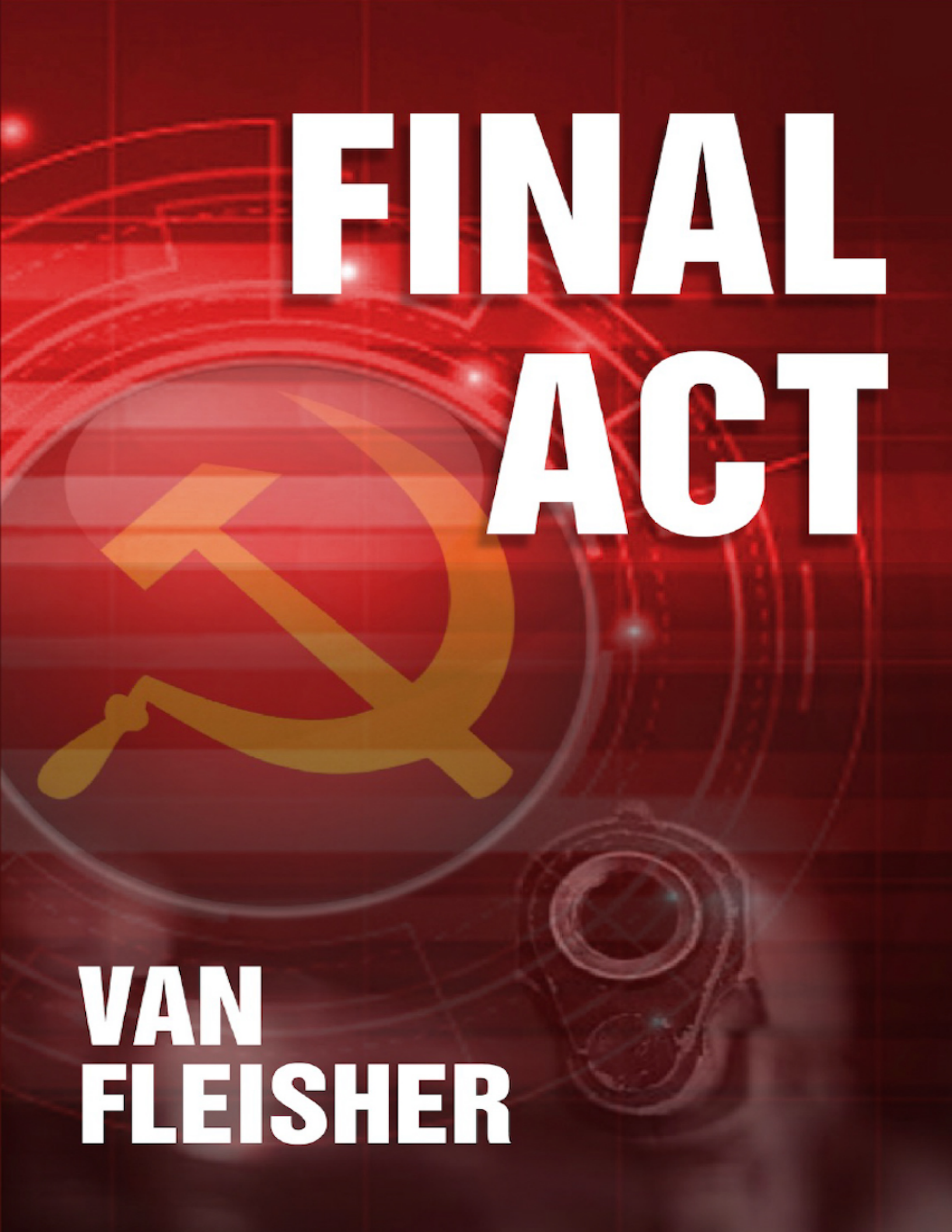


FINAL ACT

The background is a dark red, almost black, with a grid of glowing red lines. A large, glowing yellow hammer and sickle symbol is positioned on the left side. In the center, there is a glowing red eye-like shape. In the bottom right, there is a glowing red mechanical device, possibly a camera or a sensor, with a lens and various components.

**VAN
FLEISHER**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FINAL ACT QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS

CHAPTER 1 OF FINAL CHANCE (Book 3 of the FINAL Trilogy)

PROLOGUE

Two years earlier. Vijay Patel had invented the VT2, a fitness watch with extremely advanced capabilities that could analyze blood properties in real-time, actually and accurately predicting the wearers' deaths to a precise date. While the concept was conceived to allow users time to get their affairs in order, talk with family and friends, or perhaps address a long thought-about bucket-list item, some receivers of their Final Notice decided to use their remaining time to right a perceived wrong or settle a grudge ... with complete impunity.

Given the easy access to guns, and the NRA's ongoing promotion of fear, America's love affair with guns continued to grow, fueling even more senseless murders by Final Notice recipients. Patel, stunned by the havoc his invention had brought about, worked in cooperation with Zoe Brouet of the FBI to stem the violence associated with the VT2 – violence that affected everyone from U.S. Senators to store clerks, from senior citizens to scientists.

