

# ALL IN A DAY'S TWERK



A COOPER WRIGHT MYSTERY

BY ROB STEELE

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Now here's an industry I hadn't given any thought to in a few years: Music Videos. I wasn't sure they were still being made. Once MTV stopped playing them back in the 90s, I didn't think there was much call for it. MTV turned into some reality show channel. VH1 started showing documentaries and movies. BET started showing both. What's left? Where do you show these anymore? I mean, is it that big a thing on the internet? Actually, I guess everything is big on the internet. And sooner or later, where there's something big going on, something is going to go wrong. Very wrong. And that's usually when I get called out.

There was what appears to be a drive-by at a music video shoot. The rappers, Mixx-E-Max and Sugar Bling, are fine, but one of the dancers, Mallory Oliver, isn't. Pronounced dead at the scene which isn't where I would have initially guessed. Give me a hundred chances, and I probably wouldn't have come up with the Splashtown Water Park as a setting for a rap video... especially in November. It's a bit cold out there.

Nevertheless, that's where I find our coroner Dr. Seong-ho Young and his assistant Henry Ruth. A quick consultation confirms the eye-witness cause of death. "Mallory Oliver was unlucky enough to catch three of the shots. Looks like they're from an AK-47. But that's just me eyeballing it. I'll have ballistics get back to you." One of the other 'dancers', a term I use loosely for reasons I will explain momentarily, caught a shot in the arm but has been taken to the hospital and she'll be fine.

As I understand it, and also view it on a video playback, the rappers Mixx-E-Max, a home-grown artist and his 'special guest' Sugar Bling were doing a, well, I'm not sure if duet is the right word, but it will do, in the foreground while seven scantily clad women twerked in the background in front of a waterfall. (Twerking not really being a dance in my mind thus the earlier comment.) This section of the park has a chain link fence separating it from the parking lot. The witnesses say that a brown sedan tore through the lot and the driver fired an automatic rifle at the performers. One pass and then gone. No one got a license plate number and they were too busy taking

cover to get a good look at the driver.

Security at the waterpark was minimal. None of their regular security guards were there since the park is closed for winter. It turns out that half of the security cameras don't work either, although that did come as a surprise to the park's owner Bobby David, who's only real contribution to the case was to say that he'd just rented out the park. We had to get that statement over the phone as he's spending the off-season in Jamaica. That sends up a red flag for me and I make a note to have someone look over this guy's financials. This water park can't be making enough for him to spend the winter there! Although it is a decent enough alibi for the murder... unless he hired someone to do it. I need to talk to our rappers and see if they have any decent input.

The first I come across is Mix-E-Max. He looks too much the stereotypical rapper. Baggy jeans, tee shirt, big gold chain, absurdly large sunglasses, baseball cap with the word "MAX" written across it with 3 x's. "Hey man," he drawls, "don't make this take too long. I need to talk to the press, yo! My sales is gonna go through the roof, baby!"

"I'm so glad you're able to show so much compassion for the young woman who was killed," I *want* to say. Fortunately, for my job's sake, it comes out as, "We need to know if you know of anyone who would want to kill you, Mr., erm..."

"Max!" he beams.

I shake my head slightly. "No, sir. I'll admit to knowing very little about you or your music, but I know your parents didn't name you Mix-E-Max. I will need your real name for the reports."

"Yo man! My name is Max. Wit three x's! Put that in your report!" He tries to get in my face and square off with me. Luckily, for both of us, his manager, Larry DeForrest and the other rapper, Sugar Bling, step between us. Somehow, the rather scrawny accountant-looking manager pushes "Max" back and tells him to wait in his trailer. 'Ms. Bling' just stands between us and looks worried and apologetic. She also looks as though she'd been crying – a display I'll have to admit, I wasn't entirely expecting.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” she says. “He has an ego the size of Jupiter. Once he calms down, we’ll get what we can out of him. In the meantime, I think you wanted to talk to me, too?” She seemed sincere and, if I’m honest, not what I was expecting, either. She was dressed in a leather, I think the term is, unitard. Lots of bling. But she was different somehow. She wasn’t skinny like the dancers. If anything, she was borderline, I’ll go with: ‘hefty.’ Not that that’s a bad thing. It’s just unexpected in this day when every celebrity seems to be promoting the skin-and-bones look.

“Um, yeah, I do need to talk to you, too.” I eventually stammer, feeling a little uncomfortable with her closeness. Oh, it’s not that she’s unattractive. Just the opposite, if anything. It’s just that my wife would kick my ass if she saw her this close to me. “Let’s start with your *real* name.”

“Susan Thorpe,” she replies matter-of-factly. She seems to sense my unease and backs off a little. “And as much as I’d like to tell you I saw something, I didn’t. Didn’t even see the car. I had my back to the lot and just dropped when I heard the shots. That’s a horrible thing that happened to Mallory. I mean, I just met her today. We got her through the Chandler Agency for the shoot...” she stopped abruptly and began to tear up. “Sorry. That’s not the way I should have phrased that. Excuse me.”

She began openly crying. She turned and ran toward one of the trailers in the parking lot. I let her go. I’m not that good with crying women. I had seen the footage of what happened and Ms. Thorpe was, indeed, facing the other direction. At this moment, I’m actually surprised by the return of Mr. DeForrest. “I’m sorry about my client, Lieutenant... Wright, was it? He’s trying to maintain his image but really, inside, he’s a pussycat and is really broken up by the death of Ms. ... um... I’m sorry. I’ve forgotten her name.”

