

**NIGHTMARE
BEGINS
WITH AN
EYE**



BRADY STYLES

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For Patti, whose guiding light continues to brighten my life.

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PREFACE

Basil Tait and Chad “Sticks” Lampwick, retired musicians turned private detectives, agree to assist Veena, niece of their old friend, Inspector Errol Nathan, in returning a potentially deadly artifact to its place of origin. Their dangerous mission takes them into a bizarre world of giant creatures, carnivorous plants, cannibals, quicksand, and earthquakes. Along the way, the mysterious deaths of several members of their expedition lead Tait and Sticks to believe that someone in their midst is a psychotic killer.

CHAPTER I

An Eye for an Eye

The antelope stopped grazing and raised its head. There wasn't a sound, but it could sense danger. Crouched, unseen, and motionless, the lioness, driven by hunger and desperation, made her move. Slowed by age and the heat of the African sun, the tawny beast once again failed in its never-ending struggle for survival. Panting heavily, it stood in the tall grass and watched in frustration as its planned midday meal disappeared into the distance. Finally accepting its loss, the proud animal turned and loped back into the shade of the jungle. There would be other opportunities.

In another part of this dense wilderness, an old man screamed in pain as he fell to his knees. Strapped to his back was a large, heavy object wrapped in cloth. His clothes—what was left of them—were torn to shreds, and his hands, arms, and legs were covered in flies feeding on the pus and blood oozing from his infected wounds. Another coughing fit wracked his thin body as he struggled to stand up. Stumbling a little further, he screamed again as the sharp edge of a branch ripped a deep cut in his right cheek. He staggered forward, narrowly avoiding further pain by feeling the trunk of a huge tree directly in his path. Easing around it, he groped at thin air until he felt another tree, then another. Trudging cautiously for some time, he kept muttering the same words over and over. “Must return it. Only hope! Must return it.”

Suddenly, as he broke through the clinging vines and thick foliage into a small clearing, he let out another agonized scream, clutched at his chest, and collapsed. The hot sun was already beginning to burn his skin as the

last breath of life left his body. Even if he had lived, he would never have found whatever it was he was searching for.

Two dark crawling masses of flies feasted on the empty sockets where his eyeballs had been. Death could well have been a blessing.

* * *

“Would you like a highball, Bas, or shall I open a bottle of unwooded?” Sticks asked.

“Hmm,” Tait replied, totally engrossed in reading the morning newspaper.

“Was that a yes, no, or maybe?”

“Hmm.”

“Maybe you’d prefer a double chocolate malted milkshake with pepper, salt, tomato sauce, and three finely chopped onions?”

“That sounds good.”

“Perhaps followed by a healthy serving of ice cream, oysters, and lighter fluid, enticingly topped with a pair of old shoelaces?”

“That’d be nice.”

Sticks gave up, and as he uncorked a bottle of their favourite chardonnay, the familiar sound broke Tait’s concentration.

“Good idea, Sticks. Let’s have a drink.”

Sticks shook his head and handed his old friend a glass.

“Listen to this,” Tait continued. “Two days ago, while on safari in Africa, a few American tourists found a human skeleton.”

“The poor bugger was probably still waiting for a bus. I’ve heard public transport isn’t the best over there.”

“The remains are thought to date back approximately two thousand years. But, the bizarre side is, underneath the skeleton, they discovered a diamond-encrusted, solid gold orb the size of a soccer ball. The orb was wrapped in a strange cloth that, oddly enough, was still in perfect condition. Apparently, archeological experts are having difficulty in deciphering some weird symbols inscribed along one of the edges of the cloth.”

“Sounds like one of my shopping lists,” Sticks said.

“It appears to be written in some ancient, unidentifiable language,” Tait continued.

“No, I just write slowly because I’m not a fast reader,” Sticks replied.

“I’m talking about the symbols on the cloth, you twit!”

The phone rang just in time to save Tait’s sanity.

“Good morning, inspector.”

“Bas!” Inspector Errol Nathan’s voice had the cheerful sound of a man who had slept well and didn’t owe too much money. “Can you and Sticks come over? There’s someone here I’d like you to meet.”

Tait could almost see the smile on Nathan’s face. “We’re on our way,” he replied.

“Trouble?” Sticks asked.

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“It might not sound like it, but you can be sure there’s trouble hiding somewhere in that phone call.”

