

## A Pound of Flesh By Michael Danese

A Turkey buzzard is high in the sky over suburban Santa Barbara. From his view he can see a castle of a house. It isn't the Taj Majal or San Simenon, but it will do.

By the pool he can see a woman lying lazily. She lights another cigarette and fumbles with her iPod. Her name is Shannon. She is in her mid 30's, quite fit and attractive. There was really no need for the obvious cosmetic surgery to her face and body, but when you live where she lives, and live with who she lives with, it comes with the territory.

As the buzzard flies away, Alex quickly walks from the house to the pool. It is quite a stroll, past the gardens, the hot tub and the sitting area. "Hey . . . Hey!" he yells, trying to get Shannon's attention.

Shannon catches a glimpse of him coming as she rolls over. She takes a single ear bud out and waves.

"I'm outta here, I'll call you later," says Alex.

"Bye," says Shannon as she shoves the tunes back into her ear and rolls over again.

Alex changes direction and heads for the garages.

He is about 45, and in his youth he was probably an athlete. But now his body has gone to seed and he has lost some of his hair. What is left is mostly gray. The word is that Shannon married him for his money. And who could blame her? His medical practice makes plenty of it, and she makes a hobby of spending it.

He jumps on a Harley and speeds away. Today isn't going to be a good day for Alex, in fact it will be the worst day of his life.

But before we get to that, let's back up a few years where we find Alex and another woman at a casino in Las Vegas. Alex is a little thinner and has more hair, and there is still some color in it. He is obviously no stranger to the gambling tables. He keeps rolling them bones and shelling out more cash – enough to fund a small country. It doesn't seem to bother him much, and the babe on his arm seems entertained.

This scene is repeated on a regular basis, the only changes are the women, the casinos and the type of game. Alex is an equal opportunity loser – roulette, blackjack, Texas Hold 'em, you name it, he can lose at it. He doesn't limit himself to the casinos either. His bookie, Rocco, is on his speed dial. Alex doesn't know too much about sports, but he thinks he does. Rocco is glad to take his money. Alex usually runs a tab, then he pays it off every few weeks. Rocco would do just fine if Alex was his only client.

You see, attentive reader, Alex has found a way to supplement his already sizable income.

We see him sitting at his desk in his opulent office. An original Warhol hangs behind him. A Remington statue is on the credenza behind him. The picture window to his left frames a lovely view of the Pacific. The phone rings. He answers. The voice on the other end says, "Ready?" "Always!" is his standard response.

"OK, H-B-minus, L-O-minus, LV-B-minus, K-B-plus, K-O-minus." Then the line goes dead.

Alex stashes the post-it note in his pocket and goes about his business. He is in the office today, but doesn't have any patients scheduled. He likes to put a day aside each week to do his paperwork and check back with patients from the previous few days.

A moment later his assistant, Jillian, breaks the silence over the intercom. “Incoming!” she says. He rises and exits the office, passing by Jillian, a shapely twenty-something with long blond hair. “Two minutes out,” she adds.

Two minutes later the double doors in the rear fly open and two paramedics enter with a patient on a stretcher. “Talk to me boys!” barks Alex.

“Cycle vs. tree, male, 28, type B negative,” says Bert. Bert, and his partner Ernie (I know, they’ve already heard all of the jokes) have been together for three years. They’ve been to Alex’s door many times in those years.

“Ok, let’s get him on the table,” says Alex.

Bert and Ernie have the patient on the table in a flash. He is stripped and prepped in no time. Alex takes a confirming peek at the post-it note - H-B-minus, LV-B-minus. He quickly takes a scalpel and makes an incision in the man’s chest. Soon he inserts a chest spreader then does more detailed work with the scalpel. In seconds he has the man’s heart in his hands. He places it in a small ice chest that Ernie is holding. A few seconds later, the man’s liver is placed into another little cooler. He carefully closes the man’s chest and then Bert puts the clothes back on the body. They move the body back onto the gurney and place the two coolers underneath.

