



# AT FIRST SIGHT

**A Novel of Obsession**

**STEPHEN J. CANNELL**

 Vanguard Press  
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

*This one is for my "Hollywood son,"  
Mario Van Peebles, friend, workmate, and inspiration.*

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I HAD AN ACTING JOB ON A STEVEN Seagal movie that was shooting in Berlin. Long hours of waiting in dressing rooms during other shoots had taught me that it is always a good idea to have some fresh reading material from authors I admire on hand. Since I was scheduled to be on the film for a month, and since Germany in November can be very wet and bleak, I had a suitcase full of my favorite novelists.

Among them was a book written by Andrew Klavan entitled *Man and Wife*. I thoroughly enjoyed that novel. I thought it a very unique tale told from a fresh perspective. I have always felt that Andrew took big chances with his books, pulling them off beautifully. I began to wonder if I shouldn't be trying to push a little harder and take more chances myself. I love writing my Shane Scully mysteries, so this feeling wasn't because of any loss of excitement with those books; it was more about trying to pull off something totally different. I resolved that when I got back to L.A. I would find time among my other assignments to write my "unique" novel. I already knew

what the book should be about because I'd had the initial idea for *At First Sight* three years before. Whenever I tried to explain my vision to those involved with my career, they would beg me not to write it. But then nobody but me could really see what was inside my head. I decided to avoid more discussion and just write it on spec.

The novel poured out. I had a rough draft in around two months. So here it is. The book nobody wanted me to write.

I hope you like it.

If you don't, send your letters to Andrew Klavan. Even though we've never discussed it, Drew's work inspired this effort.

**CHICK**

## CHAPTER



### LET'S START WITH THE ESSENTIALS.

My name is Chick Best. Chick is short for Charles. I'm five-feet ten-inches tall and I weigh one-hundred-eighty-five pounds . . . okay, if you want to be picky, one-ninety-four—but I'm about to lose fifteen. I'm starting the Atkins Diet any day now. I'm fifty-five years old and I live in Los Angeles. My mother was named Celeste, my father was Chick Sr., so that means I was Chick Jr., until Dad checked off the ride on the Hollywood Freeway during my sophomore year in high school. He fell asleep and ran his silver Jag into a bridge abutment. People said he didn't deserve to die . . . but he was drunk, so who else can you blame? Rim shot. Cue the strings. I'll deal with that whole mess later.

That's the birth and genealogy stuff.

I guess I should also give you a quick, personal history. Just the headlines though—I promise not to drag it out. After Dad died, I

lived with my mother and my grandmother. They tried to see me through my wild years, through high school and junior college. For me, this period was pretty much a drug haze—my chocolate-chip period. Instant Zen, the Great White Light, a Sunshine Ticket to oblivion. My excuse is it was the seventies. If you didn't get high, you didn't get laid. I lost my student deferment from City College because I discovered drugs, got wasted, and got an incomplete in Western Civ. Missed the final. Uncle Sam was on me like puke on a wino. The chronology there was unremarkable, but classic: unlucky lottery number, induction, last acid trip, first train trip, Fort Ord, and then six months of pure, ass-kicking misery. I resurfaced half a year later as a buck private and ammo-humper for the good ol' USA with a one-way ticket to Vietnam.

But I never saw combat. In fact, I didn't even see Vietnam. I became a REMF, which in the military stands for Rear Echelon Motherfucker. Here's the quick story on that. My dad had been a talent agent before he kamikazied out on the Hollywood Freeway. He booked comedians you never heard of into clubs you'd never go to. Dad's old partner had a connection to Bob Hope's USO Tour. He pulled a few strings and fixed it so I could stay stateside. I ended up in the chairborne infantry booking USO shows for the armed forces—a post I defended valiantly, holding off talent managers and agents from my fifth-floor office on Wilshire Boulevard in L.A. My joke back then was—I find comics that kill, instead of Commies to kill.

After I got out of the service I spent a kick-ass year on Maui. Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll. Of course, I've fired up my last blunt. I'm not

beaming up on thrusters or bang anymore either. My acid flashbacks are finally history. I'm clean as the Board of Health and am now absolutely against drugs, which I've said at least two thousand times to my sixteen-year-old daughter, Melissa, who listens to these lectures with amused indifference, which is the same expression she wears at traffic court.

In the past two years Melissa has discovered more drugs than Dow Chemical. Every time I do my "Life Is a Choice" speech, she starts rolling her eyes like I'm the biggest excuse for bad behavior since Sigmund Freud.

I should probably add that I'm having a huge problem with Melissa right now. Of course it didn't help that my wife, Evelyn, let it drop last Christmas that I was busted and did six months for dealing Pakalolo in Hawaii after Nam. I'll get back to all this later, but for now, suffice it to say, that after I got out of the Hawaiian prison, I came back to the mainland and started my business career, mostly retail. I got married in 1990 to Evelyn, my current and only wife, and we had our first and only child, Melissa, a year later. For the past twelve years, I've been running my own Internet company in L.A.

That's the quick history . . . short and sweet, like I promised. There's more, but for now, let's move on.

