

THESE MEAN STREETS, DARKLY

A LIQUID COOL PREQUEL

The Cyberpunk Detective Series in a High-Tech, Low-Life World

AUSTIN DRAGON

Chapter One: Beware the Rabbit Hole

Metropolis was more. It was an urban mega-city that occupied a region nearly twice the size of almost all others in the nation, hence its power. Amateur wordsmiths in the media were always trying to make up new hyphenated words to describe it—omni-city, over-city, super-city. Mega-city seemed such an antiquated and ill-suited term. Metropolis was called a mega-city way back when it was ten times smaller. All its buildings, both business and government, were larger and taller today. The downtown business district, with City Hall right smack in the middle, towered over the many ethnic neighborhoods, with the only exception being the exclusive, super-rich ones, of course. Everything spiraled out and away to create a concrete maze from the ground to the sky. There were no houses as in the past. Everyone lived as they worked, in mega-skyscrapers. There were no individual storefronts. Businesses were either part of a floor, owned the whole floor, or owned the entire business tower. The dark, urban landscape was offset by flashing neon and video signs. Street lampposts hung over nearly every city corner, and lights liberally adorned the surfaces of buildings, usually in some kind of geometric design. If that wasn't enough visual madness, there was the glowing eye-wear of the people themselves. Bright lights scared away the gloom and doom of the dark and cloudy skies—nine out of ten city psychologists said so. This "neon jungle" was filled with fifty-million two-legged animals (humans) living, breathing, and dying beneath the ever-present rain.

Buildings dominated the horizontal space, but the public transportation thoroughfares sprawled out vertically, ultimately circling the entire circumference of the city. All private hover-car traffic was funneled into designated virtual lanes, one above another. The only vehicles that could fly where they pleased were the police, firemen, and garbage trucks. And then there were the mega-corporate zeppelins floating through the air, flashing their advertisements for the hour or the day.

There was a system to life that everyone followed from the smallest guy, shuffling along to make a living to the god-like guy, consumed with power and fortune. Where to work, where to live, where to play. Public schools, public transportation. Labor and delivery rooms to birth your babies, morgues for the "meat" (dead bodies), and finally, funeral parlors for processing to the crematorium. The cycle of life. That didn't mean that the gray people of the

masses had to go about life in the rain without style. In their designer Goodwill wet-wear clothes and glowing shades, they found their own particular way to cope and survive in the drudgery of the world. Know your place, don't upset the order of things, and, though you'd never get Up-Top, make it to retirement to relax free-and-clear for your last decade or two of life. Most accepted this unsaid, universal contract. Most accepted that they were mere automatons in the cosmos, even those not bionic, either working for international or multinational mega-corps, the arch-enemies of Big Brother, or working for uber-governments, the "Man," the arch-enemy of Big, Bad Business. Metropolis wasn't a bad place, but it wasn't a good one either.

There was another choice, a third choice, as an occupation—the streets. Forgo the legitimate, nine-to-five corporatist or government job for the freedom of the streets. But that was euphemistic talk for the Crime World. There was no money to be made being an off-Grid survivalist. In the criminal world, a bigger criminal or the cops would probably get you eventually, but many didn't mind the side-hustle, the gamble to try to beat the odds. Make—or steal—enough to live like an obscenely rich and famous scenester or wealth-hog, or buy your way Up-Top where Paradise was not a hallucinatory dream, but a real-life, fairytale reality for the masses and not the select few. The ultimate payoff could be huge, which was why the risks were so deadly. Every slippery-shoed hustler, knuckle-dragging thug, and in-bred criminal under-boss was in your way, and you were in theirs. There were the streets and then there were the mean streets, which despite the neon lights, were dark and dangerous. Mean streets were the places that every legit, average-Joe should stay far away from.

The back streets were truly black—no digital signs, no nearby street lamps, no building strobe lights; only the natural light from the sky, which meant near-darkness. It was a not-so-nice part of town. No smiley faces or smiley people here. Crime never tried to hide here. It happened right in the open on main streets as well as the back-alley corners and the many not-so-respectable establishments. It was Exhibit A of the inevitable dark side of the free-market. Dirty money for dirty products and dirtier services. "Some place in the city has to be zoned for sin," the conventional wisdom said, otherwise the filth would be knocking on everyone's front doors, both respectable and rich alike. The name of this part of the city was Whiskey Way, and, back in the day, all kinds of illegal things were run through its streets. Can a place be inherently bad so much of the time that it always attracts bad people? No one knew the answer. Whiskey Way was always a crime hot spot and neither City Hall nor any Mayor

was ever able to "solve it." On these streets, even if bright and sunny were possible, it would be like looking through a cloudy glass—darkly.