“Stop whining,” Tait said, “and let’s get down to police headquarters. Errol’s in an unusually happy mood, and I’m looking forward to finding out why. I’ll just need a couple of minutes to kick-start Old Val back into life.”

Tait was referring to their much-treasured 1962 white Chrysler Valiant, which, unlike Tait and Sticks, was in fairly good condition for its age. While Tait lovingly resuscitated the engine, Sticks kicked the offside front tyre. Satisfied that it had no intention of going flat, he said, “Okay, Bas, she should get us there and back. Let’s hit it!”

As Tait aimed the old car in the right direction, it shuddered, coughed twice, gave a long metallic sigh, and then chugged off into the distance.

* * *

Basil Tait and Chad “Sticks” Lampwick, both in their late fifties, had recently formed a private detective agency. The screen images of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe had always intrigued them—the bars, the booze, the broads, the broads, the booze, the bars. The possibilities seemed endless. And they were also both financially strapped. Their respective businesses had gone down the tubes, and the computer age had crept up and rushed past them so fast that they were still wondering if it was possible to catch a virus from the gigabyte of a mouse.

Their friendship went back to the sixties, when they’d formed a five-

piece rock band with Tait on guitar and Sticks on drums. The group had a successful run for more than a decade, playing rhythm 'n' blues in some of the best pubs and sleaziest grease traps in Sydney. Then the music scene began to change, becoming more involved, more demanding, and, ultimately, less fun for them. The writing was on the wall. Before long, they all mutually agreed to go their separate ways, closing the curtain for the last time. Nevertheless, in years to come, these enthusiastic, fun-loving young men would look back and consider themselves extremely fortunate to have lived, laughed, and loved through an astounding and exciting era filled with turmoil, history-making events, unforgettable faces, unmentionable places, and, of course, the music.

The glory days had passed, but a lingering ovation would remain in their memories and hearts forever.

Then, three months prior, jobless and in need of cash, Bas and Sticks joined forces once more. With the help of their old friend, Inspector Errol Nathan, they had already worked on a number of cases.

It was common knowledge that, on the whole—even off the whole—the police had an exceptionally low opinion of private detectives. But, Nathan's friendship with Tait and Sticks extended as far back as the sixties, when he was a roadie with their rock group. Consequently, he was more than willing to help in their latest business venture by offering them cases from his so-called too-hard basket. To his astonishment, in their bumbling way, they somehow managed to solve them. Despite their success rate, Nathan was still of the opinion that their crime-solving skills were obtained, not from the Sherlock Holmes School of Deduction, but from the Marx Brothers Academy of Destruction.

They'd set up office in the Chinatown district of the inner city. The slightly less than cheap three-room apartment contained a bed, Tait's favourite black leather swivel chair, a desk with obligatory lamp and phone, a filing cabinet, a dilapidated object that they both insisted was a lounge, a small bar fridge stocked with unwooded chardonnay, and a TV surrounded by dozens of old videotapes. There was little else except for two framed original movie posters—both in pristine condition. One was Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman's timeless classic, *Casablanca*. The other was the Bob Hope, Willie Best, and Paulette Goddard's spooky

comedy, *The Ghost Breakers*. Both were among Tait and Sticks' favourite films.

The sign on the glass panel of their front door, which read, "Tait and Lampwick, Lampwick and Tait, Private Investigators," was the result of one of their rare disagreements.

"It should be 'Tait and Lampwick.'"

"No; 'Lampwick and Tait,'" Sticks responded. "It sounds better, like 'Perry and Mason' or 'George and Gershwin.'"

The phonebook entry had posed a similar problem until they both agreed on having a silent number. They gave the number to Inspector Nathan, and Sticks still couldn't figure out why Nathan was the only one who ever rang them.

As the posters suggested, Tait had a passion for old movies. He also had a photographic memory for their stars, year of release, and even their studios. And, on occasions, his astounding knowledge of film dialogue, situations, and plots had helped them work their way out of a few tight spots.

Sticks, on the other hand, had a passion for comics—especially Scrooge McDuck adventures. And there were times when his grasp of the English language left a lot to be desired—to the point of driving Tait into a state of frustrated annoyance. Something else about Sticks that Tait could never understand but over the years had learned to accept was his old friend's charm and winning ways with the opposite sex. For some inexplicable reason, Sticks was generally capable of getting away with sexist or outrageous pickup lines. But if Tait used the same lines, he usually ended up with three black eyes, a couple of swift high-heeled kicks in the crotch, and a wardrobe full of lawsuits.

