

Chapter 1: The Alley

Friday Night, 13 November 1998
Silver Spring, MD

SO I PEED behind a dumpster—sue me. But before you do, hear me out. Getting to a restroom tonight was out of the question. Sure, there’s a Gents inside the bar, but I couldn’t go near it. This goon named Mullet came looking for me earlier, see, so I had to bail out to the alley.

Mullet.

Am I scared of an angry man with a stupid haircut and an even stupider nickname? Yes, I am! See, due to a recent financial misunderstanding, Mullet wanted to have a “chat” with me. Luckily for yours truly, however, the “mullets” of our world abide by the age-old axiom: *dead men don’t pay*, so I knew if he grabbed me, something unpleasant might happen, but I wouldn’t be killed.

But out in the alley, there was an actual *killer*, a guy who bumped someone off not twenty feet from my dumpster *baño*. Did you hear me? Twenty feet! One moment I’m tending to my own business, the next I’m running for my life! I’d caught the attention of this murderer, see, who proceeded to chase me down the alley. I’m pursued to the rear of St. Paul’s Church, down its cellar steps, down into a crowded basement where I’m currently hiding.

Just relax, catch your breath—I’m talking to myself here, not you—*and stop panicking, or you’ll look like the winded idiot you are.*

Okay.

Now I’m not safe yet, but it’s better in this basement than being chased through the dark, so I guess I have time to introduce myself. My name’s Trevor, Trevor Pug. Think pug as in “rug” or the crumple-faced dog from *Men in Black*. Got a wife, a kid, a job . . . which isn’t important right now. The alley killer chased me a block and a half, see, and now he’s down here in this crowd somewhere, too, looking for me. I didn’t see him clearly in the alley, and I’m pretty sure he didn’t see me either—it was dark, my back was turned—but I can’t be sure.

So, the basement: it’s large, crowded with hundreds of folding chairs and all sorts of people. It’s one of those twelve-step meetings—everyone’s finding their seat. I don’t have a drinking problem myself, but like my dumpster wee-wee, this is an emergency, so thank God for drunks and their

well-attended AA meetings, 'cause that means the alley killer's got a couple hundred folks to sort through.

Got my breath under control now—that's the good news—but I'm still shaking. Have you ever tried to stop shaking on willpower alone? Try it sometime, tell me how you do.

Okay, the murder. I'm sure you're curious.

Picture this. It's 9:30 p.m. and dark, the kind of dark making my any-port-in-a-storm alley stop completely secluded, or so I thought. I was whizzing away behind this eight-foot-tall BFI dumpster when suddenly I heard voices, loud ones, so I closed my floodgates so as not to be caught urinating like some asshat. That done, I stuck my head around the dumpster. I was curious; I get that way when I drink. Just beyond the dumpster, there's a break in the alley wall, a twenty-foot cutout for a loading dock. There's a six-foot-tall chain link privacy fence in front of it, plus a door that's normally chained shut. I remember carefully stepping over an empty Blockbuster VHS sleeve to quietly get closer.

The voices were coming from behind the fence. I couldn't see through the mesh because it had those plastic slats weaved through it to block prying eyes—like mine, I guess. There was an unlocked padlock hanging from the fence door. I've never seen it unlocked. (I use this alley a lot.)

More on the alleyway: At one end of it there's a couple of no-pay parking spots along Loraine Boulevard, and at the other it's Georgia Avenue. Nelson Street, with its front-facing businesses, runs between them, paralleling the alley. I usually park in one of the Lorraine Blvd no-pays so I can walk up the backstreet to the rear entrances of my two favorite bars: Shorties and Hell.

And yes, you heard right. "Hell" is the official name on the liquor license—no fooling. It's where I usually start my Friday nights, like tonight. I'd arrived earlier through Hell's rear entrance. This was about 6:45, so still some daylight. (When it's full dark, I take the longer way along the well-lit Nelson St sidewalk to avoid the mugging I'd otherwise deserve.) I'd meant to get a quick beer before heading to Shorties for the book club, but I lost track of time—to be honest, three hours' worth.

But back to the unlocked gate. The fenced-off cut-out's maybe fifteen feet wide by thirty feet deep. Behind it is an elevated loading dock with a rolldown door. The business, Nelson's Paper Supplies, went belly-up five years ago, so no reason for anyone to be there. Well, no *good* reason, anyway. Yet here two guys stood, arguing. I eased up to the chain link. I still couldn't see them, but I could hear better. One guy had a high, nasal voice. This guy—turns out his name is Mark—sounded desperate, so it was easy to catch what he said. The other guy had a deeper, harder-to-hear voice. Between the two, this was what I heard:

"C'mon, man, I need it!" said Mark. "That's why you carry it, right?"

