

Chapter 1

It began with an eyeball.

Its pupil was wide as a Texas prairie, its iris the color of faded denim. Crimson vessels spiderwebbed its yellow-white sclera.

More on that later.

Sunday, 30 January

"Don't hurt yourself."

"I've got this." Despite the cold and damp, my palms were sweaty. My everything was sweaty.

The carton slipped from my hands as the words left my mouth. *Thunk!*

"Damn."

Sighing in irritation, Katy set down a lamp, a peculiar Alice-in-Wonderland arrangement with a long, crooked neck.

"Did you notice the word on top?" Assuming I hadn't, she spelled it out. "B.O.O.K.S. What do you suppose that means, Mom?" We'd been at this for hours and, in addition to clammy, we were exhausted and sick of the whole bloody thing. And cranky as hell.

"The box contains books." Terse.

"And what is one property of a box of books?" Lips barely moving.

I said nothing.

"They're heavy!"

"Let's break for lunch."

"Let's."

We hopped from the back of the truck. Grabbing the lamp, Katy crossed a small patch of winter-dead lawn fronting a mid-century brick bungalow whose front entrance was standing wide. I followed her inside, for the zillionth time that day, and closed the bright red door behind me.

As Katy climbed the stairs with Alice's curious illuminator, I continued down the hallway to the kitchen. Which, given the home's aged exterior, was astonishingly state of the art. Marble counter tops, College of Surgeons-level lighting, built in coffee extravaganza, adult beverage center, top of the line stainless steel appliances.

Crossing to a Subzero refrigerator the size of a boxcar, I withdrew two cans of cream soda and placed them on the island beside a white takeout bag. I was adding paper towel napkins for flair when Katy reappeared.

Seeing the bag, she beamed. "Please tell me you hit the Rhino."

"I hit the Rhino," I said. "Got your deli favorite."

"The Stacked High?"

"Yes, Ma'am. A Sicilian for me. Cold."

Hands washed, we unwrapped our sandwiches and popped open the sodas. Were messily chewing when Katy asked, "How's your back?"

"Dandy." Though my lumbar was suggesting displeasure with the morning's activities.

"You really should leave the heavy stuff for me."

"Because I'm a nerd scientist and you're a badass combat veteran?"

"Was."

"Hallelujah!"

"What? You didn't approve of me serving my country?"

"I approved of your service. I hated that much of it was done in a war zone."

"That's generally what serving your country is all about."

Following a post-college period of, I'll be kind and call it 'uncertainty', my naive and reckless daughter went full circle and answered Uncle Sam's call. Awesome, I told myself. She'll find direction. Self-discipline. Being female, she'll be in no peril. Sure, my attitude was sexist. But this was my twenty-something golden-haired child who was boarding a bus for boot camp.

Then the regs changed to allow women in the trenches. En masse, the ladies shouldered their M14's and marched off to fight alongside their brothers in arms.

Following basic combat training, the golden-haired child chose her occupational specialty, 11B. Infantryman. Katy's time in uniform re-introduced me to military acronyms and jargon I hadn't heard since my ex, Pete, was a Marine.

In a nanosecond, or so it seemed to me, Katy was deployed to Afghanistan to join a brigade combat team. Not so awesome. Lots of anxious days and sleepless nights. But her tour went well, and twelve months later she returned home with only a small scar on one cheek.

Life in the field artillery agreed with my daughter. When her enlistment ended, to my dismay, she re-upped. To my greater dismay, she signed on for another Middle East deployment. Hello darkness, my old friend.

All that was past, now. The tossing and turning was over. Well, mostly.

Last fall, Katy had decided to hang up her boots and camos and return to civilian life. She was honorably discharged and, to my surprise and delight, decided to settle in Charlotte. At least for a while. Why? She won't say.

Katy also refuses to talk about her time in the army. Her friends. Her overseas duty. The scar. So, we're playing it like her former employer: Don't ask, don't tell.