Yet, despite their differences, an almost brotherly bond existed between them—an unspoken acceptance that, if and when necessary, each would readily sacrifice his life to save the other.

* * *

"Come in, boys," Nathan responded warmly to Tait's knock.

They entered the office and then stopped in their tracks. Leaning over Nathan's desk was an exquisite example of female sublimity. Tait guessed

that she was possibly in her late twenties or early thirties. From the parts he could see, her sun-tanned skin fit her perfectly. She flicked her long brown hair back off her face, and, as Tait gazed into her large blue eyes, he suddenly felt naked. It was as if this heavenly angel had just stripped away his protective façade and was searching the depths of his soul—discomforting and yet quite pleasurable. Her pale pink, skin-tight dress, clinging to her curvaceous body, could almost be termed illegal. She was fully aware that the angle at which she was leaning was baring practically all of her beautiful, firm breasts—but she didn't seem to mind and neither did Tait and Sticks. She straightened up and, as a traffic-stopping smile parted her full lips, Tait could hear the thumping in Sticks' temples.

"Bas, Sticks, I'd like you to meet Veena," Nathan beamed. "She is—"

"Absolutely gorgeous," Sticks cut in, then wolf-whistled. "Tell me, do you always look like this or have you just put on an image of perfection for our benefit?"

"I've heard all about you, Sticks Lampwick." Her sensuous voice stirred something within both of them.

"If there was anything you didn't quite understand," Sticks replied, "I'll explain it over dinner but, right now, how about you and me—"

"How about you shut up and listen!" Nathan's smile was showing signs of impatience. "Veena, who is a world-renowned expert in archeology, is also my niece."

If the absence of sound could be measured on a decibel level, the ensuing silence was deafening. Veena finally broke the quiescence. "Uncle Errol has told me that you're overbearing, overwhelming, overweight, oversexed, and over the top but, if it's any consolation, Sticks, I don't believe a word of it. Well, maybe a little overweight."

Sticks smiled but said nothing; he'd just been skillfully overruled.

"Now, I'd like both of you to keep quiet and listen for a change," Nathan said. "Veena has something that I'm sure you'll find fascinating and very exciting."

Tait couldn't agree more.

"I'll begin by telling you a chronicle you may or may not believe. Don't worry—even the experts can't decide." Satisfied that she had Tait and Sticks' undivided attention, Veena continued. "There is a story that has

been passed down through the centuries of a lost civilization deep in the African jungle. This society of gentle people, known as Arachs, worshipped a spider god named Arachnus, who protected them and provided for their every need. Legend has it that to honour him, they constructed a huge spiderlike statue in which his spirit could reside when it visited the earth. The idol was believed to be made of solid gold and completely encrusted with diamonds. Having no need for the riches that surrounded them, the Arachs existed in peace and harmony, totally unaware of the evil, greed, and corruption of the outside world. However, the tale goes on to say that one day a group of mercenaries, who were hopelessly lost, happened to stumble into this mythical utopia. They remained just long enough to teach the simple Arach people how to cheat, steal, hate, and murder. Arachnus, angry at what his people had become, caused a terrible earthquake that swallowed up their entire civilization, right down to the very last diamond. Eventually, the jungle completely blanketed the area, leaving no trace of their existence. That was around two thousand years ago. Since then, many have searched for this fabled place but no one has ever found proof to substantiate the—according to some—totally preposterous legend ... until now.”

“You wouldn’t be referring to the recently discovered golden orb?” Tait asked.

“You know of it?”

“All I know is what I read in this morning’s paper.”

“Veena thinks that the orb is actually one of the eyes of the Arachnus idol,” Nathan added. “She also thinks that it was possibly stolen not long before the Arachs’ destruction.”

“I *know* it’s the eye of Arachnus!” Her eyes flashed as she quickly corrected Nathan. “And we need to return it, as soon as possible, to its rightful resting place, otherwise—”

“Otherwise? Otherwise, what? And what do you mean by ‘*We* need to return it’? I don’t like the sound of that.” Sticks was getting that here-we-go-again feeling.

