

# The Eye Inside

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I

Amor E Morte

Murder is an inauspicious way to begin a love affair.

In the mayhem of a criminal investigation, distracted by the twists and turns of paths taken in pursuit of a serial murderer, surrounded by calculating competitors and angst-ridden friends, I almost missed it – love, that is.

I'm 43, and they call me Mach, although my real name is Marchesa Jesus Piazza. I'm a newspaper reporter, caught in the tides of change, like a bottle bobbing on the waves, tightly corked but with a powerful message inside. I used to be on the real estate beat at my New York City daily until real estate crashed. Now I cover murder investigations, mainly cold cases.

Cold cases, warm heart – that's me.

Funny thing about love, though. We spend our lives yearning for it before we find it, pining for it when we lose it, absorbed in it so we're distracted from all else. But once we have it, if we don't destroy it, how can we make it fit into the rest of our lives?

As I write this, sitting on top of the washing machine in the basement of my Manhattan co-op building – the only place these days where I can find any privacy – I ask you...what would you do in my sneakers? I guess I'd better start at the beginning, or else how can I expect you to understand?

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## II

### Playing Footsies

It started just after Christmas.

The Columbia University campus was closed for winter break. The university maintenance crews on holiday. Detective Emilio Urquia, Mil to me, and I trudged through knee-high, unplowed accumulations of snow as thick and dense as wet plaster. We followed in the boot holes left by the first responders.

There was a path leading from where the small crowd was gathered toward a faraway building that I could see had been roped off. The uniformed members of the NYPD and OCME, that is the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, stood in the frigid air looking like anxious ticket-holders in our theater district around Times Square.

A couple of slender crime scene techs erect as BiC pens in their blue uniforms, were surveying the area inside the ropes. I strained to make out what they were staring at.

“Looks like we got fresh prints,” Mil said.

“How can you tell from here? I can’t see a thing.”

“See those two crime lab techs inside the rope? The ones spraying wax in the snow? They’re our footprint specialists – they’ll analyze the imprints and tomorrow tell us more about the culprit than his own mother could. Height, weight, sex, socioeconomic status, and even the guy’s mood when he committed the crime. That’s one good thing about snow; couldn’t ask for a better print.”

My nose was so cold it felt as if it might fall off.

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“Could be sled tracks and reindeer hooves in this weather,” I said. I’m in good shape, but trudging through knee-high drifts was hard work. My hamstrings were killing me.

“Can’t you ever be serious?”

Mil was in a crappy mood.

“Did you know Santa is sexist?” I answered, seriously.

“Why? Does he pay his boy elves more than the girls?” Mil huffed. I watched as the steam surrounding his words eclipsed the puffs around mine.

“No. Fact is male reindeer shed their antlers in the fall and don’t grow them back until spring. While female reindeer’s antlers...”

“Female reindeer have antlers?”

“Indeed they do. As I was saying, female reindeer keep their antlers until the spring, when they give birth.”

“Your point being?” Mil asked.

“That Rudolph, Prancer, Blixen...the whole team was female. So Santa suffered from gender confusion or he’s a sexist.”

“This from a woman who calls her dog Kitty,” Mil scoffed.

The steps leading from College Walk to Low Library on the Columbia campus melded into one. A slope had formed, like a ski run. The streams of yellow and black police tape that formed a perimeter around the crime scene fluttered in the icy wind like impatient wasps.

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It was night. The first responders had erected spotlights on tripods. As Mil and I drew closer, we saw a cavernous hole melted in the glistening slope. In the hole was the naked body of a young woman, pale as alabaster, stretched like an X in the cavity. There was very little blood, only around her genitalia. Low Library loomed above us, a speechless overseer to the horrific crime that had been committed on its steps.

Mil flashed his badge at a uniformed officer. "Who reported the body?"

"Security guard." The officer nodded toward a distraught woman, bundled in official clothing, with tears streaming down her face.

"Security cameras pick up anything?" Mil asked.

