

ETHAN CROSS



BLIND JUSTICE

DON'T TRUST WHAT YOU SEE
TRUST WHAT YOU KNOW

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About the Book

Deacon Munroe is a unique investigator. Intelligent, cultured, well-connected. And totally blind.

In Washington DC the death of a high-ranking general and his wife is dismissed as a domestic argument gone horribly wrong.

Deacon Munroe does not trust what other people see - only what he knows is true.

What Munroe soon knows is that the general's death is part of a far greater plan, a sophisticated plot to kill thousands of innocent people.

But with only a small team to help, and just hours to stop a devastating attack, can Munroe unearth the truth in time to bring justice to the city?

About the Author

When a fireman or a policeman would visit his school, most of his classmates' heads would swim with aspirations of growing up and catching bad guys or saving someone from a blazing inferno. When these moments came for Ethan Cross, however, his dreams weren't to someday be a cop or put out fires: he just wanted to write about it.

Now his dream of telling stories on a grand scale has come to fruition with the release of his thrillers, *The Shepherd*, *The Prophet* and *Blind Justice*.

Ethan Cross lives in Illinois with his wife and two daughters.

Also by Ethan Cross

The Shepherd
The Cage (a thriller novella)
The Prophet

Blind Justice

Ethan Cross



arrow books

To my daughter, Calissa, for introducing me to the world of
special needs . . .

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To all of these and my extraordinary readers, thank you so much. I couldn't be living my dream without your support.

Part One

1

GENERAL GEORGE EASTON woke up covered in blood.

He tasted the coppery liquid on his tongue before he noticed it on his hands and arms. Glancing around, he tried to clear his thoughts and determine where he was. An exact copy of the *Resolute* desk rested in front of him, its top stained with dark red handprints. He had commissioned the creation of the intricately carved replica shortly after the Senate had affirmed his nomination for Commandant of the Marine Corps. The original desk, built from the timbers of the British Arctic Exploration ship *Resolute*, sat in the Oval Office as a gift from Queen Victoria to President Rutherford B. Hayes. Easton had felt the replica fitting since his large white colonial home, located in the Marine Barracks at 8th and I in Washington, DC, was truly the White House of his chosen profession, and this was a marine's equivalent to the Oval Office.

As Easton tried to stand, pain shot through his limbs. He had seen combat many times. He had watched men die, had killed men himself. Training had conditioned him to keep his head in situations such as this, and his mind ticked off the possibilities as if reading from a checklist. He sniffed the air. There was no trace of smoke or gunfire, just the smell of old leather - and fresh blood.

As he pushed himself up from his black leather chair, his feet slipped on the hardwood floor. His shoes left bloody smears on the dark wood as he stumbled forward and steadied himself against the side of his desk. And that was when he saw the woman's crumpled body in the corner of his office.

Easton rushed forward, knocking over a lamp and chair, falling on his knees in front of the mangled body of his wife. Crawling forward, he took her lifeless form into his arms and cradled her like a child. He didn't bother to check for a pulse. There was too much blood. Her face had been beaten into an unrecognizable pulp. With shaking arms he pulled her close to his chest as he sobbed, the tears flowing down his cheeks and mixing with the blood.

The realization of what had happened came slowly at first, then thundered through his mind, flooding him with anger and guilt. In that moment, he knew exactly who had killed his wife and why.

"I'm sorry for your loss, general."

The gravelly voice startled Easton, and he spun in the direction of the sound. A copper-skinned man with coal-black hair stepped from the shadows. Nondescript military fatigues covered the man's large frame, and his right fist gripped a silver decorative Colt 1911 pistol. The general recognized it as his own gun that normally rested inside a display case on the mantelpiece of his office.

Easton began to stand, but the other man aimed the weapon at him and said in a South American accent, "Please don't move. I would hate to kill you before we've had a chance to speak, but I will. I'm sorry that it's come to this, general. You were just trying to fulfill your duty, to do the right thing. But so am I."

