



THE MEDALLION: A NOVEL

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The Medallion/Chapter One

In sea water, sound travels at 343 meters per second. Sasha knew this from his physics class at the gymnasium, what they called high school in the Ukraine. He had fled to the USA from the city of Ostrog with every ruble he had, five years earlier. But he still remembered the physics lesson. Whatever made the sound might be a mile away or right next to him, serrated teeth and a mouth open like an excavator bucket.

“Wake up, Sasha. Sasha, wake up,” said Wally, tapping on the cab window.

In the 17th of a 24-hour shift, Sasha Denisov slouched in the passenger seat of his cab, his jacket on the meter and a Red Sox cap over his eyes. He dreamed himself in a trench in the Pacific; ten thousand feet of water drove him down into the darkness where the fish carried their own lights. His breathing shallowed from the squeeze on his ribs and lungs. A couple more meters, and he would be crushed. Sasha heard the sound again; this time he thought he recognized car keys striking the window of his cab.

“Sasha, wake up.”

It was Wally Too-Too, Sasha knew as he came to the surface. Wally drove for Mystic River Cab. His real name was Walter Kibaki. When he started three years ago, having moved from the slums of Nairobi to the tenements of Chelsea, Walter said, “Get me drink too, too,” to whomever went for coffee. “I give you money.” The name stuck.

“Wally,” Sasha said, adjusting his makeshift pillow, ready to plunge again. “Let me be. I’m on a double shift.” Sasha’s English sounded American, except his *h*’s, *w*’s and his *p*’s were borrowed from the 37 consonants of the Russian language. A specialist might also catch the Slavic accents of Ukrainian in Sasha’s speech. He carried those sounds in his mouth, a legacy.

“Sasha,” Wally knocked again.

Twelve-hour shifts were common for cab drivers around South Station. That included gassing up, eating, taking bathroom breaks, fixing a flat from nail spills, giving receipts to maybe 50 customers, making change for them, listening politely to them, separating tips from meter money, 300 miles on a shift. More if you had a long fare.

Once or twice a month, Sasha did a 24; one day and night straight. The extra money, like the cash from tips, went into a safety deposit box at Cambridge Trust. He was saving for his own medallion, for the privilege of operating his own cab.

“Sasha, help,” said Wally. “It’s my cab.”

That was the word, *help*. Sasha didn’t think he had ever heard Wally say it. Through the glass, he thought he saw a welt on his friend’s black face, a raised ridge on his cheek bone. Sasha took a swig of cold black coffee. He grabbed his jacket off the meter and let the door of the cab swing shut behind him. He was awake, nearly so, his heart picking up its pace to fuel his legs. Ahead of him, Wally ran past the entrances to South Station, past an office building, toward the street fronting on Fort Point Channel. Sasha saw the spotlight moon reflecting off the water.

He saw Wally go straight at the Channel, then take a sharp right and leave the moon hanging. Their friend Raoul Benitez joked that Wally’s ancestors out-ran leopards and lions. Raoul himself was a great swimmer; his ancestors made the 90-mile trip to Florida in rafts to get away from Fidel Castro’s Cuba.

Struggling to catch up, Sasha turned the corner. Wally’s cab idled a foot from the curb, doors open and lights on. Two people, a man and a woman, argued in the back seat. Wally lay on the pavement next to the cab. Sasha stopped and took a long breath. This was trouble.

The dispatcher's request crackled through the small speaker in the dashboard of car 2074.

Detectives Benjamin Schwartz and Alphonse Di Natale got word to investigate “a Code 12, South Station, Channel area, and possible altercation involving a taxi, license or medallion number unknown, TBA.”

A Code 12 was intentionally vague, most often a noisy disturbance, a party out of hand, but could be an equally vague altercation – anything from knives, pistols, and fists to a food fight. No one knew what was going on, whether the police would need to break up an evening of murder . . . or just fun.

The detectives were coming off the late shift when they caught the call. Schwartz had visited the dispatcher's station one night, with a cup of coffee and a Danish in paper bag, to see the person behind the microphone. She sat before the famous green screen, scratched from years of fingernails and pens pointing to details on its scarred face. The lady dispatcher had a voice that remained steady no matter the contents of the announcements – rape, murder, an officer shot or injured. Tonight she had tracked their Crown Vic as a white dot moving near a larger square labeled South Station.

