

Chapter One

“Exit 29,” the computer said in a breathy female voice as the car veered to the right. Jack Marschenko took the wheel, deactivating the autopilot. He swept through the intersection onto Seventy-Third Street, where the abrupt change in the road’s conditions tested the vehicle’s suspension, evidence of the District’s half-assed efforts to maintain the infrastructure in the poorer neighborhoods. Marschenko, having grown up here, knew the area well. At Eighty-third he swerved to avoid a large pothole without slowing.

He turned left on Eighty-Fifth Avenue, slowing as he drove past pawnbrokers, a tattoo parlor, quick-loan services, run-down apartments and hotels. He spotted a guy inside a dumpster, tossing out items he could use, then noticed a gang of hooded teenagers closing in on a solitary civilian. Marschenko shone his spotlight on them, forcing the gang to scatter. Unlocking the door to a housing complex, the man waved his thanks.

Marschenko sped off. Another innocent temporarily saved—the gang was probably stalking the next victim already, he thought. Can’t save everyone in this neighborhood. So why keep coming back here? For a strip-club waitress?

Yet as the image of Lily appeared in his mind, he found himself smiling. He’d planned an expensive dinner at Horatio’s. Then he’d take her back to her place and delve into her nether regions, bringing her to a shuddering climax. He reveled in her deep and honest laughter. God, her laugh was infectious. For the rest of the evening, she’d devote herself entirely to his needs. Marschenko’s body tensed in anticipation.

Up ahead he saw the large pink neon cat above the doorway of Kitty Kat’s Korner. The Korner shared a parking lot with Romy’s Bar. From the outside the two buildings looked much the same; inside they couldn’t be more different. The Korner boasted a high-class clientele

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and décor to match. Romy's—a dark, dirty place—catered to alcoholics. His mom used to drink there.

Marschenko pulled into the lot and swung into an open spot next to a sleek sports car. He shut off the engine and stepped out of the car, leaving his Elite Ops helmet and Las-pistol on the passenger seat. He'd only be inside a few minutes, and the Korner barred weapons. He locked the car and set the alarm with a voice command, then visually swept the lot as his car windows became opaque. Eight rusted junkers belonging to patrons of Romy's sat on the other side of the lot. Half a dozen luxury vehicles were parked near the Korner's door. A slow night.

As Marschenko strolled through the lot, a shape lunged at him from between two cars, hitting him hard just above the knees. Marschenko fell to the ground, the man landing on top of his chest, straddling him, a knife pressed against Marschenko's throat.

“Give me your cash card,” the man rasped. He wore dark camouflage clothing, his face blackened.

Marschenko reached for his wallet but the man's weight on his chest made it difficult to move.

“I can't get at it,” Marschenko said. “You're too heavy.” He tried to sound terrified, hoping to put the mugger at ease. As the mugger shifted position slightly, his knife blade left Marschenko's throat for an instant.

Marschenko swung his legs up, forcing the man off. Leaping to his feet, Marschenko barked out the emergency command that opened his car door. He reached in for his Las-pistol but the mugger scrambled up and darted across the lot before Marschenko could retrieve it, so Marschenko grabbed his helmet too.

Two of the Korner's security guards ran out of the building but Marschenko waved them away. “I'll take care of it,” he said.

Donning the spacious helmet, filled with communications and sensory software, Marschenko linked to Elite Ops HQ via satcom—allowing the night watch coordinator to see what he saw. He locked the Las-pistol into the port embedded into his left palm, enabling him to fire as quickly as he could think to do it, faster and more accurately than a man firing the same weapon conventionally.

The two security guards retreated into the safety of the building. Using the infrared feed on the helmet's visor, Marschenko tracked the mugger's heat signature. Sprinting across the parking lot, he followed the infrared trail. When he reached the street, he spotted the mugger up ahead. He suppressed the urge to kill the man. The poor bastard was probably just trying to feed his family. Adjusting the setting on his Las-pistol from medium to low, Marschenko fired a blue pulse as the man dodged around a corner. An agile mugger—Marschenko had to give him that. Adrenaline coursed through Marschenko's body as he sprang forward.

The night watch coordinator spoke softly in his ear: "Do you require assistance, Jack?"

"Adrian, that you?" Marschenko replied.

"Yeah, you lucky dog. You got me tonight."

"What the hell did you do to pull night watch duty?"

"Long story. Your friend looks like he's been enhanced."

"That's what I was thinking. He moves too quickly to be a Natural."

Marschenko reached the corner where the mugger dodged his first shot, noting the black mark on the building's face left by the chem-laser. Still a half-block ahead, the mugger approached an open alleyway. Marschenko took aim and fired. Once more the mugger dodged around a corner. Marschenko sprinted after him, reached a dark alley and noticed with satisfaction that it ended with no outlet. Gotcha, he thought.

"Alley's dark," Marschenko said. "A code violation."

"Got it," Adrian replied. "Sending a citation now."

For a second, Marschenko regretted verbalizing the infraction, knowing some struggling business owner was going to be fined. But the problem had to be fixed.

His helmet amplified the ambient light, illuminating the alley as if it were daytime. Despite the mugger's camouflage clothing, Marschenko could see him clearly. The man moved left, then right, searching for a way out, then ducked behind a dumpster. Marschenko eased forward slowly and spotted the mugger cowering in a ball behind the dumpster. Maybe he wasn't enhanced. Marschenko

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contemplated the best way to teach him a lesson, then took aim at the man's buttocks.

Before he could get off his shot, an explosion knocked Marschenko off his feet. The smell of cherries infused the air. It had been a trap. He'd been lured here. As he sent a distress call, the knockout gas dragging him under, he heard Adrian's voice slowly fading: "Jack, Jack, stay with me, Jack."

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