Easton clenched his teeth so hard that pain shot through his jaw. His eyes scanned the room for anything to use as a weapon.

"Don't get any ideas. Remember, you have four children and seven grandchildren to think of as well."

"You stay the hell away from—"

The man stopped him with a raised hand and said calmly, "Please, general, let's not make this any more painful than it needs to be. If I could get to you here, in a secure military facility within the heart of DC, do you think that I would

have any problem snuffing out the lives of a few young couples in the suburbs? We'll start with your oldest son, the lawyer, and his family. It's his birthright, after all. Please understand that I don't wish you or your loved ones any harm, but don't question my resolve. Where is Wyatt Randall?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Another man, with the wiry frame and intense eyes of a special-forces commando, stepped in from the hallway. He held a dark Glock pistol.

The copper-skinned man said, "We know that's not true. If you do the right thing now, this ends with you. No one else has to get hurt." As he spoke, he circled Easton like a shark but stuck to the periphery of the room, away from the bloody crime scene. "A true military tactician realizes when it's time to order the retreat and save the lives of his remaining forces rather than needlessly sending them all to their deaths. Think for a moment. Look at this situation objectively. There is no nobler death than that of a father sacrificing his own life for his children. But let's say for a moment that you somehow overpower myself and my partner. What then? We're not working alone. Our associates will still visit the homes of your children and grandchildren. You have no choice. There is no way out for you."

Easton closed his eyes and hugged his wife's corpse tight against his body. Her warm blood soaked through his shirt and ran down his skin. Her hair still carried the scent of cinnamon from her favorite shampoo. "I don't know where Randall is, but he's supposed to meet me tomorrow morning at 8:30. In front of the Lincoln Memorial. He's going to turn over all the evidence then."

"And he hasn't given you anything yet?"

"He's showed me the files, but he kept them with him. As insurance."

The copper-skinned man scratched at the black stubble covering his cheeks and narrowed his eyes. Then he

retrieved a cell phone from his pocket, punched the keypad, and placed it to his ear. "Yes . . . kill the son."

"No! I'm telling you the truth. Search my computer and my files. There's nothing here."

The man hesitated a second, searching Easton's eyes. "Hold that order. If you don't hear from me in five minutes, then kill him." The phone snapped closed. "We've already searched your files. I don't know that I believe you, but unfortunately, we're out of time. I'm sure you've guessed that we're not going to leave you alive, but I am going to give you a choice about how you die. You can either do it yourself, or we can force you and simply make it look like suicide. I'm not sure of your religious beliefs on the matter, so I wanted to give you the option."

Easton glared at the man, his hatred overshadowing his fear. "How considerate of you." His words dripped with venom. He raised his hand, palm out. "Give me the damn gun."

The man slid the decorative .45-caliber 1911 across the floor. It spun to a halt against Easton's foot inside the pool of red. Hesitating only a second, the highest-ranking marine in the United States picked up the weapon. The gun had been a gift from an Italian general that Easton had worked with while in Naples and during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. He had never fired it. "What's your name?"

The man cocked his head to the side. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to let the devil know to be on the lookout for you."

"My name is Antonio de Almeida. But I've seen a glimpse of hell during my life, general, and I truly pray that you're destined for a better place. You may have a moment to prepare your soul, if you need it."

The general ignored Almeida. The man's words about a father dying for his family being noble came back to his mind, but he didn't feel noble. He felt fear and helplessness and failure. Only two years left of his four-year term as Commandant, and then he and his wife had been going to

retire to a farm in Tennessee. Forty-four years of marriage. More good years than bad. He stroked his dead wife's hair and hoped that he would get to see her again on the other side.

