

CHAPTER I

*In brief: During the harshest winter in memory
I met someone who would have a lasting impact on the rest of my life.*

Manhattan.

The city.

It had been my home for as long as I could remember, and I had never liked it. In fact, I hated most everything about it. I know some people can see the charm of a half-deserted city, but I was never enough of a philosopher to see the good things and ignore the bad.

Once a thriving metropolis and part of New York City, Manhattan now stood alone, a collection of aged, decaying monoliths that nobody outside the city limits cared about anymore. In fact, I'm not entirely sure if the inhabitants of Manhattan themselves care about their city. Most have little reason to. They stay at home, only rarely leaving the comfortable confines of the four walls surrounding their computers and VR access. Life inside virtual reality is, generally, a lot better than life on the streets.

Still, I had always been fonder of the Street People than of the countless VR-addicts. VR-addicts reminded me of the mindless, decaying zombies of an old pre-Freedom War flick. At least the Street People seemed alive, although it was a life of much more hardship than the average American.

I liked a lot of the gangs for the same reason, be they composed of Street People, Wells or Indies. Evolution is inherent in any civilization, and even the most violent city gang was advancing human culture in some way, which is more than I could say for VR-addicts.

Worse than the street people, the gang members and the VR-addicts are those who don't contribute to society in any way, shape or form.

They are a plague, an infestation, a cancerous tumor. And any enlightened person knows that a cancer has to be removed.

That's where I come in.

Or came in, I guess. I probably should use the past-tense here. Anyway, my life changed on that harsh winter day in 2080. But you'll find out what happened shortly, even though I don't know if I'll get all of the details right. I'll try, though. God, I will try. Being as precise as possible may be the most important thing I've ever done.

I'm digressing again.

So, there I was, roaming the streets at night, shortly before *madrugada* kicked in. It was almost midnight, but according to my information, *he* went to sleep very late and so he should still be awake.

The climate changes of recent decades had made for warmer weather, but also for violent and unpredictable temperature drops. I don't remember any winter being as cold as that one. A lot of the poorer people were suffering badly. The streets were almost deserted, and there wasn't a single cornerpunk to be seen. Even the pusher gangs had taken their activity elsewhere. Manhattan only had 210,000 residents left, but there was usually *someone* outside before *madrugada* started. Even after midnight the streets weren't completely deserted. They were now, though. Dark lanes sparsely lit, the dim lights trying to shed a semblance of vitality on the surface and the walls, failing miserably, pathetically.

A thick layer of snow covered just about everything in sight. It was as if a higher power had decided to cover Manhattan in a white sheet to hide the ugliness of the concrete buildings. Gone was the graffiti which covered so many of the walls. Gone was the broken pavement and gone were the cracks and tears in anything man-built. The cold bit at every exposed nerve, but I welcomed the breeze because at least it kept the cloud away. And I welcomed the snow. It almost made me forget how much I hated Manhattan.

Someone once told me vendors used to sell postcards that were all black on one side and on the other claimed to be some city *At Night*. It has always seemed odd to me why anyone would want to buy those. They seemed too generic to me, adding nothing to the message being sent.

Still, I would buy a *Manhattan At Night* postcard, just because a black piece of cardstock is still a lot more beautiful than the real thing.

So I liked the snow, too.

My electronic ears detected the movement of air even before I saw the boy round the corner. Reflexively, I stopped moving and distributed my weight evenly between both feet as I shuffled my left foot backwards. I lifted both of my heels from the ground while I pointed my

right toes at the kid and turned my left toes slightly outward. It would help me kick quicker.

The boy stopped as soon as he saw me. He looked straight at me, sizing me up but without adopting any offensive stance. I could see caution in his big blue eyes, but no fear or anger. His clothing is what I remember most about him. It was freezing, but he only wore a shirt and torn pants. I could tell from the amount of snow on his hair and shoulders that he hadn't been outside for long.

There was no way to know the boy wasn't a Colin, or a kid borg. I wasn't on Drake or Orphan turf, so I had no particular reason to think he might belong to either of those groups. It was better to be careful than to get stabbed in the back by a kid with a mind copied from a serial killer.

