

The Family Family

The office was yellow, too damn yellow for Scott's taste. It looked like happiness had walked into the room and vomited all over the walls. Five bright blue plastic chairs sat around and a rainbow-colored magazine rack held old copies of *Athletics Illustrated*, *Better Dwellings and Yards* and a couple of the industry trades. A small fake plant leaned in the corner, old and covered in dust; it looked almost sad when compared with the rest of the room. Scott sat silently waiting for the receptionist to call his name.

He glanced at the posters on the wall: *Buttercup Brigade*, *Willow Station*, *The Secret of Seventeen*, *Banjo & Tenderfoot*. These were the feel-good family shows the network specialized in. It made him wonder why in the hell they had asked for a meeting. He adjusted in his seat and checked his watch. It was 10:05.

He had arrived on time, actually one minute late, for his meeting with Mr. Sharp at 9:30 and had been waiting ever since. Shit, was he going to wait out here forever? Scott

looked around the office for something to occupy his mind. Other than the magazines, there was nothing. The receptionist was typing away at her computer, completely ignoring him.

When he had walked in and told her he was there to see Mr. Sharp, she had given him a look like he was playing a practical joke. She sarcastically asked if he had an appointment. He replied in the affirmative so she searched Mr. Sharp's appointment book and found his name. "Mr. Scotter-son," she had said in a dull monotone that had a twinge of anger in it, "have a seat and Mr. Sharp will see you when he is ready." At that she had turned her head back to her computer and continued typing. Scott wondered: was she using company time to send an e-mail? Maybe she was drafting a letter for her boss? Maybe she was pretending to type, all the while watching a muted horse porn video on the Internet? The last thought made Scott snicker and she shot him a quick, glaring, evil eye and went back to her keyboard. Scott grabbed a magazine.

Range was the name of the trade; it had a picture of Grant Tomb on the front coming out of one of the posh Hollyweird restaurants with some wannabe actress drunkenly hung on his arm. Scott couldn't tell which restaurant it was. It looked like it might be Lucky's or maybe Vermicelli's. God knows he had been to all of them at one time or another. He shook his head at the cover, thinking that Grant Tomb had about as much range as a concrete block. He flipped through the pages, giving each story a cursory glance. Towards the back there was a one-page write-up about the tenth anniversary of *Give It*

to Me Good. Apparently it got picked up by CBN and was going to be rerun during the holiday break. Scott read the article, smiling at the names of the actors and writers he had worked with on that project. His name was mentioned a few times along with words such as “brilliant,” “hilarious,” and “has-been.” The last barb gave Scott a tightening feeling in his stomach and he put the magazine back in its rack.

He rubbed his hands on his cheek. He had always done that when he got nervous. Now he was starting to feel not just nervous, but desperate. He didn’t know how many more chances he was going to get, but it seemed like the last chance machine was starting to hitch and smoke. Soon it would be broken. “Mr. Scotterson, you can go in now,” the receptionist said. Scott stood up and smoothed his hands across his jeans.

“Thanks,” he said, then under his breath, “enjoy the horse porn.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. Mr. Sharp’s office is on the left?”

“His name is on the door.” She rolled her eyes like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Thanks.” Scott walked down the long, narrow corridor that served as the gateway to the offices of the Alive Network. He passed the doors of one vice president after another. He wondered how many hit shows had been dreamed up behind these doors. Better yet, how many had been killed before they ever saw the light of day? The Alive Network wasn’t known for putting out garbage comedies and half-season piles of shit. Lately both of those had been Scott’s specialty. A man

stepped out of an office; fat and pasty, he was a walking heart attack waiting to happen. He gave Scott a quick glance and muttered something under his breath. Scott stepped to the side and let the man pass. “Ratings Vice President” was stamped in gold lettering on his office door and underneath that, “Ron Sconejelly.” Scott figured that had to be a tough job these days, especially at this network. He continued down the hall and stopped in front of the last one on the left. “Network Vice President” was on the nameplate. Beneath that it said “Razor Sharp.” Scott told himself to relax. He knew that the network must be in a bind if they were calling him in to write; in fact, they must have their balls in a vice. “Fuck me,” he said, “nothing but your career.” He opened the door, and walked in.

The office was expansive and nicely furnished. It was nothing like the waiting room Scott had just been in. Dark mahogany shelves filled with DVDs lined one wall, a massive flat screen hung on the opposite wall, and a leather couch was parked in the middle of the room. Mr. Sharp was seated at a desk signing checks. Behind him a gigantic window offered spectacular views of the city below. He raised his hand and waived Scott in. Scott took a seat in a leather chair and waited for Sharp to finish his signing. “I see you found our office. Thank you for coming,” Mr. Sharp said. He raised his head and gave Scott a nod. His face was serious and deeply tanned. Scott didn’t think he had ever seen hair so full, silver and magnificent. The black Armani suit and large, gaudy rings he wore made him look like the Godfather.

“My pleasure, Mr. Sharp. I was surprised when I got the call. I didn’t think your network employed writers like me.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here, Mr. Scotterson, or Scott. Can I call you Scott?”

“Whatever you like, Mr. Sharp.”

“It’s Razor.”

“Okay. Razor,” Scott said as he rubbed his hands on his cheeks.

“Do you drink, Scott?”

“Um... I have the occasional Scotch,” he lied. Razor pushed a button on his phone.

“Meredith, two glasses of the Johnny Blue.” He looked at Scott, “Neat or on the rocks?”

“Rocks.”

“Ice in both, Meredith. Thank you.”

“Yes, Mr. Sharp.”