"We got the tapes but the lenses were thick with snow," the officer was shaking his head. "I doubt it."

"Was she raped?" I asked. The officer referred me to the coroner. He was talking with an assistant M.E., according to the big white letters emblazoned on the back of her dark blue jacket. As I walked over to them, I noticed that the M.E. was a woman with striking, almost feral features: jet-black hair, a prominent forehead, extremely high cheekbones, sharp teeth, and predatory eyes.

"Excuse me," I said.

She turned and looked me up and down in my fur boots from Target, tartan tam-o'-shanter, fleece pants, wool mittens, and parka with a polar bears-frolicking-on-ice-floes print. "Who the fuck are you?" she asked. "This is a crime scene." Then to another uniform, "Get her outta here."

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As I was escorted to the sidelines by a hulky young cop who looked like he'd rather be anywhere but there, I saw Mil approach the statuesque M.E. to plead my case. What started out as a friendly discussion between the two of them ended in what resembled a cock fight with fingers pecking at each other and the crime-lab techs, uniformed cops, and EMTs circled around placing silent bets on their favorite to win.

Nothing more exciting than a cock fight, especially when one of the cocks is a hen.

"What did she say?" I asked Mil as he came to my side. I was standing on the side of the Admissions Building furthest from the scene, an irony not lost on me.

Mil was red in the face, his intense brown eyes filled with fury. As he hyperventilated, with his sinewy flushed neck expanding and contracting in angry syncopation, he looked more frigate bird than the threatening cock of moments before. "No reasoning with that bitch. I told her about your special status on the Task Force and she asked, 'What fool made that decision?' I told her, 'Your boss, Dr. Matthew Rowan.'"

Dr. Rowan was chief medical examiner and a pretty good guy. Whoever this newcomer was, I couldn't imagine her bucking Dr. Rowan.

"So what did she say?" I was fascinated by anyone who would stand up to Mil that way. I glanced at her directing the team, all of them men but her. She was about six feet tall, athletic-looking, maybe a body-builder, with huge thighs and an oversized rear end that stuck straight out over her long legs.

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I'm only five-eight (okay, okay five-seven, short brown hair, blue-green-gray eyes depending on my mood, more girl-next-door than tiger-in-the-woods (not *that* Tiger in the Woods). Physically, the only thing this Amazon and I had in common that I could see was long legs, but, based on her body language, we were both women who knew who we were and what we wanted.

"She said, 'You're lookin' at the boss of this crime scene, and I decide who comes and goes.' Then she started the finger-poking business," Mil continued.

"So, how did you resolve it?"

Mil shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't. She's the M.E. It's her crime scene until cause of death is determined."

"What's her name?" I asked, red notebook open to jot down the answer.

"Klandagi Moorison."

Once beyond the glow of the hastily erected spotlights, Mil and I trudged through the snow on the gated campus with only the moon as our guide. When we reached Broadway and 116<sup>th</sup> Street, the streetlamps glared, the sidewalks were cleared and the avenue had been plowed clean.

It was past the dinner hour by then, so Mil and I slipped into Ollie's, across from Columbia's main gates, for some cheap eats. We ordered two steaming bowls of Mandarin noodle soup, Mil's Shredded Pork & Salted Mustard Leaves and mine Mai Fun, which said a world about our respective personalities.

"What kind of name is Klandagi?" I asked, fiddling with my chopsticks. Never did get the knack of eating with wooden poles.

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"It's one of those My Ancestors Were Kings In Africa names."

"Queens," I corrected him.

"I don't know where she lives. Maybe."

"No...I meant My Ancestors Were *Queens* In Africa names. And that comment is sort of racist even without the sexist connotation."

The waiter brought our soups. I held my face over the steam to help it thaw and, just between you and me, for the free-facial effect. Does wonders for the pores.

"Whatever," Mil said. "The guys down at OCME say she's half American Indian."