He was doing good up until then. “Oliver. Mallory Oliver.”

“Yes,” he sniveled. “Oliver. We’d just gotten her this morning. Oh dear. How do we contact her family? What should we say?” This part he seemed genuine until I realized that he was probably trying to cover in case of a lawsuit. I explain that we have that part covered, but a gesture on his part might not be a bad idea. In the meantime, giving me some suspects might be a good idea. “Oh yes, there are going to be a few. Maxxx was in two

gangs growing up. The Black Riders were his original gang but the territory where he lived was taken over by the Onyx. As I understand it, they just incorporated the members.” He continued for a while but didn’t really have much in the way of useful information. Nor did anyone else at the scene.

I returned to the office to talk with Andy Kosinski in the gang squad about the Black Riders and Onyx. “Geez, really?” he began. “I haven’t heard about either in quite a while. The Riders were wiped out about ten years ago. Onyx took most of their territory. And then most of Onyx were wiped out by us. Remember that raid that went south about five years back? Yeah, that was them and them.” I do remember that. Not a good situation. Supposed to be a drug bust, and there was illegal activity going on, but it wasn’t drugs... it was arms. Turned the whole thing into a shooting match. We lost seven officers that day. They lost more. It wasn’t pretty.

But if the Riders were gone and Onyx were gone, where to go from here. There was something else nagging at me as well. Something about the footage. There were cameras on just about everything except the parking lot. But that makes sense, they want shots of the rappers and the girls and maybe the waterfall. I head to the video bay to watch the footage again.

Mallory Oliver was on the end of the ‘dance line’. And she was closest to the parking lot. That’s why, we figure, she got hit three times. But there’s something about her that looks off. Then I finally find the camera angle that helps the most. There was a camera getting individual shots of the girls and one showed Mallory just before the shooting. She was twerking, which is something my wife would not like me watching but this is in the line of duty, when she turned and looked toward the parking lot... and smiled.

We’ve got this all wrong. No one was after Mix-E-Maxxx or Sugar Bling. They were after Mallory Oliver. This took the case in a whole new, and surprisingly easier direction. I sent Detective Manny Vasquez to the Chandler Talent Agency to get more information on Ms. Oliver. From that we got an address, which we didn’t have before, and we went to check that out. Her apartment was in a decent part of town, but this particular complex was a bit run down. And in the parking lot, we got a magnificent surprise.

As we pulled into the lot, we being myself and Manny, we see a brown sedan, a 1979 Datsun Bluebird of all things, packed to the brim with boxes and clothes... with the hood up and someone under it with an expression that is all too familiar to anyone who has ever had engine trouble. We park a couple spaces down and approach the man under the hood casually. He notices our approach and asks, "You guys know anything about cars?"

"A bit," I answer and join him by the hood, "What seems to be the problem?" Manny makes his way around the car and sees something interesting in the passenger seat. A shell casing for an AK-47. Manny opened the door and collected the casing by sticking his pen in the open end and held it up for me to see.

The man under the hood saw Manny holding the rather incriminating evidence and panicked. "You guys are cops!" he managed to blurt before trying to stand upright from under the hood and run away. Well, I say run away. I've never seen anything like this before. He stood up from under the hood alright, but he caught the back of his shirt on the hood latch and when he tried to run, it tangled his shirt and yanked him back toward the car not only causing him to fall but slamming the hood down on his hand where he tried to catch himself.

We manage to extricate him from his predicament and take him downtown. Once we get him some medical attention for his hand and ankle, which he apparently sprained in the fall, we find out a few things. For example, his name is Randy Stanton. Amidst the packing he did before skipping town, he did manage to pack the AK-47, which we found quite easily. He also claims he was Mallory Oliver's live-in boyfriend and he was jealous of Mallory's success in 'dancing' in rap videos. "She was becoming a rap whore! And I wasn't gonna put up with it anymore. She was mine!"

After a minor tirade, Officer Walker took Mr. Stanton to booking to be processed. Along the way, Mix-E-Maxxx made an appearance. He threatened Mr. Stanton with a lawsuit for trying to kill him, which I'm fairly certain would never stick. Manny stepped in and broke it up and eventually got Maxxx and his posse to leave. I congratulate Manny on the way back to the office.

“That was good work back there, Manny.”

“It was nothing, boss,” he replied in his typical humbleness. “There’s something about that guy that’s always bothered me and getting to make him back down was a good feeling.” He winked. But something changed as we entered the homicide office. Suddenly Manny stopped. “Son of a bitch,” he exclaimed.

I don’t know that I’ve ever heard Manny talk like that. It doesn’t sound right. Not that I have trouble saying things like that myself, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. But from Manny it sounds, odd. Almost like hearing it from a priest or something. Not that Manny’s a priest. I give him a look hoping he notices and continues the thought. “That was Clarence Willingham!”

“Who?”

“I went to high school with him! That’s what’s been bugging me. I knew I knew Max from somewhere.”

I’m a bit surprised. “Really? What was he like back then?”

“You remember Urkel from that tv show?”

“That bad?”

“Make him about 350 pounds,” Manny smirked. “I will give him this: he’s lost a lot of weight.”

I give Manny a friendly jab in the arm. “Nah. He just moved it to his ego.”