The dispatcher offered to call the Transit police instead. Schwartz cleared his throat to get the weariness out of his voice. No, the detective said, everything outside the station was their jurisdiction and they'd take it.

Five hours earlier, at 10:32 PM, they had investigated a shooting in Roxbury, three young black men, one of them shot. The detectives knew the names of streets and corners as well as their own block: Crawford, Fulton, Pierce Streets, and Drumlin Ave, from Mattapan Square to an enclave of Somali immigrants, called Little Mogadishu. The adults – blacks, Hispanics, and Somalis --- got along fine, but the young, some armed, some in the drug trade, fought over asphalt and cement turf like tribes.

Di Natale had stood on the gas pedal down Blue Hill Ave. Lit by sodium lights, the broad avenues and side streets shone like a night game at Fenway. When they arrived after the uniformed patrol men, they identified themselves as homicide detectives. There was no deceased, yet. An ambulance sped the badly wounded young man to Boston Medical Center.

The two survivors of the attack were sitting on the steps of a three-decker on a street lined with them. One had been treated for a minor injury, his hand bandaged. The other was shivering from the adrenalin

wearing off. The uniforms passed them a couple of blankets. The detectives allowed the victims a half hour to decompress while officers stood nearby to keep them from leaving.

Schwartz and Di Natale knocked on doors. The neighborhood had already been roused by the gunfire, the half dozen police cars and spot lights with humming generators. In Schwartz's experience, neighbors near a crime scene were usually helpful. Most were frantic for the police to fix their wild streets. Too many gunshots on too many nights, the tired voices of citizens said to Schwartz. His own neighborhood was so quiet that his wife Evie complained about a dog barking too long.

Schwartz and Di Natale walked across the street to interview the two young black men on. Up close, they looked maybe 16 or 17. They didn't know much except for the black car, which pulled up beside them, rolled the windows down and started shooting. They were too scared to talk and would be revisited. The detectives found the school ID of the kid who was shot. He wasn't quite 15.

Di Natale said, "Christ, it's not safe around here even if you are 14 years old."

Back at headquarters, they sat at Schwartz's computer, read from their notes, and typed their report, incomplete as it was. Di Natale was faster on the keys than Schwartz, whose finger tips lost their sensitivity from years of diabetes pricks. They got along well in spite of the difference in ages. On one assignment, a witness asked Schwartz if Di Natale was his son; yes, he answered, his wife and he adopted the ugliest baby in the orphanage no one else wanted. Di Natale said his ex-wife would agree with the ugly part. The two men were friends as well as partners. When Di Natale was in Iraq or Afghanistan with the National Guard, Schwartz was cranky if he waited too long for an email reply.

When the detectives heard the dispatcher's alert, the altercation at South Station, they were headed home at last, Schwartz driving. They just learned that the shot 14 year old had made it through surgery. A uniformed or detective would talk with the boy tomorrow, -- and he wouldn't remember much either. In that neighborhood, young men had their own justice system, big on capital punishment.

Schwartz looked at his mirrors. No traffic behind, they were seven blocks away on Tremont, below the gold-domed State House. Winter Street was also empty. Schwartz took the turn fast, tires screeching like cats on the cobbles. Schwartz lit up the vehicle's lights and strobes, the illumination reflecting off the buildings on Summer Street where Washington crossed it. At each intersection, Schwartz gave the siren a hit.

Ahead of them stood South Station, the Fort Point Channel, and a gibbous moon.

Octavio Mendes heard the commotion from his cab; something was happening close to the Channel. He waited in line with the other cabs for more foot traffic from the trains or buses. Up ahead, he saw a short guy leave his cab, let the door swing shut behind him, head toward the Channel, and disappear around a corner. He noticed a few other drivers rush down the block. "*Las peleas!*" he heard someone yell. There was a fight somewhere.