Then he raised the gun to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

2

DEACON MUNROE COULDN'T see the flashing lights of the crime scene. He couldn't see anything at all, but he could hear it and feel it. The creaking of the flashers rotating in light-bars atop police cruisers. The murmurs of a crowd of onlookers. Patrol officers controlling the scene and pushing back the crowd. Feet striking the pavement, moving with purpose. Detectives. Crime scene techs. Reporters shouting questions. All of it overlaying the dull roar of the city. His city - Washington, DC.

The world was an intricate tapestry of sounds, smells, and vibrations that most people never noticed. But, in the years since losing his sight, Munroe had learned to weave the data from his remaining senses together. He intertwined each strand in his mind's eye and could usually stitch together a picture of his surroundings. Still, there were so many details that were lost to him. If he couldn't hear it or smell it or feel it, then it didn't exist in his world.

He had always prided himself on his attention to detail, and it was this affinity for minutiae and problem-solving that had led him to become a detective in the first place. Then, one day, half the details had just disappeared and the world had become a frightening place of darkness.

"What do we see, Gerald?" Munroe asked in his soothing Southern drawl. He adjusted the dark designer sunglasses that rested on the bridge of his nose. He was seldom in public without them. Although his eyes appeared normal, people found his vacant stare to be unsettling.

"Crime scene," Gerald Dixon said. His voice was deep and smooth. "Lots of cops going into the commandant's house. I

see some jackholes in windbreakers with white letters. Probably NCIS.”

“Jackholes?”

“Yeah, you know. More than a jackass, slightly less than an asshole.”

“I see,” Munroe said. People often found it odd when he used verbs that referred to sighted actions, and conversations always grew awkward when someone accidentally used such a word around him. But, in reality, he used terms like that constantly in common speech, even though they were technically inaccurate. There was nothing offensive about it. In fact, he found it more offensive when people noticed the faux pas and apologized, as if he were some sensitive child that needed to be coddled.

“Check the crowd. Anyone suspicious? Anyone seem out of place or watching just a bit too closely?”

A moment passed, and Gerald said, “Nothing.”

“Okay, let’s make an entrance.”

Gerald guided Munroe’s hand to his forearm and led him up to the door. Agents and police stopped them a couple of times along the way, but a flashing of their credentials from the DCIS – the Defense Criminal Investigative Service – allowed them to pass.

Once inside, Munroe heard the voices of detectives and CSI crews echoing off the hardwood floors, but a loud nasal voice cut through the rest. “What are you doing here, Munroe? This is an NCIS investigation. We don’t need help from a *special* investigator on this one.”

“Hello, Agent Ashter. I’d try to insult you now, but I’m afraid that I may lack the proper vocabulary for it to be effective or even understood.”

“Screw you, Munroe. You’re a liability, and I don’t want you stumbling around my crime scene.”

Munroe laughed. “*Your* crime scene? We both know Markham’s never going to let you take the training wheels

off. Speaking of Markham, don't you need to be picking up his dry cleaning, getting coffee, mowing his lawn?"

He felt Ashter push in close. The man smelled of breath mints and Old Spice. "You shouldn't even be an active agent. You're a cripple. I don't know what you hold over the heads of the big boys at the Pentagon, but if you ask me, your retirement's about ten years overdue."

Munroe was descended from Southern aristocracy, and like a true Southern gentleman, he reacted to the other man's comments with a calm, indifferent smirk. But on the inside, the remarks reverberated through his mind. He wanted to scream. He wanted to bash Ashter's face in. He had become accustomed to people discounting him because of his disability, but few were as blatant and rude as Ashter. Still, Munroe's father had always said that to show anger to those beneath you was to put your weaknesses on display.

"I do so enjoy our little talks, but I have work to do. Where's your boss?"

He could hear Ashter chewing on his bottom lip and suspected that the agent's head was shaking as well. Munroe continued, "Come on. You know that all I have to do is make a quick phone call, and this ignorant posturing will be for nothing."

Ashter hesitated but then said, "Stay here. I'll send him down to you."