I knelt down, so that my eyes were level to his. I was ready to grab one of my concealed weapons, and I figured I could shoot him before he could ever get to me.

"Hi, kid," I said softly.

"Hi," he replied, sounding as if he was prepared for anything. Clowdians might drop out of the sky, a tsunami might hit the city, or I might give him a piece of candy. It didn't really seem to matter to him. That was bad.

"What are you doing outside? It's freezing." I tried to sound concerned. First and foremost I wanted to assess if he was a threat. Knowing how to size up others is one of the most valuable skills one could have in Manhattan, especially in my line of work.

"It *is*." In the cold, I could see his breath. I was sure the boy was hurting, but he didn't even flinch.

"You have to get back inside."

He shrugged indifferently.

"You'll die out here."

He shrugged again.

I sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

"I'm sure you don't want to die, right?"

"I can't go back inside," he said matter-of-factly.

"Why not?"

"It's my parents, sir. They're fighting again."

His parents. So he wasn't an orphan. I didn't hear anyone else nearby, so they apparently weren't looking for him. Maybe they didn't even realize he was gone.

"Do they live nearby?"

The boy nodded. He had started to shiver. It wouldn't take long before the cold got to him, a merciless assassin with a helpless victim. It

was getting more difficult for the kid to say anything, but he did point to the street behind him.

“Listen, I’ll walk you to the building your parents live in, okay? We have to get you inside. You can decide if you want to go in your apartment later.”

Once more, the boy answered my question with a nod. I didn’t have to do much convincing. He wasn’t ready to die yet, and his lips were already turning blue. Yet he seemed to be hesitating, so I nodded in the direction he had pointed. “Go.”

The kid turned slowly, more because of the cold than because of any unwillingness to get back inside. I walked beside him, but I still kept my distance. You never know.

I wanted to get him talking again. Even though we probably didn’t have far to walk, I wanted to make sure he kept using the muscles in his face.

“So what were your parents fighting about?”

“Me.”

“Did you do anything bad?”

He stopped and looked at me as if the idea of doing something wrong was utterly unimaginable to him. “No. Of course I haven’t.”

I pointed in the general direction he had shown me. “Keep walking, kid.” He obeyed. “So, what happened?”

“Mum wants to keep me. Dad thinks I’m lazy. I don’t work enough. He wants to kick me out.”

“Are they Unborn?” I wasn’t sure if he was old enough to understand what that meant. He must have been seven or so, but he seemed smart.

“No, sir. But they’re not my real parents.”

Figured. Foster parents make extra money taking in children who have gotten into the hands of the state because of abandonment, serious neglect or abuse. Needless to say, not all foster parents are driven by a genuine love of children.

We stopped at a closed door. A quick glance at the buzzers told me there were six apartments in the building. A dirty glass window was set inside the door, and I could barely make out a hallway behind it. I didn’t have my geoinfo goggles on, but I didn’t need to consult the pirated police data chip to know that this was a fairly safe neighborhood. Of course, no part of the city can be called safe, but compared to Skin Borg turf this was like a children’s playground.

The boy hadn’t done anything to make me think he was any kind of danger. I was confident that my training, reflexes and modifications would let me deal with any offensive action on his part. I knelt to one knee and looked the boy in his eyes while I reached out to the back of his

head. As soon as I saw he didn't feel uncomfortable, I let my hand rest on his skull. I hoped he found it soothing, but I was prepared to crush his skull if I found out he was leading me into a trap. There was something about him, though. Something *likeable*. Or maybe I just recognized myself in him. My younger self. Back when I had lost hope too.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Jonah."

"Well, Jonah, I don't suppose you have a key, huh?"

"No." He looked over his left shoulder, then over his right shoulder, as if something was stalking him. Something was. It was death. "I'm cold, sir."

"I know." I tried to sound as calm as possible. "Which buzzer should I use?"

I looked at him, but he just turned his head away slightly while gazing at me through the corners of his eyes. For the first time, I felt as if he didn't trust me.

