

## *Dark Eye*

### Chapter one

Three times I've fired my weapon. Three times. Twice because I had to. The third time was optional. But I never plugged anyone for making a pass at me, no matter how tempting it might be. It was a rule. Until that night in early October. When the whole damn mess began.

I really don't know how it happened. For starters, I looked like hell and I knew it, despite what the guy was saying. It was all bullshit.

"Has anyone ever mentioned that you have a gorgeous pair of eyes?"

"Only my ophthalmologist," I told the kid in the Polo.

"No, seriously, you do. My mom says I've always been an eye man." He leaned closer. I could smell the whiskey on his breath. "Are they different?"

"Different from . . . your mom's?"

"From each other. It's like . . . your right eye is darker than the left."

I nodded. "Cat scratch. When I was five."

"Well, it works for you. Gives you an exotic aura."

"If you like that, wait till you see my athlete's foot."

He smiled, which wasn't his best look. "You know what? You're funny."

"Not another reference to my appearance, I hope."

He scooted his chair closer to mine. "Look," he said, his voice suddenly low and tremulous. "I think it's obvious what's happening here. Why don't we cut through the baloney, go back to my place, and give each other what we both know we want?"

"At the moment, there's only two things I want."

"And they would be?"

"Another bourbon. Neat."

"I can arrange that. What else do you want?"

"You to leave."

The bar, Gordy's, was a hellhole I'd discovered when I was working on a case. Mind you, Vegas has some beautiful neighborhoods. This just wasn't one of them. Cops get called to some of the seediest parts of the city—actually, I think I've been to all of them. My specialty is the psychological profiling of deviant personalities. They call me a detective, but what I really do is provide detailed descriptions of creeps they haven't been able to catch, which can be plenty challenging. I love it. Anyway, I tracked some low-life child molester here. Hated him but loved his bar. I bonded with it; I don't know why. It wasn't at all a Cheers thing. Barely anyone there knew my name, and I liked it that way.

The décor was deadly. Tacky like the worst small-town plywood watering hole, except this was buried in Vegas's old downtown. Noise thundered relentlessly, assaulting your eardrums, not just music but an endless stream of chatter—sports, politics, and lame come-on lines. The place stank, maybe because drunks kept leaving the men's room door open, maybe because a wino on one of the bar stools kept vomiting on himself. Even the tables reeked, moldering wood soaked in way too much spilled hooch. There was a staleness to the air that made your head throb the second you stepped inside, that made cigarette smoke seem like a welcome alternative. And Gordy's teemed with men of the worst sort—not the bikers, pimps, prostitutes, mobsters, gamblers, and bookies that gave Vegas its colorful reputation, although they were there in force, but preppy types from UNLV in starched golf shirts who knew they could treat anything with breasts like dirt and still get laid because they were so damned hot and hunky.

Be it ever so humble.

I wasn't even thinking about work, so it came as a surprise when I saw Hikuru Mikimoto enter this two-bit saloon. He was a big-time drug dealer. And I hate drug dealers. I'd been consulting with some of the boys in Narc, trying to draft a profile that might help them find him. I really wanted to help, to prove that I could still do the job, but we'd been looking for more than three weeks without results. And then I just look up and there he is.

I wasn't entirely sure I was up to an arrest, but I couldn't let a godsend like this slip through my fingers. I pushed to my feet, bumping the table over, and fumbled for my badge.

“LVPD. Freeze, Mikimoto!”

He was a middle-aged Asian man, his paunch masked by a black T-shirt and what looked to be an Armani sport coat. As soon as I spoke, he took a decisive step backward. And two men behind him surged forward.

Personal goons. This was going to be more complicated than I had realized.

They came on strong and quick. My only chance was to take them out before they could gang up on me. I pulled my gun and fired, but the shot went wide. It hit the mirror behind the bar and shattered it. The lounge lizards sitting at the bar scrambled. A second later, one of the goons knocked the gun out of my hand. I did a quick spin behind the table and a swing kick with my left leg, catching him full in the face. He dropped like a sandbag and didn't get up. The other one lunged from behind and grabbed me around the throat. I bit down on his arm, and when he

released his grip, I gave him an elbow to the solar plexus. He doubled over. I grabbed him by the ears and propelled him into the hardwood bar.

Stupid fool didn't know when to quit. He pulled himself together and came at me again. I whirled around at the last moment and used a move they'd taught me at the academy, a little Judo 101, to flip him over my shoulder. He flew forward and crashed into that splintered mirror. Big chunks of glass sprayed the room. All the patrons ducked for cover.

