

A spectacular underachiever with a serious drinking problem finds instant fame when he kills a notorious murderer who has broken into his home. The ensuing national drama exposes his character flaws on his reluctant road to recovery.

The Alcoholic

By T.S. Flanagan

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T.S. FLANAGAN

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Chapter 1

September 30, 2016 - 1:05 AM

Roland leaned a shoulder against the tree in front of his building and frisked himself for his keys. The trudge up the hill, if you could call it a hill, had been slow. Now suddenly the street seemed tilted in the other direction as if it were balanced on a fulcrum and a weight been flung from one end to the other. Woozy, he tottered and reached out a hand and steadied himself on the trunk then knelt. On the verge of puking, he swallowed hard to hold it off. Looking at his vomit on the sidewalk when he left for work the next morning would be an ugly way to start the day. He would disgorge into his commode like a proper gentleman.

The street lay perfectly quiet. The lamp overhead shed no light, having spent its last flicker months ago. As tall a man as Roland was, he was barely visible in the dense midnight shadow under the tree. Many nights he'd been grateful for the darkness afforded by the defunct lamp and would sit with his back to the tree and doze off; but now, feeling ill, he rose to go inside. By day he used the more convenient side entrance in the alleyway, but at night, without the streetlight, the alleyway was so dark that Roland, mighty martial artist though he was, chose the safer course and mounted the steps to the front door. Before he went in, he surveyed the length of Sacramento Street, noting the several gaps where lights were burnt out. The addicts had their free government needles, he thought, but the city couldn't manage to illuminate the thoroughfares well enough so pedestrians might avoid stepping in their waste at night.

Roland threw up in his toilet, brushed his teeth, undressed, and crawled into bed without flipping on a light. The only luminescence in the apartment glared from the red display on the clock in his bedroom at the end of the hall. It read 1:11 AM. Early really. Time enough to sleep for a few hours then grab a bite to eat on his drive to work, as long as he could quiet his mind and fall asleep straightaway. He reached down and felt for the bottle of Jack Daniel's on the floor next to his bed and took it by the neck. It sloshed heavily. Still plenty there. 1:15 AM. He lifted his head from the pillow, filled his mouth, and gulped down a few swallows. That should do the trick. *Another industrious day safely logged in the books.*

Roland took another drink, capped the bottle, and lowered it back home. Then he drifted off.

He woke to a loud pop. Supine, he opened his eyes and listened. The clock read 1:38. He sat up as if to sense the world more clearly and heard the sound of wood scraping against wood. It came from his parlor, right next to his bedroom. It stopped. He kept listening, now fully alert. There it was again, this time louder. No question, someone was forcing open a window in the parlor and with considerable difficulty. The building was old, its window casings weathered and warped. He knew which one. The steep slope of the alleyway made it possible to reach only the corner window without a ladder. Its crescent latch was misaligned and could not be secured, and the condition of the frame kept it pretty well stuck, but apparently not permanently. *Fuck. This can't be happening.* He swiveled out of bed thinking he might be able to get there in time to stop the intruder from crawling through, but before he could take a step he heard a thump. The man—he correctly assumed—was inside. Roland groped for his Laredos and found one—the right, thankfully—and pulled it on. No time to find the other. Instead, he leaned down quietly and took the bottle by the neck.

The beam from a flashlight panned across the kitchenette just outside his door, across the hall from the parlor. Roland stood just inside his bedroom doorway. Should he call out and warn the man off? *I've got a gun, motherfucker!* Believable in some cities, but not in San Francisco. He remained frozen, not with fear but with indecision. He felt sure that whoever it was had come alone, and Roland soon would have the drop on him. Twenty-five, he'd never been in an actual fight, though he'd sparred with and competed against adult blackbelts of various disciplines since he was fourteen. He'd been the occasional target of drunken men trying to prove themselves but had always been able to talk them out of their stupidity, a skill that proved invaluable to a late-night bar drinker who measured six-foot-six. But now was not the time for a parlay. Sluggish from intoxication and confined to the tight spaces of his apartment, worried the intruder might be armed, Roland raised the bottle and waited, his breathing calm, his heart trilling.

The man appeared before him in profile, short compared to Roland, gloved, wearing a black hooded sweatshirt that revealed only his dark eyebrows and sharp nose. He held the flashlight in his right hand and a

pry bar in his left. He turned and shined the light on the front door at the end of the entryway then at the open bathroom halfway up the hall. It was a quality flashlight, producing a powerful beam, with a long handle that doubled as a truncheon. This was no random intruder, he figured, but a working criminal, standing just a few feet away, his back turned. In an instant, as though he sensed being watched, the man spun around and shined his light on Roland just as he stepped out of his bedroom to make room for a swing. He brought the bottle down squarely on the intruder's head. The bottle shattered. The man stumbled backward and dropped to one knee, his hood thrown back, his face wet with whiskey. A line of blood dripped from his forehead down his nose. He looked at Roland standing there outside his bedroom, naked except for his steel-tipped boot, the jagged neck of the broken bottle still in his hand. He stood up and lifted the pry bar to attack, but before he could aim a blow, Roland delivered a swift side-kick that sent him crashing shoulder-first into the wall. The flashlight rolled away and stopped, providing a steady light. Roland stood back and waited to see what the intruder would do.

The man rose, his twelve-inch steel tool, hooked at one end, gripped firmly in hand. He stared at Roland, one foot bare in the broken glass, unshaven, hair down to his shoulders, muscled like a well-conditioned athlete and without a stitch of clothing, green eyes steady amid the whiskey fumes. The bottom of the square-shaped Jack Daniel's bottle had landed flat and still held a bit of liquor. Both men glanced at the improbable sight then back at one another.

Roland spoke. "Vete."

The man dropped the pry bar and wiped the blood from his face with the palm of his hand.

"Vete. Vete Andale!"

The man didn't go. Roland dropped the jagged remnant thinking the man was ready to throw down. He'd gladly go mano-a-mano with this stupid little shit, but the man was not after a fistfight. He reached into his pant waist and unsheathed a knife, an Arkansas bowie with a ten-inch drop-point blade polished to a high shine.

"I'm not a Mexican." It was an honest mistake. His olive skin, black hair, and short stature marked him as possibly from south of the border.

"Then get out of here in English."

“I’m going to cut off your cock and shove it down your throat.” He spoke in a flat West Coast tone.

Roland looked down at his member and processed the situation. All he had to do was take two steps backward into his bedroom, close the door, turn the lock, and call the police, but he decided that he’d rather not live with that decision. Sure, he was afraid, but more than that he was irritated.