The thin man stood tall in his three-piece suit, though he was actually scared at having to deal with such a person—a crazy thug, who watched him through dark shades. In the dark of day or the pitch-black night, everyone covered their eyes with glasses.

"Did you know that the sky has all kinds of shades of red in all that blackness? Like blood and bruises." Red snickered as he popped another red pill. "What's the name?"

"Easy Chair Charlie."

The Thin Man was already reaching out his hand with a photo.

Red took it with a metallic hand and studied it. "Where?"

"Sweet Street in Old Harlem."

Red reached out from the shadows again. The Thin Man handed him a wet bag of cash.

"It must be serious for you to venture out all by your lonesome to the mean streets, in the rain, through dark alleys, far from your luxurious, upper-floor domicile. Maybe I can be your next-door neighbor one day."

"I much prefer you down here."

"Where I belong, right?"

"Down here you're something sinister. Up in my world, you'd just be a freak in a rabbit mask. I doubt that perception would be good for the psycho business."

Red laughed. "When you're right, you're right." He finished flipping through the money. "You know why I like cold, hard cash? Because that way no one can ever double-cross me. Credit cards can be bugged, traced, tracked, or erased remotely. We couldn't allow that to happen. Don't trust that digital stuff. Gotta remove all temptation from the equation. There's no apples in my gardens."

They both went quiet and still. A pedestrian half-ran down the street nearby. Red was invisible in the shadows, but the Thin Man had to pull his black hat down a bit to hide his face. The passerby had neon-blue shades and was an average-looking guy in a suit with a hoodie; obviously trying to get out of the

rain, somewhere fast, or both.

"Let's get on with this," the Thin Man said under his breath. "You have the money. I need it done within the hour."

"You know how I do things, right?"

The Thin Man was getting more impatient and looked up at him. There was no neon sign with its blink-blink to pierce the night, but the Thin Man could see him fine with his night-view red spectacles. Red's silly buck-toothed grin, his large floppy ears sprouting from his head like bean stalks, those dark holes for eyes behind the shades, and dressed in a similar suit—though not as dapper.

"I do. So go do it."

Red snickered again. "I'll get a-hoppin.'"

The sky was especially menacing today, she thought. A vast expanse of blackish-blue with streaks of red, but there was no accompanying downpour, not even a drizzle—but it was coming. Boy, it was coming hard. She could tell from the rumble above.

This was Metropolis weather. Drizzle, rain, storm, repeat. Old-timers like her actually remember the old places like Seattle. The world was now Seattle—always raining. But the Metropolis didn't care. Its structures were always growing higher into the sky, its technology always expanding with flashier machinery, the throngs of the gray masses always multiplying with more offspring—as if there wasn't enough people packed into the city. But the rain was more powerful. It slowed the pace of human progress to a crawl. If it weren't for the rain, the skyscrapers would have reached Saturn by now, the machines would have become suicidal, and the people would have become homicidal. The rain actually kept the world manageable. You could run, but not too fast. High-tech could progress, but never smother the end-users.

Carol lifted up the collar of her gray slicker, shivering just thinking about the downpour to come. She returned her black gloved hands to her coat's pockets. "We're late, you know," she said.

The little girl, decked out in her trendy gray wet-wear—a hooded, two-piece gray outfit with attached knapsack and soft lunch-box in her hand—continued to skip through the puddles on the sidewalk. Even in a hurricane, she would

stay perfectly dry, except for her cute face with blue eyes and a lock of light brown hair dangling out from beneath the top of her hood. With each splash, she watched a hint of some color in the water—maybe a blue or orange or lavender. Her goal was to see every rainbow color for the day. She stopped to glance at her mother with a smile. "Skip with me, Mommy."

