



**THOSE
EMPTY
EYES**

CHARLIE DONLEA

Books by Charlie Donlea

SUMMIT LAKE

THE GIRL WHO WAS TAKEN

DON'T BELIEVE IT

SOME CHOOSE DARKNESS

THE SUICIDE HOUSE

TWENTY YEARS LATER

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THOSE EMPTY EYES

CHARLIE DONLEA



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Follow the evidence wherever it leads, and question everything.
—Neil deGrasse Tyson

McIntosh, Virginia January 15, 2013

Sin was a mystery.

Some believed their sins went unnoticed and could be committed without consequence. Others repented in the conviction that an omnipotent God witnessed all discretions and forgave unconditionally. The shooter, dressed in boots and a long, sweeping trench coat, believed something else—that the most egregious sins should always be noticed and never forgiven, and that those who commit them should be punished.

The shooter climbed the stairs silently while the family slept. At the top of the staircase, the figure approached the bedroom and used the barrel of the shotgun to push open the door of the master suite. The hinges creaked and disrupted the otherwise quiet home. The door came to a rest with just enough space to pass through the door frame. The shooter slipped inside and walked to the foot of the bed. The soft breathing of the woman could be heard between animalistic snores from the man lying next to her. The shooter lifted the shotgun and secured it—tight to the shoulder, right cheek against the cold metal—so that the barrel pointed at the snoring man. A finger settled over the trigger, paused momentarily, and then twitched, unleashing a deafening blast. The sleeping man's flesh exploded as buckshot tore into his chest. Disoriented, his wife sat up quickly. In her confusion, she never saw the shooter standing at the foot of the bed or the barrel of the shotgun rotating toward her. A second blast sent the woman's torso ricocheting off the headboard.

Reaching into the pocket of the trench coat, the shooter removed three photos and dropped them onto the bed. As the ringing of the gunshots dissipated, floorboards creaked outside the bedroom. Quickly, the shooter cracked the barrel of the shotgun open, allowing the spent shells to sail into the air. With hands protected by latex gloves, the shooter retrieved two live shells from the second trench coat pocket, inserted them into the smoking chamber, and snapped the barrel closed before aiming toward the bedroom door. An eternity passed until the hinges whined again as the door opened fully to reveal a young boy standing in the door frame.

Raymond Quinlan was thirteen years old, a troubling age for the shooter—old enough to be a viable witness, but young enough to make the next decision challenging. As Raymond struggled to understand the scene before him, the shooter allowed no time for the boy to orientate himself. The barrel of the shotgun was trained at the boy's chest, and a third deafening blast filled the home.

As the concussion ricocheted off the bedroom walls, melancholy began to settle in but was quickly brushed aside. There would be time for despondence when the mission was over. A job that moments earlier had been complete was now only three-quarters finished. The shooter walked quickly from the bedroom. Raymond lay in the hallway, an expanding pool of blood seeping across the hardwood. A quick glance back into the bedroom allowed the spent shells to stand out against the carpet where they'd landed. But they were not a worry. Nor was the gun itself. In fact, the plan had been to lay the weapon at the foot of the bed when the night was over, but Raymond had spoiled everything. Stepping over his body, the shooter hurried down the hall to the far bedroom. There was another family member in the house that now demanded attention.

Reaching the end of the hallway, the shooter used the barrel of the shotgun to push open the bedroom door. This time, however, the door did not budge. It was latched shut. Twisting the handle and finding the door locked, the shooter lifted a knee and aimed a boot heel at the doorknob. The wood splintered but did not give. A second effort burst the door open and sprung the top hinge from the frame so that the door hung crooked from the jamb. Entering the room, the shooter saw that the bed was empty but the covers were tussled. Placing a palm to the sheets, the bed was warm from where someone had been sleeping just moments earlier. As the shooter turned from the bed, attention fell to the closet. The wicker door was closed. Walking over, the shooter used the barrel of the shotgun to tap on the door.