The invention of the VT2 prompted millions to consider the question, "What would you do if you knew you had 10, 20, or 30 days to live?" FINAL ACT asks that question as well, but adds, "What might others do if they knew that you'd received your Final Notice?"

CHARACTERS

FINAL ACT contains two types of characters, which I'll call "Transient" and "Core." The Transient characters will typically appear for only one chapter and are used to flesh out the wider story, while the Core characters have a more important role and generally appear more than once.

Core Characters – In order of appearance

Vijay Patel
Zoe Brouet
Eric Hawke
Demi Magray
Alek Belikov
Vik Vasin
Jennifer Andrews Patel
Mike Kalin
J. Edward Konig
Bill & Nicole Andrews
Yuri Chernyshevsky
Ninad Banerjee
Moki Joe Hunter
Tocho Tom Hunter

CHAPTER 1 – WHEN IN ROME ...

Rome, Georgia. The beautiful, crisp, autumn Saturday that greeted Mildred Pierce as she opened her front door and stepped out onto Broad Street masked what lay ahead. The sky was bright blue with only a few puffy clouds floating by, in sharp contrast to the thunderstorm of just a few hours ago. The storm had kept most folks indoors, and the empty streets suggested that few were ready to venture out.

Mildred was looking forward to having lunch with her best friend, Esther, who'd been away for a few weeks visiting her family in California. She had chosen her brand-new fall pantsuit for the occasion – a smart, two-tone grey outfit that complimented her lithe frame.

Mildred was nearing eighty, but with her tall, almost military-like bearing, and energetic, confident stride, she could have passed for sixty. She wore her silver hair in a medium bobbed fashion that attractively framed her wide grey eyes, upturned nose, and mouth that defaulted to a warm smile. She appeared self-assured and upbeat, completely belying her inner feelings.

It had been a rough few weeks without Esther's warmth and love, and she knew it would feel good to be back in the glow that her friend radiated. But a part of her also dreaded the meeting.

It was just a short walk to Sweet Pickles, a favorite restaurant of theirs. She loved the chicken salad, accompanied by the famous sweet pickles that Penny made, and she and Esther often shared a piece of Penny's delicious chocolate cake, as well. But when she reached Fourth Avenue, only a short distance from the restaurant, a black pickup truck purposely swerved toward the curb, sending a

tsunami of muddy water from the morning rain that literally covered Mildred's fresh new pantsuit. She gasped from the splash and heard laughter and shouting from the passenger looking back from the open window. Shocked, she looked back as the truck sped away, its Confederate flag curtaining the rear window.

Mildred surveyed the damage and knew that she couldn't meet Esther looking like this. Her spirits momentarily dashed, she turned around and headed back to her apartment. Esther was always late, so even with this unexpected wrinkle, it would be OK. As she made her way quickly back to her home, she couldn't help but wonder why someone would do that to her. She knew it was intentional, and the hooting and laughter from the truck confirmed it, conjuring up the dark thoughts from the past that she had been wrestling with since she'd received her Final Notice.

Traffic was now at a standstill on Broad Street, and she could hear sirens and see flashing red and blue lights up near Second Avenue. She continued on her way, deciding which clothes to change into when she saw the Confederate flag in the rear window a few steps away from her. She stopped for a moment, the loud music blaring from the open windows, assaulting her ears. She also heard something else – laughter from long ago as the dark, unbidden thoughts raced through her head. She glanced down at her watch and made her decision. Unzipping her purse, she purposefully strode up to the truck, pulled out her silenced Glock 26, and put a bullet through the temple of the passenger, whose head jerked back, giving her a clear shot as she pumped another round into the driver's forehead while he stared at her, frozen, wide-eyed with surprise and fear. Calmly putting the gun back in her purse, Mildred didn't hear the sound of an alarm coming from the driver's watch. Muffled by the loud music and approaching sirens and obscured by the flag in the rear window, no one else heard the shots or noticed Mildred's act, and she simply continued her walk home to change clothes. Everyone else on Broad Street was trapped in traffic, texting, talking on their phones, or chatting with each other.

The sirens muffling the shots and the flag hiding the splattering of blood may have obscured Mildred's crime from everyone in Rome, but 1,085 miles to the north, just outside of Boston, Massachusetts, Vijay Patel was watching.

The dead bodies remained undiscovered when Mildred passed by again, now dressed in a clean blue pantsuit. As she walked past the motionless pickup, with its equally motionless driver and passenger sandwiched in the gridlocked traffic, she briefly glanced over. *Why did they do that? Because she was old? Because she was a woman? Because they were assholes? Or maybe all of the above?*

Mildred had never forgotten the many assholes she'd encountered over the years. The men who thought they were God's gift to women. The men who tried to grope her as though she owed them a piece of her body for a drink or dinner. And the men who used their positions and gender to try to intimidate her at work, some with promises of promotions and others with threats of losing her job. She stole another glance at the two dead men in the pickup, recalling their laughter, and, as though it were yesterday, she heard the laughter from an event of over sixty years ago.