“Guess you’ll have to kill me first.”

The man studied him and slid forward, tracing tiny circles in the air with the point of the outstretched knife. Roland took a defensive stance, the stance he learned on his very first day in karate class when he was six. *Left arm up to block, right arm tucked to punch, light on the balls of your feet, right leg back and poised to kick.*

“You won’t be my first.”

“I’m not going anywhere. The door is right behind you. I suggest you pick up your tools and use the door or this will not go well for you.”

The two stood facing each other for what to Roland seemed like half a minute but, in fact, was only a few long seconds. He’d finished what he had to say and waited for the intruder to make a decision. He relaxed his arms and opened his palms upward in a gesture that said *What’s it going to be?* The man sprang forward and slashed at Roland. Roland blocked the knife with a downward sweep of his left arm and kicked the man in the ribs with the steel point of his boot, driving him hard against the wall. He slid off the wall and stumbled backward toward the door and fell flat on his back. Roland sprang upon him with a heavy knee to the chest and drove his right fist into the man’s jaw. He heard the mandible crack and felt the crunch of broken teeth. The man still clutched the knife. Roland pinned the wrist of the knife-hand and hit him again, this time squarely in the temple. The knife fell free and spun slowly on its brass handle guard. *Son-of-a-bitch can take a punch.* Roland had often scoffed at how in action movies people could batter one another tirelessly without losing consciousness. He knew from experience that even wearing headgear a man could be knocked out with a single powerful blow. So, when the intruder, face bloodied and jaw shattered, patted the floor for the knife, Roland regarded him with puzzled respect. *Adrenaline?* Perhaps. He looked at the gash in his forearm, now throbbing with pain, and saw blood dripping from his fingers.

“Motherfucker.” He grabbed the knife with his blood-wet hand.

The intruder groaned and coughed, his eyes ajoggle. Roland shook his head, half in pity for the defeated man beneath him and half in disapproval of what he was about to do. The words of the intruder echoed in his mind—*You won't be my first. Okay, then, he thought, you deserve this.* Roland switched the knife to his right hand and plunged it into the man's chest, aiming for the heart. The blade glanced off a rib and pierced the left lung. The man convulsed and spit blood. Roland stood and regarded his handiwork. His victim struggled to sit up and burbled blood down his chest. Then he lay back down and tried to pull out the knife, but the blade stayed wedged between two ribs.

Roland looked at his injury, his blood still dripping off his fingers. In the spray of battery-powered light, he could see the gash line, thin, about six inches long, and not too deep. *Idiot.* It was his own fault. When he'd relaxed his arms in a show of mock impatience, he'd left himself vulnerable. Without time to sidestep the thrust, he'd had to deflect it. He looked down at the man on his floor and observed his impending expiration. With both hands on the knife handle, he'd managed to pull it out an inch or two, his coughs growing weaker, blood now flowing freely from one side of his mouth. Roland watched intently as he backed into his kitchenette to get the dishtowel draped through the handle of the refrigerator door. Sobered by adrenaline, he walked back to where the intruder lay dying, careful now to avoid the shards of glass strewn about the hallway.

“Ambulance.” The man began to choke. “Call – an – am – bu – lance.”

Roland stood over him, winding the towel around his arm.

“I gave you a chance to leave on your own, and now you want me to call you a ride.”

He spit out a mouthful of blood as though better to form his words then looked at Roland.

“I am Kasabian. Samuel Kasabian.” His hands fell from the knife and onto the floor palms up. The handle bobbed, tilted to one side, the blade partially unmoored.

“Not for long.”

He went back to his bedroom and found his phone in his jacket and tapped 9-1 before he changed his mind and set the phone on the dresser

and went back to the hallway and switched on the light. He knelt before the little miracle. He lifted it gently, careful not to spill any, and turned it to find the safest spot to place his lips then poured the last few ounces of sour mash into his mouth and set it back on the floor.

He went back to his room. The clock read 1:44. He took the phone, sat on his bed, and searched his contact list and placed a call.

The man he called picked up after three rings. "Who the hell is this?"

"You know. You can see my name on your display."

"I mean who the hell do you think you are, calling me at this hour?"

"You told me I could call you whenever I needed to, Denny. I just killed someone."

Denny went silent. Drunks say a lot of crazy shit. He'd sponsored dozens "Mmmhmm," he said.

"Look, Denny, I'm not fucking around here. There's a guy bleeding to death in my hallway. He broke into my apartment and attacked me. I stabbed him in the chest with his own knife."

"You said you killed someone. Now you say he's not dead. How much have you had to drink tonight, Roland?"

"Not so much that I couldn't get out of bed and put up a fight. Listen to me, man. I need to know what to do. You told me not to make any big decisions until I ran it by you first."

"I haven't seen you in months. You stopped coming to meetings when you got my last signature on your court card. You're no longer my problem. Besides, I told you you could call me anytime *unless* you were drinking."

"This is not about my struggle with sobriety, Denny." Roland's phrasing was dishonest. He'd never once confessed to himself or to anyone that he struggled with sobriety. He believed he could stop drinking anytime he wanted to. "I'm a little freaked out here. I just want to know what to do."

"Wait for the cops to remove the body then clean up the blood. That's all I can think of. You're not clergy so you can't administer last rites, though I don't suppose that would do any harm. If he's still alive, see if you can throw together some sort of last rites. Maybe google it. I've got to get back to sleep."

"You think this is a joke? You need to see a picture? If you think this is a joke, I'll snap a picture and text it to you."

Roland waited for an answer. Denny stayed silent. Roland continued. "Should I? Do you need to see what I'm talking about?"

Finally, Denny spoke. "No. Do not send me a picture. Have you called the police?"

"No."

"Listen to me very carefully. As soon as I finish my next sentence, I'm hanging up the phone. If it's true that someone is dead or dying on your floor you need to call 911 because you've created a phone record that points to me and the longer this call goes on the more the police will have reason to believe that I know about whatever you've done tonight and if they contact me about whatever this is I need to be able to say only that I told you to call the police immediately and hung up on you, you unbelievably stupid idiot." Click.

"Asshole," he said to the phone and set it on the dresser.

"Idiot," he said of himself again.

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The man was not yet dead. Roland could see the handle of the knife twinging as its unconscious owner labored to draw his last shallow breaths. Roland's mind suddenly became clear. He had to place the call, but he needed to delay as long as possible. But if he sat there and waited for the man to die, it might take a while, and if the blood on the floor was already hardened when the police arrived, they might be able to prove that he sat around and waited before placing the call. He gambled on an expeditious death.

"911 Emergency Dispatch." It was a female voice.