The thick voice: "For emergencies only."

"This *is* an emergency! My skin's crawlin'!"

"No, Mark," said Thick Voice. "You know what needs doing, you just aren't doing it."

"Sure I am!" Mark insisted. "Just need it for my nerves, then I'll go the distance."

"I wish you would, but we both know you won't."

"Sure I will!" Mark again insisted. "C'mon, man! Give it here!"

"No," said Thick Voice. "It stays in my pocket."

After a short silence, the Mark guy gives this enraged yell and a struggle begins. Someone grunted, then someone bounced off the chain link fence, flexing it loudly. I couldn't make out anything through the privacy slats, so I stepped closer to the fence gate—not because I was brave, but because Budweiser makes me curious—and I knew the slats on the fence door stopped a foot above the ground. If I crouched next to it, I could look underneath the door, so I did. Now I could make out footwear: dirty Nikes and a pair of scuffed work boots. I watched the shoes shuffle as they fought. Mark kept yelling "Gimmie! I need it!" and Thick Voice kept answering, "No you don't." The scuffle intensified. One of them got slammed hard against the loading bay wall, and . . . there was a fleshy, cracking noise. The one wearing the sneakers dropped, hitting the pavement with this awful *wunk* sound.

Thick Voice exclaimed, "Mark!"

Though the light at foot level was poor, I knew it was Mark of Nike shoe fame lying on the asphalt. He was badly hemorrhaging. Without help, he would surely die. I could also make out the killer's rawhide-laced boots. Seeing all this, I stood up to get away. Unfortunately, my clumsy foot kicked a bottle (*cau-clink-clink!*) and the bootman heard it. I began running. He rushed to the door, flinging it open and yelling, "Wait!"

I remembered thinking, *I don't think so, pal.*

The Bootman wasted no time pursuing me, his heavy boots clomping. I desperately wanted the well-lit freedom of Lorraine Blvd (and my car), but the Bootman blocked that direction, so I juked the other way toward Hell, back to where my dumpster adventure began.

As stupid as this sounds, I knew I needed to go to Hell as quickly as possible (haha)—Hell may be a sketchy bar, but it's crowded on Friday nights, so I'd be safe there. Then I remembered: Mullet! He was probably playing eight ball at the table near the backdoor (the one I'd vamoosed through earlier) keeping an eye on it just in case I was stupid enough to return. Now, running straight into a cue-wielding Mullet was a terrible plan

B, but it beat being caught by the murderous Bootman, so I went to Hell. (Haha again.) My reasoning: Mullet and his goon buddy, Rocker, wouldn't expect me to burst back inside like a bat out of . . . yeah, yeah, sorry. Once inside, I planned to swoop past them—please forgive me—through the Gates of Hell. Seriously, that's what the front doors are called.

Unfortunately, the weak light over Hell's back entrance revealed that the Bad Luck Express had just pulled in: a bored-looking Mullet stood in the alley, smoking. I flew toward him, involuntarily making eye contact. Surprised, he dropped his Winston to lunge at me. He was too slow, however, but with Hell blocked off, I had to keep barreling down the alley. "Wait!" Mullet yelled. My pursuer also blew past him, boots clomping hard.

Despite my need for self-preservation, I began slowing, Budweiser competing with adrenaline. In another hundred feet it wouldn't have mattered—I'd reach Georgia Avenue's well-lit six lanes of freedom. From there, I'd double back to Lorraine Blvd and my car.

The last building before the alley ended was St. Paul's Church, or more accurately, its rear basement steps. In front of them, blocking me from freedom, however, were a couple dozen smokers.

My choices: turn and face Bootman the Alley Killer or dive into the crowd. I dove, mumbling apologies as I forced my way to its center, supposedly the safest part. Just then, some bell I couldn't hear must have begun ringing. The smokers heard it though, 'cause they suddenly heeled their cigarettes, then began moving down the basement steps like livestock. It came to me then: *They're going to an AA meeting*. I thought about fighting my way back to Georgia Ave, but starting a shoving match with these people, some of them Mullet-sized, didn't seem wise. Plus, I figured this AA crowd should keep me, you know, *anonymous*. Once inside, I'd find another way out.

