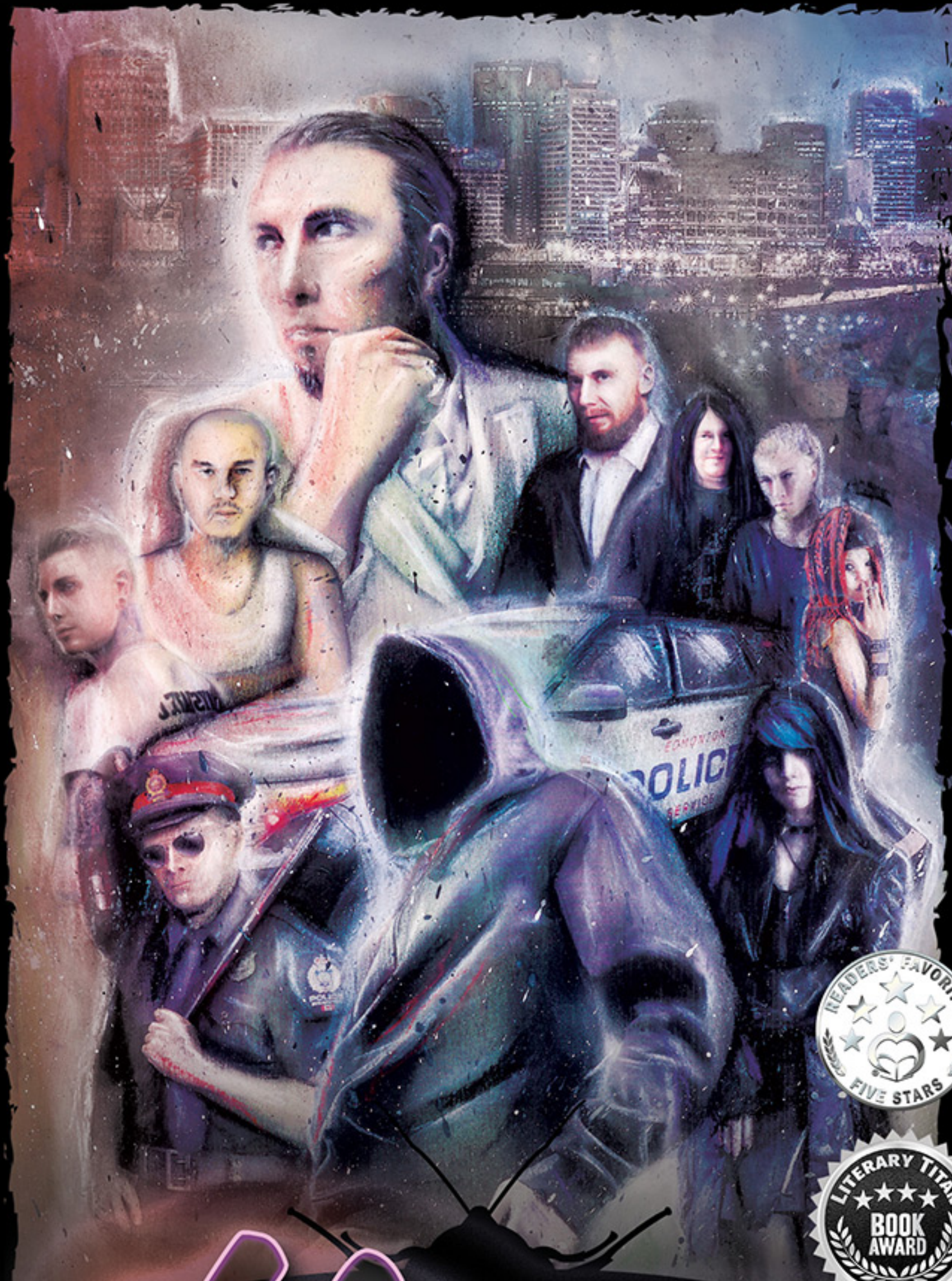


A NOVEL BY

KONN LAVERY



AYEGMAN

CHAPTER 1
BANG BANG



Steam seeped from the black liquid that filled the paper cup. Coffee: a staple of the working man. The fuel that amplifies productivity. It also has the flavour of dirt. Like the majority of the working class, I need it to stay vigilant. Its taste is something that I simply got used to—kind of like my frequent use of cigarettes. I guess the two go hand in hand when you're in a high-stress environment day in, day out.

Wake up, I thought. I adjusted the utility belt of my dark-blue uniform then brushed the crumbs from my torso. Some of them rested between the crevasses of my work shirt and the gunmetal name tag by my chest reading *Michael Bradford*.