A few moments later, Munroe heard NCIS Special Agent Dean Markham approaching. Markham had taken a round in the hip several years before, and it gave his gait a rhythm that Munroe found distinctive. Munroe stuck out his hand and said, "You need to keep your dog on a shorter leash."

Markham shook the proffered hand and replied in his Boston accent, "He's a good agent."

"If brains were dynamite, that boy wouldn't be able to blow his nose."

"Why are you here?" Markham said, all business.

“I was here to see General Easton. At his request. He called me and said that he had an urgent matter that he needed to discuss. I came as soon as I could.”

Munroe heard Markham flip open a notebook and click a pen before the agent asked, “What did he need to talk about?”

“He wouldn’t say over the phone. I really have no idea.”

“What’s your relationship to the commandant?”

“We’re old friends. We get together now and then, drink some Scotch, smoke cigars.”

“Did he often discuss personal issues with you? Marital problems, anything like that?”

“No. He wasn’t looking forward to his retirement, but his wife definitely was. You want to tell me what’s happened? Why are you asking about marital issues?”

Markham released a deep breath. “Because it looks like he brutally murdered his wife and then killed himself.”

Munroe was silent for a moment. “That’s not right. The man I know would never do something like that.”

“It’s too early to draw any definite conclusions, but that’s the way it looks.”

“Things aren’t always the way they seem.”

Markham flipped the notebook closed. “They almost never are, but this is our investigation. I’ll let you in out of respect for your service to this country and your . . . sacrifice. But stay out of our way. If you see . . . I mean . . . *pick up on* anything, you come to me first.”

Munroe once again fought to maintain his calm demeanor. It seemed that these guys always fell into two camps: one that thought he should be collecting disability and one that gave him undue respect for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. None of them respected his skills as an investigator or treated him as an asset. He was just thankful that the DOD and the Joint Chiefs didn’t share the viewpoint of the NCIS and FBI.

Gerald led him up the stairs and down a familiar route, the rhythm of Markham's footfalls sounding on the hardwood in front of them. He knew that they were heading for General Easton's office. Munroe and George Easton had shared many glasses of fine Scotch in that room. As he counted their steps to judge the distance they'd traveled for his mental tapestry, he knew that the eyes of the previous commandants were looking down on him from the portraits that lined the hall. He could feel the weight from the gazes of the great men, urging him to find justice for their fallen brother. History was thick in this place. The home of the commandants was said to be the oldest continuously occupied public building in DC and one of the few not to have been burned by the British when they sacked the capital in 1814. Legend held that the British had spared the home of the commandant from the torch out of a gesture of soldierly respect. It occupied fifteen thousand square feet, including thirty rooms not counting closets or baths. Unfortunately, Munroe had never actually *seen* the interior of the great structure. Just one more detail and experience stolen from him.

The noise from the crime scene grew closer, and he heard and felt the sound alter as they entered Easton's office. It was like a change in pressure as the voices and footfalls no longer echoed from the walls of the corridor. "What do we see, Gerald? I know the layout. Just give me the details of the crime."

Gerald Dixon had been his best friend since they were children. The large black man's family had worked for Munroe's forebears on the plantation for generations. Young Deacon Munroe hadn't known that Gerald was below his station in life. And older Deacon Munroe simply didn't care about such things. One of the crops grown on the farm was tobacco, and he still vividly remembered the first time that he and Gerald had decided to try to smoke some directly

from the field. The two boys had been sick for what felt like a week.

Gerald took a deep breath. “The bodies are along the north side of the office. Easton’s on his back with his wife cradled in his lap. It looks like she was beaten to death. Her face is . . .” Gerald’s voice trailed off, painting Munroe an especially grim picture. “The entry wound on the general’s head is to the left temple with the exit wound on the right. I think I see powder burns consistent with direct contact of the barrel.”

“Did you say the entry wound is to the left temple? Gun in the left hand?”

“That’s correct.”

“Go on.”