"Or – I can just get you in the hallway. Maybe your parents don't have to know you're back. At least, not yet."

A faint smile appeared on his face and he nodded several times.

"Okay, then. This'll only take a few seconds."

I took my lock picks out of their tiny black leather pouch. I hadn't exaggerated when I said it would only take a few seconds. *They* had trained me well, mostly through the best VR programs available anywhere. The lock was well-crafted, but it wasn't particularly sturdy. It would deter an amateur, but a professional burglar only needed a few moments to get it open.

I opened the door for the boy and let him in. He eagerly went inside. I followed him and closed the door.

"Can you wait here for a minute?"

The boy nodded. He knew. I'm sure he did. He didn't ask me any questions, but he knew I was going to visit his parents. I waited a few heartbeats to give him a chance to protest before I started to climb the stairs. He said nothing.

All the apartments took up two floors. There was an entrance every second floor. I passed the first two doors, slowing down at each one to pick up any sound which might indicate I had found the correct apartment. I climbed two more levels and then stopped.

My ears look normal on the outside, but internally they're not. Using top-of-the-line electronic sound sensors, I can follow a whispered conversation from a hundred feet away. So hearing an argument, even from behind a closed door, is easy.

As it turned out, electronic ears weren't necessary to hear what was happening. It sounded like a bad scene in a low-budget soap opera. I could hear a man and a woman shouting at each other and glass breaking. I didn't bother to continue listening. I didn't burst in either. After all, I wouldn't be doing the boy any favors if the lock to his apartment was broken. They were probably too distracted to respond to knocking, though, so I used my lock picks once more, quickly palming them and sliding them back into my pouch before I entered the living room.

I've been taught to appraise a situation in the blink of an eye, so I had decided exactly what to do before they had a chance to understand what was happening. I just walked up to the man, an ugly guy, with a beer belly and a sweaty white T-shirt, and grabbed his neck, clenching my fingers tight enough to make him feel I meant business. I shoved him hard into the wall. His head shattered the glass of a picture frame which housed a reprint of a painting by the Clowdian artist R'Thusulah. I disliked R'Thusulah's work, but it had nothing to do with the fact he wasn't human. I've never liked the way he uses his brush. There was plenty of time to think about artists I liked more while I was holding Jonah's 'father.' The man didn't really put up a fight. His body, muscles rigid and heart pumping quickly, ready to take action, was struggling with his reason as I closed his windpipe shut. Despite his obvious drunkenness, he must have been smart enough to know he was outmatched. His breath smelled as if he had the contents of several bottles of pruno inside of him.

His wife didn't say anything. She didn't scream, nor did she try to help her husband. She was acting as I had expected.

The man looked at me with big eyeballs. I wondered idly if they might just pop out of his head, but obviously they didn't. I also thought about having a cup of tea. I think it's called *stream of consciousness*. Thoughts just continue to flow. Most people think about a lot of things at the same time, unless they're very focused. I didn't need to focus while I was holding this pathetic excuse for a father, though. This came easy to me.

"Listen up. I'm going to make this quick. There's a kid outside. He's yours. He would have frozen to death if he had been left to his own devices. Obviously you were too busy arguing. Now, I'm going to let the boy come in." I tightened my grip. The man now grabbed hold of my hands, but he made no attempt to pry himself loose. His head was starting to resemble a giant tomato. I thought about ketchup. I like ketchup. It's surprisingly healthy and widely available. I changed my voice to a snarl. "Now, I'm going to tell you what to do. You're going to stop fighting. You'll be nice to each other. You'll never fight again, at least not in front of the boy. And you'll spoil him. And give him a lot of love. In fact, you're going to give him so much love that the next few

times I come around, I'll be impressed by the warmth and affection this family has to give. Maybe in a few years or so I will stop coming around. Maybe. Get it?"

The man tried to nod. He couldn't, because I was holding him too tightly, but I could feel his neck muscles contract in a way that suggested a movement that had nothing to do with trying to get air past his closed-off windpipe. Iliocstalis lumborum, splenius, sternocleidomastoid, rectus capitis and other neck muscles were working together in perfect unison.