"That's interesting. Now that you mention it, I can see it in her features. She's kind of an exotic beauty, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Like a crocodile." He looked at his watch again.

"Hot date?" I asked.

Mil squirmed in his seat. We had practically been glued together at the hip for four months, yet I knew so little about him. He was smart, good-looking in a macho sort of way, wiry and taut like a runner. Dark skin and sunken cheeks marred by the remnants of youthful acne. He wore a St. Michael's medal around his neck that lay prominently on the white T-shirt peeking out from underneath his sweater.

He gulped. "A meeting."

"At this hour?"

"You know...a meeting."

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After a second, I figured it out. Toward the end of our first case, Mil, whom I had never seen drink before, got as drunk as a frat boy while we were deep into a debriefing at the Broome Street Bar and told me he loved me while slathering my neck with wet kisses. I promised to forget about that night but, really, who could? Oh Christ! So I took him back to his place near The Cloisters in upper Manhattan and found a phone number for Sponsor in his wallet while looking for his address.

“You mean...”

“Yeah. There’s a good one near here at St. John the Divine on 110<sup>th</sup> Street,” Mil said.

On impulse, I asked: “Mind if I come?”

I’m a diet Coke girl myself, so I’d never had the need or opportunity to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I probably would’ve asked to go anyway just because I’m naturally curious. But, also, I felt that Mil and I would be connected for the foreseeable future and I wanted to know him, to be able to support him, Achilles heel and all.

Sure, I had witnessed his peculiar habits, God knows we all have those, such as betting his paycheck on the lottery or rubbing his hand over his face when he’s at his wit’s end. But I never got out of him the reasons why he did these things.

Men are so secretive; a woman would tell you her life story plus some after ten minutes and an opening.

A short walk later we were in front of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The massive church stood before us as if it had been transported from thirteenth-century



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France by a fleet of taxis. Its Gothic architecture and stone-on-stone construction is legendary in New York. Since any guidebook can tell you more than I, let's skip to the two reasons why yours truly has always meant to visit. I never thought it would take an AA meeting to actually get me there.

First, St. John's holds an annual Blessing of the Animals every October in honor of the patron saint of animals and birds, St. Francis of Assisi. Although I've never been, I understand it's a real hoot (and baah, oink, meow, etc.). My dog walker, Gloria Yap, goes every year with all her elderly and infirm charges. She told me they use Milkbone slivers for communion.

Sometimes I think the reason I gravitated away from my strict Catholic upbringing was because the Church teaches that animals have no souls. Anyone who has met my six-year-old Jack Russell terrier Kitty would know nothing is further from the truth.

Second, I've always wanted to see the Chapels of the Tongues, one for each of the seven largest ethnic groups, including my Italian ancestors. The recognition of our *mélange* of ethnicities puts St. John's in a class by itself in understanding what truly makes New York City, my adopted domicile, unique.

And, third, I love the Poet's Corner with its stone plaques inscribed with the names of American authors from Dickenson to Twain – all Gods to me.

"This way," Mil said, leading me down a flight of stairs. The snow had not been shoveled but was packed flat.

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We were in the basement, in a long windowless hall. The poor and homeless were huddled along the walls trying to keep warm. The soup kitchen had hung up its kettles for the night and the space had been converted to a meeting room, with chairs in a circle and a coffee urn and paper plate of Oreos on a table near the emergency exit. As we joined the group, a sad-looking man stood up from where he sat. He reminded me of the Straw Man from The Wizard of Oz.

“My name is Arthur and I’m an alcoholic,” he said.

A murmur swept through the circle as each member muttered: “Welcome, Arthur.”

“I have been sober for one year, nine months, and seven days.” The circle broke into applause. “Every day I want a drink. My wife still won’t let me see my daughter. She’s got a new boyfriend now. She wants a divorce.”

The word “sorry” snaked its way around the circle. It sounded like a hiss.

Next Mil stood.

“My name is Emilio, and I’m an alcoholic.”

I was beginning to get it. This was something akin to group confession.

