

ONE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2008

Three Vicodin, half a bottle of Pepto-Bismol, early on a bitterly cold morning. Frank Parrish stands in the narrow bathroom doorway of a derelict apartment, his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, his earpiece switched off, and inside his shoes he has no socks. He cannot recall where his socks are. He knows they are covered in someone else's puke.

There is a lot of blood in the bath tub ahead of him, and amidst the blood are two people. Thomas Franklin Scott, sitting there, legs outstretched, out of his mind on something harsh, and his crazy bitch of a girlfriend, name of Heather, leaning against him, her back to his chest. Parrish was told her surname, but he can't now recall it. There's a wide gash in her thigh, cut with a straight razor. Her blood has been flicked around the place like this is some kind of performance art thing, and now Tommy Scott has gotten it into his head that they are going to end it all here and now. Is everybody in? he asks. The ceremony is about to begin. Acidheads and fuck-ups. Just what's needed at eight o'clock on a Monday morning.

Tommy, Frank Parrish says. Tommy boy. For fuck's sake. This is bullshit.

Is it? Tommy says. Bullshit you say? He laughs coarsely. B-U-L-L-S-H-I-T.

I can spell, Tommy.

It's all a scam, Frank.

Tommy laughs again, forced and unnatural. He's scared, he's hot-wired.

I know it's a scam, Tommy, but you're young. How old are you, for Christ's sake?

Twenty-four last count. He laughs again, and then he starts to gag like there's something stuck in his windpipe.

Twenty-four? Jesus, man, that's young as anything, you got time, Tommy. Look at me. Forty-something years old and I'm in a fucked-up state most of the time. You don't want to wind up like me—

I already did, Frank. I already wound up no good. There ain't nothing happening here for people like us. Right, Heather, sweetheart?

But Heather is bleeding out. Her eyes are half-closed and her head is lolling back and forth like a string puppet. Nuuuuggghhh, she slurs, and Frank Parrish knows that she has maybe an hour, probably less. She looks terrible. Pale, real fucked up, thin and weak, her body ravaged by whatever the hell she's been chucking into it. Skag. H. Hardball. Sugarblock. All of it cut with baby laxative, Drano, talcum powder. She isn't gonna last long. No fight in her. Not anymore.

Tommy! For Christ's sake! How long we known each other?

You put me in juvy.

Frank smiles. Hell, you're right, man. I forgot about that. Shee-it, that's gotta count for something hasn't it? I put you in juvy. You lost your cherry with me. Fuck it, Tommy. Get out the fucking tub, get yourself cleaned up and we'll take your girl down the emergency room and go get some breakfast. You had any breakfast?

Nope.

So let's go get some. Bacon, some home fries maybe? You want some steak an' eggs? My treat.

Fuck it, Tommy says. He has the straight razor in his hand.

Nu-nu-nu-nuuuuggghhh, Heather slurs.

Tommy, man, come on.

Fuck it, Tommy says.

*Frank can hear the earpiece crackling at the end of the wire. Don't use negatives, they'll be telling him. Don't tell him what he can't have, what he can't do. Tell him what he *can* have and do. Positive influence. Make him feel that the world wants him. Use first names. Eye contact. Find his level.*

Fuckers. What do they know? Come live here for a week and tell me about positive influence, tell me how the world wants you so bad it's got a hard-on.

Tommy. Seriously now. Heather don't look so good, man. We gotta get her down to ER. They gotta put some stitches in her leg.

As if in response to Parrish's words Heather turns towards the wall and the scarlet mouth of a wound that gapes in her thigh oozes another quart of blood into the tub. Must have hit the femoral artery.

And Tommy is having a hard time sitting upright now. He's skidding, can't get purchase. He's got the straight razor in his hand and it's all going to hell in a hand basket.

He starts crying. Like a little kid. Like he bust a window with a football and he's been grounded and he's sorry, and there's no allowance for a month. He didn't mean to do it. Isn't there such a thing as an accident? It was an accident for God's sake, and now all this shit is coming down on him, hot and heavy, all this b-u-l-l-s-h-i-t . . .

Hey there, Frank says, his voice calm, soothing, comforting, paternal almost. Frank has kids. He says kids, but they're all grown up now. Caitlin and Robert. He's twenty-two, she's two years younger. They made it into college, they're doing good. At least when he last heard. Their mother is a nightmare in high heels and lip gloss. No, he shouldn't say that. He should be more tolerant. He should be more forgiving. Ah fuck it, she's a bitch.

So he says hey there, Tommy, his voice gentle and certain. Hey there, son. We can make it out the other side. It's gonna be okay, I promise.

