

ON THE STREET  
WHERE YOU  
DIE



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Al Stevens



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Mockingbird Songs & Stories, Cocoa, FL

ISBN-13: 978-0-9886623-4-6

*Dedication*

To the memory of Frederick W. Stevens, Sr.

## *Acknowledgments*

Thanks to Joy Seymore for her suggestions and corrections to this story.

## Chapter 1

On the afternoon when all this trouble started I was sitting alone in my office, reading the newspaper, and waiting for cocktail hour. Or daylight savings time, whichever came first. A half-empty fifth of cheap bourbon beckoned from my desk drawer, and I tried with good intentions to ignore its call. But when there's no work for a private investigator and no woman in his life, drinking is what's left. Come to think of it, it's also what's left when you're busy and getting laid.

The outer door opened and closed, and footsteps sounded across the floor.

"A client?" I said to no one at all.

A client was just what the bill collector ordered. Business had slowed to a crawl. Blame it on the economy. People were staying married, in jail, at home, or some combination of the three. Times were tough.

I looked at my Mickey Mouse wristwatch. Don't laugh. It's all I got in the divorce. It was a few minutes past four, and Willa had gone home. I was about to get up and go greet the visitor when the door to my office opened. André the Giant stood in the doorway.

He hadn't knocked. Good thing I wasn't doing the bottle, scratching my nuts, or anything else private.

The light was directly behind him, and his height, broad shoulders, Al Capone fedora, and alpaca overcoat presented an imposing silhouette.

"Come in and sit down," I said to the imposing silhouette. I took off my reading glasses and put them on the desk.

In my business, a big guy coming in uninvited and unexpected could be bad news. I made a fast mental inventory of cheating

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husbands I might have pissed off and bail jumpers I had restored to the judicial system, and none of them had been anywhere near that big.

My gun was in the safe. Plan ahead.

The big man moved into the light. The desk lamp cast shadows upwards on his face giving him a fierce, chiseled look, hardened and set with a bigger jaw than anybody needed. His blue-gray eyes scanned the room and settled on me.

The alpaca overcoat was expensive. So were the spit-shined imported alligator-skin shoes, the cost of either one of which would have paid for my car and bought a tank of gas and a year's insurance, neither of which I had at the moment. A man of means. A big man of means.

"Mr. Bentworth?" the big man of means said.

"That's the name on the door," I said. Not exactly the snappiest of repartees, but the best I could come up with on short notice. I've done better and am known for it.

The stranger shifted from side to side and adjusted his shoulders as if to take a more at-the-ready stance.

I fidgeted in my chair, and my skivvies wedged into the crack of my ass. Why does that always happen just when you can't do anything about it? One of life's small mysteries.

"Call me Stan," I said. "And you are?"

He pulled a chair over and removed his cream-colored wool felt fedora. He dropped the hat on the desk, spun the chair around backwards, and lowered himself onto the seat, his arms on the back, his knees high on either side of him. He looked around the room again and took in the office accoutrements. It didn't take long. There wasn't much to take in. A desk, two chairs, a safe, and a coat rack.

All that and me rutching around in my swivel chair from cheek to cheek trying to get my skivvies to pop out on their own. It never works.

"Sergeant Penrod says you're the man I need," the big guy said. He was articulate with a cultured voice that belied his tough guy stature and bearing. "He says you know how to find people."

"That's my specialty. Who's lost?"

"Someone is putting the squeeze on me. I need to find out who."

"What kind of squeeze?" I said.

He looked around again. "You don't look all that prosperous."

"My needs are simple. Who's shaking you down, Mr...?"

"Overbee. Buford Overbee. You ever hear that name?"

I stifled a smile at the notion of a man who looked like Hulk Hogan having a name like Buford Overbee. But who am I to question a guy's name? How many private dicks do you meet named Stanley?

"Can't say I have," I said. "So who needs finding?" I sat back, folded my arms, and waited.

He looked around the room again. "Never heard of me, huh? Buford Overbee?" He emphasized both halves of the name and seemed disappointed that I didn't recognize it.

"Nope. So, when are you going to tell me who you need found? I got to be somewhere Tuesday."

"Don't get your briefs in a bunch," he said. "I'm getting there."

I wished he hadn't mentioned briefs. Mine were still tucked up my ass.

"Bill Penrod recommended me?"

"He did."

"He works homicide," I said. "I hope you don't want somebody killed."

"I want somebody found."

"What's his name?"

"Don't know."

"Where's he live?"

"Don't know."

"What's he look like?"

"Don't know."

"I charge more for don't know, don't know, and don't know."

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"Money's no problem."

My kind of client. "Makes things easier," I said.

"If you're willing to take this job, I'll give you a few days to see what you can do."

He opened his wallet, took out a handful of hundred dollar bills, and put the stack on the desk.

"That's a thousand. Will it do for a retainer?"