“Six weeks ago, I slipped.”

More like crashed I thought.

“After ten years, I was sure I could handle one drink. Then one turned into six, and I made an ass of myself.”

Commiserating laughter from around the circle.

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Mil continued. "This addiction is a vortex. I started drinking heavily when my father got shot...no, no he's O.K. I mean he's a paraplegic, but alive. Then I stopped drinking the first time ten years ago, when..." he paused, looked at me, closed his eyes and said: "...I hit a kid with my car."

Oh Christ! Maybe I didn't want to be in this confessional. All heads were bobbing ... had they all run over kids?

"She was O.K. A few bruises and scrapes. I was only twenty-two, so her parents didn't press charges. But I realized how close I had come to ruining my life and that little girl's, how disappointed my parents would have been in me, so I stopped drinking." They all praised him, and then Mil sat down.

At the coffee break, I asked Mil if that's why he became a cop.

"It's complicated, Mach. I figured I should pay back because I was spared, yeah, but I also wanted to see crime from the inside, understand how a jerk like me gets off every time and a hard-working saint like my dad ends up in a wheelchair for the rest of his life."

During the second half of the meeting I sat through the stories of Mary, Saul, and Alex, living proof of Thoreau's observation that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them," all the while thinking about my friend and cohort Mil. I surmised that he had begun drinking out of guilt, because it wasn't the first time he had mentioned what had happened to his dad. Now I knew he'd stopped because he could've killed a child. But why he'd started again a few weeks before was still a mystery to me.

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We all stood, held hands, and those who knew them recited the 12 steps. It seemed like a lot of religious mumbo-jumbo to me, but I could see it gave order and hope to these self-professed sinners. It gave them a new lease on life – one day at a time. I was beginning to understand that some people’s cars had no brakes.

“Think the Amazon and her warriors are gone?” I asked as we emerged from the church onto a silent city street with cars embedded in banks formed by the snowplows. In a city where it costs more to garage a car than to eat, I understood the alternate side of the street parking parade, with auto owners rising at the crack of dawn to move their vehicles so the garbage trucks could get by. What I didn’t get was why people had cars in New York at all.

“I was wondering the same thing.” Mil slammed his open hand on the hood of an SUV.

“About the cars?”

“What cars? About Klandagi and her crew.”

So despite the late hour, we returned to the scene of the crime.

A lone officer, obviously a rookie judging from the peach fuzz on his face, guarded the crime scene. Looking half frozen, he stiffly waved us in when he saw Mil’s badge. The body had been removed, probably taken to OCME’s Forensics Garage on 26<sup>th</sup> Street for the autopsy. I pulled out my trusty Nikon, nicknamed Tonto by Mil during our last case because she never left my side, and started taking flash pictures of everything in sight.

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"Are those what I think they are?" I asked Mil. We were standing side by side outside the rope.

He squatted down to get a closer look. "Yup. Paw prints. Big ones, too. What do you think?"

I joined him close to the ground by squatting on my haunches. "Great Dane, maybe," although to me there is only one great Dane and that's Hamlet. I took a series of pictures of the prints. "I'll show the photos to Gloria. I'm sure she'll know."

"Gloria your dog walker?"

"Yup. Nothing about canine's she can't tell you."

"If only the human species were as understandable." He sighed, then said, "There's something missing."

"You mean the body?"

Mil rolled his eyes. "Mach, do you see any human prints?"

I looked carefully. There were dozens of boot and shoe prints outside the crime scene perimeter and around the body, but none near the dog prints, which seemed to lead all the way to where the corpse was found from the direction of a building that I later learned was the Columbia University School of Architecture to just behind Low Library. "Are you suggesting the murderer is canine?" A chill crept up my spine. A wolfman, perhaps? There was a full moon...

"That's preposterous, of course. Dogs don't commit murders."

"In mere size and strength it was a terrible creature which was lying stretched before us..." I quoted.