Another day on the force was about to start. Like the beginning of any workday, I had my pre-shift meal of caffeine and a muffin. If you could call that a meal. The combo isn't a glorious start to a day, but it's all I ever have time for. My focus is on the work. Despite its difficulty, the job is more rewarding than good eating habits. The challenges are why I have to mentally prepare myself every day. You never know when you could get stabbed.

I placed my paper coffee cup on my desk, next to the silver-framed photo of an elderly woman with curly grey hair.

Mom. I recalled how she humoured my interest in the law when I was growing up. Bonnie is her name, and I owe her a lot from my youth. That's why I want to make sure I take care of her in her old age.

Having her son become a cop wasn't easy on her. I'm sure she would prefer if I was strapped to a desk. If only she knew half of the chaos that goes on during the job. Unfortunately for Mom, it was the best option for me. Politics was never my specialty and being a lawyer was too technical. There just isn't anything else that gives the same rush as starting a day on patrol. No other craft has made me this excited. Computers? Art? Engineering?

Come on, it's not even close. I guess I can be one of those cops who stays on the force for fifty years—or until they get shot. Hopefully, that will happen after Mom is gone.

Footsteps echoed down the hall, getting louder as another officer marched toward my desk. He brushed his slicked-back hair while looking over at me with his emerald eyes.

“Evening, sunshine,” he said. It was Ace, my partner.

I swung my legs off my desk and looked up at him. It was basically like looking in the mirror. We have the same height and same build. If it wasn't for his hair, we'd look indistinguishable.

He stared at my cup. “Drink up. It's time to hit the road.”

I took a sip of my coffee. “Just getting mentally ready. I'm still not used to doing beat work again.”

“Yeah, it's the last week for this volunteer crap. We'll be back on patrol next week, hopefully in Three Delta,” Ace replied.

“Wouldn't that be nice? These night shifts are killer.” I snatched the remainder of my blueberry muffin from on top of the desk and devoured it before getting up, wiping my face.

“I heard a new club is having its grand opening night,” Ace said, grabbing a notebook from his desk and putting it into his pocket.

“Really?” I downed the remainder of my coffee before tossing the cup into the garbage can that separated our desks. “Not sure how I missed that. Looks like we're going to have a hectic Friday.”

“Yeah, well, it's better than responding to those Snapper calls.”

“True, club kids are easier than that shit,” I said, thinking of the infamous Snapper—a name that brings chills to many Edmontonian folk.

Ace shook his head. “What kind of coward preys on junkies?”

“Serial killers and drug dealers,” I said with a smirk. My partner was right, though. The Snapper is selective with his victims. When he finds one, the first thing he’ll do is beat their faces into a pulp. After he’s done making them bleed, he breaks their necks.

“I hope we can catch the son-of-a-bitch,” Ace said.

“One can hope. Major Crimes hasn’t got a clue about it.” I folded my arms. “So what’s this new club?”

“It’s called The Glowing Monkey. From what I know, it’s one of those electronic dance clubs that are popping up all over the place.”

“Oh great,” I sighed. “As if we didn’t have enough.”

“It’s rather close to Y Afterhours, so we’re going to have to keep close tabs on some of the street urchins.”

Street urchins: the inside name that Ace and I gave drug dealers that hustle on the streets. They’re the bottom of the barrel—sometimes I’d argue they’re below that—of the drug dealing distribution chain.

I rubbed my brow. “Street urchins aside, it’s probably going to attract the Crystal Moths.”

“Every club attracts that gang,” Ace replied.

“Like a moth to the light.”

Ace chuckled. “Nice one. That explanation makes more sense than their ridiculous dress code. Have you ever seen one not in white?”

“Nah, every single one dresses like that. It’s like they’re in a boy band.”

“It makes them easy to spot. Maybe we’ll see some tonight.”

Ace pulled out a ring of keys from his side pocket. "Let's roll."

I nodded and the two of us left our desks. We marched side by side down the fluorescent-lit halls toward the front entrance. Our exit led us to the lobby where about half a dozen civilians were lined up, waiting to chat with the police manning the front desk.

"I don't know where he is! That's why I am here!" came a raspy voice from a stick-thin, wrinkly lady in dirty jeans and a torn windbreaker. She leaned against the counter, speaking to the officer on the other side of the glass.

Another man sat in a chair at one of the lower stations beside the door Ace and I entered from. He was large and had grease stains on his shirt. He gripped a cane, breathing heavily. "I just don't want him coming near me anymore. He makes me feel unsafe."