"I'm too old for that." She would never tell her daughter that the ground puddle rainbow display was courtesy of the City's nasty 'natural' chemical residue. "And I don't want all that water all over my stockings," she continued. Other than her slicker, Carol wore her plastic head scarf and plastic boots over her shoes. She called herself old, but she had a ways to go before really being old. She was a White female with dark hair and minimal make-up. A mini-umbrella was always clipped to her slicker, but she never used it. The wind loved mini-umbrellas, snatching them right out of human hands to use as a projectile to hit some unsuspecting fool in the head.

"You need frubber leggings like me, Mom." The girl was now posing like a model, sticking out a leg wrapped snugly in the wet-wear legging, which looked almost exactly like her natural skin. Her mother always wondered if she wore them for style or for boys.

"I'm okay, thank you. I'll buy the fancy clothes for you, and I'll keep my old, boring clothes. That's what parents do. Now, come on. We're late. And the rain will bucket down any minute."

Their weekday walks to her school in the early morning hours always took them through the outskirts of Woodstock Falls, a working-class, multi-ethnic neighborhood. Nothing crazy or wild ever happened here, and that's exactly how the residents and business owners wanted it. But that didn't mean she was any less vigilant of the surroundings. Even safe neighborhoods were not immune to the occasional undesirable or street punk.

Carol didn't run. She wanted to go at least a full week without slipping and falling on her butt. Her daughter skipped ahead of her, one puddle after another. At this time of morning the streets were virtually empty, except for early morning deliverymen, sweepers, and the ubiquitous trash collectors zipping by in their hover-trucks.

It was their daily ritual Monday to Friday—Carol walking her daughter to school, without fail.

At the other end of the street in the shadows, he watched them. His telescoping goggles automatically adjusted focus to follow the females. He stood quiet, leaning on the corner building under the large black awning. He was too far away and it was dark enough that he could be right across the street from them and they wouldn't see him.

"Digital man killed the analog man..." he hummed the lyrics to himself. The song was barely audible from his old orange headphones.

He stepped forward in his exceedingly comfortable, five-toed, platform shoes to follow them.

The walk wasn't a bad one. Her daughter loved it, because it was that quiet time for her to play unencumbered by any other care in the world. For her mother, it was quiet time too, but far from carefree. While her daughter joyfully skipped along the slick sidewalks, her eyes were constantly roving for trouble. She was a meek woman, except when it came to the safety of her daughter. In that regard she was a vicious, carnivorous tigress. "Freakazoids," she called them. The prowlers and pedophiles that the media liked to report on and scare parents about.

"Let's go this way, Mom."

"Which way?"

"Alien Alley." The girl pointed to the neon sign, wall poster adorned pedestrian-only alley.

"Why? Are you expecting to see some extraterrestrials?"

The girl laughed. "No, Mom. There's no such thing as space aliens."

"Except for the human ones."

"It's a shortcut."

"How many times do I have to tell you—?"

"'There's no shortcut when it comes to safety'," the girl repeated her mother, word for word, before she finished.

"Then you ask me to allow you to walk to and from school by yourself."

The girl sighed, now realizing she had sufficiently wound-up her mother.

"Okay, Mom! No Alien Alley. Pretend I never asked."

"Imagine how many freakazoids are down there. I never even heard of this alley."

"We pass it every day to school, Mom. It's always empty."

"Then why don't they call it Empty Alley?"

"Oh, Mom. Forget it!"

"You don't take safety seriously."

"I do."

"I wish you did."

"I do, Mom."

"Like this instant, there's a damn freakazoid following us."

"What?" The girl stopped skipping and immediately turned around. She stared back down the long, dark street. "Where?"

Her mother just watched her with her hands in her pocket. Her daughter looked at her, then back down the street. She stared for a while, and then her smile returned to her face.

"There's no freakazoids back there, Mom. You're just trying to scare me for nothing."

"Doesn't look like I'm doing a very good job."

"Mom, they've shown us the entire Scared Straight series in school multiple times, including pedestrian street safety."

"Listen to you."

"Mom, I do keep a good look out when you're not here. I promise I do. Just how you taught me. Promise."

Her mother lifted her arm to glance at her large wristband watch. "Let's move it. We'll be late for sure, and I don't want you to get another tardy demerit."

"Let's cut through Alien Alley, Mom. It's empty. We can run. No one can catch us if we run."

"I will get wet."