Octavio was resting his tired eyes; in the vanity mirror the whites looked like they were ready to bleed. There had been too much beer the other night, his wide Colombian belt like a dam holding back his gut. Octavio had the radio on; he cheered himself up by listening to AM 1440, Salsa 'Til Dawn. Outside of the cab, it was quiet, hardly any foot traffic, with few trains and buses until the real morning, not this dark-as-the-devil's-heart time, a few hours after midnight, but what he called the pretty time, when dawn dabbled the western sky in gray, orange, and red. It was the only time he was glad to be up so early.

Octavio itched to lock the cab and leave for the fight, but his brother Julio had called on his cell and said to stay put. He had pissed his brother off enough lately and didn't need another reason. Octavio pledged to stop taking samples of the drugs he distributed for his brother. His customers were usually too nervous or wasted to notice he was light. Still, he might get caught, particularly when he came back from deliveries as high as a 747 climbing through the clouds.

Instead, he could impress his brother with improving his English; maybe take courses at the community college, with an eye to moving up into management at the Zapata Cab Company where he and Julio worked for that tight-fisted Mihael Alvarez. Julio had confided to Octavio that he had big plans to get his own cab. Julio made good money with Mihael, who sometimes treated him like the son he never had and sometimes like hired help he could replace in a second.

Octavio saw himself getting a cut of the new cab, from their businesses, the legitimate and the others, the drugs and the girls. Julio mentioned a medallion, the right to operate a cab, on sale at a good price, somewhere in Dorchester. The brothers would get that one or the next. And they would break away from Alvarez and become his equals.

The back door of the cab opened and the dome light, extra bright to count change and embarrass customers into a bigger tip, went on.

“Put that music down,” said Julio, sliding across the back seat. He had a McDonald’s bag in his hand. Octavio slid open the Plexiglas partition between the front and back. Julio put the bag on the passenger seat next to Octavio. Julio was taller than his older brother, in great shape, more like a V than Octavio, who more closely resembled the first letter of his name. Julio wore that nice tweed jacket Octavio liked to borrow.

Whenever Julio carried the product, he also packed his pistol. The tailor let the coat out on that side so you couldn’t notice the .357 short-barreled revolver Julio carried against his ribs.

Julio had been shot a few years before and nearly died. He was making a delivery in Roxbury and was caught by *el ladron*, robbers who would leave his wife a widow. If Julio hadn’t been armed, Felisa would have gone shopping at Nordstrom’s wearing black. But the shooting was one reason Julio sent for his brother in Bogota. Julio was working too hard and wasn’t being careful enough.

Julio’s shoulder still had a dent from the .380. Now he always carried a powerful pistol on business. Someday, Octavio thought, he’d have his own *pistola* too. Julio promised Octavio that if he straightened up his life, anything was possible. As Julio said, they were businessmen; only difference is that they wouldn’t report their profits to the IRS, and when they were in trouble, they served as their own police.

“No wonder I have to repeat what I say to you, bro’,” Julio said about the music. “You be losing your hearing with this shit.”

“No, no, no,” Octavio protested. “I hardly listen. On quiet nights keeps me from sleeping. Whatcha got?”

“Big Mac, fries, and a Coke. In the bag is something for a guy in Waltham. Finish eating at the back parking lot of the Walmart off 128. You’re going to hook up with a blue ’09 Beemer, license tag begins with B39. The guy has a small goatee. Looks more like a goat, if you ask me.”

“It’s amazing,” Julio continued, “what these *idiota* think is cool. Leave him the bag and take his money. Wait. He hands you the money and *then* you hand him the package. Not the other way, Octavio. Understand? Gotta go,” he said, squeezing his brother’s shoulder. “I’m parked illegal.”

“By the way,” Julio passed his Zapata Cab Company business card, “on the back of this is the motel where Nicole is staying. After you deliver your package and get paid, pick her up. You have her cell. Drive her back to Chelsea.”

Octavio turned his taxi free light off and pulled out of the line, heading for 93 north. Nicole was from their other business. She was one of the better-looking ones, young with a kid and a live-in baby sitter. She didn't like talking much on the ride home; maybe she didn't want to encourage the brother of the boss. Others did, and Octavio got lucky once in a while.

The hamburger smelled so good that while waiting for a light to change, Octavio reached in for a bite. Whatever the fight at the Channel was, he would miss it. But there would be others, he was sure.

