

# ONE

PAUL FARRINGTON WAS A face-to-face guy. Want to talk business? Set up a meet. He didn't mess with texting, conference calls, or e-mails. Nothing traceable.

Except when it came to family. Madge, his source of marital bliss for 23 years, and Isabella, his precious jewel, liked to talk on the cell before bed when they weren't all home together, so here he was driving with a Bluetooth jammed into his ear.

"Hon, I get the picture, lots of rich people on and off campus. Still, she'll fit in."

Two blocks from their home, the GPS screen mounted on his beloved Caddie's dashboard blinked red three times. The modifications Brisbane had made were paying off, alerting him that someone had tripped the perimeter monitors on his property.

Farrington cut the headlights, spun the wheel sharply right, and plunged the car off the street and onto Mrs. Ferguson's driveway. Sweet old gal would be sleeping for hours by now; no worries about borrowing her space. "Bottom line: did she like Yale?"

"With reservations, yes. Izzie wants to see the other campuses before making any decisions."

He popped the modified GPS off its dashboard perch and secured it right over his watch face. "That's my girl," he smiled, tapping a button that caused the blinking light to be replaced with a directional indicator that pointed northeast and read *.25 mi.* "And, hey, we need to start

calling her Isabella; what kind a name is Izzie for an Ivy Leaguer?"

"Don't set your heart on it, sweetie, Izzie and I were just talking about whether we can even afford any of these colleges."

Switching off the interior car light, he opened the car door silently, slipped out, crept to the rear of the vehicle, popped the trunk soundlessly. "Bella wrote a perfect score on the SATs, hon; she's going to a top school. I'll delay retirement a few years, so what? We will afford whatever she needs, and that's final."

Farrington quietly shifted two pieces of luggage, allowing him to extract a 50 caliber Action Express Desert Eagle, personally modified by Brisbane with a silencer equal in length to the monster handgun.

"Whatever you say," Madge yawned, signaling both surrender and the beginning of their cherished nightly ritual.

He screwed the gun parts together. Now the gun looked like he was carrying a short cane. "So tomorrow you two head up to Boston, scout the colleges we agreed upon. If I can get an extra few days off, I'll join you. If not, we switch luggage at Newark Airport Friday at 1700 hours, and fly out on Continental at 1800. I got your warm weather stuff all packed and in the trunk already."

"Our clothes will be a million wrinkles!"

He slid night vision goggles over his eyes. "Not the way I pack, hon. Semper Fi, baby."

"Izzie reserves the right to have everything pressed when we get to Disney World."

"You women have no faith in military training. Our schedules all set, boss?"

"Yes, thank you."

"So, we ready for goodnight smooches?"

She blew him a kiss. He did the same, then killed the

line. One of the keys to success in their marriage was never saying goodbye; they just let the bliss continue.

Farrington pocketed the Bluetooth, turned off the cell, then disappeared silently into the foliage leading to his upper Rockland County home. He took his time, moving without sound toward the invader.

Fact was senior partners at The Company had been dropping lately due to “heart attacks,” “aneurisms,” and other natural causes from which rich people weren’t supposed to die. This little visit confirmed his suspicions; someone was orchestrating a sophisticated, silent coup. And whomever it was had realized Farrington would be contracted for defense. Eliminating him was an understandable objective. But at his home? Where his wife slept? Where his daughter felt safe? Big mistake.

He approached their property from behind that little gurgling artificial waterfall Madge recently had installed. He never understood the attraction but the sound covered his approach; at least now he could write it off as a business expense.

He saw his target 50 feet away, laying in wait among those rose bushes Madge tended over slavishly. The would-be hit man was young. “Trying to burn the old man, huh,” Farrington thought, bristling just a bit. “Take my place?” He raised the Eagle, using both hands to prep for the horse kick to come, and aimed for the assassin’s trigger hand. “You ain’t burning me, kid,” he smirked at the notion, “I got bills.”

Even with the extensive silencer, the shot sounded like muffled thunder. The assassin’s hand exploded. To his credit, the younger man came up firing with his other.

Admirable, but one calm trigger squeeze from Farrington and the shooter was headless. Couldn’t have bullets flying through neighbors’ windows; it would draw attention. Too bad about the kid’s head, though, Farring-

ton noted. He would have liked to question the guy as he bled out, confirm who'd done the hiring, trim down his own To Do list.

The problem was clear, the solution simple. If his genius daughter, currently a high school junior, was going Ivy League as he dreamed, Farrington needed to work. Private special ops never made anyone a millionaire, despite what Hollywood movies suggested, and his line of employment didn't come with 501ks, pension plans, disability or annuities. Unwilling to drain the nest egg to pay college expenses, he had to sustain the income his family was used to, and he was now too old to go out on the open market. Demolition guys, cleaners, fixers, black ops from the Iraq and Afghanistan messes were crowding the field these days. Sure, no one had the whole package like he did, but they were younger, worked cheaper, and were less demanding—a blight on the profession, to be honest, and a pain in his ass. Bottom line, he'd have to remove anyone who might have knowledge of this contract. It was the right thing to do; remove the obstacle set before his family. Simple logic.