I held my breath as my partner and I walked by the man, trying to avoid his unbearable odour. Either he didn't care about his intense scent of sweat and must or he couldn't smell it.

Ace and I exited through the front entrance, pushing the door aside and embracing the cool downtown scenery of skyscrapers and the darkening sky. We're assigned to the main station in the heart of the city.

"I never liked doing front-desk work," I muttered as we walked down the concrete staircase.

"You and me both," Ace said.

Only once was I assigned to work the front desk. I wanted to give it a try to see if I could help people in a way that didn't involve street action. I thought it might put Mom's mind at ease and I could learn to enjoy sitting still. That didn't work out. Now I avoid it as much as possible. You need a special level of patience to deal with the public while restrained to a desk.

It's like working at a call centre, but you can never hang up the phone.

"You know, Ace, I'd really like to be able to do something more," I said.

"Do more?" he asked.

"Yeah. This beat work for the past week has got me thinking: I'd like to get involved with solving cases." We stepped down the last set of stairs.

"Cases? You mean like being a detective?"

"Yeah, I think we'd be able to get more results than we can just doing patrol. We could go after the street urchins' higher-ups."

"What's this *we*? That's way too much paperwork. Leave that stuff to guys like Glenn Hayes. He's good at his job and we're good at our job." He pointed at me. "You of all people would get frustrated without the constant stimulation of the streets. You *just said* you didn't like the front desk."

"Yeah, you're right about that. Just pondering the idea. It'd be nice to start seeing some results first-hand, you know?"

"Look at you, Mr. Do-Gooder," Ace said with a smirk as we approached our squad car. He unlocked the unit with his remote starter and headed to the driver's side. "I'll drive this time," he said, opening the door and ducking into the vehicle.

"I guess I'm saying I'd like to do more," I stepped in and buckled my seat belt as Ace started the engine, causing the patrol unit to roar to life.

Ace shifted the car into reverse. "As you always do. You know what I think?"

"Besides getting a girlfriend?" I replied, knowing how he brought the topic up any time he felt I got too preachy about

anything.

“I think you need more of a life outside of work.”

“Not a lot interests me. Sometimes I wonder if I am going to be one of those people who does the same job for the rest of his life.”

“I get that fear too, but do you really want to get into all of that extra typing? Personally, I like what we do and how we do it.”

“So do I. But sometimes it’s discouraging.”

“How so?”

“We have to be incredibly cautious. One mistake and it’s a big internal investigation.”

“Well, that’s a part of the job, Michael. You knew that when signing up.” Ace shifted back into drive and turned out of the station toward to the main drag of downtown: Jasper Ave.

After four blocks, we came up to a red light then turned off to the main road. I broke the silence: “It’d be nice to appreciate the city again.”

“You’re full of deep thoughts today,” Ace said, spinning the wheel.

I eyed the bright lights of the oncoming traffic and licked my lips. “It’s this beat work. Think about it. We spend all our time out here making sure the streets are safe—seeing the darker sides of the city. Where’s the good side?”

Ace let out a laugh. “Good? Come on, Michael, that’s all a matter of perspective.”

I raised my eyebrow. “You don’t believe in good or evil?”

“No, I don’t. I think we’re all just people. Some put themselves in difficult situations that conflict with the majority.

Their stance is, more often than not, the law. Someone breaks the law, and we bust them. It's that simple."

"Humour me: with that logic, do you think a killer is okay?"

Ace shook his head. "What? No. Of course not."

"Is it wrong?" I asked.

"Sure," Ace said.

"So, something wrong is evil—not good. The two aren't a matter of perspective, Ace."

"Evil is. A serial killer doesn't see what they're doing as wrong. Like the Snapper, for example. They're mentally sick."

I shook my head. "He's not sick. He's a monster, and that makes him evil."

"Whatever. Doesn't really matter what you call it. I enjoy helping people, and this is the best way for me to do that."

"Same here. It's not like I'm good at negotiating with people."

"Which is another reason why detective work isn't for you," Ace said. "Also, why a girlfriend would do you some 'good.'"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah." I sighed, eyeing the busy sidewalks across the street.

It was shortly after nine, and we were on One Delta, the shift that goes from nine to eight in the morning. The bars already had people lining up outside of their doors. The bouncers at the front were checking IDs before they let people in. I couldn't help but wonder how many of those were fake IDs. Or how many bouncers let someone in for an under-the-table offer—of any kind. And who was smuggling in drugs or weapons.