Mikimoto tried to run away. Not likely. I dove for him, brought him down hard. By this time, the rest of the customers were racing for the doors, desperately trying to get out of my way. None of them offered to help.

I straddled Mikimoto, pinning him facedown against the filthy glass-strewn floor. He was raging, babbling incoherently in some language I didn't understand.

"You're under arrest," I said, wishing to God I had a pair of cuffs. "You have the right to remain silent. If you choose to waive that right—"

Mikimoto swung around with a speed that caught me by surprise. He had a small switchblade in his hand.

Now that pissed me off.

I twisted his arm at the socket, breaking it. The knife clattered to the floor. I wrenched his hand back, pinching it in the soft fleshy part between the thumb and forefinger. He screamed. With his slicked-back hair in my fist, I pounded his head against the floor.

"Goddamn drug dealer," I muttered. "Preying on kids. Pulling a knife on me." I shoved his face down again, hard, and then repeated it, again and again and again.

I felt someone pulling on my shoulders, trying to interfere. Another accomplice?

No. It was Harry, the old guy who worked behind the bar.

"Susan!" He'd been shouting, but for some reason it hadn't registered until now. "Stop it! Stop it!"

"Keep cool," I said as I let Mikimoto's limp head flop to the floor. "This creep's the worst scum in Vegas. Pushes hard drugs to schoolchildren."

"Who the hell are you trying to kid?"

I didn't understand him, didn't get it at all. But as I stared at Mikimoto's face, it seemed to, I don't know, sort of shimmer. Like a shape-shifter in a science fiction movie.

"This is police work, Harry," I growled, still staring at the face on the floor. "I'm doing my job."

“You’re drunk off your ass is what you are. Did you bloody that kid up just ’cause he was trying to make time with you?”

I kept watching as the face changed, the whole body changed, and instead of a slick black T there was a pink Polo. How had the drug scum pulled this off? I wondered. Disguising himself as some preppy creep!

I pushed up to my feet. All at once, I realized how wobbly I was. The room began to spin, so I sat down again. The problem with that was, my eyes went back to the face, that kid’s face, and I saw all the splattered blood and swollen flesh surrounding it. That finely chiseled face was like a pound of ground round.

Strong hands rummaged under my coat, taking my flask, and I didn’t resist. “I told you to lay off the sauce an hour ago,” Harry said. “Didn’t know you had a private stash, damn you. How the hell am I going to explain this?”

The room was still spinning, even though I was sitting. I felt like I might rip my stomach out with a dull knife if I could. Then I noticed that I was bleeding, too, that I was sitting in a pool of glass, and that there was an especially large shard right in front of me, and I re- call thinking someone should do something about that because it could hurt someone, and then I grabbed it and jabbed it into my left wrist. Blood spewed everywhere.

I fell over onto the floor, head first, and the rest of the world went away. After that, I don’t remember anything. I assumed I was dead.

“Am I dead?” the young girl asked.

He stared down at her, stretched out on the table before him, a luminescent tableau so full of innocence and youthful curiosity. Her lengthy stay in the basement, so far from the bright lights of the city, had caused her skin to etiolate, but rather than detracting from her natural splendor, it seemed to enhance it. The primordial was strong with her, he sensed. He had chosen well.

“Of course you’re not dead, my darling. You can see, can’t you? Hear, smell, taste, and touch?”

“I can’t move. Not at all. Nothing below my neck.”

“I know.”

“I think I’ve wet myself, but I’m not sure.”

“You have.”

“Even talking is hard.”

He brushed a hand gently across her forehead, straightening her bangs. “I’m so sorry.”

“And I’m scared. Really scared. You’re not going to hurt me, are you, mister?”

He was short of stature, but he liked to think he had a certain presence just the same. Did his accent thicken as he spoke to the offering? He suspected that it did. The genteel Southern gentleman rose to the surface.

He turned and gazed out the window, just above ground level. The sky was clear as glass; the air was pungently sweet. And oh, the stars—! The stars seemed to go on forever, traveling from his private aerie all the way to Dream-Land. Heaven was real here, far removed from the decay of the city, the fiberglass façades and organic stench. He did not look down but across, outward, into the desert, the vast untouched expanse, the low-lying Spring Mountains, feeling the arid warmth as it bathed and reassured him.

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