“The general appears to have scratch marks all over him, consistent with a struggle. The room’s the same way. Lamp’s overturned. A chair. Some papers and books are scattered across the floor. Bloody footprints leading to the desk. Bloody handprints on top of the desk. Blood on the chair.”

“What about the murder weapon?”

“For the wife, it looks like she was beaten to death. I see a lot of blood and abrasions on the general’s fists. It doesn’t look good, Deac.”

“Continue.”

“The gun is a decorative Colt 1911. It looks like the one from his display case.”

“Check the case. Is it bloody?”

“No, it looks clean.”

“Good. Could you summon Agent Markham for me, please, Gerald?”

A moment later, Markham’s clip-clop footfalls approached, accompanied by another set that Munroe guessed to be those of Ashter. Munroe said, “What do you think about the scene, Markham?”

Ashter's nasal voice said, "Are you kidding? It's clear that —"

"Adults are speaking," Munroe interrupted.

"What is your problem, Munroe?" Ashter said, playing the victim in front of his superior.

Munroe turned sharply toward the sound of the man's voice. "I don't like your face." Turning back to where he assumed Markham to be standing, he continued, "Your thoughts, Special Agent Markham?"

When Markham spoke, his words were slow and measured as if he were considering every syllable with care. "It's too soon to draw any definite conclusions. We haven't gathered all the evidence yet. But from what I've seen to this point, it appears that General Easton and his wife had a physical altercation, and Easton, a highly trained soldier, killed her during the fight. He then sat down at his desk, considered what had happened. Realized what he'd done and decided to end his own life. He retrieved the gun, cradled his wife's body, and shot himself in the head."

Munroe nodded. "At first glance, that is what appears to have happened. However, there are a few inconsistencies. First of all, the commandant is right-handed. Why would a right-handed person use his left hand to hold a gun and commit suicide?"

Ashter cut in. "Maybe he hurt it in the fight. That doesn't —"

"Second, if things played out as you described, why isn't the display case covered in blood? Have you checked the weapon? Any traces of blood on the magazine or the rounds that Easton would have loaded?"

Markham told them to hold on and went to check with his people. When he returned, he said, "The real test will be done at the lab, but they checked with UV light and found no traces of blood on the magazine, bullets, or display case. But before we go off half-cocked with wild conspiracy theories, none of that necessarily proves anything more is

going on. There are scratch marks on Easton and skin under the wife's nails and a whole lot of other evidence saying that the wife fought him for her life. It's too soon to come to any conclusions."

"Please, we both know that you came to a conclusion within thirty seconds of seeing this scene. I'm just saying not to let any preconceptions allow evidence to be missed or possibilities to be overlooked. Are your people checking for witnesses who may have seen anyone suspicious?"

"We know how to do our jobs, Munroe." Markham walked off with Ashter following on his heels like a new puppy.

Munroe said, "Let's take a walk down the hall, Gerald."

The big man led him out of the room and away from the others with his guide arm, the one Munroe was holding, sliding behind his back. The small gesture told Munroe to transition into a single-file line in order to maneuver through a tight space. "I don't like your face, says the blind man?" Gerald commented.

"I thought you might like that. I bet our boy's still chewing on that one."

"You think that somebody faked the scene? Is that why he's holding the gun with his left hand?"

"No, I think that it was a message. George was leaving us a clue. If a professional had faked the scene by forcing the gun to his head, they would have assumed that he was right-handed. And that's if they hadn't checked beforehand to be sure. But if they had threatened him in some way, forced him to do it, then he may have used his left hand in order to throw up a red flag. Do you remember the Sherlock Holmes short story, 'Silver Blaze'? We read it in Ms. Petrie's class when we were kids."

"Yeah, it was the one where Holmes solves the case because the dog *didn't* bark."

Munroe nodded. "Good memory. There's a dog *not* barking here too."

"What are you saying?"