"I need an ambulance."

"Are you injured or in distress?"

"I'm a little injured but I'm not calling about me."

"What is the nature of the injury or distress?"

"There's a guy in my apartment and he's hurt pretty bad."

"How badly is he hurt? Can he talk?"

"No."

The dispatcher was silent. Roland waited right along with her.

"So, you're sure he can't talk?"

"Yes."

The standoff continued for a few more seconds. Roland figured she couldn't pull his address from his mobile phone and wasn't about to give the address until she asked for it.

"Is that *yes he can talk* or *yes you're sure he can't talk*?"

"If he could talk, I'd put him on the phone."

"Where is the man exactly?"

"Look, lady, if you're not going to send an ambulance I'll just hang up and call back. Maybe I'll get someone who knows how to do her job."

"Sir, I am following the correct procedure..."

"By asking the same question twice? They must recruit you people from the tent village in the Civic Center. If this dude dies, it's on you."

"Have you been drinking tonight, sir?"

"Is that in your script? Maybe stick with the script."

"I need to establish that this is a legitimate emergency."

"How are you going to do that? What words do I need to say? What is your job, exactly?"

"Sir, if you could please calm d—"

"You answered the call by saying 911 emergency dispatch. I did the 911 part, now aren't you supposed to do the emergency dispatch part?"

The woman waited again. "What are the injuries?"

"He has a knife in his chest."

"Is he still breathing?"

"A little bit."

"You're calling from a mobile phone—correct?"

"Yes"

"Tell me the address."

Roland gave his address. He could hear her fingers moving rapidly along her keyboard as she silently set the emergency wheels in motion.

"Ok, sir, the EMTs and police will be there shortly. Now I need you to give me some more information."

Roland hung up. Not in defiance of her push for useless information but because he had to get dressed and ready for the authorities. He took off his Laredo and put on his pants and a shirt. The clock read 1:49. He couldn't shake the voice of his sponsor—*you unbelievably stupid idiot*. Not a phrase this prodigy—champion in all endeavors growing up—was used to hearing. *Stupid idiot* gets tossed around as a term of endearment in the colloquy of post-pubescent males, but *unbelievably stupid idiot*—that took

conviction. Such a slap was meant to raise a welt. And it begged a question, one he could not immediately answer and did not wish to entertain. *Why did I call Denny?* It bothered him. Calling him was not, as Denny would have put it, the next indicated thing. For drunks and addicts buffeted for years by their own erratic whims, divining *the next indicated thing* in the early days of recovery was often reduced to the most mundane of tasks, such as tying one's shoes or even getting out of bed in the morning. In the most desperate cases, the unrecovered, in despair, decide that *the next indicated thing* is to take one's own life.

The urgency of the moment intruded on his bewildered self-reflection and drove him to his own *next indicated thing*—the bottle of wine in his refrigerator. A bottle of white. He hated white wine and kept it there only for emergencies, but not this kind of emergency. Roland's modus operandi, on a lucky night, was to spend it in the bed of a stranger; but when circumstances, such as her roommate, prevented that, he would bring her to his grubby abode. He found that women were, as a rule, more agreeable to white wine than, say, straight bourbon.

He uncorked the bottle and chugged until he needed air. *I'm alive and you've breathed your last, you murderous son-of-a-bitch.* He set the bottle down and moved over to see if it was true. Of one thing he felt certain—Mister Kasabian would never see the light of day and probably not even hear the sirens that were beginning to awaken the denizens of Nob Hill. He pivoted to fetch the bottle and drove a shard of glass into the ball of his left foot.

“Motherfu—”

He returned to his bedroom and pinched the glass from the wound and double-socked the foot then pulled on both boots and went back to the kitchen and took another pull off the bottle. He set it on the counter and exhaled a deep sigh as the familiar sense of ease and comfort warmed his body from within. *Everything's gonna be fine.* Roland stepped over the dead-enough man—*good luck, Sammy*—opened the door and went down to the lobby.

A police car escorted the ambulance. Both vehicles parked in front of his building. The sirens went quiet. Red and blue lights splashed through the glass front doors and circled the foyer, bouncing blindingly off the array of aluminum mailboxes. Roland propped the front door open and went outside to greet the civil servants, raising one arm and

waving it side-to-side. Two officers approached him shoulder-to-shoulder, hands on their holsters.

“He’s in apartment two on the floor in the hallway right behind the door.”

Two EMTs pulled a stretcher from their rig and one of the officers led them into the building. The other officer approached Roland. He took a step backward and leaned heavily against his tree. He’d hit the white wine a little too hard—a little too fast.

“Please step forward into the light, sir.” The officer removed the flashlight from his service belt and pointed the beam at Roland’s face.

“Please don’t shine that thing in my eyes, Officer.”

“It’s not just for shining. Please come out from under the tree so I can see you.”

Roland complied and made sure not to walk directly toward the policeman, whose other hand hovered above his sidearm.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to take a run at you.”

The officer nodded and smiled smugly. Roland angled his steps unsteadily to the mouth of the alley. “As you can see,” he said, swirling his right arm above his head, “the streetlight is out. This is where the whooooole thing started.”

“How much have you had to drink tonight?”

“Wait a second.” Roland pointed to the dark passage behind him. “Shine your light up there so I can show you where he broke in.”

“Let’s start with your name.”

Roland slumped his shoulders in defeat. He wanted to sit down in the street and recount the night’s sequence of events, beginning with him sliding into bed. It seemed the officer wanted to go back much further.

“Roland Hazzard.”

The officer stepped away for a brief exchange with someone on the radio hooked to his epaulet. He returned with a black leather notepad in hand.

“How do you spell that?”

Roland spelled his name.

“You live here? In apartment number two you said?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

The EMTs came down with their gurney unoccupied and collapsed it and rolled it back into the ambulance.

“Where are you going, guys?” Roland said in the voice of a disappointed child whose new friends were about to run off. The men ignored him, didn’t appear even to have heard him.

He turned to the officer. “What’s going on? They shouldn’t be leaving.”

“They transport the living.”

“The man up there is dead?”

“No. Vital. Signs.”

Roland held up his left arm to show the now thoroughly blood-soaked towel wrapped around it. “Can you ask them to look at this at least?”

“Stay right where you are.” He went over and spoke to the EMTs.

One of the medical men came back with a kit and took a look at Roland’s wound. He spoke to the officer as if Roland were not there. “It’s a knife wound. Sharp blade—that’s pretty clear.”

That annoyed Roland. He sat down on the curb and presented his arm for treatment. “*Defensive* knife wound,” he said.