I looked at the stack lovingly. This month's rent and some left over for necessities. Such as bourbon.

"It will if I take the job, which I haven't decided."

That was bullshit. I was going to take the job. Whatever it involved. If he wanted Jimmy Hoffa found, I was going to take the job.

"Keep the dough. If you don't want the job, it'll be hush money to keep your yap shut about what I'm about to tell you. Does that work?"

I picked up the thousand, swiveled around, and put it in the safe.

"I'll take that for a yes," he said.

He stood and turned the chair around the way it was meant to be. He sat, put his elbows on the desk, and rested his Jay Leno chin in his Michael Jordan hands.

"Make no mistake," he said. "I expect you to honor the confidentiality I just purchased."

"Mr. Overbee, I didn't invite you here just to get a lecture on professional ethics."

"You didn't invite me at all. I let myself in."

"Fair enough."

He got up, hung his coat on the coat rack, came back, and plopped down again. He shifted around. He was too big for that chair. His butt hung over the sides, and his knees were at chest level. He stared at me. Then after a moment he said, "What we are about to discuss is a matter of life and death."

"Whose life and whose death?" I hoped he didn't mean mine.

"If you find the guy, it could be his. If you don't, it might be mine."

"Sounds serious enough. Who is it? Inquiring minds and all that."

It didn't matter who the target was. In my current situation I would have found his cat if the fee was there.

I shook a cigarette out of the pack on my desk and offered one to Overbee. He shook his head. This would be my last cigarette. I was determined to quit smoking.

Overbee waited while I lit up, took a long drag, and exhaled a plume of blue smoke into the room. Then he said, "The guy I want found is shaking me down, and if I don't pay him, I could get killed."

"By whom?"

"There are people looking for me. He could tell them where I am."

"Who's looking for you?"

"Still not convinced you're right for this job," he said.

"Well, I'd certainly try to convince you if you'd only tell me more about the fucking job."

He looked me up and down. "You talk tougher than you look."

"If you want somebody found, I'm your man. If you're looking for muscle, I'm not it."

"I can tell."

I wish people wouldn't be so quick to notice that.

He continued. "Suppose when I came in here, I came to beat the shit out of you. What would happen?"

I looked him up and down. "You'd beat the shit out of me." I paused. "Assuming you could catch me."

"You don't think I'd catch you?"

"You'd be slipping in shit the whole way."

Not even a smile. Jokes were wasted on Overbee.

"What about the street?" he said. "How do you handle trouble?"

"Mr. Overbee—"

"Buford," Overbee said.

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"Buford. The wise and noble framers of our great Constitution bestowed upon us the right to own and bear arms."

That's an argument never lost on a real man. Or so they tell me.

"How are you with computers?" he asked. "I don't see one here." He looked around the room again. I wished he'd quit looking around the room.

"I get by with them, but I have a guy who's a whiz."

"How good is he?"

"Well, I'm not saying Bill Gates calls him whenever he can't figure something out, but he could. Now tell me more."

He took a deep breath and said, "I'll start with a warning." That caught my attention, and I leaned forward. "There are those," he said, "who would do anything to know what you are about to learn. My life wouldn't be worth a dime if they found it out. Anyone who knows who and where I am could be in similar danger if the wrong people find out. Do you want me to proceed?"

I sat for a moment and cogitated about what he could say that would put me in danger just for knowing it. Who was Buford Overbee? Who wanted to know? I was hooked and wasn't going to pass up hearing this story.

"Proceed," I said.

"I used to have other interests that, if exposed, could compromise the fiduciary trust that I enjoy with my clients."

"Clients?"

"Investors. I have a dubious past, you might say."

"How dubious?"

"I used to work for the mob."

I dropped my pencil on the desk and sat back in my chair with a thump.

"Are these the guys I should be afraid of?" I said.

"Everybody should be afraid of them."

I couldn't sense any fear coming from him, but what do I know? I'm a wimp. He's Jesse Ventura.

"What was your job back then?"

"Collections."

Which meant if you owed the mob money, Buford would encourage you to do the right thing and meet your obligations. He looked qualified for that line of work.

"Got it. Did you use words like 'fiduciary trust' when you were a wise guy?"

"No."

"So now something's backfired."

"It has. I'm being blackmailed."

"Well, I'm shocked." I leaned back in my chair and raised my eyebrows. "Given all the mobsters and shady investors you've done business with, it saddens me that someone would sink that low. What's this world coming to?"

He didn't crack a smile.

"Who do you think is putting the clamp on your nuts?" I asked.

He shrugged and raised his hands palms up. "That's the problem, Stan. I don't have a clue. He's anonymous."

This wasn't going to be easy. I looked at my watch, the Timex with Mickey Mouse on the dial.

"It's almost six. You want a drink?"

Overbee looked at his watch, a Rolex with diamonds on the dial. "It isn't almost six, and yeah, I want a drink."