We ate in companionable silence for a while. Katy broke it.

"Is the nerd scientist currently working on any rad bones?"

"A few."

Katy curled her fingers in a give-me-more gesture. They were coated with shimmery creole mustard.

"Last week a barn in Kannapolis burned to the ground. When the rubble cooled, firefighters found the remains of two horses and one adult male, all charred beyond recognition."

"Shitty deal for the horses."

"Shitty deal for everyone."

"Let me guess. Farmer Fred was a smoker."

"The body wasn't that of the property owner."

"Did you ID the guy?"

"I'm working on it."

“The horses?”

“Chuckie and Cupcake.”

“Were they valuable?”

“No.”

“Weird.”

“What’s weirder is that the man had a bullet hole right between his eyes.”

“Whoa. Someone went kinetic.”

Katy fell quiet again, thinking about bullet holes, maybe horses. Or creole mustard.

I am a forensic anthropologist. I consult to coroners and medical examiners needing help with corpses unfit for standard autopsy – the decomposed, dismembered, burned, mutilated, mummified, and skeletal. I help recover those with the misfortune to die away from home or a hospital bed. I give names to the nameless. I document postmortem interval and body treatment. I consider manner of death, be it by suicide, homicide, accident, or natural causes.

Mine was not the job of any parent Katy encountered growing up. But she was good with me being different, and in her teens began asking questions. Some things I shared, others I didn’t. *Many* others.

In my experience the world divides into two camps: Those fascinated by my profession and those repelled by it. Katy, never squeamish, has always been a member of Camp Fascination.

I glanced up. Katy’s eyes were looking past me, focused on a point elsewhere in the room. Elsewhere in time? Didn’t ask what she was thinking. Waited until she spoke again.

“What’s up with Monsieur le détective?”

My daughter was asking about Lieutenant-détective Andrew Ryan, a former Sûreté du Québec homicide cop with whom I currently was living. In Montreal and Charlotte. *C’est compliqué.*

“Ryan?” I asked.

“No. Inspector Clouseau,” she said, rolling her very green eyes.

“We’re good.”

“*That* sounds convincing.”

“Really. Ryan was here at Christmas. You two just missed each other.”

“He’s retired, right? Working as a PI?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he now?”

“On a case in Saint Martin.”

“Tough duty.”

“The guy blisters if he even looks at a beach. Canadian skin, you know.”

“He’s gone a lot.”

“He is.”

“What’s he privately investigating?” Hooking air quotes.

“It has to do with a sunken sailboat and an insurance claim.”

“Sounds boring.”

“Many of his cases are.”

I took another bite of my sandwich, blotted red wine vinegar from the front of my tee. Stole a peek at Katy. She’d asked about my love life. What the hell?

“So.” Casual as a Sunday stroll on a boardwalk. “Any romance in your life?”

Katy gave what some might call a guffaw. I’ve never been clear on how one sounds.

“*Ro*-mance? Did you really use the word *ro*-mance? Like, do I have a suitor? A sweetheart? A beau?”

“People still say romance.”

“People over eighty.”

“What about—”

“Let it go.”

Katy’s altered tone triggered a warning. But we’d been joking. Hadn’t we?

I was about to change the subject when Katy’s eyes narrowed in a way I didn’t like.

“I’ve been in the army for eight years, Mom. I’ve been to war. I’ve seen people with their limbs blown off, their heads shattered, their organs spread around them as they bled out. I’ve seen little kids die. The last thing I believe in is romance.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” Unsure how I had. But I think you’re getting the picture. My daughter came home touchy and I was treading softly.

Katy leaned back and ran both hands down her face. "Sorry. I'm just tired from this friggin' move."

"It's amazing how much a small truck can hold," I said, lightly.

Katy raised a palm toward me. Despite the greasy yellow coating, I high-fived it.

"Let's wrap this bastard up," she said.

"Let's do," I agreed.