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“Shakespeare?” asked Mil. As smart as Mil was, a crack chess player too, I wouldn’t say he was particularly well read. But he had detected my penchant for the Bard.

“Nope. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It’s from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.”

“Sorry, Sherlock. It’s a human who committed this murder, and the three back a few years ago.”

“You think they’re connected?”

Mil rubbed his face with an ungloved hand. “Looks like the same M.O. What I can’t figure out is how he approaches his victims. Maybe he levitates?”

“There’s a Transcendental Meditation Center on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Should we check it out?”

“I was kidding. But, yeah, maybe we should. Nothing else comes to mind.” He yawned so widely I could see his uvula even in the near dark. “Let’s make a plan in the morning. Long day.”

Mil and I walked a bit and then parted where he’d left his car. He offered me a lift, but I wanted to walk to where I lived on West End and 76<sup>th</sup> Street. As I did, I sang old Frank Sinatra songs at the top of my lungs so that to passersby I must have seemed to be a drunk myself. I didn’t care a whit. First of all, I love Frankie; second, when I go to my grave I intend for there not to be a single song left in me.

Maybe I’ll even have them engrave on my headstone: She Did It Her Way.

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## III

### Cat Rhymes With Rat

I set my alarm for six a.m. with the best of intentions. My plan was to put in some time on the elliptical at the gym before heading to the office. Instead, I smothered the clock radio with a pillow, pulled Kitty's furry body closer to mine for warmth, and went back to sleep.

An hour later my editor, Scott Screen, called and woke me from a deep sleep, asking if I could meet him at the office. The urgency in his voice signaled trouble, and my curiosity was piqued.

Kitty stood up on the bed and stretched. Then she cocked her head to the left in that inquisitive way as if to ask: "What's for breakfast?" She followed me into the kitchen, where I drank my coffee and cooked some oatmeal. Kitty used to love oatmeal with raisins and walnuts before I found out from Gloria that raisins can kill dogs. All my life I had fed raisins to my dogs, but, then again, no one ever died from eating peanut butter when I was a kid either.

I browsed through the news headlines on my laptop. Even I, news junkie that I am, had dropped my subscription to the *New York Times*, although doing so made me feel like Benedict Arnold. It was all those jump pages and inky fingers that drove me to it.

And right there, in...can't really call it black and white any more, can we?...digital code was a headline about the infamous Eric "Tai-Pan" Rathbourne's interest in taking over our paper and merging it with his own, *The New York Leader*. I didn't know Eric Rathbourne personally, but the Hong Kong-based media billionaire was as close to a

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pirate as one could get. Once he snuck his way onto your ship, he was notorious for tossing the crew overboard and selling off the cargo, which in our case consisted of our proprietary copyrighted content and our gorgeous art-deco building off Times Square.

Eric Rathbourne had built a global empire that stretched from Hong Kong to Helsinki using this brazen technique. They didn't call him "Tai-Pan," Chinese for Big Shot, for nothing.

Poor Scott looked worse than I'd ever seen him. That lanky body looked limp, that aristocratic face a mask of worry. There were dark circles under his eyes and worry in them visible especially to someone who knew him as well as I did.

"I saw the news this morning," I said to Scott. He was waiting for me at the elevator when I arrived.

"Let's go to the cafeteria, Mach. Have you eaten?"

I had. But oatmeal never did it for me (especially without the raisins), so I let Scott buy me a blueberry muffin and a latte extra foam. "So, are we under attack? Do you think he'll win? Will there be a proxy fight? Will you jump ship?"

I saw him crack a smile. It was like a ray of sunshine in an otherwise overcast sky.

"Slow down. I really can't discuss the takeover threat with you. It's confidential."

"But..."

"I know. It's all over the news. That's Tai-Pan's style. Exert pressure from within by making promises to shareholders. Then squeeze from without by spreading rumors to the public. Suffice it to say, we're dealing with it." He leaned over and wiped my lip. "You have a milk moustache," he said.



