one would ever be able to put an accurate price tag on it.

With the nation's infrastructure disjointed and fractured, many of the world's largest corporations came to the rescue. Their motivation was clear: as long as America's economy was in shambles, the world's economy would be in shambles. Laws benefiting corporate interests and signing away small pieces of judiciary, civil, and administrative control facilitated the nation rebounding and rebuilding within a decade.

Government costs plummeted as corporations competed to handle everything from city planning, to public works, to emergency services like police and fire. As more and more government agencies reorganized under corporate control, little things that Americans took for granted in the preceding fifty years gradually slipped away.

After the huge population reduction, the company that took over both the census bureau and the remnants of the social security office determined it would be easier to create a new identification system. The National Identity Act readily passed through Congress. The fifteen digit national identification number, and the ID card later tied to it, took the place of social security cards as well as state IDs. Fake ID cards and identity theft became so commonplace that laws were enacted to change the identification from a card to a chip that was surgically inserted into its owner. The national database kept everyone's information up to date and its security system was virtually impossible to crack. As more and more corporations found this national database to be useful, small addendums were passed to allow more types of data to be stored on the ID chip. By 2045, every American's birth date, school record, work history, income history, tax information, marital status, credit rating, criminal and military records, history of listed residences, medical records including blood type, drivers license, insurance record, bank information, purchase history, marketing data, religious preferences, Nielsen habits, and a current "within one year" photograph were contained in the database.

Ninety-nine percent of the population went along with these changes quietly. The corporations had brought the country back from total ruin so it made little sense to question what they said they needed to keep things improving. Not everyone fitted themselves into this new America, though.

As corporation-subsidized law enforcement and judiciary ground to a near halt, criminal elements flexed their muscles. The corporate response was surprising. Organized crime was big business and, rather than suppressing it, the corporations wanted a slice of the proceeds. Many of the laws controlling illegal substances and the sex trade were quietly repealed, most under the claim that they were unconstitutional. Personal choice was a freedom, and no one wanted to deprive anyone of freedom. New laws were slipped in, instituting far harsher penalties for operating any business without government approval.

A new class of criminal was created: men and women who operated outside of the law; people who were paid in cash or certified credchits; people who removed their identity chip and became anonymous. In short, people who didn't exist. Nulls.

As Beret crossed the river, he marveled at the Lake Street Bridge. The bridge was a survivor, just like he was. It had survived the Chicago fire, it had survived the riots, and it had even survived the corporate rebuilding of Chicago. He chuckled as an El train rumbled overhead going the other direction. Like him, it had been modified to accommodate an ever-modernizing world. He remembered what the old trains had sounded like. The modern rails were quieter, but they didn't have the same personality.

"Turn on Wells. We're going to Shorty's." Beret fished in his pocket and pulled out a small, clear box. Popping the lid, he tapped out a pair of small mints and dropped them into his mouth. He tossed the container into the bag that hung from his glove box. "Remind me to get some more."

"Damn, those things are strong," Lucy's voice sputtered as the car pulled over.

"Would you rather I start smoking again?"

She chuckled. *"Gosh, I love mints."*

Beret got out of the car and Lucy locked it with his internal transmitter. A security alarm was useless — no cop was going to respond to an auto theft — so auto security had been forced to improve. Beret's alarm was elegantly simple. Only the driver's door could be opened from the vehicle's exterior. If someone opened the door, or attempted to start the vehicle without the proper transmission key, the headrests contained small speakers that would blare a monotone note for five seconds, at a head-rattling loudness of 120 dB. If the windows were not armored, the blast would shatter every one in the car. If the thief survived, the trail of blood from his ears would be easily tracked.

"We've got targets." Lucy quickly highlighted four gangers. Beret zoomed in on them in time to see that one was trying to discreetly identify Beret to the other three. *"I'm seeing knives and pistols. Something heavy under the jacket of the big guy in the back. The guy to the left has a sub. Looks like a police issue Ingram. Nothing spectacular."*

Beret continued across the street "Switch to EM for a sec. I wanna see what they got for wetware." His vision suddenly went screwy. Colors flared and distorted. Power lines and cell phones lit up like torches. After a few seconds, his optics returned to normal.

"Nothing major, mostly cosmetic, except for the big guy in the platforms. Looks like he's a juicer."

Beret muttered, "Shit." To do their job better, most nulls used wetware — cybernetic implants that either replaced organs or improved a person's performance. When Beret had gotten out of the military, he had "neglected" to return his implants.

Over the years he had done jobs for people who had paid in upgrades rather than cash. There were people who had better wetware than his, but in his estimation, they probably worked for black ops groups like the CIA. Gangers simply didn't have the cash or the contacts to get the good stuff. They relied on mega-steroids or cut-rate gene therapy in back offices run by hacks and sadists.

Juicers were another matter entirely. The idea had originally been developed for the military just before the Blight, but had been dropped because of a variety of problems. Somewhere on or in their body, usually a pocket in their abdominal wall, a small pump was inserted that was tied into several organ systems. Vials of a cocktail made with epinephrine, adrenaline, amphetamines, and a few other choice drugs were placed into a feed line. A manual contact injected the cocktail into the body as needed. Under the effect of "juice", a person felt no fear or pain, and reacted far faster than a normal human being. They were stronger than their musculature indicated, and could take inhuman amounts of punishment before going down.