The next alley we drove by had four guys and a girl walking from the main drag, laughing and lighting up a cigarette—or was it a joint? The one girl had a chrome flask. She tried to conceal

drinking from it with her coat. Her drunken movements made it all too easy to spot.

I'd love to stop and fine them, I thought. Realistically, it wasn't worth our effort. Besides, this is the last week we're volunteering to do beat work, and this wasn't our area.

What we would do is get to our section, park the unit, and cover a one-to-three-block radius before returning to the vehicle. Then we'd move the unit and repeat the cycle. The normal beat routine.

Ace glanced over at me. "Hey, let's take a drive around to The Glowing Monkey before we park. See what we have to look forward to later this evening." He pressed on the gas to pass the just-turned yellow light, speeding through the intersection.

"What street is it on?" I asked.

"Just up this block."

Ace turned the vehicle away from Jasper Ave and into a darker street leading north. Up ahead, we could see bright neon lights on the left side of the road coming from a two-floor building. The rest of the street was pretty dull. A number of construction signs blocked the road where potholes would be filled, reducing the road into two lanes from the regular four. Only the one narrow, black building was lit up. Swarms of people cluttered the sidewalk and trickled out onto the closed-off lanes.

"This is it: The Glowing Monkey," Ace said.

Our car passed the club slowly, letting us take a good look at what was in store for us later. The club goers wore a range of attire including furry cat-eared hats, baggy pants, beads, and glow sticks. Some guys wore clean dress shirts and the ladies were in skimpy skirts. It was typical wear for a dance club.

Directly above the front door of the club was a green neon

sign in bubbly text. “What a stupid name,” I said. The sign was complete with yellow lights in the shape of a monkey. The rest of the building was a black matte. The main floor had no windows—only the one door. The second floor did, showing purple lights on the ceiling inside.

“We never used to have so many of these electronic clubs in the city,” I stated. “What happened to kids being into rock and roll?”

Ace shrugged. “No idea. It probably doesn’t help that the Crystal Moths started popping up in the past year. It really changed the place.”

“Yeah, they put a spin on the whole nightlife. I’m still baffled at how they managed to grow so quickly.”

“We had a pretty good handle on the gangs, but these guys are crafty. Now they have everyone craving their crack and MDMA.”

“Everything that a party kid wants.” I sighed. “This city is in need of a massive cleanup.”

“Tell that to the mayor.” Ace raised his eyebrow. “Maybe he can pull some magical funds out of his ass or something. Oh wait. No. He’ll just have us go on speeding ticket raids.”

“That’s not the problem.”

Ace shook his head. “I was joking. We need more officers. Until then, we do what we can.”

Do what we can? I thought. Don’t get me wrong, I have major respect for my partner, but sometimes he says the dumbest things. We only do what we can within the constraints of the justice system. The advantage criminals have is that they don’t obey any protocols. Crafty pricks can murder, rape, and steal while we chase their tracks. By the time one transgression is

handled, a couple more slip under the radar. My partner doesn't get that, and sometimes it isn't worth arguing with him. He prefers to shrug things off.

"Let's get started. We should be on foot," I said.

"All right. Let's go a little further west. We'll make our way back to The Glowing Monkey once it's closer to midnight. Things will get a little busier then."

"Good plan."

Ace drove back down to Jasper Ave, heading for 109th Street. The drive was a bit mundane. From the car, we could only observe all the activity. I stared out the window like a dog, just waiting for the right opportunity to get out onto the street. Waiting to sink my teeth into the first fool that did something wrong. It was that unmatched rush I got at the start of a shift kicking in.

"You know, I've been thinking." Ace scratched his neck. "You ever look at one of those robot vacuums?"

I squinted and looked over at my partner. "What?"

"It'd be nice to not have to vacuum on your own, you know?"

"I guess." I looked back at the sidewalks as we passed an alley, eyeing the sea of clubbers entering and leaving the various bars.

"I just find it such a chore, and the girlfriend gets annoyed when I don't do it. A robot would solve our problem. I think . . ."

I lost track of Ace's comments as we passed an alley where a group of three men dressed in white suits walked in a single row. *White suits*, I thought. My eyes widened. *Crystal Moths*. "Hey, Ace. Check out those three in the alley."

Ace quickly glanced over then brought his eyes back to the road. "So? Let's park and start the beat."

“They’re in white. Pull down the alley so we can profile them.”

Ace sighed. “Fine. Then, we park.” He changed into the left lane and quickly pulled a U-ie, backtracking to the alleyway.