This story begins in January. My wife, my daughter, and I arrived at the Four Seasons on Maui to vacation during the week between Christmas and New Year's. I love that hotel. We go every December. Everybody knows my name there. You walk around and it's, "Hello, Mr. Best," or, "Nice to have you back, Mr. Best." Makes you feel important.



The only thing I don't like about the Four Seasons at New Year's is it's a magnet for A-type personalities. You see them out on the beach doing mortal combat over sun chairs.

They have these cabanas at the pool. Strange as it may seem, there's a sort of pecking order that comes with who gets which one. There are three or four that are on the high ground and command a view of both the beach and the main pool. These have become sought-after sunspots. People scheme and fight for these locations. Personally, I could give less of a shit about being in a cabana. But with my wife, Evelyn, it's a life-or-death situation. She's got to have one. If I fail to secure her favorite, it's some kind of cosmic confirmation of my worthlessness as a provider.

I used to be able to score the right location for a hundred bucks up-front. A little palm grease and a pool boy would set me up for the week. But that was five years ago. Things have changed. Hollywood discovered the hotel. With all the Beverly Hills A-List power players, actors, agents, and directors, you have to grab a flat sword and shed blood to get one of these silly little sun tents. Now on arrival I'm paying five hundred to the pool guy, and that only buys me a place at the starting line for one week. If I can get down there early enough, and edge the competition, it's ours. Great. Except one of us has to get up at four in the morning to beat the rush and secure it.

I've tried to tell Evelyn that it's nuts to make Melissa get up that early and sit in the cabana till we get there, and it's become World War III with the kid every time we ask, but Evelyn loves her power

cabana. She preens and struts when we get one. You can see all this in her body language.

As long as we're on my wife's body, let me take a moment to describe it. Evelyn's got a killer shape. I'm not kidding here. It's a Gold's Gym trophy exhibit. Tight ass, cut abs, sculpted delts. We invested thirty Gs last year in some silicone. The results are staggering. From the neck down, my wife looks like Ms. Fitness USA, but in the past decade, her face has become pinched and angry. It almost seems as if her eyes have grown a few millimeters closer together each year. Her mouth is always curved down at the edges, angry and mean like a killer bass about to hit a water bug. Evelyn's face has become a constant mask of disapproval. For a while I wondered if it might be "roid rage." I thought her trainer might be slipping her some gym juice to get all those impressive body cuts. But now, I think she's just naturally pissed off and unhappy.

Why should she be pissed, you might ask? She has everything: a house in Beverly Hills on Elm, in the really exclusive six-hundred block. She has a no-limit Amex Black Card, a Mercedes, a power cabana. She has *moi*. I don't get it either. Okay, she says she's mad because I've changed, and I guess to some extent I have.

The past few years haven't been pretty for me. As I mentioned, I run an Internet company, and if you'll permit a little egotism, it's quite a bit more than just some online flea market. I'm a dot-com wizard. At least that's what *Wired* magazine called me in an article on start-up phenoms that they wrote a few years ago.

My company's called bestmarket.com. A play on my name. What it is is an Internet sales site for CDs and DVDs. Order online and your friendly FedEx man will deliver the movie or music CD of your choice within twenty-four hours. I started this company in 1996 and for the first four or five years had the DVD-CD Internet field pretty much to myself. I was going strong when Amazon, Netflix, and about half a dozen other better-financed companies jumped on my idea. With all the competition, I've been getting pretty badly shredded for the past several years. My bankers have all grown dorsal fins.

The week before we left for Hawaii, I was hanging by a thread. Couldn't borrow any money, couldn't stock enough inventory. I subcontract my product from major studios and record companies. I used to get all my merchandise on consignment deals, but because of my money problems, the entertainment companies I was interfacing with all thought I was on the verge of going broke. They started refusing to let me sell their stuff on consignment, forcing me to buy the product, stock it, then mark it up for my service. Because of the current banking environment, the business was quickly strapped for cash, and soon we didn't have enough of what our online buyers wanted in stock. We ran a survey and found that if our customers couldn't get the titles they requested once or twice, even our preferred shoppers stopped hitting the website. That's my sad story.

So I was bleeding from the ears when we got to Hawaii, but my wife didn't give me a moment's rest. She's become the Queen of American Express. I'm afraid if I ever go to their national headquar-

ters in Fort Lauderdale, there'll be a marble statue of Evelyn out front, abs and delts flexed, Amex Black Card at port arms.

Anyway, that was our happy little family the day we hit the Four Seasons, December 26th, the day this all started.

I had just begun breakfast with Evelyn the morning after we arrived. We were in the open restaurant on the second level of the hotel. The palms swayed in a gentle breeze. Turquoise water glistened, the smell of tropical flowers wafted. You get the idea—Paradise. My wife was wearing a skimpy top with a see-through sarong tied around her butt-floss thong, giving the hotel guests and staff a great look at her buns of steel. Her abs were rippling, advertising hours of physical dedication. As we ate, Evelyn was analyzing the other female guests, criticizing their flabby waistlines.

“Lookit that cow. She should never wear a two-piece. Doesn't she own a mirror?”

