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# ROBERT CRAIS

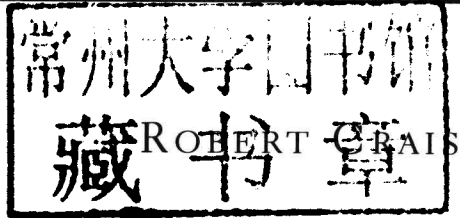
## THE FIRST RULE





# The First Rule

*A Joe Pike Novel*



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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## **The First Rule**

## ALSO BY ROBERT CRAIS

*Chasing Darkness**The Watchman**The Two Minute Rule**The Forgotten Man**The Last Detective**Hostage**Demolition Angel**L.A. Requiem**Indigo Slam**Sunset Express**Voodoo River**Free Fall**Lullaby Town**Stalking the Angel**The Monkey's Raincoat*

*for my friend,*

*Harlan Ellison,*

*whose work, more than any other,  
brought me to this place.*

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The organized criminal gangs from the fifteen republics of the former Soviet Union are governed by what they call the “Vorovskoy Zakon” — the thieves’ code — which is comprised of eighteen written rules. The first rule is this:

*A thief must forsake his mother, father, brothers, and sisters.  
He must not have a family — no wife, no children.  
We are his family.*

If any of the eighteen rules are broken, the punishment is death.





*Gotta do that right thing*  
*Please*  
*Please*  
*Please*  
*Someone be that hard thing*  
*For me*

—DECONSTRUCTED CHILD



FRANK MEYER CLOSED HIS COMPUTER as the early winter darkness fell over his home in Westwood, California, not far from the UCLA campus. Westwood was an affluent area on the Westside of Los Angeles, resting between Beverly Hills and Brentwood in a twine of gracious residential streets and comfortable, well-to-do homes. Frank Meyer—more surprised about it than anyone else, considering his background—lived in such a home.

Work finished, Frank settled back in his home office, listening to his sons crash through the far side of the house like baby rhinos. They made him happy, and so did the rich scent of braising beef that promised stew or *boeuf bourguignon*, which he never pronounced correctly but loved to eat. Voices came from the family room, too far away to make out the program, but almost certainly the sound of a game show on television. Cindy hated the nightly news.

Frank smiled because Cindy didn't much care for game shows, either, but she liked the background sound of the TV when she cooked. Cindy had her ways, that was for sure, and her ways had changed his life. Here he was with a lovely home, a growing business, and a wonderful family—all of it owed to his wife.

Frank teared up, thinking how much he owed that woman. Frank was like that, sentimental and emotional, and had always been that way. As Cindy liked to say, Frank Meyer was just a big softy, which is why she fell in love with him.

Frank worked hard to live up to her expectations, and considered it a privilege—beginning eleven years ago when he realized he loved her and committed to reinventing himself. He was now a successful importer of garments from Asia and Africa, which he resold to wholesale chains throughout the United States. He was forty-three years old, still fit and strong, though not so much as in the old days. Okay, well—he was getting fat, but between his business and the kids, Frank hadn't touched the weights in years, and rarely used the treadmill. When he did, his efforts lacked the zeal that had burned fever-hot in his earlier life.

Frank didn't miss that life, never once, and if he sometimes missed the men with whom he had shared it, he kept those feelings to himself and did not begrudge his wife. He had re-created himself, and, by a miracle, his efforts had paid off. Cindy. The kids. The home they had made. Frank was still thinking about these changes when Cindy appeared at the door, giving him a lopsided, sexy grin.

"Hey, bud. You hungry?"

"Just finishing up. What am I smelling? It's fabulous."

Pounding footsteps, then Little Frank, ten years old and showing the square, chunky build of his father, caught the doorjamb beside his mother to stop himself, stopping so fast his younger brother, Joey, six and just as square, crashed into Little Frank's back.

Little Frank shouted, "Meat!"

Joey screamed, "Ketchup!"

Cindy said, "Meat and ketchup. What could be better?"

Frank pushed back his chair, and stood.

"Nothing. I'm dying for meat and ketchup."

She rolled her eyes and turned back toward the kitchen.

"You've got five, big guy. I'll hose off these monsters. Wash up and join us."

The boys made exaggerated screams as they raced away, passing Ana, who appeared behind Cindy. Ana was their nanny, a nice girl who had been with them almost six months. She had bright blue eyes, high cheek-

bones, and was a fantastic help with the kids. Another perk of Frank's increasing success.

Ana said, "I'm going to feed the baby now, Cindy. You need anything?"

"We've got it under control. You go ahead."

Ana looked in at Frank.

"Frank? Anything I can do?"

"I'm good, hon. Thanks. I'll be along in a minute."

Frank finished putting away his paperwork, then pulled the shades before joining his family for dinner. His office, with its window facing the nighttime street, was now closed against the darkness. Frank Meyer had no reason to suspect that something unspeakable was about to happen.

AS FRANK ENJOYED DINNER with his family, a black-on-black Cadillac Escalade slow-rolled onto his street from Wilshire Boulevard, the Escalade boosted earlier that day from a shopping center in Long Beach, Moon Williams swapping the plates with an identical black Escalade they found outside a gentlemen's club in Torrance. This was their third time around the block, clocking the street for pedestrians, witnesses, and civilians in parked cars.

This time around, the rear windows drooped like sleepy eyes, and street lights died one by one, Jamal shooting them out with a .22-caliber pellet pistol.