The high beams from our unit lit up the alleyway as we rolled onto the crooked road. The lights shined directly onto the backs of the three men.

The one to the right turned around. He had slicked-back hair and a goatee. He patted the back of the shorter, bald man in the middle. All three of them moved over to the right side, including the tall, slim man on the left.

Ace pressed the radio button on the dashboard and spoke. “Control from One Delta Two Three. We have potential Crystal Moths on 107th Street and 102nd Ave.” Ace decelerated the vehicle as we passed the three.

I held my breath, not blinking, and eyed the three men. They glared at our unit as the hood moved passed them.

“One is Caucasian, one African American, the other Asian. All dressed in white suits. The Caucasian: slim with dark, gelled hair. Asian: bald, slightly shorter, and built. African American: tallest, ponytail.” Ace stated.

I took note of their hands, pants pockets, and belts. None of them appeared to be concealing weapons. They were clean. There was nothing we could work with, despite the obvious fact that they were Crystal Moth members.

The voice of a female came through the radio, distorted. It was Stacey. She generally worked the evenings. “One Delta Two Three from Control, noted.”

The three men moved over to the side of the alley as Ace pressed on the acceleration. “I will admit, they are out for

trouble.”

I wiped my face. “If only there was another form of identification for the Crystal Moths.”

“Supposedly there is,” Ace said.

“That’s all speculation,” I said. “Any Crystal Moth we’ve brought in hasn’t had scarification.”

Ace turned the car back onto the street. “Yet here you are getting worked up on profiling these guys based on speculation.”

“Well, yeah. That’s not the point.”

“You’re too ambitious. That’s what gets you into trouble with the sergeant.”

I folded my arms and stared out the window. I’ve gotten into heat with the sergeant for some of my more direct approaches. He got pissed off any time I tried to do what was right if it differed from the procedural course of action. I suppose keeping his squad in line is his job, though.

“We’ll keep an eye on those guys,” Ace said. “Come on. Let’s start strolling.”

He brought the unit a block over, parking by a meter near one of the major intersections on Jasper Ave and 109th Street. This section has a bar on all four corners and a plaza with restaurants, cafés, and a liquor store, making it a popular attraction for the downtown lifestyle.

Ace unbuckled his seat belt and put on his deep-blue officer’s hat complete with a central badge and a red horizontal stripe wrapped just above the brim. “Shall we?”

I got out of the vehicle and put on my own hat, slamming the door shut before placing both hands on my buckle and eyeing the busy streets. The two of us began walking side by side toward Jasper Ave. Considering it was the weekend, the beat

work would most likely consist of ticketing people for public indecency, open bottles, and drunken fights.

“So what are your thoughts on that vacuum?” Ace asked as we crossed the street onto Jasper Ave.

“I don’t know, I don’t think it’s that huge of an issue to vacuum the place on your own. Let’s just stay focused.”

“Are you taking Britney’s side?” Ace asked jokingly.

A group of what looked like college kids stepped aside so Ace and I could walk by. Two of them were boys and the other three were girls wearing light coats and shivering from the cool air.

“Good evening.” Ace tipped his hat at them.

“Howdy, officers!” One of the boys, blond, waved at us with a slanted smile.

Kind of a doofus, I thought while giving the group a cold stare. Would have they stepped aside for another group of pedestrians who weren’t wearing the uniform?

The further we walked, the more compacted the sidewalks were with people. They stumbled and ran up and down the streets. Some talked loudly while others weaved in and out of the crowds to get further ahead. The large groups of people that stood still on the sidewalks were directly outside of bars, smoking, talking, and laughing.

We were about to pass our first bar. It used to be one of the city’s most popular locations: Oil City. It was where the city’s hockey team would go and party at after a game. Now, I’ve lost track of what the bar’s called. They change their names so quickly. Ace and I still call it Oil City.

“You fucking asshole!” came the nasally voice of a blonde girl in a short, tight black dress. She stomped in high heels like a newborn calf, storming up to a man with jacked arms and no

neck, wearing a tight black shirt and jeans that made his ass poke out.

“Baby girl,” the man said, reaching out to grab her hips.

“Don’t you fucking touch me!” She snarled and spat at his face. The saliva launched from her mouth onto his nose with a splatter. “I know what you and Jessica did last night.”

The man’s eyes widened as if they were about to pop out of his face. His veins rose from his neck.

“Looks like we got a roid-rager,” Ace muttered.