I was nodding and trying to stay out of the line of fire. Evelyn's always on me about my body. Okay, I'll admit, I've picked up a pound or two, but I'm killing myself at bestmarket.com, and I'm still losing ground. I eat and drink a little more than I used to—so shoot me.

“You really oughta get into that weight room, Chick. I can have Mickey D set you up with a routine. He could fax it over here and we could get the guy in there to help you through it.”

I was back in the squirrel cage running for my life. Mickey D was Mickey DePolina, Evelyn's personal trainer. I loathe Mickey D. Here's the story on that guy: He shows up at our house every day at 5:30 P.M.

He used to be Mr. Burbank or Mr. Bell Gardens, I can't remember which—trapezius muscles that slope down his neck like a cobra's hood, abs and shoulders that won't quit, but with the IQ and vocabulary of a tractor salesman.

After he arrives, the two of them wide-arm their way down to the private gym I have in the basement and go at it. I use this term cautiously, because I think he's screwing her. It started while I was out of town doing the road show, trying to raise money to take bestmarket.com public. No proof. I don't have Polaroids or anything, just a guess. So far, I haven't said anything, but if you want the honest truth, I'm close to the end of my rope with this marriage. It was okay when the business was strong. I could hide out down at the office. People were kissing my ass. But now, with the company in shambles and money running low, I'm completely out of ass-kissers and feeling a whole lot less charitable. Why should I put up with this? But for some reason, I do. I keep my mouth shut. I soldier on.

After breakfast I decided to go down to the cabana and relieve my scowling daughter so she could go upstairs and do her morning line of blow. Just kidding.

I found her lying on the chair listening to her music. Another term I use cautiously. She's into some kind of alternative techno-synth that sounds to me like a guy squirming on a vinyl chair making balloon animals. But she's deep into this music, and to further piss me off, has started punching holes in her body. She has ten pierces. Her dedication to her new alternative lifestyle knows no limits. Over

the past eighteen months it has become almost impossible to get my daughter through an airport metal detector.

Melissa felt my shadow and looked up, her face wrinkling as if she just smelled something foul.

“Already?” she said. Sarcasm.

“Sorry. Your mother overslept.”

“Jesus. I hate Hawaii. I hate this fucking hotel, I hate these phony people, I hate coming down here at 4 fucking A.M. every morning.” Melissa, expressing herself. “What’s wrong with a regular pool chair, for God’s sake? What makes this dumb-ass tent so almighty fucking precious?”

“Your mother likes it . . . and stop swearing.”

I should add that Melissa has purple hair. It looks simply hideous. She’s got her mother’s killer body, but with fewer cuts because Mickey D hasn’t been able to convince her to start lifting yet. She’s round-faced but mean-looking. Her eyes never smile.

She swung off the chaise longue and gathered up her things.

She looked angry enough to break a window. She’s not above something like that, either. When she was ten, the first year we came here, she became enraged because we sent her to her room. She locked the door and threw golf balls at the guests from our seventh-floor balcony. They called us into the manager’s office and told us if we didn’t control her, we’d have to leave the hotel. Humiliating.

“Where are you going?” My version of parental concern.

“Gonna call Big Mac,” she snarled.

A word here about Big Mac. His name is Bud McKenna. He's about six-five, two-sixty, and is the current president of the Devil's Disciples, a Southern California motorcycle gang. This guy is her boyfriend in L.A., and he is way the hell too old for Melissa. He's in his mid-twenties and scares the hell out of me. I think Melissa picked him because she knew I would hate him on sight and wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. He's violent and unpredictable and has tattoos that threaten your life, like B2K, which means "born to kill," or D4H, which is "death for hire." The guy's a homicidal nutcase—an animal.

I believe that, like most of these bikers, he's in the crystal meth business. I can't prove it, but he is always taking her for rides on his Harley up Angeles Crest Highway. It's been in the papers that the sheriff was trying to catch a bunch of crystal cookers brewing blue meth and chicken powder in their double-wides parked up in the mountains. It didn't take Stephen Hawking to see the connection. I'd been watching Melissa, trying to spot any personality changes, which might occur if she switches from pot and coke to crystal meth. But since she only has two moods anyway—pissed-off and about-to-be-furious, it's hard to tell. Being the father of a sixteen-year-old is no damn fun.

Melissa turned a few heads as she did her purple-haired stripper walk around the pool and disappeared into the lobby.

After she was gone, I lay down on the cabana pool chair and tried to shake off my daily bout with lethargy. Over the past year lethargy has become a regular part of my mornings, right along with acid reflux and deep depression.

I looked out across the pool, and that's when I saw *her*. That's when this whole thing started. Her vibe shot across the expanse of pool decking and grass and grabbed me so hard that my body shook. I let out a lungful of air and made a gushing sigh. My stomach flopped and my fingers and toes started curling. It was that powerful, that visceral.

I know . . . I know. I can hear what you're thinking. You're thinking, bullshit. But unless you've actually experienced it, you couldn't possibly understand what I'm talking about.

When I saw her, even from twenty or thirty yards away—when I felt that metaphysical projection lodge in my heart like one of Cupid's arrows—I knew I would never be the same.

In that second, with that brief glance, my whole life changed at first sight.