"No, Mom. We'll be running too fast for that. And we'll beat the big downpour that's coming, too." The girl looked up to the sky, squinting, as if something was about to fall on her any minute. "You'll be right with me. Let's do it, Mom. Live dangerously, Mom."

Carol stood there, watching her daughter with a half-smile.

Her daughter had already turned back to walk to the alley. "We'll get through the alley lickety-split and to school on time. But we have to run now, Mom."

"Give me a minute." Carol touched her plastic head scarf and bent down to make sure her socks and boots were pulled up. "Old folks have to prepare themselves for childish recklessness. It's not spontaneous anymore for us."

"It is going to bucket down, Mom. You said so yourself."

"Okay, young lady, you can stop now. There is such a thing as overdoing it and losing the sale, when you got it in the bag, by adding one thing too many."

Her daughter grinned at her.

Carol stood up straight and looked back with an oh-so slight grin. "Run!"

Mother and daughter disappeared into Alien Alley with sounds of feet sloshing through water.

Chapter Two: Red and Blue Light Show

The police cruiser glided through the sky thirty-feet above all the normal congested traffic. It was a standard five-seater hovercraft with its two officers in full silver-and-black body-armored uniforms and visored half-helmets. The driver was Officer Break, a Black policeman on the Force for some twelve years. Officer Caps, the White policeman in the passenger seat, joined the Metropolis Police Department a year later. The senior officers had been partners for over seven years now. While most policemen couldn't wait to get off beat work for Homicide, Vice, Sex Crimes, White Collar, or anything else; they both preferred the grunt work. It meant do your shift and then go home; nothing more. Moving up the ranks meant more paperwork and more headaches. The only headaches they wanted in life were those from restless wives and kids entering puberty.

"Come in Unit 7-8-2-7," a voice echoed through the front speakers.

Officer Caps touched a flashing red button on the dashboard.

"Unit 7-8-2-7. Go ahead, dispatch," he responded.

"2-11 in progress at the Downtown Seven-Eleven on Beat Street. Shots reported by armed suspect. Armed civilian security guard on the scene holding near the main entrance. Code 2."

"10-4 dispatch. Code 2 acknowledged. En-route three minutes."

"10-4 Unit 7-8-2-7, back-up units five minutes out. Dispatch out."

"Acknowledged, dispatch. Over and out." He tapped the button again.

"Five minutes?" Officer Break asked matter-of-factly. "We'll have the perp bagged and tagged before the cavalry arrives." He accelerated the cruiser forward on a vector further above the sky traffic.

The Downtown Seven-Eleven on Beat Street was not a huge store like others in the city, but it was on prime real estate on the street corner at the bottom of a parking structure in the city's "capitol." During the work week, the foot traffic was huge. Other times, customers could whip in and out of vehicle parking by hovercraft, hop into the express elevator, exit, shop, pay, and go. Everyone knew the relatively small store was a gold mine for its owners, but no one

understood why the occasional robber would try to steal from it with City Hall, Police Central, and Downtown FBI just a few blocks away—mega blocks yes, but still only blocks away.

The robber waved his heater (laser pistol) wildly. "If I see a cop, she's dead!"

Someone watched the human stick figure of a punk yell with his blond mullet hairdo partially hidden under the hood of a jacket. He held the laser pistol to a terrified Asian female store attendant. Mascara tears trailed down her face onto her white-and-red 7-11 uniform—a college kid paying her way through school, but today, in the wrong place at the wrong time. But then the sniper sight, with its yellow lens, was focused on him, not her.

The White male punk was pinned inside the convenience store and making up his words and actions as he went along, trying to look tough, covered in tattoos everywhere, even on his face. A lone strip mall security guard had already taken a shot at him once and was now kneeling behind a communications pole across the street—the punk had fired back at him. He smiled, eager for the coming 'excitement.'

The strip mall guard was another college kid, from some East European country, and was as scared of his standard issue gun as he was of the robber. He looked up to see the glow of boot rockets high up in the sky and sighed with relief. The police had arrived.

Downtown Seven-Eleven was like every other one in the world. They were all identical. Only the overall size changed. Row after row of products, and what couldn't be placed on shelves, could easily be fetched from the back by robotic arms and presented to the counter for purchase. The front counter was like a mini neon digital explosion of various advertisements, especially for lottery tickets, as well as scrolling news headlines, the New York and Tokyo Stock Exchange ticker feeds, and "Have you seen this child?" or "Have you seen this criminal?" bulletins.