We bunched our wrappers and stuffed them into the bag, and were heading down the hall when Katy asked,

"Have you ever met one?"

I was lost. "One what?"

"A cold Sicilian."

I could think of no response.

"I've dated two," she said. "Each was hotter than a steak on a griddle."

I definitely didn't follow up on that.

*

The remaining boxes and household items took over three hours. One oversized chair almost didn't make the cut. With a lot of cursing and maneuvering, and a little muscle from a sketchy-looking guy passing by on the sidewalk, we finally managed to force the thing through the door.

Since we looked and smelled like escapees from some subterranean chamber, dining out wasn't an option. Having no idea the location of her soap and towels, Katy accepted my invitation to clean up and eat dinner at my home, called the annex, but insisted on sleeping in her new digs.

Remembering my first apartment with its mattress on the floor and Salvation Army Papa-san chair, I understood and didn't try to dissuade her. She'd hang back to lock up, and follow in her own car.

Long before the era of zip codes, the fine citizens of Charlotte loved to distinguish the sectors making up their town. Each area was endowed with a name and set of stories. Plaza-Midwood. Tryon Hills. Eastover. Dilworth. Cherry. Perhaps this practice wasn't always for the purest of reasons. Nevertheless, old ways die hard. As the city grew and new

developments appeared or old areas gentrified, the new neighborhoods were also tagged with catchy, realtor-friendly labels. NoDa. South End. Piper Glen. Ballantyne.

Katy's house was in Elizabeth, an older section composed of a hodgepodge of bungalows fronted by expansive front porches and interspersed with enormous brick mansions, and high-priced condos resulting from the demolition of the quaint but outdated. Mature pines, live oaks, and magnolias shade the here-and-there charmingly root-buckled sidewalks.

But Elizabeth isn't strictly residential. The hood's main drag is home to the Visulite, the city's first movie theater, recently converted to a live music venue. Its streets host a suitably eclectic collection of restaurants, bars, boutiques and food trucks, frequented by the well-to-do and the barely doing.

No description of Elizabeth appears without the word 'trendy' or 'hip.' It's that combo of soccer practice and carpool by day, partying and merrymaking by night vibe, plus a location just a bump east of uptown, that accounts for the area's appeal to young professionals.

Point of information. Some Charlotteans say uptown, others prefer downtown. Positions on the issue are unshakable and have nothing to do with geography.

I live in Myers Park, another bump out from the city center. Its shaded streets boast a mix of old Georgians and Colonials elbow-to-earlobe with new Italianate, Neo-classical, and brutalist monstrosities resulting from the replacement of knock-downs on undersized lots. Meticulously manicured lawns all around.

Myers Park has a price point only slightly higher than Elizabeth, but its residents tend to be more conservative. More lawyers and bankers, fewer artists and poets.

The drive took all of ten minutes. It was dark by the time I pulled onto the circle drive at Sharon Hall.

A word about my home, which is somewhat unconventional.

Sharon Hall is a nineteenth-century manor-turned-condo-complex lying a spit from the Queens University campus. My little outbuilding is called the "annex." Annex to what? No one knows. The diminutive two-story structure appears on none of the estate's original

plans. The big house is there. The coach house. The herb and formal gardens. No annex. Clearly the little outbuilding was an unimportant add-on.

I once sought the help of an architectural historian at UNCC. She dug but failed to learn anything useful. Kiln? Tackle shed? Smokehouse? She had other suggestions that I've forgotten. I don't really care. Barely twelve hundred square feet, the arrangement suits my needs. Bedroom and bath up. Kitchen, dining room, parlor, and study down.

I rented the annex when my marriage to Pete imploded, eventually bought the place. Made no changes until the past year. Then, major renovation. The Ryan story. Later.

Arriving home, I let myself in and set my purse on the counter. Called out to Birdie. No cat appeared.