Then, his wife decided that having to be friendly was worse than getting strangled. "Who do you think you are, you asshole? Jesus fuckin' Christ?"

I let loose of her husband, but I timed it perfectly. He crumpled to the floor, I found myself fantasizing that this was an ad for an AutoSober mental program. I turned to face the woman. She looked more like the guy's addicted twin sister than like his wife, and even at a distance of five feet I could smell the alcohol on her breath as well.

"Lady, I don't know what your problem is, but..."

"Right now, you're our fuckin' problem, cocksucker!"

"Martha..." the man stammered.

"Look, Martha," I tried to say in a voice full of authority without sounding too aggressive, "I meant what I said earlier. You treat this kid badly, I'll make you pay."

"What are you gonna do?" She was already glancing at a few big shards of broken glass. "Kill us?"

I waited a few moments. I've always had a good sense of correct dramatic timing. My debriefing officer tells me it's an inborn talent. I had almost forgotten about Greenblum, and about the job she was waiting for me to finish and debrief her on I had to get out of here and get to the target before he fell asleep.

Nobody has ever beat me at poker. Sure, I've never played all that much, and I've never had to face off against a pro. I learned the game in VR, just like I learned about art, during my frequent downtimes. But I've also been taught to hide my emotions and thoughts from others. She had asked me if I was going to kill her, so I answered.

"Yes."

I paused to see her reaction. She wasn't looking at the broken glass anymore. Instead, I saw her eyes flicker like they only do when someone who has been obstinately denying an irrefutable fact comes to the realization that she has been avoiding the truth.

"Yes, I will kill you both."

It was like a logical conclusion based on valid premises. All Greeks are human. Aristotle was Greek. Hence, he must have been human. It

was like an unavoidable reaction to an action. Like a linear correlation with a probability of one.

It was a lie.

My whole profession was based on being able to lie, and I wasn't exactly dealing with trained interrogators here. Actually, experiments have shown even professionals are usually unable to detect lies, so I wasn't scared of them seeing through me.

She bowed her head like a submissive animal. I took one more look at her husband.

"Get up. And change clothes. Your kid will be here in a few minutes."

I walked to their front door, crushing a few pieces of broken glass underneath my boots. Before closing the door, I took the liberty to pause one more time and say, without looking over my shoulder: "One more thing. You're both going to stop drinking. Now. Unless you want a bottle of pure alcohol poured down your throats next time I see you."

I had considered saying "unless you want a bottle of absinthe shoved up your ass," but I had decided not to. It wouldn't have had any class. Too many people use rude words in this city, why should I be one of them?

Back down in the hallway, the boy was still trying to warm his hands by rubbing them together. He was in no danger of freezing, though, as it was a lot warmer inside than outside. He stopped rubbing his hands as soon as he saw me coming down the stairs. I tried to smile.

"It's okay. I don't think they're mad at each other any more."

No reply.

I walked up to him and gently took hold of the back of his neck. I was pretty sure he was harmless, but I still kept my index and my thumb locked around the axis of his skull, ready to dislocate it if I deemed it necessary.

I bowed down, and slowly, deliberately, soothingly said: "Everything's going to be alright now." Why do we always say that anyway, even when it's painfully clear nothing's going to be alright? We can't seem to help ourselves. I once saw an old compilation in which a would-be illusionist was killed while trying to do an escape trick. Several ten-inch blades had penetrated his head and thorax, and still a journalist who had been watching yelled: "Quick! Call an ambulance!"

The boy nodded. There was a lot of that going on today. I stroked his hair once, then went for the door.

"Sir?"

I stopped.

"Will I see you again?"

“No, I don’t think so, son.” I was wrong, but there was no way of knowing that at the time. This boy would change my life.

I opened the door.

“Sir?” the boy asked again. Snow was already flying in my face, coming to rest on my clothes. There, the snowflakes would eventually melt and die. Some might say they would transform into something else. I say they die.

“Yes?”

“Will you be alright?”

I grinned. “No, kid. No, I won’t be alright.”

I didn’t wait for a response and stepped outside. There was work to do.