“George had an ornate clock in his office that ticked with every second. A present from his grandmother or some such, one of those new clocks that are designed to look like antiques. It always annoyed the piss out of me, but George found it relaxing. He kept saying that he was going to send me one for my office at home, that I needed to relax a bit more. But where’s that clock now? There wasn’t any ticking in his office.”

“Okay, wait here. I’ll take a look. Maybe it was broken in the struggle.”

Munroe listened to Gerald’s footsteps as his colleague walked away. Waited. Thought. Listened to the same footsteps return a few minutes later. “I found it,” Gerald said.

Munroe shook his head. “Damn, I thought I had something there.”

“It wasn’t in his office. It was in the study a couple doors down.”

“Really? I don’t hear it.”

“It’s not working. Batteries must be dead.”

Munroe considered this. Why would the commandant have moved his clock and let the batteries run down? He loved that damn clock. Especially when he knew that Munroe was coming. Unless it was another message. One directed specifically at him.

“Check the battery compartment. Don’t let anyone see you do it.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. They’re all focused on the office.”

A moment later, he heard Gerald return. His partner’s breathing pattern had changed noticeably. “You were right. I found something where the batteries should have been.”

3

JONAS BLACK ALWAYS pushed himself harder on the last leg of his run. Exhaustion pressed down on him and his legs burned, but he pressed forward, gaining momentum, arms pumping, teeth grinding down. He was in the best shape of his life, even better than when he had been a Recon Marine.

The training to become an elite special-forces operator had been difficult for him. Most spec-ops soldiers were small and wiry and quick. Jonas was none of those things. At six-foot-six and two hundred and seventy pounds, he was a freight train, not some kind of ninja. Most people thought that being big gave him an advantage as a soldier, but they were wrong. His size made everything about the job more difficult. It was hard enough to carry a fifty-pound pack through dense forest and up cliffs during SERE (survival, evasion, resistance, escape) training when you weighed a hundred and sixty pounds. He had nearly twice as much bulk to contend with and could never move as fast as his smaller counterparts.

Sometimes, though, his size did give him an advantage. Like when he had become an inmate at Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama. In prison, size mattered, and Jonas Black was an intimidating opponent for even the craziest of his fellow prisoners. The others gave him his space, and he liked it that way. He just wanted to do his time and get back on the outside. The problem was that a big percentage of the inmates at Holman were serving life without parole. They had nothing to lose, while Jonas only had six months left on his sentence. Still, he knew better than to show any kind of weakness to the wolves.

That type of thinking wasn't anything new for him. He had learned that the strong survive and the weak get swallowed up and spat out. Fortunately, he had never been weak.

He finished his run around the prison yard and placed his hands on top of his head as he caught his breath. A little white guy known as Shorty peeled away reluctantly from a group of other inmates and approached him. Shorty stank of body odor and cigarette smoke. The little man's voice trembled when he said, "Yo, Black, think you can hook me up with some Julep?"

Jonas wiped the sweat from his forehead and ran his hand through his closely cropped hair. "How much you want?" he said in his gravelly baritone.

"Bottle'll do it."

"You have payment?"

"Got two Mrs. Freshleys."

"A bottle will cost you four Mrs. Freshleys and a pack of Bugler."

"Damn, Black! I thought you were in here for murder, not robbery."

"That's the price, Shorty. Don't waste my time. No credit, no loans."

Shorty shuffled back to his group, still mumbling curses. Black had made a decent business for himself while on the inside. The prisoners, of course, weren't supposed to have drugs or alcohol, but Jonas had never let a little thing like rules stop him before. He didn't deal drugs or use them, but he had acquired a special recipe for Julep, which was a kind of home-made whiskey in high demand at Holman. It was difficult to make and could often result in an alcohol content as low as two percent, but the batches that Black made were much stronger and much more expensive. The current going rate was a pack of Bugler, the brand of tobacco sold out of the prison store, and four Mrs. Freshley's Grand Honey Buns. Strangely, the treats had become a better prison currency than cigarettes. Black wondered if there was