When no answer came, the shooter turned the handle and slowly pushed the door open. But the closet, like the bed, was empty. It was then that the cold chill of night drifted across the back of the shooter's calves, below the hem of the trench coat. Across the room, the window curtains twirled as they filled with the night air that passed over the sill. After rushing across the room, the shooter ripped the curtains to the side and pushed the window fully open. The screen lay on the walkway below, broken free from the frame when the final family member had escaped through the window.

It was a problem. A serious error created by careless miscalculation, but not the only one the shooter committed that night.

PART I

The Final Witness

“If it bleeds, it leads.”

—Garrett Lancaster

Fall 2013

CHAPTER 1

District Courthouse Thursday, September 26, 2013 3:05 p.m.

GARRETT LANCASTER WALKED TO THE COURTROOM PODIUM AS TELEVISION cameras recorded his every move and millions watched the live coverage. The defamation trial of Alexandra Quinlan versus the state of Virginia had captured the attention of the nation. Ever since the night the Quinlan family was slaughtered and the seventeen-year-old daughter was arrested for the murders, the country had been fascinated with Alexandra Quinlan. First, when she was accused of the crime and labeled a sadistic killer. And later, after she was exonerated when evidence surfaced that proved her innocence. And especially now, when Alexandra had turned around and sued the state of Virginia, claiming that the McIntosh Police Department and the Alleghany district attorney's office had not only botched the investigation into her family's murder, but ruined her life in the process.

Because of the media attention the Quinlan murders had received, Alexandra's defamation case had been fast-tracked. Predicted to last two weeks, the trial was right on schedule. For the first few days—Monday through Thursday morning—the jurors had listened to testimony from a careful list of witnesses Garrett Lancaster had called in strategic order. Now, Garrett had Thursday afternoon and all of Friday to finish presenting his case. He planned to fill those hours with testimony from just two individuals, his final witnesses. If things went according to plan, the state's defense attorneys would sit silently for the final two days of the prosecution's case. They wouldn't dare go after the testimony they heard today, and wouldn't so much as *think* of cross-examining his witness tomorrow.

Garrett knew the untenable position he was about to put the state's defense team in. He knew this because Garrett was usually the attorney doing the defending. It was only through a bizarre set of circumstances that he found himself in the unusual position of being the prosecuting attorney representing Alexandra Quinlan in her defamation suit against the state of

Virginia. The managing partner at one of the biggest defense firms on the East Coast, Garrett was a defense attorney by trade, and therefore in the unique position of knowing his opponents inside and out.

Garrett had designed his strategy carefully. Despite the temptation to allow the jury to hear testimony from his two star witnesses earlier in the week, at the start of the trial when juries were easy to impress, he instead saved their testimony for now—Thursday afternoon and Friday morning. The plan was to wrap things up the following morning before lunch and then persuade the judge to adjourn for the weekend. Garrett wanted the testimonies from his final two witnesses—as well as their faces and tears and cracking voices—to be fresh on the jury members' minds as they headed into the weekend. He wanted the testimony to linger for two long days before the jury reconvened Monday morning to listen to the attorneys for the state of Virginia mount their full, unfettered defense against Alexandra's claims that the McIntosh Police Department was incompetent and that the Alleghany district attorney's office was corrupt.

"Your honor," Garret said after reaching the podium. Dressed smartly in a crisp navy suit and yellow tie, he carefully arranged his notes in no hurry, putting forth a sense of composure and confidence. He knew a television audience of millions was tuned in and he did not shy away from the attention. In his midfifties and handsome, Garrett knew how to use his presence to work a jury and was no amateur when it came to high-profile cases. "The prosecution calls Donna Koppel."