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“So if you can’t talk, why’d you get me here so early?” Based on Scott’s history of protecting me (he had saved my job not once but twice!), it crossed my mind that he might be giving me an early warning to start hunting for a new one. Or, in my recently acquired role as investigator extraordinaire, maybe I was going to be deployed to dig up some dirt on Tai-Pan that would send him and the ship he sailed in on back to Hong Kong with its anchor between its jets.

“Lisa.” Scott let out a moan.

“Your sister Lisa?” Now, I’d know Scott for a long time, including when we were lovers back in another life, and his sister Lisa was no fan of mine. Truth be told, she didn’t think I was good enough for her Park Avenue raised, Buckley and Amherst educated brother.

“The one and only. She wants to move in to my place with my nephew and niece.”

“What happened to the house in Scarsdale?”

“They lost it. And all their savings too. I had no idea they had put their money in a feeder fund of Bidwell’s.”

Truman Bidwell, that nefarious Ponzi-schemer who had left New York reeling, seemed to have tentacles that reached even further than I thought.

“Is Rob moving in too?”

“That’s the thing, Mach. With all this financial pressure, they’re getting divorced. You know Lisa. I love her, Mach; she’s my sister, but she’s a vacuum cleaner, sucks up everything in her path. I’ll have to give her my bedroom and the kids the spare. Good thing my sofa’s a pull-out.”

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“Oh Christ, Scott. I’m sorry. For her and for you.”

A sardonic snort punctuated his comments. “She asked what day the maid is off and if the building has an arrangement with a nearby garage for her Benz. She’s submitted applications for fall transfer from the Hackley School in Tarrytown to Trinity on 89<sup>th</sup> Street with absolutely no idea how to pay for it, so I naturally stepped up to the responsibility and offered but then she mentioned the piano lessons and ice-skating and the orthodontist and psychiatrist...”

“They go to a psychiatrist?”

“Lisa says it’s to help them cope with the divorce.” He put his face in his hands and sighed. When he looked up he said, “What should I do, Mach?”

Considering that I have absolutely no living relatives, except Kitty, I weighed my words carefully before offering advice. “What can you do, Scott? They’re your family.”

Another sigh was his only response.

Back at my desk, I typed “Eric Rathbourne” into my computer. The morgue, a newspaper’s repository of already-run stories, returned 82 hits. Some of the clips went back as far as ten years and mostly reported successful takeovers of media properties, some friendly and some not. I stared at the photo of the man called Tai-Pan. Aquiline nose, longish gray, wavy hair worn in a slicked-back style, small dark eyes filled with mischief.

I read on. Tai-Pan was on his third wife, the Eurasian actress Kiki Wong. They lived on The Peak overlooking downtown Hong Kong and Victoria Harbor. I Googled the couple and started to read about the parties the two attended on several continents and

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wondered if they ever slept. They had been founding members of Elite World, a sort of Facebook for billionaires. Only by private invitation from a founder could one join.

Around ten, Mil called.

"The victim was from San Diego. Caitlin Rogers. Twenty-three last week, solid student, studying to be a teacher. Special ed," Mil said. His voice quivered a little.

"Have you notified the parents?"

"Yeah. They're on their way."

I closed my eyes and felt my mouth go dry. You didn't have to have kids to imagine how horrible it would be to lose one. "Does the pattern follow the serial guy – what was he called?"

"The Third Eyelid killer."

I paused. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"Something to do with dogs. Those crime scenes were covered in paw prints and devoid of the human variety. And the killer sent a series of notes to the investigators. The media got a hold of the first note, the one that had a picture of a dog's eye in it. One of the network anchors called the murderer The Third Eyelid killer because of that photo and, what can I say, it stuck. Anyway, to answer your question, so far we think it's him. Autopsy's scheduled for an hour from now..."

"Don't you wait until her parents arrive?" The thought of Caitlin Rogers's parents seeing their daughter for the last time sliced up like a Christmas ham repulsed me and nearly brought me to tears.