When Sasha turned the corner, he saw the maroon and white Mystic River cab. Wally's Toyota Camry was smaller than Sasha's Chevy Malibu, which meant the two people in the back had less room to move about or to get away. Wally slumped next to the cab, trying to get up. Then he sat back down, rubbing his eye; he'd been hit and the man who had hit him was still in the back seat of the cab, slapping a woman, his arm rising and falling like a conductor's baton in waltz time.

The passenger door had swung wide open, dome light on. Sasha put his left hand on top of the door and looked in. He was nearly 5-8 in his spit-shined Rockports, a little over 5-6 in his socks. Though slim, he worked out with free weights and a pull-up bar in his basement apartment in Cambridge. He also ran around his neighborhood in any weather. Sasha liked the cold. His skin glided over the bones, muscles and tendons, not enough body fat to obscure the mechanics beneath.

The man in the back seat was taller, and wider, than Sasha. His hair looked painted black, curling against the back of his neck. He seemed someone who hoisted weights for power more than endurance, and his T-shirt was a size too small. The man had made quick business of Wally, who was six inches taller than Sasha. The man was also drunk or high, his eyes wild with anger.

Sasha felt his insides shrink. His mind, its compass, was pointing away from the man, the cab, the whole incident. He thought of himself back in his cab sleeping, which he needed like a parched man needed water. Anywhere but here, his mind said, interested in preserving itself and the body that supported it. The woman's lip was bleeding, not too bad, but her arm was blue with bruising as she held it up to ward off more blows.

Sasha saw that the man, younger than him by a decade, had professional tattoos on his neck, but on his hands below the knuckles were crude prison or gang insignias, something he dreaded in customers. The letters spelled L-o-v-e on the left and H-a-t-e on the right. So, the abuser was a rightie.

Sasha was rusty with violence. While a soldier in the Russian Federation, a dozen years before, he was a Spetsnaz, Special Forces, a mechanic and driver with enough training to earn his black beret and serve in Chechnya. Spetsnaz gave all their officers and men in Chechnya a belt knife, the buckle the head and chest of a Siberian tiger. With it, Sasha amused his cabbie friends or his girl friend Ani, but that was back in his apartment and wouldn't do him much good here. Knives also meant someone could be killed or cut.

Sasha looked in at the couple and said “Hey” to interrupt the slaps and blows. The woman would have been pretty if her face hadn’t been contorted with fear, if mascara wasn’t running down to her own neck tattoo. Then Sasha found himself on the ground next to Wally. The man had hit Sasha with the back of his hand; the hard ridge of his palm pressed Sasha’s breast bone and knocked the air out of him. It was the kind of blow that could stop a heart from beating.

Sasha’s training was perhaps too old to help him much here, with the moon reflected off of the briny channel and a man with enough anger to light up the street like a small sun. Sambo, the mixed martial arts for Russian Special Forces, involved judo-like moves that broke an opponent’s will. But Sasha couldn’t do much Sambo inside the vehicle. He would have to draw the man out.

Sasha stepped back into the open door. Wally tried to catch his breath, leaning on the right fender of his cab. He would be no help, so Sasha gestured Wally to stay put. Sasha turned back into the Toyota doorway and faced the couple. The man spoke of hitting Sasha again, this time much harder. So Sasha kicked the man with the tip of his Rockport, catching the side of the man’s right foot, close to the shin and knee.

The man stopped hitting the woman and turned his full attention to Sasha in the doorway. The woman looked up like a caged animal, begging the man she called Rafael to stop. At least he knew his name now, Sasha thought. Sasha stepped back onto the sidewalk, far enough so Rafael couldn’t leap on him. Then Rafael stepped out of the cab, straightened up, and rubbed his leg. He showed his size and bulk to Sasha, and Sasha saw that this man had been inflicting pain on others for the past half hour and now was experiencing his own. He glared at Sasha, more nuisance than a threat.

Sasha looked at the man’s hands and feet, not his eyes. These would be sharp points of anger to make Sasha afraid, but the man’s hands and feet might tell Sasha what he was going to do next.