The Company was about to get an overhaul, and he would not let it stick to him.

Breaking his no business calls policy, Farrington speed-dialed a number, listened to the pre-recorded greeting, then said, "Connect with IS – 3860."

A whirr, a click, and a hum later, he heard Brisbane's perennially cheerful voice. "Scrambling are we? How Jack Bauer of you."

"We still on for tomorrow night?"

"Of course. Rich old sods rocking at 8, yes?"

"Let's get there a bit earlier. I need to go shopping."

"Identity theft! How delicious."

## TWO

THE CORPSE CAME WITH footnotes.

That's what the Lieu said to get Detective Frank Mallory to drag his ass in on his day off, leaving his family and the promise of his in-law's legendary homemade lasagna. Approaching the crime scene now against his wishes, Mallory pushed his usually swift pace even faster, weaving his way efficiently through gawking civilians, old school aviator shades hiding the frustration blazing in his eyes.

Let the rest of Manhattan's Major Case Squad study the vic, reportedly a white male, 19, found bludgeoned. They can figure out why a Brooklyn kid would be way up on 10th Avenue and 215th Street. He wanted that lasagna. A twinge of guilt amended his thought: and family, too. Of course. Loved his family. Loved them. And definitely wanted to be with them. But that lasagna, damn shame to leave that, especially to consult on someone else's case. Again. No. He refused to get sucked into someone else's catch. Not this time.

Not when there's Sicilian made-from-scratch lasagna at stake.

Hustling across 215th, Mallory noticed a well-dressed couple carrying fresh palms from Palm Sunday mass ambling toward the crime scene, casually curious. He slowed momentarily, waved them off with a nonchalant hand. "You folks don't want to ruin your beautiful morning," he said. "Today's for family, not this." Smiling

their little embarrassed smiles, they changed direction obediently.

Mallory's partner, Detective Alberto "Gunner" Genaro, waited for him at the corner, nodding along with the sway of the well-dressed woman's curvaceous butt as she sashayed away. "I love them womens in their Sunday finest..." he sang, kind of. The bigger, sloppier man fell in step alongside Mallory, his immense bulk matching his partner's near trot effortlessly. "What's the plan?"

"Get in, consult, get out quick. Gina's parents made lasagna."

"So I'm coming home with you."

"Might as well. Gina's gonna put a plate aside for you anyway."

"I love that woman. You ever get killed in the line of duty, I'm marrying her."

"It comes to that I'm shooting you before I die."

They hustled toward the subway entrance where the 1, 2, 3, and 9 lines ran, arriving just as the Crime Scene Unit finally finished. Ever since all those *CSI* shows hit it big, these guys had become prima donnas. Work that used to take an hour tops now routinely lasted two to three.

A couple of vets smirked as the partners zipped past. "Hey look, Mulder and Scully are on the scene," one cracked.

Another joined in. "Told you it was aliens."

Mallory bristled. Gunner covered: "O'Connor, quit pimping your sisters, Moldy and Skull Fuck. I told ya before, we ain't interested in no five dollar hoes."

Mallory frowned. "I hate that Mulder and Scully crap. Can't we just be part of the squad?"

"Aww, they're just jealous 'cause we're so pretty," Gunner smirked. "Anyway, we ain't long for this place; look at these all-stars," he nodded toward the paunchy, disheveled, sleep-deprived detectives standing off to the

side, a few reading from small reporter's notebooks, comparing information, most just drinking coffee. "Clearly, these foot-long studs have the case by the short hairs already."

Mallory and Gunner ducked under the tape, then descended the subway entrance stairs into the crime scene.

Spotlights illuminated the body, one hand melodramatically lashed to a thick, dark metal gate with what appeared to be his belt. The rest of him lay amid garbage: a flyer for Hustler Magazine's West Side strip club, McDonald's wrappers, an empty Poland Springs water bottle, and a sodden copy of *The New York Post*, its headline screaming: *DIET CANCER!*

Above the body to the right was a billboard featuring a smug Paris Hilton advertising some new fragrance. Another on the opposite wall announced a new CD from some rapper named Playa. A young, equally smug African-American stared out from that ad. Neither Paris nor Playa copped to having seen anything.

Mallory tugged up the legs of his pants, crouching over the victim, then traced the whole body at a painstaking crawl. Flies buzzed around the corpse, other insects crawled across its cold skin. Someone, probably the killer, had poured a sweet substance over the body to attract bugs and vermin. Mallory grimaced, then admonished himself: detach.