Razor stood and walked over to the windows, his back to Scott. “Scott, I want you to know that the Alive Network has a reputation and a tradition for the finest in family programming. Our shows are uplifting, inspiring. They have a certain moral compass. We don’t show vulgarity and we don’t pander to the public’s appetite for sex, drugs, or violence. Our viewers are mostly women, but they are also strong family men, children, and grandparents, people who are looking for a certain quality when they watch a TV show. Some people watch our shows because it makes them cry, it makes others laugh, but mostly it just makes people feel good. It has been that way for nearly a decade now,” he paused, “but things are chang-

ing. We're getting ruined by the edgier networks with their crime dramas, their over-the-top comedies and their highly sexual reality TV. I think it's filth. I mean, what's next? I keep expecting to flip on the TV and see some albino hooker blowing a donkey while some contestant tries to do back flips over the hooker's flaming tits, all the while singing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' and shoving a candy bar up his ass." Scott made a mental note to remember that last line. To him it sounded like TV gold. "Are you familiar with our number-one show?"

"I've seen an episode or two. I have to be honest, it's not really my thing. I'm more into the TV you just talked about – hell, that's the stuff I write about."

"I know that Scott. I've seen your work. I must say I thought *Life in My Ass* was absolutely appalling but I did enjoy your miniseries *Give It to Me Good*. It was a little over the top but still entertaining." Razor resumed his seat at the desk. Scott smiled a little; *Life in My Ass* was pretty bad. "That is what I am getting at, Scott. All of these other networks have storylines that are completely over the top. Why, I just watched three different crime dramas last week in which all three had their lead law enforcement character accused of murder. Of course they were all found to not be responsible in the end, but it's a bullshit storyline. Same with the boring and tired pregnant storyline, or the main characters who end up falling in love bit. It's crap, and here at Alive you won't find weak stories like that." The door opened and Meredith walked in

with two glasses of Scotch. She handed a glass to Razor and then roughly put Scott's on the desk. Scott picked it up.

"There's no ice," he said. Meredith gave him a glaring look.

"Whoops," she said.

"That will be all Meredith, thank you," said Razor.

Meredith let out a gruff "Huff!" and left the room.

"Jeez, did I do something to her?" Scott asked.

"No, she's just not a fan of your writing," Razor said chuckling a little. "When I told her you were coming in she said, and I quote, 'That asshole who wrote *Queenslander*?'"
Razor was referring to Scott's one and only attempt at dramatic TV. *Queenslander* was supposed to be a love story set in Australia, but sometime during the writing process things went off the rails and instead of a love story, it just turned into forty-five minutes of the main character, Quimby Queenslander, hauling ass through the Outback in a sports car killing kangaroos with an Uzi. It only lasted two episodes.

Razor raised his glass in a toast fashion, Scott followed suit and they both sipped. The Scotch burned a trail of liquid lava all the way down into Scott's stomach. "Back to what I was saying, unfortunately, the general public eats those storylines up like a junkie doing lines of coke. I mean they love it, and it doesn't matter how many times you run the story, they still watch. And they are not watching us. Scott I am going to be completely honest with you here and I hope that this can all remain confidential."

"My lips are sealed," Scott said.

“Good. The last thing I need is a bunch of reporters staking out my parking spot.” Razor took another sip of his Scotch. “The Alive Network is going under. Our ratings have tanked, our sponsors are running for the hills, and our number-one show, *The Family Family*, is getting its ass kicked all over Thursday nights. As much as I hate to say it we need to add some spice to the storylines. We need to rub a little jalapeño in the eyes of the show and throw some gasoline on the fire. We need to start taking some risks. We need to start running storylines that nobody has ever seen before and it needs to happen now. That is why I need you, Scott. I need you to write my show, I need you to make it a hit again.” Razor sat back in his chair and let his words sink in. Scott was confused. He was the writer of such piles of shit as *Booger Town*, *The Flying Island*, and *Rudy Sausage: The Ice Cream Spy*. He didn’t write family drama – it just wasn’t his thing.

“I think you may have the wrong guy,” Scott said. “I mean, do you know what kind of stuff I write? Have you seen my comedy *Booger Town*? I’m vulgar and offensive. I think I would run your audience right out of their living rooms.”

“Scott, don’t you think I’ve thought of that? Don’t you think I tried every other option out there before calling you in here? Believe me, I have. But our researchers say that if we go completely out there with the second half of the season we may be able to salvage the network and at the very least draw in a whole new demographic of viewers. I need you. The network needs you. Besides, I don’t see any of the major networks beating a path to your door. Last I heard you were a

month late on your mortgage payment and in danger of having your car repossessed.” Scott’s mind was racing. Could he do this? He would probably just fuck it up and get fired the first week. God knows it wouldn’t be the first time. There’s no way they would let him write what he knew he would end up writing, just no way. They would run him out of town and never let him back. He would be done, finished. “Scott Scotterson fucks up another writing gig, what a surprise,” they’d say... although if he didn’t take this job he was done anyway.

“I’ll need to know that my ideas are final no matter how over the top and ridiculous.”

“Okay,” Razor agreed.

“You’ll communicate this to the other writers and the actors?”

“Yes. There will be no problems.”

“What I write goes on the screen.”

“Of course.”

“Well, then I think you may have just saved your TV show, Mr. Sharp – Razor.” Scott stood and extended his hand to Razor. Razor shook it with a powerful grip, but his hands were like supple leather. Scott smiled; fire danced in his eyes. Already his mind was a flurry of ideas and stories. This was his ticket back. He felt very much like jumping up and down and screaming at the top of his lungs, but he quelled the urge and swallowed the rest of his drink.

After Scott had left, Razor sat in his chair staring out the window. “God help us,” he said.