“Nice work, guys,” Alex tells the two EMTs. Then he adds, “Here is the death certificate, all signed. Tell Lisa in the coroner’s office that I will attend the charity ball next month. My check is in the mail, sorry for the late reply.”

“No prob, doc. Catcha later!” says Bert. They go out the way they came, and they are gone.

The next day the office is filled with patients, some double booked, you know, just like your doctor’s office usually is. Jillian’s voice comes over the office intercom – “Dr. Marks, please call 211.”

Alex excuses himself from the patient that he is in consultation with and picks up the phone and dials the three numbers. “This is Dr. Marks,” he says.

“Incoming. Six minutes,” Jillian tells him.

“Thanks, I’ll be ready,” he replies before hanging up the phone.

He returns to his patient. “Okay Mr. Evans, please follow the instructions as we’ve discussed and continue on the medication and you should be fine. If you don’t have any other questions, I’m afraid that I need to hurry out. That call was for an emergency that is coming in. Please see Jillian to schedule your next visit.” He exits the consultation room and heads back towards the double doors. He quickly prepares the operating room. He knows that Jillian will juggle the scheduled patients until he can resume his appointments.

In no time the double doors open and a patient on a gurney is wheeled in. The two paramedics, Sharon and Phil, are new to the operation. They’ve been on the job for only a few months, and he has only seen them two times before. They usually handle the northern suburbs. But he is happy to see them today. He is already masked when they enter, trying to save time. “Talk to me,” he says.

“28 year old female, B positive, drowned in a friend’s pool,” Sharon says as they move the woman’s body onto the table and begin to undress her.

Alex checks his post-it note - K-B-plus. “Ok, we are going for her kidney,” he says.

Phil rolls the body over and Alex has the kidney in the cooler in seconds. He quickly signs the death certificate and hands it to Sharon.

“Please forgive the rush, but I have an office full of patients today,” he says.

“No problem, doc. We have a bit of a ride and I want to avoid the traffic,” Phil says.

They exit through the doors and disappear.

I hope that you are not surprised by these activities, gentle reader, but it is a pretty sweet set-up for Alex and his fellow members of the Shylock Society. With their location in Santa Barbara, they are able to service the large population of the rich and privileged members of our society. They are within an hour’s flight of the Northern California elite up in Mill Valley, the Southern California moneyed folks in Brentwood and Beverley Hills, and even those clients in the Las Vegas area. I’m sure that you’ve noticed how many celebrities and rock stars have had heart and/or liver transplants in the past few years. Well, friend, that doesn’t even scratch the surface. This is big business, and money talks.

The Shylocks have a wide-reaching network of paramedics, doctors, coroners, and most of the transplant surgeons in the areas where they are needed. The society even includes prominent funeral directors. No detail is left uncovered. They’re not recruiting new members, either. It is a *very* closed loop that is just as big as it needs to be. “Why has this been permitted to continue for so long?” you are thinking to yourself. Well, it would have been on *60 Minutes* years ago if a certain CBS executive hadn’t profited from the service. Same goes for the other networks. No, the Shylocks are here to stay.

So back to our story – about 10 years ago Alex’s wife, Shannon was a promising medical student at UC Santa Barbara. They met while Alex was speaking at the university. They hit it off right away. Her looks and his money were a perfect match. Well, they married and Alex’s gambling curtailed a bit for a while. But as long as it doesn’t impede Shannon’s spending, she could care less. She has even called Rocco a few times to lay down some bets.

Alex and Shannon are fixtures on the Santa Barbara social scene – there is always a charity ball, silent auction, or dinner dance on their schedule. The causes don’t really matter because each one is a much needed tax write off. Alex became an expert at keeping track of his receipts and donations. If he paid the same attention to his gambling strategy he would be even wealthier, if that was even possible.

Plus, as you have probably surmised, the Shylocks operate on an electronic basis, with most of the business taking place in the Cayman Islands.