Not up to dealing with a feline snit, I climbed to the second floor, stripped, and took a very long, very hot shower. When I emerged, smelling of goats' milk and chai body wash, the cat was regarding me from atop the vanity, round yellow eyes filled with reproach.

"I know. I was gone longer than anticipated. It couldn't be helped."

No response.

"You wouldn't believe how much stuff she had." Jesus. I was apologizing to a cat.

Birdie hopped to the floor and exited without comment.

"Whatever," I said to the haughtily elevated tail.

I was pulling on sweats when a voice called up the stairs. "I'm here."

"Coming right down."

Katy was standing in the kitchen, face tense.

"There's a box on your doorstep."

"No," I laughed. "Not another box."

I stepped outside and scooped up the package.

"Who's it from?" Katy's voice sounded odd.

"No idea."

"Is there a return address?"

I shook my head no.

"Were you expecting something?" Back rigid, Katy maintained her distance from me. From the thing in my hands?

Suspecting that the unexplained parcel was the source of my daughter's uneasiness, I set it on the counter, got a Heineken from the fridge, and handed the beer to her.

"Chill," I said, wary of whatever dark memory had been triggered. And wanting to calm her. "I get lots of deliveries. Half the time, I've forgotten what I ordered."

Digging a boxcutter from a drawer, I cut the brown paper then sliced through the tape. After laying back the flaps, I peered inside.

My breath caught in my throat.

My hand flew to my mouth.

Chapter 2

Impaled like a bug on a pin, the thing was fixed in place and gazing straight at me.

Katy's reaction was more verbal than mine.

"Holy fuck!"

Slowly, I lowered my hand.

We both stared.

You guessed it. This is where the eyeball comes in.

When detached from its owner, an eye looks like a macabre Halloween prop. This one's iris was blue, its pupil dilated and dead black. The whole glistened with a hyaline sheen.

The muscle at the eyeball's base was the color of raw beef, the vessels feathering its exterior an anemic red. The paper toweling on which it lay was white with turquoise patterning along the edges.

Colorful. That was my first reaction. Funny the things your brain offers when shocked.

Katy voiced my second thought.

"It looks fresh."

"Very," I agreed.

"Could be from a cow," Katy suggested after a brief pause. "Cow parts are easy to buy."

"Cows have brown eyes," I said absently, my attention focused on anatomical detail.

The small sphere was about one inch in diameter. Too small for a bovine.

"Some animals have blue eyes. Dogs, cats, horses, swans, owls —" Realizing the awful implications, Katy let the thought go.

I noted that the pupil was round, not oval.

Retrieving my recovery kit from the pantry, I withdrew a flashlight and two latex gloves. Back at the counter, I thumbed the switch and shined the beam into the pupil. Observed the area just below the retina, at the level of the choroid.

Saw no blue-green sparkle.

A cold knot began to form in my gut. Ignoring it, I leaned closer to the box. Smelled no preservative. No hint of putrefaction. This enucleation was recent.

I swallowed.

Katy is genius at interpreting my body language. Always has been. Even as a kid she was never fooled by my evasions or diversions.

Katy sensed a shift from genial to grim.

“What?” she demanded.

“I think it’s human,” I said quietly.

“Why?”

“Size, shape of the pupil, number and arrangement of the muscle attachments, absence of a tapetum lucidum.”

“What’s that?”

“You know how some creatures’ eyes appear to glow when caught in your headlights at night? That’s because of the tapetum lucidum, an area of pigment at the back of their eyeballs. The tapetum lucidum amplifies light entering the eye, thus improving the animal’s night vision.”

“And this bad boy has none?”

I wagged my head no.

“This is fugazi.”

I had no clue the meaning of that, but based on her delivery, had to agree.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now I call the ME.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s the law if this is a human body part.” I nodded toward the box.

“It’s Sunday night.”

Good point.

The current Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner was hired when her predecessor, Dr. Margot Heavner, got the axe due to unprofessional conduct. For almost a year, Heavner, who liked to be called Dr. Death, had made my life pure hell. Don’t get me started.