“Otherwise ...” Veena shrugged and looked at Nathan, “we’re not sure. But another part of the legend suggests that those who choose to remove any body part from Arachnus shall forfeit an equivalent body part

in return.”

“In other words, an eye for an eye,” Sticks said.

Veena nodded slightly and shrugged. “I suppose that’s one way of defining it.”

Tait didn’t miss the furtive glance between Veena and Nathan. “And what else?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Veena said, raising one eyebrow.

“Please don’t play games. Games are reserved for the sporting minded, and my mind was never inclined toward sport. What else aren’t you telling us?”

She sighed and turned to Nathan, who nodded and said, “You’ll have to tell them sometime, Veena, and now is as good a time as any.”

Veena took a deep breath. “You’ll probably find this part of the legend even more incredible, but here goes. When the Arachs were building the idol, each piece was meticulously assembled, supposedly under the guidance and instruction of Arachnus himself. When the statue was nearing completion, the Arach people were then ordered to inscribe strange words and symbols around the body of the idol. They had no concept of what they meant, but every word, symbol, number, and equation was carefully designed for a significant purpose.”

“And what was that?” Tait enquired.

“His purpose was to give his people an unparalleled wealth of knowledge—to eventually teach them everything they would ever need to know. Various combinations of the words, symbols, and numbers are said to form countless codes, which, in turn, hold keys to unlock equations within equations.”

“I’m hopeless at mathematics. What does that mean in broken English?” Sticks asked.

“If it is possible to decipher the inscriptions and understand the codes to unlock the equations, they are believed to contain the answers to every question imaginable—unveiling the secrets of life, death, the universe, and beyond.”

Tait and Sticks remained silent for a while, each letting Veena’s astounding statement sift through the filtering system in the soft, convoluted mass of nervous tissue within his skull.

“Unfortunately, Arachnus made a serious mistake,” Veena continued. “He envisaged that only his people would study and learn from the inscriptions. He didn’t consider the possibilities of discovery by evil, ruthless invaders from the outside world. The immeasurable wealth of knowledge contained within the inscriptions, used correctly, could greatly benefit and advance every aspect of our existence, now and in the future. But, if the idol ever fell into the wrong hands ...” She didn’t need to finish the sentence. “That’s one reason why we must return the orb and make sure the idol can never again be found.”

“There’s another reason?” Tait asked.

After a second glance at Nathan, she replied, “The final part of the legend indicates that, once every two thousand years, the spirit of Arachnus will visit Earth and reside within the idol.”

“Uh oh!” Sticks exclaimed. “I feel a nightmare coming on. Am I correct in assuming that when good old Arachnus drops into his earthly body and finds that he’s missing a few bits and pieces, he’ll belt the crap out of the annual Zambezi River Canoe Race?”

“Not quite,” Veena replied. “Change that to belt the crap out of anyone in *possession* of his missing bits and pieces. But taking that thought one step further, if he has the inconceivable powers he’s supposed to have, and he just happens to be angry enough—”

“Okay, okay, I get the picture,” Sticks said. “And, if the age of that skeleton they found near the orb is correct, Arachnus is just about due for another visit.”

“Veena and I have convinced the authorities here and in Africa to keep the lid on this thing,” Nathan said. “They’ve also given their approval for us to search for the orb’s resting place.” He began rubbing his chin. “Veena is keen to undertake the task, with the assistance of a few fellow associates, but I’d like both of you to accompany her. That’s not an order; it’s a favour to me. I’d feel a lot happier about all this if she had someone sort of looking after her. Will you do it?”

Sticks laughed and said, “You must think we’re crazy! You want us to fly off to Africa, pick up the eye of a mythical idol, and then trek through the jungle in search of some place that probably never existed. And, as an added bonus, if there *is* any truth in this fantastic story, there’s the

possibility that Arachnus could pop in at any minute and zap all of us into oblivion for taking one of his eyes for a walk. Just great! When do we leave?”

“I’ve already booked a flight for tomorrow morning,” Nathan replied.

“You’ve been quiet, Bas,” Sticks said. “You seem to be worried.”

“You *are* coming with us?” Veena questioned.

“Of course,” Tait replied. “It’s just that ... why does it have to be a spider? Why couldn’t they have worshipped a sparrow or a squirrel? I hate spiders!”

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