People in the nearby apartment buildings had opened their windows to observe the proceedings, and Roland’s neighbor, Astrid, a young woman, late twenties, in a purple terrycloth robe, came outside and stood next to Roland’s tree with her arms crossed, wearing the satisfied expression of a queen about to witness the execution of a disloyal subject.

The officer repeated his original question, but this time as a direct request. “Tell me how much you’ve had to drink tonight.”

Astrid voiced her opinion. “He’s a drunk. Whatever else he is or did, he’s a daily drunk. I’ve seen him sleeping against this tree in the morning. Why would anyone walk home drunk and sleep outside instead of coming in?”

Roland thought about explaining that he found the cold midnight air salutary during slumber but instead belted out in his best Mick Jagger country twang. “Come on, calm down, sweet Petuniaaaaah. Come on, calm down, I’m beggin’ yooooo.” The medic gave his elbow a tug to remind him to keep his arm steady as he dressed the wound.

“Please go back inside, ma’am. We’ll talk to you later if we need more information.”

“Well, I’ve got plenty to say. I live in unit three right next door to him. I’ll fill you in on the questionable habits of Roland Hazzard.” With that, she walked back inside.

“I see you’re pretty popular around here, Mister Hazzard.”

“Actually, I am, neighborhood-wide. No one likes her though. She did try to get me to sleep with her once and I probably should have done it just for good community relations, but that can backfire as you probably know. Besides...”

The officer cut him off. “Mister Hazzard, if you’re too drunk to answer my questions, then you’re going to have to sleep it off tonight in lock-up.”

“Hold on. Hold on.” Roland collected his wits. “I’ve done nothing wrong here, sir. I just got stabbed in my own apartment and now you’re talking about taking me to jail. I don’t think so.”

“If you don’t quiet down, I can do just that.”

Roland realized that he should probably shut up. He needed to get to work tomorrow for his three-month probationary review. He liked this job. Denny had hooked him up with the interview through one of the other AA members and he didn’t want to go back to cleaning fish on the docks. He looked at the officer.

“Fine. What exactly do you wanna know?”

“You’ve had a lot to drink tonight, right? I just want to establish that first.”

“Yes. For most people. By my standards, I’m pretty far from drunk, not drunk like that silly woman was sneering about. She has seen me drunk, but this ain’t it.”

“Slow night, huh?”

“I got to bed alright, but after I called 911, I chugged most of a bottle of wine. I can still feel it coming on.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“To stop my heart from pounding.” The truth, should he have sought it, would’ve been too hard to formulate. The medic completed his work on the injured arm and stood up to leave.

“Thanks, mate,” Roland said. The officer thanked him as well, and the medic jumped into the vehicle and his partner hit the gas.

“Let’s go inside and take a look at your friend.”

“Not my friend. Let me show you where he broke in, just up here.” Again, Roland pointed to the alley.

“We’ll get to that later. First, let’s go take a look at the man in your apartment.”

Roland led the way. The door to his place was wide open and all the lights inside were on. The other officer stood over the body and spoke to someone on his radio. He looked a few years younger than his partner and more physically fit.

“We’ll need a van for the body and a forensics team.” He buttoned off his radio and looked at Roland. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“They were taking care of my gash.” Roland held up the freshly dressed arm.

“Looks like a knife wound,” the senior officer said.

“Which one of you guys is in charge?”

The officers looked at each other. The younger one spoke first. “He sounds pretty drunk. Can we interview him?”

The senior officer shrugged. “Let’s give it a try.”

Roland looked down at the decedent. Anyone, he reasoned, could see that, whoever the guy was, he had it coming. He seethed inwardly with self-righteous impatience at the rigors of process.

“I need to get to bed. You guys look smart enough to take a look around and figure out what this is.” He moved toward his bedroom.

“Not so fast, cowboy.”

Roland turned around. “I’m not asking you to scrub off the blood and sweep up the glass.”

“We’re not a body removal service,” the junior officer said.

“You can call yourselves whatever you want, but if the body is still here when I get up tomorrow morning, I’m going to brush my teeth then drag it out onto the sidewalk because I am not a body storage service. The city must have those big, refrigerated drawers in the morgue like you see in the movies. I think that’s where it belongs, but I’m not going to jam it into the back seat of my car and take it there myself. I’m sure you find guys dead on the street all the time in this jewel of a metropolis so we can just let it be another one of those.” He turned toward his bedroom again.

“Stop right there,” the senior said in a threatening tone.

“What are you going to do—shoot me for going to bed?”



“We should just take him in,” the junior officer said.

“On what charge?” Roland laughed.

“Suspicion of murder,” the junior officer said.

Roland looked at the senior. “Let’s go. Let’s go book me for murder.”

“Why don’t you just tell us what happened here.”

Roland looked down and pointed to the pry bar on the floor and cocked his head to the side like he was giving a silent demonstration. Then he pointed into the parlor and did a pantomime of someone jimmying open a window.

“We know how he got in, asshole,” the junior officer. “What about all this glass?”

“I hit him with my bottle of bourbon, standing right here in front of the kitchen, naked as a jaybird.”

The senior teased out the narrative with a series of questions.

“So, you came from the bedroom?”

“Armed with nothing but my flaccid cock and a fifth a’ Jack.”

“You hit him—then what?”

Roland decided to omit the blow-by-blow account. “Well, his hood was down and that must have softened the blow a bit. He stumbled backward and got up and pulled out his knife.”

“Then?”

“I asked him to leave.”

“You could have gone back into your room and closed the door.”

“And locked it,” the junior officer said. “The door has a lock.”

“Castle law.”

“So, you’re a legal expert?” the senior officer said.

“Just the basics.”

“What’s he talking about?” the junior officer said.

“He doesn’t have to retreat to the bedroom—that’s what he’s saying.”

Roland crossed his arms. “So, we good here? I really do have to get some sleep.”

The senior man continued. “How did the knife get in his chest?”

Roland grew visibly annoyed. “Let’s be precise here—*his* knife—the one he cut me with.” Roland lifted his bandaged arm to emphasize his point.

“How did you get the knife?”

“I never said I got the knife.”

“He didn’t stab himself.”

“We fought. I got in a kick and a few punches, then we grappled with the knife. I turned it around on him.”

“Turned it around on him?”

“He wouldn’t let go of it, so I bent his wrist around and when the point was on his chest, I leaned on it. He made that necessary.”

“And then you drank wine.”

“I called 911, then I got dressed, then I drank wine.” Roland stepped into his kitchen nook where the bottle sat uncorked on the counter and picked it up by the neck. “This wine.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell us?” The younger officer sounded a bit sarcastic.