The punk pulled his human shield back further into the store and around the counter to take better cover behind the register. He watched the outside street closely.

"I should have shot you and that guard and made a break for it. Now we'll

have to have the shoot-out right here. How unlucky for you. No college graduation for you. No twenty-first birthday for me."

"Just let me go. I didn't do you anything," the store attendant said as calmly as she could manage.

"You didn't give me my money."

"It's not your money."

"It's not your money either, so why didn't you just give it up? You think your bosses who aren't here care about a few bucks in the till? A few bucks is nothing to them but a lot to me."

"To do what?"

"None of your business."

"You're holding a gun to my head, so everything about you is my business."

"Feisty, huh, for a hostage who's about to die." He held her closer and repositioned his gun to her temple. "Who do you think is going to kill you first? Me or the cops? You know how many innocent people get accidentally shot by the cops?" He glanced further into the store. "And that goes for the rest of you, too!"

There were thirteen other hostages in the store, all of them lying on the floor as directed earlier, looking up at him with fear.

The large front glass of the store was neon glass and had a tint that changed colors. In an instant, it shattered and cascaded down to the ground. The top of the punk's head was simultaneously blown off and his body collapsed to the ground. The hostage grabbed the sides of her face screaming hysterically.

Officers Break and Caps stepped through the open storefront, their boots crushing the glass on the ground as they walked, long guns in hand. As with all Metropolis police officers, the word "PEACE" in big white letters was prominent on the front and back of their uniforms.

"Ma'am," Officer Break called out.

The woman was in a state of shock, staring at the body of the mangled would-be robber-killer.

"Ma'am!"

She looked at him now.

He put a finger to his lips. "Shh!" She stopped screaming.

Officer Caps touched the call button on his shoulder-communicator. "Dispatch, this is Unit 7-8-2-7. Robbery suspect is dead. Scene secured."

"Unit 7-8-2-7, meat wagon en-route. Back-up on scene now," dispatch answered.

From outside the store, through the drizzle, one appeared, then another, then several more silver-and-black police "PEACE" officers appeared—their silent jet-packs with accompanying boot rocket nozzles made them seem like wingless black angels descending from the sky. They stepped through the open storefront into the premises—long guns in hand, visors concealing the top half of their faces. Now the night was illuminated by red-and-blue-siren lights.

"This is the police! All hostages, please stand and come forward with your hands in the air," one of the new policemen said with an enhanced, booming voice. He lifted his mouth from his shoulder-microphone to speak normally. "Ladies and gentleman, we'll process you, take statements, and have you home within the hour."

All the store customers on the floor slowly rose to their feet and held up their hands. Officer Break walked to the store's attendant and took her by the shoulder. "Ma'am follow me outside. Ambulance services will take you to City General."

She had stifled her screams, but her eyes locked on what remained of the would-be robber on the ground.

"Ma'am, don't look at him. Don't pollute your memories with that human filth. He got what he deserved. Go about your life and don't give another nano-second of thought to it."

"Thank you...Officer," she managed to say.

Their first call of the day was a silent alarm. The next call was a full-out "red-and-blue siren party" with the lights illuminating the sky for miles around. Office Break peered out his driver's side window as he acknowledged the ground officer directing him down to a patch of sidewalk with a double flash of his high beams. Officer Caps watched the people on his side congregating on

their balconies at the nearby hi-rise closest to the scene.

"It's going to be a tight fit," Break said to his partner.

Caps leaned forward to look down to the sidewalk. "I've seen you land this bird on a dime before," he responded.

Officer Break spun the cruiser around, backed it up, situated the craft, and slowly took it down. It touched down and both officers immediately lifted up the doors to step out.

Two White officers walked to them—Boot was the bigger Russian, and Bus was the Italian.

"We heard you two gave some skell a cranial haircut with one shot. That sounds like you, Caps."

"B and B," Officer Caps greeted with a smirk.

"Don't be shy, guys," Officer Boot said. "It's almost month-end and we'll be counting up the kills. If I'm going to be knocked down from my perch at the top, I want to know by who in advance."