You can't promise squat, Tommy says, and Frank notices how the razor catches the dull light through the window. The day is dull. A gray faceless nothing of a day. Not a good day to die.

You can't promise me anything, Frank. Whatever you say here means nothing. You're just gonna say whatever they've told you to say so I don't stick her, right?

Frank wishes he had his gun. Left it back there at the door. There were terms and conditions for getting this far. Leave the gun behind. Undo your shirt to the waist. Take that piece-of-shit listening thing out of your goddam ear. I don't want you having conversations with anyone but me. You get that, Frank? You get me on this one?

I get you, Frank had said, and he left his gun at the door, unhooked his earpiece, removed his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt . . . and out in the hallway there are maybe eight or ten other guys, negotiators, bullshit-artists of all descriptions, and they're all a hell of a lot more qualified to deal with this, and all of them are straight-up sober, whereas Frank is slugging his way through the shadow of three days of drinking. Enough Bushmills and he's sick like a baby. He doesn't have enough Irish blood in him to stand up against the onslaught.

But Tommy Scott has been arrested half a dozen times by Frank Parrish. Tommy knows Frank's name. So when there's a call about some asshole with a straight razor cutting up his girlfriend in a

bathtub, when a uniform gets down here and calls it in, it's Tommy who says Get me Parrish. Get me Frank fucking Parrish or I'll stick her in the fucking throat right fucking now!

So here he is. Shoes without socks. Puke stains down the front of his pants. No gun. No earpiece. Early Monday morning after three days of Bushmills, and he feels like the Devil raked him a new asshole and turned his guts inside out.

Okay, so we're done playing games now, he says. He's beginning to fray at the edges. He wants out. He wants to go home. He wants to take a shower, find some clean socks, get a cup of coffee and a smoke. He's had enough of Tommy Scott and his dumb cooze of a girlfriend, and he wishes they'd get the fucking thing over with one way or the other.

And that's what Tommy does.

Fuck it baby one more time, he sings, and he pulls that straight razor right up against the side of her face, and then he jerks it round like he's pulling the whipcord on a chainsaw.

Blood – what little of it she has left – jettisons up the wall to Tommy's left, and sprays back against the shower curtain.

NO-O-O! Frank hears himself holler, but there's something so magnetic about what he's seeing, something so horrifyingly compelling, that he's rooted to the spot, right there in his puke-spattered brogues, and it's all he can do to lunge forward when Tommy Scott takes that straight razor and cuts his own throat.

Takes some fucking balls to do that, Frank will say later. Takes some stainless steel fucking balls to cut your own throat, and cut it deep like he did.

Tommy didn't bleed out earlier. Tommy ain't no sapling. He's gotta be five eleven, maybe one hundred and seventy-five pounds, and when he opens up his jugular it comes rushing out of there like a street-corner fire hydrant in the height of summer.

Frank gets a mouthful. It's in his eyes, his hair, all over his tee-shirt. Even as he's struggling to get a grip of the kid, even as he's trying to pull him up out of the bathtub and lay him on the floor so he can push some fingers into the wound and stop the blood . . . Even as he's doing this he's wondering whether Tommy Scott is HIV Positive, or if he's got AIDS or hepatitis or something.

Two minutes, maybe three tops, and Heather something-or-other will be as dead as it gets.

Frank Parrish manages to haul them out of the tub. Later he won't

even remember how he did it. Where the strength came from. It's all a mess of twisted arms and legs. Blood everywhere. More blood than he's ever seen. He's kneeling over Tommy Scott, who's now on the bathroom rug twitching and gibbering like he's got his fingers in a socket, and the blood won't stop coming. Frank is holding the guy's neck hard enough to choke the poor bastard, but there's some horsepower back of this thing, and it keeps on coming, keeps on coming, keeps on coming . . .

Heather is gone. She's deadweight. Not a prayer.

Fuck it, Frank, is the last thing that Tommy Scott says. The words are choked through a throatful of blood, but Frank hears him good and clear.

He dies with a smile on his face, like he believes whatever is waiting for him is one hell of a lot better than whatever he's leaving behind.

Frank sits back against the side of the tub. He has blood all over him and it's starting to dry. The negotiator comes back to the bathroom, wastes no time telling him how he fucked it up, how he could have saved their lives.

Saved their lives? Frank asks him. For what, exactly?

And the negotiator looks right back at him with that expression they all do. Heard about you, that expression says. Heard all about you, Frank Parrish.

And Frank says Fuck you.

Once upon a time – he can't remember when – someone asked Frank Parrish why he chose the job.

Frank remembers how he smiled. How he said, You ever get the feeling that maybe the job chose me?

He pulls himself to his feet and goes in search of a smoke.