“Before he died, or when he realized he was probably going to die, he said his name—Samuel Kasabian.” He tilted the bottle and drank from it.

The senior officer took out a pad and pen. “Say that again.”

Roland finished his quaff and held out the bottle to eye how much remained. “Samuel Ka-say-be-an.”

The officers stared at Roland and Roland stared back. He saw in their identical expressions a mutual incredulity, not of his veracity, necessarily, but of wonderment at this behavior. He pursed his lips and squinted to assure himself that, contrary to the looks on the officers’ faces, there was nothing wrong with him.

“So,” he said, “if there’s nothing else.”

“The homicide forensics team is on its way,” the senior officer said. “Why don’t you keep us company until they get here?”

Roland wavered and rolled his head in a circle, exaggerating his condition. He took his wallet out of his pants and removed his driver’s license and set it on the kitchen counter.

“No can do, Magoo. I’ve had enough of today. Tomorrow has begun and I’m already chasing the sun. My name etcetera are here on my license and my prints are on the bottle in case you need them.” He drained its contents and set it on the counter with a thunk. “Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I’ve got to lie down and pass out. I’ll leave the door unlocked in case you need to arrest me, but I’m going to be a hard man to wake up.” He turned around and stepped into his room and closed the

door behind him. He took off his Laredos and stripped off his pants and collapsed onto the bed with his shirt still on.

Outside he could hear the officers moving around. To muffle the noise, he pressed in his earbuds and put Beethoven on shuffle. The clock read 2:00. The bars were just now closing. He wished it were 1:59.

## Chapter 2

September 30, 2016 - 6:00 AM

The antiquated steel doorbell did not produce a pleasant ding-dong but sounded more like a fire alarm. It jarred Roland awake at 6:00 AM on the dot. The reporters outside, in a perverse nod to civility, must have decided that waking Roland at 5:59 would be wrong, but 6:00 AM was acceptable. The building, being very old, had no intercom, so Roland had no choice but to get out of bed, dress quickly, and limp out to find out who the hell had his thumb on the bell. Morning twilight had just begun to seep through the blinds in the parlor and made the hallway visible. The body was gone. On the wooden floor where it had lain was a thick bloodstain about two feet across, still soaking into the raw old floorboards. He crunched over broken glass with his boots as he swore his to his door and opened it. Light from the foyer below. Roland squinted. His mouth was dry. His face flushed. *They'd better be selling gold ingots at half price.* Who was he kidding? Roland was practically broke, living mostly off a credit card. Worse than broke, really. He had gambling debts to the tune of thousands. Other than the few twenties in his wallet, he had only the promise of a paycheck next Friday.

Outside the building stood a group of some ten reporters and a few cameramen, all jostling for position in front of the glass door. They had a clear view of the steps leading down to the foyer and were able to see Roland's slow approach, legs first, then the torso, then the man himself, unshaven with hair splayed in several directions. The fresh white bandage stood in contrast to the dirty black t-shirt from which swung his long, muscular arms. From their red-ringed sockets glared his most fearsome eyes growing wider with his mounting rage as he flung open the door.

"What the fuck you think you're doing? There are people sleeping here." He might as well have said I have blueberry muffins fresh from the oven.

They all talked at once. He could make out his name repeated in their breathless excitement.

"Yes I'm Roland Hazzard, goddamnit." He lowered his voice. "Now slow down so we can have a conversation." They looked at him mutely

and raised their electronic devices toward his face as if they were observing a well-practiced ritual.

“Does anyone have a smoke?” They all started talking again, this time in a somewhat more orderly fashion. “Do you think you’ll be arrested? Did you know the man you killed? How many times did you stab him?” Roland wrenched the phone from a hand shoved too close to his face then carried it aloft out into the street to get the crowd to move away from the building. He turned to them and repeated his request. “Someone give me a cigarette. I know at least one of you must still have the nerve to smoke.” One of the cameramen took out a cigarette.

“Should I light it?”

“Yes please.”

“Give me my phone back,” a woman said.

Roland backed up until he was leaning against his rusted yellow Nissan Sentra. One would have doubted that a man his size could squeeze into such a runt of a vehicle. He handed the phone back to its owner and took the lit cigarette from the man.

“Thanks—my brand.” He took a drag and exhaled the smoke in their direction and watched them jerk away in unison like school fish. “Now what do you unruly early-risers want?”

“Did you know the man you killed?”

“Do you know who you killed?”

Roland thought a second, parsing the two different meanings, “No. I didn’t know him. Was he someone important?”

“The Glendale Butcher—that’s what we’re hearing.”

Roland had heard the moniker. Most of the country had. The Glendale Butcher was blamed for the murder of seven women in California and the Southwest in the space of a few months several years ago and was still on the loose. Technically, he was only a suspect, but the evidence collected left no room for doubt.

“Whoever he was, he ruined my evening.” Roland exhaled another cloud of smoke.

Questions came again in a flurry. “What happened to your arm? Did the Butcher say anything? How many times did you stab him?”

Roland fished his keys from his pocket.

“All I can tell you is the good guys won.” He deftly unlocked his door and squeezed himself into the driver’s seat. “Gotta run, kids—can’t be

late for work,” he said, the cigarette clenched between his teeth. He yanked the door closed and started the car and pulled away from the curb.

Their shouts trailed off as he drove away. His exhilaration from the impulsive escape carried him for a few blocks until his hangover returned full force. Pouring a bottle of wine on top of a belly half full of whiskey—God, Evolution, whatever was behind it all—was no way for the human being to treat itself. Regret was built into the system.

He needed to kill a few hours before work. He needed a shower. Hadn't showered since Wednesday morning. In the testing lab at the video game company where he worked, you could get away without bathing for a day, maybe two; but even under that loose standard Roland was unpresentable. He had a solution. At the local 24-hour drug store he bought shampoo, a towel, a new bandage for his arm and, to slake his monstrous thirst, a jug of water. A few miles west, just south of the Golden Gate Bridge, lay Baker Beach, a popular destination for the clothing-optional set. Not that it mattered. In *The City by The Bay*, one could go naked just about anywhere without attracting legal attention. Hell, people were known to defecate on the steps of City Hall and in the planters outside the towers in the Financial District. Such was progress.

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The beach was empty. That suited Roland. Neither exhibitionist nor prudish when it came to public nudity, Roland nonetheless would have felt uncomfortable performing his morning ablutions for the world to see. Before he undressed, he gorged himself on water. Over-gorged, in fact. Recalling what he'd read about the indomitable Comanche preparing for a raid, he drank until he vomited. He had no idea why the savages did that, but he figured a good purging would accelerate the detoxification process, so he dug a hole in the sand and puked into it and covered it over. He felt better immediately and took off his clothes.