As the crowd moved along, I saw the figure of the Bootman behind me in the alley. Too many people to get a good look, but it must've been him—he was out of breath like me. To my horror, he too joined the herd. We entered the basement, trundling through a hallway like satisfied concertgoers, all small talk and laughter (them, not me). Somebody said hello, nodding like she knew me, but I just looked down, which made me unhappy because there were tons of boots. (Most of these people must work with their hands. Perhaps the Alley Killer does too.)

We passed by a kitchenette holding a huge coffee urn and a big candy bowl. Several people stopped for coffee, filling Styrofoam cups and pocketing Jolly Ranchers. There was a buzz—everyone was talking. We then entered a very large room, the one I'm in now—rows and rows of chairs with an aisle down the middle—seating for hundreds. The front of this room was higher than the rest, like a stage. On it, a wooden lectern was flanked

by folding tables; people were sitting behind them like contest judges. Kinda felt like a middle school assembly.

Which brings me to the present, as in right now. *Where do I sit?*

"Your first meeting?" asks an older African-American man. Picture Alex Haley, the guy who wrote *Roots*, then add wrinkles and thick glasses. "No, not my first," I say. I don't know why I lie—I've never been to an AA meeting in my life—but I do. "Not seen you here before," he says, extending his hand; his eye wrinkles tighten as he smiles. "Welcome. My name's Reggie." I don't know what to do, so I shake his hand and *boy* does he have a grip. I don't want to tell him my name.

Now I'm freaking out 'cause if I don't sit down soon, I'll be the standing, out-of-breath, easily identifiable guy. (Perhaps the Bootman's picked me out already! I can't express how much that possibility sucks.) Meanwhile, Reggie politely steers me to the last row where two middle seats remain. People graciously move their feet as we step past them. We sit.

Mouth to ear, Reggie whispers, "I can smell the alcohol." I panic—he's gonna throw me out! That kind of attention, hell, *any* kind of attention, is the last thing I need. "Don't worry, it's okay," Reggie says. "I wasn't sober my first meeting, either."

I'm confused; I'd already told him I'd been to an AA meeting before. How does he know I'm lying?

"Why don't you and I keep a low profile here in the back row," Reggie suggests.

"Really low, sir," I say. He chuckles. I look at my watch. It's almost 10:00. A few people in the row in front of us turn to acknowledge Reggie. They nod to me as well with this weird friendliness. I don't like it. Thanks to my brother Willie's exploits, my cult radar begins pinging: *The hard sell cometh*. But I tell myself, *Don't worry about what flavor of Kool-Aid's being served, just keep it together*.

"Figure you don't want to give your name," Reggie whispers to me.

"That's right."

Reggie smiles again. "I'd like to call you by something, though," he says. "How about I call you 'Bud?'"

"Sure," I say. "I've been called worse." I slouch in my folding chair, ball cap low over my eyes. I'm sneaking looks at people's feet, trying not to be obvious. Bad news: boots are everywhere, at least three dozen pairs.

I take a closer look at Reggie. I told you about the wrinkles, so add to that a wedding band, short-cropped gray hair, a paunch, a collared shirt, and a pair of navy slacks. And the Buddy Holly glasses. From his wardrobe, I imagine he's got mid-level responsibility, maybe a cab dispatcher or a head

clerk. Cult member or not, Reggie's not wearing boots, so he's not the Alley Killer. I love him for that.

There's some announcement I don't quite catch, but everyone simmers down hearing it. One of the table sitters, a mousy-looking woman, gets up and goes to the lectern to begin reading from some book. At certain points during her reading, everyone in the audience, Reggie included, chants along with her, which is creepy. After she's done reading, she introduces herself and everyone says "Hi, Janice!" She begins speaking.

"This place got a side entrance?" I ask Reggie during a pause.

"An escape hatch?" His smile says *yes*.

"Can you show me?"

"Afterward," he says, pointing toward the podium.

"How long's she gonna take?" I ask. In addition to escaping, I still need to pee.

"Is there somewhere you need to be, Bud?" Reggie whispers.

I shrug my shoulders.

"The meeting's an hour. Starts at ten, ends at eleven—strict about that. Listen to Janice. You might learn something."

I'm not here to learn anything, I'm here to hide, but since everyone's intent on Janice, I feign interest too. I silently review my problems. The first is Mullet's wanting to chat with me about money. The second, obviously, is having to hide from a murderer. Oh, there's a third problem: I've totally missed book club—Loo Spicotti, my co-chair, will be furious.

Some guy two rows forward has just turned around to stare at me. He's wearing scuffed boots with rawhide laces.

Bootman laces.