But Heavner was history. Her replacement, Dr. Samantha Nguyen, was both competent and congenial.

Still. It *was* a weekend.

I was reaching for my mobile when Katy demanded, "Call the cops."

I turned to her, brows raised.

"Who leaves a fucking eyeball on a porch? This could be a threat."

Another good point.

"Christ, Mom. Who did you tick off?"

Too many candidates.

Birdie chose that moment to make an appearance. He looped my ankles, then lifted his gaze, eyes full of hope that a treat might be forthcoming.

I ignored him.

"What if this person was murdered?" Katy jabbed a thumb toward the box.

"Isn't that a bit melodramatic?"

"Is it? Living people don't get eyeballs removed and do nothing."

"Why don't you have a shower while I sort this out," I suggested.

"Fine." Tone clearly indicating that it wasn't.

After locking the back door with a resolute flick of her wrist, Katy disappeared into the dining room. As her footsteps receded up the stairs, I sat at the table, removed my gloves, and dialed a familiar number.

Thumbing more keys, I worked my way through the directory. Eventually, a human voice answered. One I'd heard for more years than I want to admit.

I explained the situation to Joe Hawkins, the death investigator working morgue intake. A job he'd held since before the invention of the wireless.

"An eyeball in a box."

"Yes," I said.

"On your back stoop." Hawkins speaks in clipped phrases. And at the rate a slug navigates mud.

"Yes."

Behind me I heard the soft *thup* of paws.

“Human.”

“Probably.”

“Just the one?”

“Does that matter?” Not fully managing to hide my annoyance.

“Nope.”

There was a very long moment of very dead air.

“Are you still there?” I asked, unsure if we’d been disconnected.

“What would you like?”

“Send transport?” Slowly.

“Could do. It’s just me here now.”

“Do you know when—“

Hearing rustling behind me, I turned.

Birdie had hopped onto the counter and overturned the box, sending the eyeball rolling free. Uninterested in the main prize, he was clawing at the toweling, scattering the Bounty with wild abandon.

“Bird! No!”

Horrified, I clicked off and rushed to lower the cat to the floor.

He sat, shot a leg, and began licking his nether regions.

I was re-gloving when Katy joined me.

“Holy shit.” She summed up the situation.

Gingerly, I collected the towels and returned them to the box. I was reaching for the eyeball, when Katy yelped, “Stop!”

My hand froze.

“What’s that?” She was pointing at the eyeball’s left side, between the parts that had faced the world and the tissue that had held the orb in its socket.

I leaned sideways for a better view.

Katy was right. There was an irregularity in the eyeball’s white outer layer. A defect? A scar?

Curious, I got a lens from my kit and raised and lowered it over the anomaly.

Eventually, found the correct level for focus.

Under magnification, a pattern emerged. Maybe?

"It looks like the sclera is scratched," I said.

"Scratched how?"

"It could be lettering. If so, it's unbelievably small." I handed her the lens. "Maybe your eagle eyes can read it." Unlike me, my daughter has been blessed with uncannily crisp vision. Ophthalmologists always marvel. And score her 20/15 in both eyes.

"Jesus, this is teeny. Must have been done with a needle of some sort." Pause.

"They're numbers. Three. Five. Period. Two. Six. One. Six. The last one's a letter. N."

I grabbed paper and pen and jotted as she deciphered. When she'd finished, we looked at the string, then at each other. Neither of us had a suggestion as to the meaning of the sequence.

Katy was repositioning the lens, when my phone rang. I crossed to the table to pick up. It was Hawkins. A transport van would be by within the hour.

When I returned to the counter, Katy had rolled the eyeball. I didn't reproach her for touching it with bare fingers.

"There's more on the right side."

I picked up my pen and spiral.

"Eight. One. Period. Zero. Four. Three. Three. W."

Katy's head snapped up.

"GOFU." Slapping her forehead with her free palm.

My face must have registered confusion.