He bundled them inside his new towel and set them with his boots, water jug, and bandage kit twenty yards up from the shoreline and carried his shampoo bottle to the surf and waded in. The frigid Northern California Pacific took his breath away momentarily and he needed a dozen rapid shallow breaths to regain his normal respiration. After a minute or two his body adjusted to the shock, his skin tightened, and he

felt a strange sensation of warmth in the cold water that encased him. The ocean breeze bit his exposed flesh, so he kept his body immersed, appearing as little more than a head sticking out of the ocean.

He sudzed his hair and rinsed it several times until it squeaked between his fingers. As he wiped his eyes clear of residual soap, he saw a woman standing on the shore watching him. She wore black jogging tights and a light blue t-shirt soaked with sweat. Her forehead was wrapped in a yellow headband. She'd finished her morning run on the beach, it appeared, and had paused to take in this unusual spectacle.

"Is this the new thing—homeless bathing the public beaches?" She spoke with a playful Irish lilt.

"If it is, I'm sure I didn't invent it. I don't qualify as homeless."

"Oh, I see—you prefer to wash your hair in salt water. Makes it silky smooth, does it?"

"It's a sad story that led me to resort to this." He rose from the water to display his full height. "I don't intend to make a habit of it."

The jogger took stock of the magnificent masculine specimen standing naked before her, his broad shoulders tapering to a slim waist accentuated by a stack of hard abdominals. The muscles of his arms and upper torso, taut from the cold water, showed the definition of a latter-day Adonis. His powerful legs and buttocks, his ample mane, might have conjured the image of a lion on the savannah. Whatever diminishing effect the cold water had on his genitals, they yet made an impressive display in the cradle of his loins.

"Oh my. You certainly don't have the body of a typical homeless male."

"Is that your lay opinion, or do you have some expertise?"

"I'm a nurse at SF General. I've seen my fair share of naked homeless." She walked over to his belongings and took the towel and brought it to the surf line and held it out, careful not to let the tide splash her running shoes. Roland kned his way through the surf and strode up the sand and tossed the shampoo bottle in the direction of his things.

"Thank you." He took the towel from her hand.

"It's a wee bit small for you."

"Best I could do on short notice." Roland dried his torso and arms as they spoke.

“Who worked on that arm?” she asked. “It looks like a professional job. Even sopping wet it’s still holding tight.”

“You’re not going to leave, are you—not going to respect my privacy?”

“I will if you tell me to. Do you want me to go?”

“I do not. I could use your help re-dressing my arm.”

She didn’t reply. To his surprise, she took the towel from his hand and walked behind him and dried off his shoulders, back, and buttocks. Then she buffed his thighs and patted down his legs, finishing at his ankles. “There.” She stood and stepped around to face him. “You can do the rest.” She handed him the towel.

“Thank you again.” He smiled, drying his groin with the towel. Now I guess I should know your name—nurse...?”

“You didn’t answer my question.” She smiled back. “Did you even hear it?”

“Maybe not. I’ve been standing here thinking you were overdressed for the occasion.”

“That’s the standard come-on, love. I jog here in the early morning when there’s usually no one around just so I don’t have to hear that.”

“I was minding my own business. And here you are.”

“I’m not opposed, in principle.”

“To helping me re-do my bandage or to taking off your clothes?”

“I’d like to know more about you. You’re awfully cagey.”

“Me? You’re the one. You just now dodged *my* question.”

“You dodged mine first.”

Roland was enjoying the back and forth with the attractive Irish woman and decided to see how much fun he could tease out of her.

“What does it matter? You either will or you won’t.”

“Won’t what?”

“Take your pick.”

“I’m not going to take my clothes off.”

“But you don’t mind standing here making me feel naked. You have me at a distinct disadvantage.”

“Hardly. You’re the one who caught me off guard, rising out of the ocean like an ancient sea god.”

He held up his wounded arm as exhibit A. “As you can see I’m a mere mortal.”

“Mortal, yes—but hardy mere.”

“Do you like what you see?”

“Not enough to fornicate with you here on the beach.”

“No? Law enforcement is pretty lackadaisical in this city.” He glanced up at the parking lot, empty but for his clown car. “If the police rolled up, they’d probably park and watch.” He was bluffing. If she’d stripped off her knickers then and there his slightly tumescent member would have withdrawn. Like most men, he leaned toward exhibitionism, but performing on the beach with a stranger in broad daylight was out of the question. He sensed that she too was disinclined and so felt confident in the flirtation.

“I wouldn’t do it here if we were madly in love.”

The words—fornicate, madly, love—the images they conjured aroused him visibly. He wrapped the towel around his waist but the tent he made in the cloth declared the fact he would conceal.

“Wouldn’t *madly* include just about anything?”

“Most men are half-mad to begin with, so I see how a man might think that.”

“How about on a warm night under the stars on a soft blanket with no one around?”

“If you want me to help you with that arm, put your clothes on.”

Roland shrugged and picked up his dirty laundry and jug of water and handed her the drug store bag. She looked inside as he began to dress.

“What’s your bandage covering—a burn, a cut? If it’s a burn, then the worst thing you could have done was take it into this filthy ocean.”

“It’s a cut.”

“How fresh?”

“Six seven hours.”

“There aren’t any scissors in here, no antiseptic cream. This won’t do.”

“I don’t need scissors to remove this bandage.”

She looked at him appraisingly. “You never answered my question.”

He knew the question she meant but decided to play dumb.

“I can’t keep track of them all.”

“Who took care of that arm for you?”

“You were right. A professional.”

“An EMT.”

“Yes. It was a house call.”

“What happened?” From her tone, Roland sensed she wasn’t going to brook another evasion. The rising sun warmed his shoulders and cast a thin orange shine on the roiling Pacific stretched out before them. He turned his head and looked directly into her eyes—his emerald greens against her limpid blues.

“A fight. I got into a fight.”

“At midnight?”

“What is this?”

“Is it a knife wound?”

“It is.”

“Big bowie knife with a wooden handle and a curved steel guard?”

Roland cocked an eyebrow. “It was well above cutlery.”

“Because last night around two AM they wheeled in a corpse, a man dead from such a knife to his chest.”

“I see. You’re connecting dots.”

“Or taking a shot in the dark.”

He’d finished dressing. He looked at her again and nodded.

“Is that a yes?”

“Sounds like my attacker.”

“Black hair, swarthy?”