The back of the head had been bludgeoned. A broken leg lay at an odd angle, suggesting the vic most likely received the head trauma at the top of the stairs then fell. Blood covered the body. The sweet-smelling sticky liquid poured on the corpse was almost definitely bourbon, and had reduced the neck, arms and hips to a feast for flies, ants, roaches, and rats. The latter habitually fled when Crime Scene arrived, leaving only disgusting, telltale bite

marks including almost the whole pinky on the left hand. But the bugs had stubbornly remained. They crawled across the vic's faded black Ozzfest T-shirt, which featured a circular burn at the chest.

Gunner nudged Mallory. "C'mon Mal, you said we were in and out. Let's allow these fine detectives to work their own magic."

Mallory pulled plastic gloves from his jacket pocket, wrestled them onto his hands.

"Mal, we need no part of this dead end. The Lieu called you—and me as your loyal partner—because he believes you make his headaches go away. But this one is gonna ruin your battin' average."

"Good." Mallory started checking pockets, swatting the bugs off in the process.

Gunner threw up his hands. "Don't start, Mal. We got plans, kid. There's lasagna waiting—your in-law's home-made, Heaven-on-Earth lasagna. And then I'm goin' out to the Hamptons to nail this old high school crush of mine I saw at the reunion – Donna Marie Callabuffo. We can't let someone else's case keep me from that well-preserved piece of ass."

"Why take the time to pour liquor on this kid after he was already dead? Was someone trying to light this guy up or attract all these bugs?"

"Who gives a flying fuck? He ain't our catch. You hate when they call us in like this, the rest of the squad hates when we get called in like this. Think of everyone's morale, buddy."

The weather was unseasonably warm for April. A distinctly warmer breeze came from the subway entrance. Hot, actually. A dry, thick gust blew out from the blackened grime of the tunnel, greasy and humid. The foul-smelling breeze gave brief life to something directly above the victim. Flapping back and forth in the filthy wind was a



once-white concert T-shirt celebrating The Who's current tour. It was now stained bloody red.

"That took some effort," Gunner murmured, "and some balls. Amazing no one saw him tying this thing to the top of the gate."

"You noticed the shirt, huh? Nice detective work. For a change." A voice from behind. Nasal. Annoying. Familiar. "So, what's the latest from the Twilight Zone?"

Mallory gazed up at an impossibly thin detective smirking under a thick mustache. He murmured to Gunner, "That's one."

Detective Edward "Tizzie" Dunn was another member of the Manhattan South Major Case Squad. Due to his penchant for arguing vehemently in an increasingly shrill voice, some sergeant from long ago had warned Dunn not to "fly into a tizzie" and it stuck. "Lieutenant Dan called in his best boy, huh? Well, all I can say is thanks. I'm glad I'm not stuck with this loser. It's better suited to your, ahhh, talents."

Mallory's mouth tightened into a frown. Gunner barely heard him say, "Two."

"You gonna close this with one of your creep show theories again, Mallory? Was it another goat sacrificer?"

Gunner smiled, raised three fingers, then patted Mallory's clenching fist. "I got this," he said. Then he raised up his bulk to full height, and looked down on the scrawny, obnoxious sneer of a man. "Detective Dunn, thank your sister for last night. Best anal I've had since your mother moved to Florida. Not quite as good at giving head as your Dad though, is she? Maybe your baby brother can give her some pointers. He's especially dedicated to knob polishing, I hear. Almost as good as you are."

Dunn spat out consonants, saliva spewing from his lips. "You c-c-can't—"

Mallory cut him off. "If we're done playing the

dozens, maybe we can play detective now? Why don't you start by filling us in?"

"You—he can't talk to me like that!"

"I can. I did. You lost," Gunner said.

Mallory edged past Gunner, stepping uncomfortably close to Tizzie. "Embrace the life lesson, Tizzie."

Dunn's lips twitched. "Somebody needs to teach your partner—"

Mallory and Gunner turned as one, walked up the stairs. Mallory made sure he spoke loud enough for the other detectives and the brass to hear. "Detective Dunn, of course we will respect your desire to keep investigating this case alone—"

Tizzie's voice became shriller than usual. "I welcome your assistance, detectives. Here's what we know—"

The partners listened.

"We believe the victim, identified from his driver's license as William Hill of Brooklyn, received a fatal head trauma from behind, fell down the stairs during which he received several other injuries. Torso was then burned, and subsequently soaked with liquor, probably post-mortem. Other wounds include numerous vermin bites to neck and arms."

Mallory nodded. "What's the story with the T-shirt flag?"

The annoying detective glanced at it, then back at Mallory. "That's one of the reasons the Lieu called you. Yeah, I know I've got to sign off on this case because I'm technically the primary, but this one's made for you."

Gunner glanced from the flapping T-shirt to the body then to Tizzie. "He go to the show?"

"How did you know—?"

Mallory pointed up, Gunner answered. "The Who played the Garden last night. He was there, right?"

Tizzie laughed. The sound was harsh, like glass