Unfortunately, there were two major side effects. If someone took the drug and their heart didn't instantly explode, they would become addicted to it almost immediately. Secondly, the combination of drugs brought out the worst in people. Sociopathic tendencies and violent outbursts were the norm. Psychotic breaks were common. Gangers were usually fringe lunatics to begin with. Juicing made them monsters.

"Hey, Beret!"

The ganger stepped in front of Beret, causing him to pause. He had matted, shoulder length blond hair tied back with a small bundle of telephone wire. Knee high buckled boots and reinforced gloves marked him as a motorboi — gangers that ran on motorcycles and caused mayhem on unpatrolled stretches of the interstate. His threadbare, filthy jeans and T-shirt reeked of sweat. He hadn't bathed or washed his clothes in weeks. The brand new orange and yellow synth-leather jacket looked out of place. Beret assumed it was stolen.

"You *are* Beret, right?"

"What do you want, scab?"

The ganger quickly looked away from Beret's insult. Meth users often scratched and picked at their skin, causing horrible looking sores and scabs. Most professional nulls had little use for junkies, especially as the media often used drug addicts and gangers as examples of the typical null. "Word on the streets is you pulled the WalCo job last month. Zat true?"

Beret sighed. Jerome was going to need to replace another waitress. His veteran staff knew better than to talk about anything they overheard in the club. The blonde with the fiber optic hair implants was new. He wondered how much she had been paid. "What's it matter to you?"

The ganger grinned and started nodding uncontrollably. "Dude! I knew that was you! Nobody else would have the balls to walk in there and smoke an exec at his desk. Nobody!" He turned to his crew. "This guy is the real deal. A certified one-percenter!"

"Watch it. The juicer just initialized his pump."

At Lucy's warning, Beret extended the two-centimeter blades from under his fingernails. He couldn't help smiling. The initial rush from his adrenal kicker and his synaptic accelerator initializing was almost better than climaxing. "What can I do for you boys?"

"WalCo is offering two hundred and fifty grand for bringing you in." Two of the gangers pulled guns while the juicer cracked his knuckles. "Two hundred if you're dead. I figure fifty grand a guy is good money, and you can't take four of us."

Beret shook his head. "Wrong." His hand shot forward, his open palm connecting with the underside of the first ganger's jaw. Teeth and jawbone shattered like glass, and the kid went flying. Along with speed and reaction enhancements, the military had hyped Beret's muscles with a biofiber mesh that nearly tripled his strength. To support muscles that strong, his bones had been reinforced with a honeycomb of surgical titanium. An open palm from Beret was like getting hit with a sledgehammer in full swing.

"Do you know why real nulls like me hate you gangers?" As the second ganger tried to swing a knife, Beret grabbed him by the arm, sinking his finger-blades into the ganger's arm, cutting him to the bone. "Real nulls have a code." He punched the ganger in the ribs with his free hand and felt several give way. Releasing the ganger's arm, Beret crouched, ducking the fists of the juicer. Beret swept the juicer's legs as he punched his chest with both hands. The ganger flipped and landed with a crash into pile of garbage cans. "It's us against them, nulls versus the corps." A leaping snapkick sent the ganger with the Ingram into the street. "They try to control, and we live free." He ran over to the ganger as he tried to scramble to his fallen sub-machine gun. Beret stomped on his hand as it reached the trigger assembly and there was a wet, crunching sound before the gun broke. The ganger started to scream and Beret retracted his claws and punched him in the back of the head, knocking him out cold. Beret turned to the juicer, who had gotten to his feet. "Nulls don't take jobs on other nulls."

The juicer's sclerae were yellowed from use of the drugs, and his pupils were dilated like black saucers. "We took this one, and I'm getting paid." He pulled a length of heavy chain from inside his ratty denim jacket. "I'm gonna break you, gonna grind you up and make you scream like a bitch." He swung the chain in a high, wide arc, aiming for Beret's head.

Beret caught the chain in his right hand, twisting his wrist once to get a better grip as he re-extended the blades on his left hand. With a sharp jerk he snapped the chain towards himself, pivoted, and thrust his left hand straight forward as hard as he could. His fingers entered the juicer's eye sockets, two fingers to each eye. The bridge of the nose shattered and gave way. When the tips of his claws struck the back of the juicer's skull, Beret pulled his hand back and snapped it towards the ground as hard and fast as he could. The gore splattered the concrete as the ganger collapsed soundlessly.

Beret strode over to the first ganger, squared his shoulders and glared at the bikerboi. He dropped the chain and hefted the blubbering man to his feet. When the ganger finally made eye contact, Beret made a gentle "shushing" sound and silenced the whimpers. "You took the job. You're not a null. You're a ganger." He motioned to the dead juicer. "I ever find you out of your territory again, you're gonna wish I did that to you. We straight?"