“The knife in the chest says enough. I can’t imagine there were two last night.”

“You did the world a favor.”

“So I gather. But how do you know?”

“The SFPD showed quite an interest. Then the FBI arrived and printed the deceased. I’d never seen authorities fingerprint a corpse before. And I heard them talking. Looks like you took out a serial killer. The Glendale Butcher.”

“That’s what brought a gaggle of reporters to my door this morning. I fled the interview looks like straight into your jogging path.”

“Imagine that.”

“I am. So, will you take care of my arm, Nurse...?”

“Deidre. What’s your name?”

“Me llamo Roland Hazzard.”

“Your name goes with the cowboy boots.” She handed back his bag of supplies. “This will hardly do. You’re not very bright, are you?”

“I get by on my lonesome. A lot of smart people don’t.”

“True enough, Roland. Anyway, let’s get your arm cleaned and redressed. I’ve got proper supplies up and my place.”

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Deidre lived in a walk-up apartment building in the Seacliff district a few blocks from the beach. She led the way. The streets were still quiet. He followed her as she padded up the hill in her neon orange training shoes. The clop of his boots on the sidewalk made him keenly aware of the silent buildings and rows of idle cars wedged tightly against the curbs. He guessed she was just one side or the other of thirty. Viewed from behind, her body could have been that of an athletic teenager, with no sign of a bulge in her hips. Roland took stock of her oscillating buttocks as they flexed in time above the gap between her thighs.

She turned her head and noticed his limp. “Are you faking a hurt foot so you can lag behind and ogle my bum?”

“No. I stepped on a piece of glass.”

“On the beach?”

“During the fight”

“That’s unlucky.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“You have bits of glass lying about your flat, do ya?”

“I broke a bottle over his head.”

“Just like in the movies.”

“Yeah, except it wasn’t stage whiskey.”

They continued their uphill march without further conversation until they reached her address and veered in. The front of the building was landscaped with acacia trees, poinsettias, and morning glory. The stairs up to her floor were painted seafoam green and each apartment door had its own custom color. Potted flowers abounded, so much so that one could not tell which flowers went with which doors. Or was it simply one happy community where everyone tended the marigolds? Communism at the local level, apart from the individually painted doors.

“Your place is beautiful.”

“That’s easy to say when you’re not paying the rent.”

“And you’re beautiful.”

She turned and looked at him. “Not even close. My face could barely launch a kayak.”

“You’re way too modest—a good-sized yacht. I’ll settle for nothing less.”

“People sometimes say *hot*. *Beautiful* is too complicated—a curse I think.”

“I think I understand. But you’re damned good lookin’.”

She unlocked her bright green door and they went inside. The place was amply furnished, tastefully decorated and remarkably tidy, as though its occupant wanted always to be ready for guests. The little air-freshener she had plugged into the wall imparted a mild vanilla smell. Roland could not imagine living this way, but he imagined it would be nice to live with someone who liked to live this way.

“The shower’s in there. I’ll wash those clothes in my little unit.”

Roland went into her bathroom and undressed again. He beheld his dirty clothes and was ashamed to have to hand them over to such a fastidious person, intuiting perhaps for the first time a moral dimension to bodily cleanliness, something touched on by his martial arts instructors over the years but in recent months completely forgotten. For the moment, his embarrassment softened his priapic impulse.

“How you doin’ in there, love?” she said through the door.

*This was her idea*, he reminded himself. *I’d have settled for first aid on the beach*. Even so, he didn’t want to open the door with his arousal on display, nor did he want to have to cover it with his hands or clothes. He wanted her to see that he was not prematurely aroused, so he drew upon the most unerotic image he could recall, that of a man he witnessed in Union Square a few days ago squatting against a wall and sucking the blood from the neck of a pigeon whose head he’d just torn off.

“Having trouble working the shower?” Roland could hear her smiling. He reached into the shower with his free hand and turned the knob and adjusted the temperature then opened the door.

“I’m not in a terrible hurry.” He handed her his dirty clothes.

“Keep the bandage on until after the shower and keep this door open. It gets too steamy in there.”

Roland stepped into the shower and slid shut the clear glass door. He could see her in the hallway loading his clothes into a miniature washing machine stored in a utility closet. She didn’t look over at him but lowered

her head for a moment as she started the machine and closed her eyes as if in contemplation.

“How long do you think it will take? I was planning on going to work this morning.”

She looked at him. “What line are you in—waste management?”

“Video games.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about you guys. Sounds like a fun place to work.”

“Yeah, the dress code is pretty lax, but not the hours.”

“I’ll have you out of here in a jiff. I need to get to bed anyway. I got off work at five this morning.”

He wiped a hole in the fog on the glass. “That’s perfect. You are very kind.”

“I am—it’s true. You needed help.”

“I did, but I didn’t know that until you showed up.”

“Tell me again why you felt the need to bathe in the ocean, other than you being just plain strange.”

Roland spoke slowly and loudly so he could be understood above the rushing water. “Reporters camped outside my building and woke me up at six. I gave them a good thrashing then jumped into my car.”

“A good thrashing—Americans don’t say that.”

“I like old movies. My TV doesn’t even have service. I use it just to watch movies on DVD.”

“I like that.” Deidre opened the shower door and climbed in. Her body was as gorgeous as he’d imagined, stunningly white, hard, and virtually hairless.

“What’s this all about?”

“You wanted to see me naked so here I am?” She cocked an eyebrow. “No point in wasting water.”

He wanted to reach out his hand and touch her but resisted. “This isn’t a very safe space to get engaged.”

“Engaged?”

“Physically coupled.”

“You’re not going to shag me in here, love.”

Roland laughed to conceal embarrassment. “Certainly not. The cut on my foot smarts under my own weight, so holding you up...”

“Shhhhh,” She touched her finger to her lips in case the shower had drowned out her sibilant. She handed him a bottle of shampoo and told

him to wash his hair then she pumped out a palmful of shower gel and began to lather his body. “Raise your arms higher.” He stood nearly motionless as soapy water cascaded over his shoulders and down his chest while she ministered to every inch of his body, including the bottoms of his feet.

“Nasty little puncture. Now rinse your hair.” She got behind him to give him room to stand under the warm stream and washed his back and buttocks.

By the time she was finished, his head was spinning, his hangover in full retreat.

“You have a gorgeous body. It begs to be touched.” She looked at him with shy civility as she began to wash her own body. He stepped to the side and made way for her to stand under the stream and leaned against the opposite wall facing her, watching, trying not to slip on his heels. In the whole of his short life, Roland had never been more aroused, and he knew it. He had ceased to be Roland, son of so-and-so and so-and-so, born on such-and-such date in Saint Whatchamacallit’s Hospital somewhere in the Milky Way. He was the man in Deidre somebody’s shower watching Deidre rub fragrant soap all over her perfect white body with steam rising around them.