Roid-rager: an inside term we use to describe testosterone-filled men who are short-tempered, well-built, and find any reason to start a fight. Basically, the male version of a drama queen. These stereotypes often *juice* to gain better performance during their workout routines, which complements their short tempers.

“You bitch. You trying to give me AIDS or something?” He wiped the saliva from his face and snatched the girl’s arm. “What’s your problem?”

“Hey, man. Keep it cool,” came another man’s voice from the crowd. He stepped out, slightly thinner and fashioning a well-trimmed beard.

“Stay out of it, prick.” The roid-rager turned to face the man, pulling the girl with him.

“Let go of me!” she cried.

The scenario was intensifying rapidly. Thankfully, we were close enough to de-escalate the situation before anyone got hurt—as long as the roid-rager didn’t overreact.

I stepped in front of Ace and picked up momentum, moving through the crowd that blocked our way to the three. People were quick to move aside. The ones that didn’t were guided by

their friends.

Ace was right behind me. We had dealt with this sort of thing before. More often than not, our presence is enough to bring the conflict to a sudden stop.

I exited the sea of people with my arm behind my back and my hand just above my gun holster, stopping with one side shifted forward about two metres from the roid-rager. “Is there a problem?” my voice boomed. I stared directly into his brown eyes.

The roid-rager turned toward me. He stared, not letting go of the girl’s arm. “No, officer. We’re just having a chat.”

I nodded, pressing my tongue against my bottom jaw. *I’d love for him chat with my fist.* My patience for those types of smartasses is thin. I don’t enjoy dealing with sly remarks. Plus, his inflated sense of masculinity was aggravating.

Stay calm. Follow procedure, I thought.

“He was hurting me!” the girl whined. She was probably overacting. Seeing the way she dressed, it was safe to profile her as a girl that craved attention from those around her.

“Why don’t you let go of the girl?” I stepped closer to the man. One metre away.

The roid-rager released her and raised his hands. “*All right.* Nice to see the law take the side of an AIDS-spitting whore.”

I stepped closer to the roid-rager until we were about a foot apart. I knew Ace was close behind me, though I was probably pushing it more than Ace would prefer. It was difficult for me to let people get the last remark in. Can’t people just accept defeat?

“Look, officer,” came the voice of the bearded man. He came up beside the roid-rager and me. “We’re just having a few

drinks. It isn't anything to be alarmed of. My friends here are just having a bad night."

"Is that so?" I raised an eyebrow, scanning him, the roid-rager, the blonde, and back to Ace who was off to my left. My partner kept his hands on his back hip where his holster was. He kept his eye locked on the roid-rager.

I smiled at the bearded man. "Fair enough. We all have our rough days, don't we?"

The bearded man smiled back. "That we do."

Sometimes, that involves spitting on people, I thought.

Ace and I stepped back into the crowd, leaving the three drunken fools to continue with their evening.

"Good call." Ace wiped his nose. "I really did not want to get involved with that."

"Nor did I. But that roid-rager was beginning to annoy me. It took a lot of discipline not to do anything."

"I know. Remember how you used to be? I'm proud of you," Ace said.

"Yeah, but those scumbags got what they deserved," I said, recalling the several sticky scenarios that I've been involved in. The media called them "police brutality"—which gets more views than "officer uses reasonable force." The sergeant also tore me a new one and suspended me for a good four months. Since then, I've worked on my behaviour to avoid that headache.

Ace pointed at me. "You're lucky the sergeant didn't have you hand in your gun for good, right there and then."

"The first time or the last time?" I smirked.

"Every time! You've got to take those warnings more seriously."

“It’s hard to remember them, honestly. All of the faces and scenarios start to blur after a while.” *One giant cesspool of crime.*

“I clearly remember how miserable you were while you were suspended. Look, let’s save this chat for a drink.”

Ace was right. We were on patrol. Chatting about how I would step beyond my boundaries was not the best idea. What if a civilian heard us?

The two of us continued our patrol for what seemed to be only minutes, when in fact, several hours had gone by. Once you’re on duty, time is a blur—unless you get into a fight. Then, a moment lasts forever.

We marched for a couple of blocks before returning to our unit. Then we drove several blocks, parked, and patrolled again. Walk, drive, park, repeat. Most of our patrols are simply to provide a presence to the public so nothing escalates.

Our radios went off several times with Control and other officers keeping in communication about the area or identifying potential suspects. No one had mentioned the three men we saw earlier in the evening. So far, the night was proving to be just another weekend downtown.