"Break drives, I shoot 'em," Caps said. "But this time, it was all Break."

"Break," Officer Boot said. "That means, we're tied up, Caps. You and me."

"I'm not worried. I'll knock you off the kill-hill."

"I don't think so. Only three days left."

"What's going on here?" Break asked them. "A 2-07?"

"Yeah. Little girl, ten years old, snatched right from her mother while walking to school. Pedophile, no doubt."

Break and Caps were visibly disgusted.

"It never stops. These pee-dophiles," Caps said.

"Gentlemen, I nominate whoever this sick perp is for the honor of being next on the kill board," Boot said.

"Deal," Caps said.

"It'll be everyone's pleasure," Officer Bus added.

Break and Caps could see another police officer gesturing to them from behind the police tape.

"Detective Do-Little calls," Break said wryly.

Carol sat on the bare asphalt, the rain pouring down. Her eye make-up ran down her cheeks, not from the rain, but from crying. She looked up and they just kept coming—"PEACE" officers descending from the air via jet-pack. Back in the day, it was "POLICE," but many years ago someone somewhere in City Hall wanted to soften law enforcement's image. She always welcomed them, but always wondered about the visual paradox. The entire area was cordoned off by police tape and police cars, flashing red and blue lights everywhere. Police on crowd-control stood on one side of the "POLICE LINE. DO NOT CROSS" tape and crowds of onlookers stood on the other side.

A policewoman stood next to her, dressed the same as the men, just as deadly with her "PEACE" lettering, but a smaller build. "Ma'am, you sure I can't get you an umbrella? You're getting soaked."

She shook her head. The policewoman's face frowned a bit, but it was with compassion.

Another policeman appeared and crouched down next to her, holding an umbrella over her with "DETECTIVE" on the chest and back of his uniform. He flipped up his visor so she could see his eyes.

"Miss," he said, "I know you gave us the preliminary statement, but let me take you down to the station so you can tell us again on the record. The more times you tell the story, the more likely you'll remember an important detail, however small, that can help us find your daughter."

"I can't leave here."

"Miss, you're not leaving. You're simply coming down to the station, which isn't too far away, to give your full statement for the record. We'll find your daughter."

"Ma'am, I'll get you back here personally," the policewoman said. "It'll be okay."

Carol looked at her and then looked at the detective. "But will you find her alive?"

She had a wild look to her eyes and the detective said nothing. She looked down to the ground. He glanced at the female officer.

"Yes, ma'am, we will." The policewoman gave the detective a dirty look.

"Officer, can you get her something warm to drink before we leave for the station?" he said to her.

"Yes, detective."

"And get her out of the rain. There has to be some place warm for her to sit." He turned back to the woman. "Miss, let the officer get you off the ground and some place warm. I'll check with my men to see if there is any new news and then we'll leave."

The female officer leaned down and helped Carol to her feet. The detective handed the umbrella to the female officer.

"I'll take her to the van," she said to the detective, and he nodded.

As he watched the female officer take her to a nearby parked police custody van, Detective Monitor walked to two of his officers.

He knew the nickname the beat officers had for him. He came from a well-to-do White family; the latter being irrelevant, the former being very relevant, because he made detective in record time.

"What ya got?"

"We'll canvass everywhere, Detective, and then canvass it again and again," Officer Break answered.

"We have the entire Alley blocked, and I'm taking the mother back to Central, so as the senior officers on site, you two run the show for me."

"Yes, Detective," Officer Caps said. "Should we expect the Feds?"

"No, the Feds don't jump anymore unless it's a Red Ball. Too many kidnappings for them to handle anymore, so we get it. Besides, we have more resources in Metropolis than they do."

"Good," Officer Caps said.

"What is this Alien Alley, anyway?" Detective Monitor asked.

"Nothing," Officer Break answered. "The word is that during business hours

it's a space fiction nerd hang-out. Extraterrestrial, spaceship, sci-fi alien crap. Just kids. No hard crimes."

"What about off-hours?"

"Apparently, no one goes there off-hours."

"Why?"

"We don't know and no one seems to know."

"What about the street?"

"We'll question the local sidewalk johnnies. They know everything there is to know about every street and alley in the city. We'll put them in the box if they don't talk."