“You should see the look on your face.” Words failed him yet. He drew her close and kissed her, not savagely as he might a temptress, but cautiously, inquiringly, exploratorily, with his lips only slightly parted.

“That’s lovely.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I had to make sure you were perfectly clean.”

“For what?” Roland believed he knew what for but wanted to hear her say it.

“Your reward.”

“It was self-defense.”

“Whose knife was that sticking out of his chest?”

“The dead man’s.”

“You mean the Glendale Butcher’s.” His lust was beginning to flag. “Killing a psychopath with his own weapon is a feat that warrants a show of appreciation.”

“I like the way you think,” was all he could manage.

“Consider this a cosmic reset. Last night you defeated the worst of evil, and this morning you’ve been blessed by the best of good.”

“Golly.” Roland had never used that expression before in his life, and he said it without irony.

“Not another word.”

When she’d finished rinsing her hair she stepped out of the shower and set a dry towel on the lid of the commode. “Have a seat, Roland. You look a little unsteady.” Roland complied. Water dipped off his body onto the floor.

Deidre wrapped her hair in a towel and cinched it tight and then proceeded slowly and carefully to straddle the prodigious grateful mute. “You’ll be pushing the edge of my envelope, love, but let’s give it a try.” Roland reached around and took the small of her back in both hands to provide maximum support as she slowly, cautiously lowered herself onto him.

“That’s good so far. Now hold still.”

She regulated the depth and speed of their intercourse with precise muscular control and narrated each adjustment with squeals and sighs and rolling grunts while he kissed and tongued her breasts. By the time they were finished, the water from the shower was replaced with sweat. Neither of them had spoken a word, though both discovered guttural sounds Roland had never known. When they finished, she stood up and pulled him to his feet and they stood up together in the tight confines and toweled each other dry.

“My neighbors probably heard that. I’m certain they’re home.”

“I hope you don’t promise them it’ll never happen again.”

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They lay side by side atop her spacious bed. He stared at the pale blue ceiling as though it were a movie screen upon which their just completed coupling was projected.

“Your clothes will be dry in a little while.”

He fought the urge to sleep, his hangover returning.

“I’ll be out of here as soon as they’re ready.”

“I think I misjudged you.”

“How so?”

“You’re not a dim bulb.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You work in high-tech, for one thing. What’s your job in video games?”

“I test the games for defects. Today is my ninety-day review, when they’ll either make me permanent or let me go.”

“You must be pretty sharp to do that job.”

“I’m the smartest person I’ve ever known.”

“Are ya now?”

“Have you ever heard of Elon Musk?”

“Vaguely.”

“He launches rockets and builds electric cars and is currently exploring neurotechnology—He might be smarter than I am.”

“Well, I’ll let you two sort that out. Now rest your eyes.”

The two slept until the dryer buzzed. He touched her hand and swiveled off the bed. She got up and brought back his dry warm clothes and stood naked in front of her mirror while he dressed. He wanted to take her again then and there but knew that would seem greedy, ungrateful, would debase the gift he’d already received. She left the room and came back with a medical kit and cut off the wet bandage.

“The man you killed—did he say anything?”

“He asked me to call him an ambulance.”

“I mean beforehand.”

“He vowed to choke me with my own castration.”

She gasped. “It’s good we gave it proper use today.”

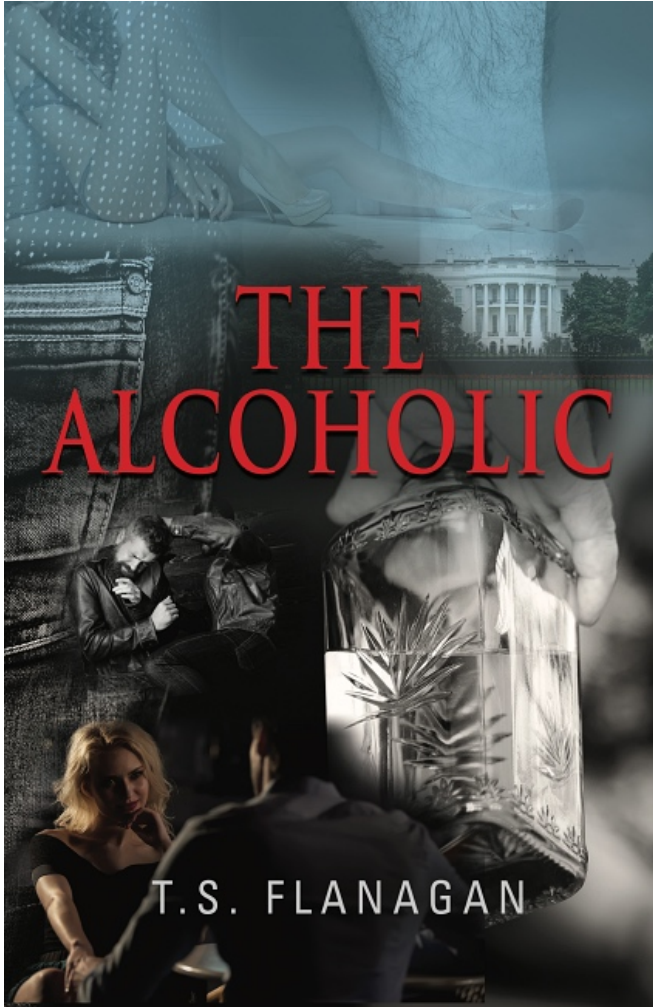
She inspected the gash on his arm then led him to the living room and set him on the couch and went to a cabinet and brought back supplies. She disinfected and salved the wound and applied a fresh bandage then set his heel on the coffee table and knelt on the carpet and dressed the cut on his foot. Watching her there naked, on her knees, tending to his injury, projected him back to an earlier time, somewhere in Ancient Anatolia it seemed, where he imagined he was a warrior returned home from a victory, there to be pampered by a devoted maiden. The image seemed more memory than fantasy, and he shook it out of his mind. She got up and put the first aid kit away and went into the bedroom and came back wearing a bathrobe and holding a comb.

“Put on your boots and tell me how it feels.”

He went to the door and pulled on his Laredos and raised himself up and down on the injured foot and nodded it felt ok. She took him by the shoulders and faced him away from her and combed his long damp hair until the comb went smoothly through.

“You truly are the best of the good.”

“I take pleasure in healing. In uniform or out.”



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