I opened a desk drawer and took out the bottle and two glasses. I poured myself a drink, started to pour one for Overbee, and stopped.

"If you're worried about the glass being dirty, and it probably is, there's running water down the hall."

"Pour."

Nothing could live in that kerosene anyway. I poured and we each took a healthy swig. The bourbon burned going down. I took another gulp to put out the fire. It didn't work.

After his first swig, he scrunched up his nose and mouth.

"You don't like bourbon?" I asked.

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“I do. And next time I’ll bring some.” He sniffed his glass, closed his eyes, and shook his head.

“Let’s don’t drink this horse piss,” I said. “We can go across the street. They pour a good drink at Oliver’s.”

He stood up and got his alpaca overcoat from the rack. I stood up, and my skivvies popped out of the crack of my ass. At last.

## Chapter 2

Delbert Falls is a typical medium-sized town in Maryland, between Baltimore and Philadelphia. My office is in the northwest section, which has low-rent industrial and commercial buildings and a few low-rent apartment buildings.

"Elevator out of order?" Buford said.

"I don't think there is an elevator. The doors and buttons are just for show."

We went down the stairs and across the street to Oliver's, a small saloon that serves an ample drink at a reasonable price.

We took a booth for the privacy. Sammy came over with my usual, a double Jack neat.

"This is Sammy," I said, "my closest friend and confidant."

Buford reached up to shake hands. "I'm Buford. I'll have the same."

Sammy went to the bar to get Buford's drink.

"You can trust Sammy," I said. "The soul of discretion."

"Every good bartender is," Buford said.

Sammy brought Buford's drink and returned to the bar. Buford looked at his glass for a while then took a sip.

"This is better." He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. I lit my last cigarette ever. I was going to quit. Did I already say that?

"Penrod said you used to be a cop."

"I was. We were partners. Homicide."

"Tell me why you're doing this and not a cop anymore. It can't be for the money."

I didn't like telling this story. But everyone wants to hear it. I should just go on Jerry Springer.

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"Got canned," I said. "I was a good cop. Caught killers. Closed cases."

"And they let you go?"

"That's a nice way of putting it. I took a swing at a suspect. He swung back. End of fight. With me as first runner-up. According to the bosses, they can't have suspects beating the shit out of detectives in the squad room. Makes them look bad."

"They fired you for losing a fight?"

"They did. If only that citizen hadn't been there with his cell phone. Click. Smile. You're on candid Youtube. And the six o'clock news."

"I can see where that would piss off the brass."

He shifted around. His girth took up most of the bench.

"Punching that moke was the last straw, according to the Lieutenant. Came as a surprise. I didn't know I had been piling up straws."

"Sauce?"

My secret was out.

"Yeah. The Lieutenant was one of those guys who bores the shit out of you with his endless litany about the evils of drink, meetings, twelve steps, one day at a time, and all that shit."

"I know the type. I married his sister." He took another drink.

"He asked who my enabler was."

"Your what?"

"Someone who encourages the drinking. Like my ex-wife. And maybe your wife. They nag you about your drinking so you drink more to block it out."

I looked towards the bar and said, "I told him these days my enabler is Sammy."

We both took slow sips. Buford took another pull on his cigar. I lit another last cigarette.

"So you wound up a P.I."

"After I retired without a pension, I got a license, had cards printed, and painted my name on the door. It was that or be a Walmart greeter."

"You like this line of work?"

"If I have to work for assholes, I might as well be self-employed."

"And now you find missing persons."

"Runaway teenagers, deadbeat dads, bail jumpers, cheating spouses, hidden assets. The usual."

I downed the last of my bourbon.

"Now," I said, "are you going to give me some details about the shakedown or are you going to have another drink?"

"Yes," he said.

I signaled to Sammy to bring another round. I took a pencil and pad from my trench coat pocket. I don't always take notes, but detectives on TV do it, and it's expected.

Like most clients, Buford recited his life story first, something I usually don't care about, but if you don't let them spill their guts, they'll keep trying. So, I am a good listener. A booth in a bar can be a kind of confessional.

"I'm a financier. Investment counselor. Big money. High-profile clientele. Moguls, movie stars, politicians. You ever read the financial section of the newspaper? Or the Wall Street Journal?"

"No. I figured I'd take that up after I make my second million."

"Already made your first?" He was probably wondering if I was a potential client.

"No. Gave up on that. Working on my second."

"That's why you don't know my name. I make a lot of money in investments."

"Ponzi? Like Madoff?"

"No. Not yet anyway. I know my shit. My clients all made money in 2008. There's a Rolls parked in the alley behind your office with a driver waiting to take me home to a twenty-two year old wife in a big house in the Heights. I want to keep the Rolls, the driver, and the house. Not to mention the wife. I need to hang onto my money."

"And you need help with that?"

"I do."

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