Finally, our beat brought us up to the same block as The Glowing Monkey. Ace parked the vehicle right on Jasper Ave before we started to walk up to the club. A part of me wanted to stand outside of The Glowing Monkey all night. That would be bad for business, wouldn’t it? A good person would have nothing to worry about if they saw a cop standing outside a club—but that’s the funny part: a *good* person. They didn’t exist here. Everyone was up to something.

Our radio fuzzed again, and Stacey’s voice came in from the station. “One Delta from Control. We have a call about the new club on 105th Street, The Glowing Monkey. Any units in the

area?”

Ace stopped walking, pressing on his com. “Control from One Delta Two Three. Status?”

“A girl called about an assault.”

“We’re on our way. Only a block from the location,” Ace said.

“One Delta Two Three from Control, confirmed,” Stacey replied. “The girl said her name was Becky. She has black-and-red dreadlocks. She says she is by the front entrance. Currently three men—early to mid twenties—got into an argument and it escalated into a fist fight.”

I nodded at Ace and spoke into my intercom. “All right. We’re on the block.”

Another officer spoke through the shared channel. “Control from One Delta Three Five, we’re three blocks from the location. On pursuit.” The voice was younger—one of the other units that patrolled downtown. Considering that a fight was breaking out, we’d need to have a number of officers on standby. If it escalated from fists to weapons, we’d swarm the scene.

I felt my heart race. This was the moment Ace and I were waiting for all evening. Well, at least I know *I’d* been waiting for it. Ace is hard to read. Some days he wants action, and other days he wants an easy shift. Regardless, this was time to act.

“I guess we get some action after all,” Ace said.

“Good,” I replied.

“Honestly, I thought it was going to be at least two before we heard anything.”

“That’s how things used to be. Come on.”

Ace and I said nothing more. We rushed up the dark block toward the bright glowing club. It was easy for us to spot the

fight. Three men were on the road, two throwing punches and another on the ground.

“Cops are here!” shouted the crackly voice of a man in the crowd on the sidewalk.

The crowd observing the fight had spread well beyond the closed-off lanes and into oncoming traffic. The drivers had to carefully maneuver around them. There was a dreadlocked girl out by the entrance, on her phone—presumably Becky. We’d have to get her witness statement when this was over.

I was about twenty paces from the three brawling men, clearly able to see the details of the scene. One of the three was wearing a white rag tied around his arm. He held another guy—had to be about 18—by the front collar of his shirt. He slammed his fist into the kid’s face several times. Blood splattered from his now-cracked nose and oozed down into his mouth. The third guy wore glow sticks and was on the floor trying to get up. His movement was wobbly.

Obscure place for a rag. Especially a white one, I thought as I ran.

“Break it up!” Ace shouted, pulling out his baton.

The guy with the glow sticks got to his feet and charged into the group, knocking the white-rag-tied man off the kid.

Ace and I rushed into the brawl. I went to grab hold of the man with the white rag by the arms, but he drew switchblade from his pocket and swung at me.

The crowd screamed at the sight of the knife and backed away.

I instinctively pulled out my gun and pointed it at him. “Drop it!” I shouted.

The man eyed me and then Ace who stood off to his side. He was now separated from the other two he was fighting. The man dropped his knife, raised his arms, and took a deep breath. It

was difficult to see his face through the sweaty, dark bangs that covered his eyes. His jaw clenched with frustration.

“Wrists together,” I ordered.

Ace walked closer to man while sheathing his baton back into his belt. He then reached for his cuffs, causing them to jingle.

A gunshot fired and the man with the white rag jerked. Blood sprayed from the side of his head. The red liquid splattered onto Ace’s face and against my hands.

Screams erupted from the crowd and they began to scatter in all directions.

“Everyone on the ground!” I ordered, stepping back as the man in front of me tumbled to the ground.

Ace squeezed the *talk* button on his radio. “Code One! Control from One Delta Two Three. A shot has been fired. Code One!”

Some of the people dropped to the floor as I scanned the crowd to see if I could spot where the shot came from. It was tough to locate—there were too many people buzzing around. *He jerked toward the club. It came from the other side.* I turned to eye the opposite side of the street. It was empty. An alleyway divided two brick buildings.

Ace pulled out his gun, moving toward me, and spoke into his radio. “We need all available units to The Glowing Monkey.”

We kept our guns aimed low, standing back to back.

The crowd kept running down the street despite Ace’s order. I scanned the swarm of people, mostly kids no older than twenty. Some got down on their knees. They kept low as their bodies shook in fear.

One man with slicked-back hair, dressed in a white suit, fled from the road and into the alleyway on the other side of the street.