The first officer to arrive at the Quinlan home on the night of January 15, Donna Koppel was the first into the house, the first up the stairs, and the first to witness the carnage in the master bedroom. The four other police officers who had responded to shots fired at 421 Montgomery Lane had already taken the stand. Garrett had expertly used the officers' testimonies to lay out for the jury exactly what was found the night the officers entered the Quinlan home. Their testimonies were identical—they'd each described the bloodshed of a family slaughtered in the middle of the night. They'd each testified about finding a young girl, identified as Alexandra Quinlan, sitting on the floor of her parents' bedroom holding the shotgun that had been used to kill her parents and brother. Garrett hadn't attempted to sugarcoat or soften the officers' recollection of the scene. In fact, he made sure each offered painstakingly detailed accounts of that evening—from arriving at the scene, to climbing the stairs, to stepping over Raymond

Quinlan's body in order to gain access to the master bedroom, where Dennis and Helen Quinlan lay dead in their bed.

It was part of Garrett's strategy. Initiating each officer's testimony and eliciting it in step-by-step detail had essentially diffused the defense's cross-examination. Nothing more could be ascertained from the witnesses. Garrett had not refuted any of the officers' testimonies about what they had seen and found when they entered the Quinlan home. Instead, Garrett took the officers' recollection as gospel and confirmed that each officer's testimony matched perfectly with that of the others—a gruesome night that had shocked each of them to their core, and a disturbing crime scene that had gone on to astonish the nation.

Earlier in the week, Garrett had called forensic specialists to the stand who testified that the gun used to kill the Quinlan family was a Stoeger Coach side by side 12-gauge break action shotgun belonging to Mr. Quinlan. In court on Tuesday morning, Garrett had dramatically presented the shotgun to the jury. Many jury members, when Garrett asked, admitted that outside of television they'd never seen a gun before. Garrett knew from jury selection that eight of them had no experience with guns, and that four were registered gun owners. Holding the weapon that had been used to kill three people, and allowing the jurors to see it up close, was startling. But this, too, was part of Garrett's plan. He did it so that when he brought the gun out again tomorrow morning when he questioned his final witness, it would seem less lethal and more ordinary. The gun would not cast Alexandra Quinlan as a deranged teenaged killer, but as the clever young woman she was.

But that bit of showmanship was for tomorrow. Today, he stood at the podium and listened to Donna Koppel's heels click as she walked up the courtroom's center aisle to whispers from her fellow officers in the gallery. The entire McIntosh police force considered the testimony Donna was about to give a betrayal. Things had gotten so bad leading up to the trial that Officer Koppel had taken a leave of absence from the McIntosh Police Department. The leave was scheduled to last for as long as the trial went on, but Garrett suspected the chances were slim that she would ever return to the McIntosh police force.

Donna pushed through the wooden partition and walked past Garrett. He noticed the quick sideways glance she gave him on the way. If looks could kill, he'd have fallen dead on the floor. Instead, from Donna's brief eye

contact he read her predominant thought: *I hope to hell you know what you're doing.*

Donna sat in the witness box.

“Please raise your right hand, ma’am,” the judge said from the bench to her left.

Donna did as instructed.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“I do.”

“Counselor,” the judge said, nodding to Garrett.

Garrett took a moment as he stood behind the podium to turn a few pages in his notebook. The stall was not to impress the jury with his command of the courtroom this time. It was for Donna, to give her an opportunity to gather herself with a few extra breaths. When Garrett saw that she was steady, he found his place in his notebook and looked to the witness stand.

“Ms. Koppel,” Garrett said. “Can you please state for the court your role inside the McIntosh Police Department?”

“I’m a police officer.”

“How long have you been employed by the department?”

“Eighteen years.”

“And you’ve served as an officer the entire time?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *currently* working as a police officer?”

“I’m on leave, presently.”

“Why is that?”

Donna swallowed. “My testimony this afternoon is not . . . popular inside the McIntosh police force.”

“It’s not popular, but it will not be dishonest in any way, am I correct?”

“You’re correct.”

“Why do you think your testimony will be unpopular?”

Donna hesitated and took a brief glance into the gallery and at her fellow officers.

“Because it goes against the narrative.”

“What narrative is that?”

“The one set forth by the McIntosh Police Department about what happened on the night of January fifteenth, both at the Quinlan home and then later at police headquarters.”