"Can't wait, Mach. Decomposition...time is of the essence."

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“Mil...?”

“No. You can’t watch. So don’t ask. But come down later. We’ll go over the results.”

Rebuffed, I returned to my vicarious globe-trotting. Eric and Kiki at the Orchid Ball at New York’s Botanical Garden, the Opera Ball in Vienna, the April Ball in Paris, the Regatta Ball in Hong Kong, the Imperial Ball in St. Petersburg. Kiki was shown in sleek, glamorous dresses by what I was sure were famous designers and Eric in well-cut tuxedos and his trademark studs with Chinese characters. I read that those same characters formed his corporate logo, were embroidered on the cuffs of his dress shirts, and served as the sole self-identifier on his larger than standard vellum business cards.

In one of the articles, from *The Tattler*, a British society magazine, a reporter asked him what the omnipresent characters meant.

“They represent the Chinese number forty-four,” he said.

“Isn’t double-four the unluckiest of Chinese numbers?” the reporter asked in the interview. “Doesn’t it signify death?”

“Think of it as a skull and crossbones,” he replied. “A warning.”

Kiki was a full head taller than her husband so I searched through the photo gallery to see if she was wearing heels in all the pictures. I finally found a photo of the two of them at a garden party on the Spanish island of Ibiza, where she wore a short dress and he had on Bermudas. Kiki still towered over her husband despite her flat sandals and his now-visible shoes with their platforms and heels. His knees were as gnarly as the branch joints of a corkscrew willow tree.

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The newsroom started to empty out for lunch, and I noticed Scott standing as taut as a bow about to shoot. He had one hand on his hip and the other held his cell phone to his ear. From the expression on his face, I could see he was arguing with the person on the other end of the line.

I knew that out of courtesy to the family of the deceased no news would be released about Caitlin Rogers until her family arrived. That gave me about four and a half hours before deadline to pull together my story about the murder. Mil didn't answer his phone, so I collected the tools of my trade – red notebooks, number two pencils, Tonto – and stopped by Scott's desk on my way out. He was off the phone.

"You O.K.?" I asked, putting my hand on his shoulder.

"That was Lisa calling from Bergdorf's. She wanted to know if I could drive to Tarrytown and pick Bobby and Jane up from school."

I knew Bobby and Jane were Lisa's and Rob's kids. "In the middle of the afternoon? Just before deadline?"

"She's clueless..."

"Did something urgent come up?" I asked. What did I know about divorces? Could be a court hearing about custody or a deposition...

"Veronica could fit her in for an eyebrow wax at three," he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

The population that rides the subway in New York midday is as different from the commuter crowd as a petting farm is from a zoo. There are toddlers and nannies, old

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ladies with plastic rain bonnets and rubber boots, housewives (should I call them apartmentwives?) who disembark en masse at the Daffy's exit at Herald Square. The doors stay open a little longer for the strollers and small-steppers. And the few men aboard still offer their seats to pregnant women and the blind.

I got to security at One Police Plaza near City Hall and swiped my Access ID card. It was declined. The guards held me in their view while they continued to check purses and briefcases. I called Mil.

"Urquia."

"Mil. I'm here. But my card doesn't seem to be working."

"Yeah. It's been revoked." He sounded sheepish. "I'll be right down to sign you in."

When Mil and I entered the conference room on 9-S, the meeting about the Caitlin Rogers autopsy had already begun. Dr. Rowan, C.M.E., was there, as were Jason Pedergast and Francesca Diggs, whom I recognized as the footprint specialists from the crime scene. The Amazon was there, along with a new team member I had never seen before. Dr. Rowan nodded at me and motioned for me to sit at the table. The lights were dimmed, and the imposing figure of Dr. Klandagi Moorison, stationed at the front of the room, picked up where she had left off talking about the gruesome autopsy photos projecting from her laptop to a screen on the wall. When she saw me her head snapped with such force I was surprised she didn't suffer whiplash.