Darkness followed the Escalade like a rising tide.

Four men in the vehicle, black cutouts in the shadowed interior, Moon driving, Moon's boy Lil Tai riding shotgun, Jamal in back with the Russian. Moon, eyes flicking between the houses and the white boy, wasn't sure if the foreigner was a Russian or not. What with all the Eastern Bloc assholes runnin' around, boy coulda been Armenian, Lithuanian, or a muthuhfuckin' Transylvanian vampire, and Moon couldn't tell'm apart. All Moon knew, he was makin' more cash since hookin' up with the foreign muthuhfucka chillin' behind him than any time in his life.

Still, Moon didn't like him back there, money or not. Didn't want that creepy, glassy-eyed muthufucka behind him. All these months, this was the first time the fucka had come with them. Moon didn't like that, either.

Moon said, "You sure now, homeboy? That house right there?"

"Same as last time we passed, the one like a church."

Moon clocked a nice house with a steep roof and these gargoyle-lookin' things up on the eaves. The street was wide, and lined with houses all set back on big sloping lawns. These homes, you'd find lawyers, business-people, the occasional dilettante drug dealer.

Lil Tai twisted around to grin at the white boy.

"How much money we gettin' this time?"

"Much money. Much."

Jamal licked his lips, makin' a smile wide as a piano.

"Taste the money. Feel it right on my skin, all dirty and nasty."

Moon said, "We gettin' that shit."

Moon killed the headlights and pulled into the drive, the four doors opening as soon as he cut the engine, the four of them stepping out. The Escalade's interior lights had been removed, so nothing lit up. Only sound was Lil Tai's eighteen-pound sledge, clunking the rocker panel as he got out.

They went directly to the front door, Jamal first, Moon going last, walking backward to make sure no one was watching. Jamal popped the entry lights, just reached up and broke'm with his fingers, pop, pop, pop. Moon pressed a folded towel over the dead bolt to dull the sound, and Lil Tai hit that shit with the hammer as hard as he could.

**F**RANK AND CINDY WERE CLEARING the table when a crash jolted their home as if a car had slammed through the front door. Joey was watching the Lakers in the family room and Little Frank had just gone up to his room. When Frank heard the crash, he believed his older son had knocked

over the grandfather clock in the front entry. Little Frank had been known to climb the clock to reach the second-floor landing, and, even though it was anchored for earthquake safety, Frank had warned the boys it could fall.

Cindy startled at the noise, and Joey ran to his mother. Frank put down the plates, and was already hurrying toward the sound.

“Frankie! Son, are you all right—?”

They had only taken a step when four armed men rushed in, moving with the loose organization of men who had done this before.

Frank Meyer had faced high-speed, violent entries before, and had known how to react, but those situations had been in his former life. Now, eleven years and too many long days at a desk later, Frank was behind the play.

Four-man team. Gloves. Nine-millimeter pistols.

First man through had average height, espresso skin, and heavy braids to his shoulders. Frank knew he was the team leader because he acted like the leader, his eyes directing the play. A shorter man followed, angry and nervous, with a black bandanna capping his head, shoulder to shoulder with a bruiser showing tight cornrows and gold in his teeth, moving like he enjoyed being big. The fourth man was a step behind, moving more like an observer than part of the action. White, and big, almost as big as the bruiser, with a bowling-ball head, wide-set eyes, and thin sideburns that ran down his jaw like needles.

Two seconds, they fanned through the rooms. A second behind, Frank realized they were a home invasion crew. He felt the buzz-rush of excitement that had always sparked through him during an engagement, then remembered he was an out-of-shape businessman with a family to protect. Frank raised his hands, shuffling sideways to place himself between the men and his wife.

“Take what you want. Take it and leave. We won’t give you any trouble.”

The leader came directly to Frank, holding his pistol high and sideways like an idiot in a movie, bugging his eyes to show Frank he was fierce.



“Goddamn right, muthuhfucka. Where is it?”

Without waiting for an answer, he slapped Frank with the pistol. Cindy shouted, but Frank had been hit harder plenty of times. He waved toward his wife, trying to calm her.

“I’m okay. It’s okay, Cin, we’re gonna be fine.”

“Gonna be dead, you don’t do what I say!”

He dug the pistol hard into Frank’s cheek, but Frank was watching the others. The bruiser and the smaller man split apart, the bruiser charging to the French doors to check out the back, the little guy throwing open cabinets and doors, both of them shouting and cursing. Their movements were fast. Fast into the house. Fast into Frank’s face. Fast through the rooms. Fast to drive the play, and loud to increase the confusion. Only the man with the strange sideburns moved slowly, floating outside the perimeter as if with a private agenda.

Frank knew from experience it wasn’t enough to follow the play; you had to be ahead of the action to survive. Frank tried to buy himself time to catch up.

“My wallet’s in my office. I’ve got three or four hundred dollars—”

The leader hit Frank again.

“You take me a fool, muthuhfuckin’ wallet?”

“We use credit cards—”

Hit him again. Harder.

The man with the sideburns finally stepped out of the background, appearing at the table.

“See the plates? More people are here. We must look for the others.”

Frank was surprised by the accent. He thought it was Polish, but couldn’t be sure.

The man with the accent disappeared into the kitchen just as the bruiser charged out of the family room to Cindy and Joey. He held his pistol to Cindy’s temple, shouting at Frank in his rage.

“You want this bitch dead? You want me to put this pipe right in her mouth? You want her to suck on *this*?”