Over the past several years he has harvested over 3000 organs, by his own estimation. He sees himself as a bit of a savior to these patients, since it is quite possible that they would have died without the aid of his organ-for-cash society. And, he is probably right in that respect. Making good money while using your skill to help people. Yes, the man loves his work.

So, now that you know Alex a little better, let’s get back to the worst day of his life. As you remember, Alex had just sped away on his Harley. It’s not just any Harley, mind you, it is the top-o- the-line cruiser, capable of travelling cross-country, but he would never have the time for that. And, you would think that a doctor would recognize the value of a helmet, but if you are

invincible, you certainly don't need one. He headed north on the 405, with its terrific views of the Pacific. Alex loved to see the waves crashing against the rocky coastline. He stopped at a little beach bar and watched a hoard of wind-surfers dance over the waves and get big air. Truly amazing. Alex could not help but think that some of those guys would be future patients!

He continued his ride up the winding trail of the PCH, enjoying the view and the wind in his hair. As he was gazing off to the Pacific on his left, a young rowdy in a SUV ran a light and broadsided Alex from the right. Alex went flying and landed in a heap. The bike was a twisted pile of metal. The young buck behind the wheel immediately had a mental breakdown and cried uncontrollably. A young woman that was behind Alex jammed on her brakes and avoided making a bad situation even worse. She pulled over and called 911.

Alex opened his eyes and wasn't sure if he was dead or alive. Once he decided he was alive he tried to turn his head. Nothing doing. He was surprised that he could not feel any pain, or anything else for that matter. He could see a small crowd gathering around him. He could hear the voices of the looky-loos. "Wow – did you see that!" "I bet that guy is dead!" "Check out that wrecked bike!" "Oh, all that blood!"

Alex knew it was bad. Soon he heard the sirens in the distance. He could see blurry images of faces peering down at him. He thinks to himself something about wearing a helmet. He hopes someone will call Shannon. He thinks that Jillian will need to cancel his appointments for tomorrow.

The sirens grew closer and finally stopped. He heard the doors open and he could see two blurry images moving towards him. "Okay, give us some room here!" he heard a guy say. "I'll loosen his jacket," a female voice said.

"What luck for me!" Alex thought. "I know these two paramedics, its Sharon and Phil! At least I know I will be in good hands!"

Sharon quickly cut away his jacket and his shirt. She used her stethoscope on him. Phil readied the gurney. Alex was so curious to know what was going on. They gently lifted Alex onto the gurney, wheeled him to the ambulance and sped away, sirens blaring.

Alex's mind was racing. "I'm so happy they are going so fast. I wonder which hospital I will end up at? I don't really know my way around here. I hope Shannon meets us there. No, wait, she had that luncheon today. I hope they called her by now. I'm gonna be outta work for a while. Jillian will need to move everyone forward." Soon Alex was asleep.

Suddenly he was jarred awake as the doors were opened and his gurney was on the ground. They pushed through the double doors and were quickly in the hospital.

"Waddya got?" said a man as they pushed him.

"SUV meets cycle, male, mid-forties, type A negative," says Sharon.

Alex's thought continue to come quick. He is in the dangerous position of having too much knowledge. "Damn, I can't feel too much on my arm. I'll bet they started an I.V. and I'm getting morphine. Next will probably be X-Rays then MRI. I wish I could turn my head."

"Lemme check my notes – Oh yes, H - A minus," says the voice near the gurney.

Now they are moving again, through more doors. "Finally, some the X-Rays," thought Alex. Sharon and Phil carefully move him onto a bed from the gurney. "Easy does it," thinks Alex, "Let's not break anything else!" At least now he can see straight up.

He sees a Dr. begin to hover over him. The lights above are bright and the man is just a blurry silhouette. "Let's get this heart out and into the cooler asap. I have a tee time in 30 minutes" says the shadowy figure.

"Heart –out!?!– No – Wait - I'm not dead! Wait! No! Sharon! Phil! Help me, help..."