Sasha stayed out of range. From his hip pocket, Rafael took out a black object. At first Sasha thought it was a comb, and then he saw a Spyderco knife, with a scalloped hole. A flick and the stainless steel blade was pointed at Sasha’s gut. The blade was not that long, but that didn’t matter; if the knife didn’t slice you open like a package, three or four inches could still find the vital organs inside. Sasha saw that the man didn’t think he was much of an opponent; the knife was more to scare him away.

The woman opened the back door on the driver’s side. One stare from Rafael and she stopped, but he looked away from Sasha. The cabbie stepped in closer and threw a punch, his gut, buttocks, legs, and back all lined up behind the short strike to the side of the man’s throat. The punch drove into bundles of

nerves and blood vessels. Sasha was sure the man was experiencing extreme pain; Sasha had been hit like it in Spetsnaz training to get used to the feeling of going under and still keep his wits.

As Rafael gasped and started going down, Sasha stepped in to bend the knife hand back and pull the man forward, the wrist like a door hinge. Then Sasha kned the man in his pubic bone. He missed, but his knee to Rafael's hip was enough to make him sit down. Sasha stepped away as if from a hot stove. As the man tried to clear his head, Sasha grabbed the knife and stepped on it against the curb, breaking the blade in half. He flung the pieces toward the Channel. Now Sasha's plan was to get out of there before the man could shake off the blows and fight again.

He turned to see the woman leave the cab to help the man who beat her. Sasha knew Rafael was still dangerous, already recovering, just embarrassed that he was now on the ground and taken by surprise. With new anger to add to the old, he could find a way to grab Sasha and punish him. Spectators came around the corner and headed toward them. No police yet.

"What do we do now?" Wally asked. He stroked two small lumps on his face. Sasha's breast bone and his fist both throbbed.

"We clean this up before more people arrive and we have to spend a day with the police sorting it out," Sasha said.

"What about the man?"

"Drunk, I can smell it on him. Who knows what else is in his veins?"

The woman was holding her man and repeating his name, Rafael. She had moved from victim to nurse in a few minutes, and Sasha was not surprised. In the back of his cab, he had intervened a few times between a couple, arguments that ended with slaps or kicks. Sometimes, the injured party or spouse took the side of her attacker once he was subdued. It was just how some people ran their lives. The woman helped Rafael up. He moved toward Sasha, willing to go another round. Sasha knew that he would not do as well if the fight continued, but by then a small crowd was getting close, and they could hear the hard pulses of a police siren.

When Sasha turned to face Rafael again, the couple had gone. They were wearing stylish black and disappeared into the dark as they got away from the street lights. Wally started to congratulate Sasha, and then stopped. They were just lucky it ended the way it did.

“Did he owe you money?” Sasha asked.

“No, he paid. They started fighting when they got out. I not remember over what.”

“Where’re they from?”

“Hartford, I think. They got off bus from Maine. Something about visiting her mother and now they were going back home. I am worried, Sash. He knows my cab.”

“They won’t be back. He’ll be worried we’ll rat him to police. He probably has a record. Who knows? He might be out on bail or on parole. We won’t see him again.”

“Will we report him?”

“No, we won’t. Do you want to spend the rest of night with the police?” Sasha didn’t need to mention that cabbies and waiters who didn’t declare all their income remained cautious about authority.

“Now go home and put ice on your face. I am walking back to my cab before someone steals it.”

“Thanks, Sash.”

They hugged. Wally closed the back doors of his cab, got in and drove away. The few curious cabbies and other spectators left when Rafael and his girl friend took off. Sasha walked back to the corner of Summer Street and turned left. He could see South Station and his cab. He also saw an unmarked police cruiser with two men in suits slow down and head to where Wally’s cab had been. The police looked Sasha over, for sure, but they looked at everyone, trying to spook a runner, someone who took off because he didn’t want to talk.

Sasha kept walking; he noticed his hands shook when he held them out. Not too bad, given what just happened. Sasha checked his Red Star watch; more foot traffic meant that a bus or a train had arrived. It was the last train before dawn, he realized. A couple with suitcases on wheels and leather bags over their shoulders waited near his cab. Sasha jogged over to open the trunk.