“Ace! Alley!” I shouted. *White suit. The man from before?* “Freeze!”

The man glanced back at me and Ace with a smug smile as he reached into his blazer pocket.

No, I thought, watching as the man began to remove his hand from his jacket. I aimed at the man and pulled on the trigger, feeling the pressure build until the trigger pulled completely. The bullet roared from the chamber, whizzing through the air and straight toward the man.

The bullet ripped through his shoulder, throwing him against the concrete wall. He slid down, collapsing to the ground. His wounded shoulder hit the road as he clenched his jaw, squinting in pain. His hands fell out of his blazer, dropping a cellphone.

A cellphone? I thought. “Fuck.” My gut tightened.

A second gunshot went off through the alleyway. Ace and I hastily moved against the closest building. I pressed on the radio. “We have a second shot. Code one!”

A goddamn cellphone. No time to ponder—I neutralized him. I knew I would be paying for it later with a ton of unnecessary reports and the sergeant lecturing me about the use of firearms in the street. That smiling prick may have just had a cellphone, but I knew he was involved in this. Why would he run? Why would he be in white if he wasn’t one of the Crystal Moths?

He was in the alley earlier. I know that was him. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the time to think about it. It was time to act.

Blue and red lights began to highlight the scene as the sound of sirens blasted up from the other side of the street. Reinforcements.

I glanced further north to see that a couple of officers were rushing toward us—One Delta Three Five.

Stacey's voice came through the radio. "Copy that, we have—"

Another shot echoed through the alleyway, drowning out the sound from the radio. Some brick from the corner of the building shattered—the bullet's impact missing us by inches.

Quite frankly, I couldn't care less about what the radio was saying. The adrenaline was coursing through my system and I was focused on the gunman in the alley.

I gotta make this right, I thought. "Can you see him?" I asked, glancing back at the crowd of people to see that most of them had cleared the area. A few were still on the ground.

"I think he's behind the dumpster. I saw him slide down there," Ace replied.

The reinforcement unit parked in the middle of the street and two more officers came out of the vehicle with their guns drawn. More sirens echoed as red-and-blue lights were spotted on the opposite end of the alleyway. We had the gunman trapped.

I crept down on my knees. "Keep an eye out."

"We've got another unit boxing him in from the other side. Wait," Ace said.

I ignored his order and peeked around the corner carefully, low enough that I could see a pair of black dress shoes standing on the other side of the wheeled dumpster—exactly what I was looking for. Pressing the radio button, I said, "Suspect behind the dumpster." Carefully, I got down onto my chest and extended my arm with the gun pointed directly at the man's ankles.

"I got a clear shot, Ace."

"Michael, we have him boxed. He'll surrender. Stand down."

The feet moved forward. He was about to step out. His feet were still aligned with my gun. I could end this.

I pulled the trigger, and another bullet roared from the chamber and down the alleyway. The sound bounced off the walls, amplifying the noise. It was followed by a cry as the bullet shredded through one of the shoes, tearing open the flesh of his foot. The man collapsed to the ground, dropping his handgun. His arm stuck out from the dumpster—a white blazer.

“Now!” I shouted.

Ace pressed his radio. “Suspect down!” He moved first into the alley as I got to my feet and followed behind him. We kept our weapons pointed at the suspect. We rushed past the previous man I shot and around the dumpster toward the man on the ground. He wore a full white suit, was tall, slim and had a ponytail.

What a coincidence, I thought.

“Don’t move!” Ace’s voice boomed. He quickly kicked the gun from the man’s reach. It slid against the uneven pavement until it hit the wall of the far building.

I holstered my gun and went for my cuffs as the officers from the other end of the alley caught up to us.

“You know we’re going to be in a lot of shit for this,” Ace said with a deep sigh. “You idiot.”

“As you keep saying,” I replied. “Look, though. These are the guys from earlier!” I argued.

“It isn’t that simple! We’re going to have a lot of explaining to do.” Ace shook his head and took a step away, looking back at The Glowing Monkey.

Ace was right. I didn’t fully think it through in the heat of the moment. I got trigger happy and wanted to neutralize the

situation.

Ace will forgive me. We've been through this, I thought. I know they're both Crystal Moths. That will be enough to justify my actions.

I grabbed the man's arms and cuffed his wrists together from behind, keeping pressure on his head with my hand, my knee on his back. He exhaled heavily, clearly trying to ignore the pain in his foot. Chances were, he wasn't going to run. He was wounded. I just wanted to remind him that he lost. You don't shoot freely at someone. No. It doesn't work that way. Not with me.