"Grasp of the fucking obvious," she translated. "Those are probably GPS coordinates."

I read what I'd written. "Thirty-five point two six one six north. Eighty-one point zero four three three west."

"That's beyond freaky," she said. "Why would someone carve coordinates into an eyeball?"

"To indicate where it came from?"

"Tell me the carving was done after the owner was dead."

"Certainly after the eyeball had been removed."

I didn't go into detail. Katy didn't request it.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Now we eat dinner and wait for the ME van."

"No black-eyed peas."

"Not a chance."

"And you call the cops."

She was right.

"Fine." Mimicking her tone from earlier. "There's spaghetti sauce in the freezer, pasta in the pantry."

I was punching another auto-dial number when the device rang in my hand. My eyes went to caller ID. Mixed feelings.

Bracing myself, I clicked on.

"I see you're having a wild Saturday night," I said. I could hear a frenzied sports announcer in the background.

"And I'm catching you between sets at the Roxbury?"

Erskine "Skinny" Slidell, for decades a detective with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, had recently retired and gone into a cross-border PI partnership with Ryan. The strategy was that Slidell, being barely fluent in English, would work cases in the States while Ryan, fully bilingual, would go international. So far, the concept was working. Business, though not exactly booming, was steady enough.

But, unlike Ryan, Slidell, couldn't totally cut the cord. A cop since emerging from the womb, and having zero outside life of which I was aware, Skinny continued to volunteer with the CMPD cold case unit. Also, unlike Ryan, the guy had the personality of a canker sore.

"What's on your mind?" I asked, ignoring Slidell's comeback to my opening dig. And astounded that he'd heard of the Roxbury, a hip 90's dance club.

"I got something I want to roll by you."

"OK." Hiding my surprise.

Katy, finished pressing buttons on the microwave, was watching me. I mouthed the name Slidell, then shrugged.

"I got a guy I'm tailing," he began.

"Why?"

"Let's call it indiscretion. I hear there's some gizmo I could put on his phone without me physically having the phone. You know anything about that?"

"You need a tekkie. I can send you some names."

"That'd be good."

Katy pointed at the box. I shook my head. She nodded hers.

"I have something I'd like to roll by *you*," I said, knowing I'd regret it.

Slidell made a sound in his throat. Which I chose to interpret as agreement.

I explained the eyeball, the miniscule writing.

There was a silence so loud it screamed. Then, "How do you get yourself into this shit, Brennan?"

I said nothing.

"So, it's like one of these freaks who carves Paris on a grain of rice?"

I hadn't thought of that. "Could be."

"You sure it's human?"

"I think so."

I waited out more empty air.

Then Slidell asked the same question that Katy had. I'd had time to consider who I might have angered.

"I have a neighbor who's annoyed with me."

"What'd you do? Pee in her pansies?"

"The man dislikes my turtle." Icy.

"I thought you had a cat."

"It's garden art. Cement. He claims it scares his kid and wants me to remove it."

"Just take the damn gewgaw inside."

"I don't want to."

"You think this shitbag could be eyeball-level pissed?"

"I doubt it."

I could picture Slidell wagging his head. Then,

"I'll call over, see if someone can check this out. I'm guessing they'll bump it to the newbie, a maybe human eyeball not being high priority."

"Who's the newbie?"

"Henry. A real piece of work."

Three beeps then I was listening to dead air.

"Skinny's up to form," Katy said.

"You heard that?"

"You were holding the phone away from your ear. Do you really think your neighbor is capable of this?"

"Not really."

"You got a laptop?" Katy asked.

"Does a duck have a bill?" I replied.

"Only when it dines out."

"Bada-bing. We're on the same page, right? We run the GPS, see what pops."

As Katy set water to boil, I booted my Mac Air and entered the eyeball coordinates into Google Earth.

I was staring at the screen when she crossed to peer over my shoulder.

"What the hell?" Katy voiced our mutual astonishment.

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