Smyrna, Georgia. Mildred had just finished her basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina, and was home on a week's leave before shipping out to the Marine Corps Air Station at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. She was a Southern girl from Smyrna, and going to Hawaii would be the most exciting thing she had ever done, other than enlisting in the Marine Corps. She'd seen most of her friends since coming home, partying hard every night, but tonight, she had decided to stay home, watch TV, drink a couple of beers, and have an early night.

Mildred was staying at her older sister's apartment. Her mom was still with her sleazy boyfriend, and Mildred wanted no part of him. She hadn't forgotten his lewd and aggressive advances. Her sister was out for the evening and told her that she probably wouldn't be back until morning ... late morning.

She had just started watching *The Twilight Zone* on TV, and she jumped at loud knocking, actually banging on her front door. She looked out the window and saw Jake Jackson, another guy, and a girl, all with beers in hand. Mildred had gone out with Jake a couple of times in the past, but there was never any chemistry, and she knew that. She'd also heard that Jake had recently completed his basic training and was shipping out to the Marine base in Okinawa soon.

Jake shouted, "Millie, one for the road! We're shipping out in the morning!"

She liked the nickname Millie, and it made her smile as she quickly debated whether to ignore them or answer the door. She decided to open it, and they all stumbled in. Jake introduced the guy with him as Travis, a buddy from basic training, but he had forgotten the girl's name. Travis introduced her as Tracey.

Millie had only drunk a beer and a half and estimated that she was at least a six-pack behind them. She knew that the two guys had just been through a grueling basic training program, much harder than her own, so there was a strong sense of camaraderie and understanding.

Travis and Tracey sat on the couch and began to make out and pretty much do as much as they could with clothes on. Jake put his arms around Millie, pulled her to him, and tried to kiss her. She pushed away and tried to verbally deflect the move. "You're in good form tonight, Private First-Class Jackson."

Jake grinned briefly and twisted her around, pinning her arm behind her back. He pushed her into the bedroom and onto the bed. She cried out, and Jake pushed her face down into a pillow to muffle her scream. He called for Travis, who picked up a roll of tape from the top of a nearby box that Millie had been packing and sliced a piece free.

Jake kept his knee pushed into her back, grabbed her hair, and roughly pulled her head up just enough so Travis could place the tape over her mouth. Now, she could at least breathe, but the two men tied her hands to the headboard. She felt her shorts and panties being pulled and then ripped off. Then her legs were tied to the footboard. As she lay there, spread-eagle on the bed, she could hear the two men breathing heavily, the rapid sound of zippers unzipping, and *The Twilight Zone* on TV in the background.

She lost track of time, and occasionally consciousness, as Jake and Travis took turns with her, cheering each other on to do it harder, longer. And that should have been the worst part, but it was the horrific and demeaning insults and profanities that they grunted, taunted, and whispered in her ears, that she was never able to forget. That and their laughter. She could just see the TV screen, with Tracey's reflection. The young woman drank a beer and intently watched the show, with neither awareness of nor interest in the brutal scene playing out less than ten feet away.

When they finished with her, they untied one hand and left, unhurried. Mildred considered calling the police or her commanding officer, despite Jake's threat that they would kill her if she did so, but she was pretty sure that her word against two male Marines and a civilian woman wouldn't carry any weight. It might even screw up her chance to go to Hawaii. So, she took a very long shower, kept quiet, went to Hawaii, and used the memory of that night to focus on her hand-to-hand combat training and marksmanship. No man would ever do that to her again. And like carrying an umbrella to ensure it

won't rain, Mildred never needed to use her unique skills ... until today.

As Mildred's thoughts returned to the present, another thought occurred to her. *Why did I do that?* She shrugged her shoulders and wistfully answered to herself, "*perhaps it was my #MeToo moment.*" And then she realized that today was probably the last time that she and Esther would share a piece of that delicious chocolate cake they ordered after lunch. She wouldn't burden her friend with her crime, nor the awful memories that prompted it. It would be difficult enough to break the news about her health.

Esther had been devastated when her best friend told her she had just days to live. And so, when she couldn't reach Mildred, she went to her apartment. Using the key Mildred had given her, she found the lifeless body, looking very peaceful, eyes closed, and the apartment spotless. Esther sat there for a few minutes, sobbing, and then called 911.

When the police conducted a routine inspection of the apartment, they found Mildred's gun and took it away for analysis. Rome being a very small town, the two police officers were aware of the murders a couple of days ago, right down the street from where they were at the moment. They saw that the magazine was two rounds short of being full – the same number of shots that killed the two men in the pickup. But how would a seventy-nine-year-old woman be involved in a double homicide?

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