"Don't be fooled by them. They like the box. Warm bed, breakfast, lunch, dinner, running shower, and toilet at taxpayers' expense. Lock-up is exactly where they want to be. Tell them to talk or we *won't* let them stay in the box."

"Yes, Detective."

"Forensics is already here, and I called in the dogs."

"Dogs?" Officer Caps asked. "Won't the rain make any canine search impossible?"

"Try anyway. Police dogs need to earn their pay just like us humans. We may get lucky. We need to get lucky. It's a helpless little girl for Christ's sake. I don't want this one to end up in the morgue. I hate these calls. I'd take a hundred calls of shoot-outs, robberies, and high-jackings if I could avoid these calls. These calls tend to always end badly."

Metropolis Police Central stood at the opposite end of the avenue from City Hall and looked like a cubical fortress. It was also rumored to be deepest building in the world, burrowing endless levels into the ground—a holdover of the Cold War days when nuclear annihilation and civil unrest of a biblical proportion was the daily fear of government bureaucrats. That was long before the mega-cities and super-cities of today, and the rain. Central was home to a 200,000 plus police force—the largest in the nation.

Carol sat in the general waiting room inside the station, which some interior

decorator attempted to make as bright and cheery as possible, but it wasn't the opposite of the grimy exterior of the building; it complimented it. With the daily march of police with their combat boots and the steady stream of captured criminals in and out, how else would it look? She sat in her chair quietly, glancing around—there was only an elderly couple seated two rows behind her.

They were actually in the inner waiting room behind the main counter and wall. The outer waiting room was like a massive zoo, with people all over the place waiting their turn to be helped, DMV-style, by counter police. She looked the other way to the bull pen of dual cubicles where the street police sat and worked when not on the beat. Further away, she saw elevated single cubicles where she imagined the detectives sat. Beyond that were the offices for the higher-ups.

She had given her statement—again and then again. Now she waited to be taken home by the same policewoman as promised. All of it seemed surreal. She realized that she hadn't even called her job to tell them she would not be in. Her daughter's school would have already logged another absence for her daughter. She had one already. Three tardies equals one absence in the system. Carol couldn't remember what she had planned for work that day, but she knew there was something important. She closed her eyes and opened them when she heard voices.

The same female policewoman was standing with the same detective, both listening to a man in dress blues.

"Take her home," the Captain said.

"What do you want me to tell her, sir?" the detective asked.

"It's your case. Tell her whatever you like."

"What are we supposed to do? You won't let me elevate it to a Red Ball, and you won't let me toss it to the Feds."

The captain angrily motioned to him with his finger. "Come here. And you too."

He led them around the corner to the large open room with the Big Board and pointed. Row after row of numbered cases were listed in "Active" status.

They were categorized by crimes, noted by two letter abbreviations. Not many cases were in the "Closed" column.

"The Feds won't take it, because they have one hundred missing persons cases on their plate now. We won't elevate it to a Red Ball, because of what's on our plate now. Which one of these mothers do you want us to tell to go to the back of the line with their missing son or daughter? Well? What's your answer, detective?"

"None, sir."

"Work your case, like everyone else. I decide who gets extra resources, not you. There is nothing special about this case. A missing girl in Metropolis is not special. A dead husband in Metropolis is not special. A drive-by shooting in Metropolis is not special. It's routine. Maybe one day you'll learn that. Work your case and get out of my face."

The captain left them where they stood as he walked the other way.

"I'll take her home," the female officer said.

"You can tell her that we'll be in touch if we have any updates," the detective said.

The female officer gave him a dirty look. "I'll come up with a better lie than that."

She turned and left him alone.

"I need a drink," he said to himself and walked to the break room.

Security at Central was formidable—armed police guards, security cameras, armed sentries at the end of the hallways near the elevators, and scanning archways; but that was only for entering. Entering and exiting pedestrian traffic was divided by a solid metal barrier down the middle of the grand hallway. For those exiting, they walked out without any checks whatsoever.

One of the police officers in work blues noticed a man in the crowd on the other side of the barrier, going out.

"Night, sir," he said as he waved slightly.

"Night, officer," the man answered.

The Thin Man exited the Central main entrance.

Excerpt from *These Mean Streets, Darkly*

Prequel to the cyberpunk detective series, *Liquid Cool*

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