“Okay,” Garrett said. “But since no one here is trying to win a popularity contest, only seeking justice for the errors made that night, I believe your testimony is vital even if it’s not respected by your colleagues. Do you agree?”

“Objection,” the state’s attorney said.

“Sustained,” the judge said.

Garrett nodded at the judge and looked back to Donna.

“Before we begin, can you let the court know how you and I are related?”

“We’re married.”

Garrett walked from behind the podium and approached the witness stand.

“Hi,” he said when he was next to her.

Donna smiled and the jury members let out quiet laughs.

“Hi,” Donna said.

“On January fifteenth of this year, were you on duty working the overnight shift?”

“Yes.”

“Did you receive a call that night?”

“Yes. I was on my routine patrol route when I received a call for shots fired at a residence.”

“What did you do?”

“I immediately responded. I was just a few blocks away.”

“Were you the first officer on the scene?”

“I was.”

“Can you take us through that night, Officer Koppel? From the moment you first arrived at the scene, and describe what you did and what you observed?”

Donna took a deep breath, and Garrett felt her nerves. No matter how many times they rehearsed this at home, there was no way to re-create the stress of sitting on the witness stand and talking to a packed courthouse with twelve jurors hanging on your every word and television cameras rolling.

Come on, baby. Garrett encouraged his wife with a subtle nod. *You’ve got this.*

McIntosh, Virginia January 15, 2013 12:46 a.m.

Donna pulled her cruiser to the curb and aimed the vehicle's spotlight at the front of the house, illuminating the two-story home against the otherwise dark neighborhood. She was responding to a 911 call of shots fired at 421 Montgomery Lane and was the first officer on the scene. Well past midnight, there were no lights glowing from inside the house and other than the few neighbors loitering outside the scene was quiet.

A man walked up to the squad car as Donna was climbing out. She held him at bay with an outstretched arm and a hand on her gun. The man stopped his advance and held his hands up.

"I live next door," he said. "I'm the one who called nine-one-one."

Donna kept her attention simultaneously on the house, the man in front of her, and the growing crowd of neighbors slowly gathering around her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I was watching television when I heard a loud bang. I muted the TV and then heard another, so I opened my back door and stepped onto my deck. A few seconds later, I heard a third bang. Only this time I was outside and recognized it immediately as a gunshot. Shotgun, probably a twelve-gauge. I'm a hunter so I know that sound."

Donna pointed at the house where her spotlight was directed. "You're sure the shots came from that house?"

"Sure as shit, ma'am. 'Scuse my language."

"Inside the house?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Keeping her eyes on the front door, Donna grabbed the radio clipped to her shoulder. "This is Officer Koppel at the scene for calls of shots fired at four twenty-one Montgomery."

"Go ahead, Officer."

“I have a witness who confirms shots fired from inside the home. Requesting backup as I assess the house.”

“Roger that. On the way, three minutes out.”

“I’ve got plenty of guns, ma’am,” the helpful neighbor offered. “Just say the word and I’ll give you all the backup you need.”

“Stay put,” she told him as she headed toward the house.

Her shadow grew longer as she strode through her car’s spotlight, until the black image climbed the front of the house and stood over her like a phantom. She removed her flashlight from her belt and shined it through the front windows, but curtains blocked her view. When she reached the front porch, she banged her flashlight against the door.

“Police! Open the door.”

When there was no answer, she looked behind her to see the group of neighbors watching from the street. Thankfully, another cruiser’s lights blinked in the distance as reinforcements arrived. A minute later she was standing on the front porch with two other officers. A third had gone around back to check things out, and now his voice crackled over the radio.

“Quiet back here. No lights. No signs of life.”

Since Donna was the first to arrive, the scene was hers to command. She reached for the handle of the front door and was surprised to find it unlocked, the door clicking open as soon as she twisted the knob. She looked at her fellow officers, who nodded their heads. With weapons drawn, they entered the house.