Clearing her throat, she continued: "As I was saying, we began with the standard external examination..."

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On the screen before me, in full color and hi-res, was the opalescent body of Caitlin Rogers, enlarged to show the section starting from her skull and ending at her waist. A blood-encrusted elongated V incision stretched from both shoulders to the point where the photo was cut off. It had been stitched by someone whose sewing skills resembled those of Dr. Frankenstein. I couldn't help but cross myself, lapsed Catholic or not; at least the familiar motion distracted me from the bile rising in my throat.

"Caitlin Rogers weighed a hundred twenty-two pounds and measured five feet, ten inches tall. She had a strawberry mole on her left breast, a quarter-inch scar on her right knee, and a tattoo on her coccyx," Dr. Moorison continued.

In quick succession, Klandagi Moorison clicked a handheld remote that rotated small inset photos of the mole, scar, and tattoo over the milky body of Caitlin Rogers.

"Hold it!" I said, saving the tattoo from dematerializing as its predecessor images just had. Klandagi glared at me. "What does it say?"

"It says Dave," said Dr. Rowan, who sat closest to the screen. "And that's a heart next to it."

Oh Christ! Caitlin was or had been in love.

While I was musing if I could ever be in love enough to permanently mar my body with someone else's name, the newcomer spoke. He sounded like Hugh Grant but was much more my type, manly not boyish, somewhere between 55 and 60, sort of a British Jeff Bridges. He was an inch, perhaps two, over six feet, powerfully built, and he commanded the room with the relaxed posture of a man who knows who he is. The way he looked when he spoke, with an intense stare, made me think of two headlights

## The Eye Inside

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in the dark. His longish, wavy hair was unkempt with the greatest of care, and he had one of those beards that is perfectly trimmed to always look four days old. How do they do that anyway?

“Might we be looking for a Dave then?” he asked.

“A depraved Dave,” Mil quipped.

I laughed, not because I thought it was funny but because no one else did. Then I stood up and thrust my hand across the table to Mr. Looks Like Jeff Bridges Sounds Like Hugh Grant. “Hi. I’m Marchesa Piazza. My friends call me Mach.”

As he clasped my hand, I felt long cool fingers. He held on just firmly enough to engage but not control. I could get free, not easily but I could...if I had wanted to.

“Ah yes, I’ve heard about you, Mach.” The way he said my name it sounded like Mock. Glancing first at Klandagi, then back at me, he added: “But I never believe anything I hear. I prefer to make my own assessments.”

“Dr. Rodney Hargrave, meet M. Jesus Piazza,” said Dr. Rowan, formalizing the introduction. “Dr. Hargrave is a consulting forensic psychiatrist and renowned cryptologist with an exclusive contract with the FBI. Quantico agreed to lend him to us for this case. Not often we get another crack at a serial killer.”

“Not a better profiler in the country,” chimed in Klandagi. I could tell she’d been eager for an opening to get her voice on the table.

Rodney turned his handsome face sideways to show off his profiling capabilities and winked. He was still holding my hand.



## The Eye Inside

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“And Mach here is...” There was an awkward silence as Dr. Rowan searched for the right words to define me. “...well, special. She is a reporter for one of our top newspapers in the city who started out last year helping us when we launched the Special Task Force on Unsolved Crimes led by Detective Urquia and ended up solving a high-visibility case that had stumped the best of us. You can trust her.”

I couldn't help but gloat a little. The Special Task Force is charged with solving a backload of cold cases so large that I'd venture to say even Birds Eye's freezers couldn't accommodate them. With a little luck and the inadvertent help of my dog walker, Gloria Yap, I figured out how one of New York's best-known real estate developers offed his wife. (Would that make her offal?)

“May I continue?” Klandagi inquired.

“Please,” said Dr. Rowan.

“There was one jarring finding in the external examination that I will save for last because it matches the physical evidence of the first three Third Eyelid murders and seems to tie this victim to the others.”

Rodney Hargrave sat down and slipped a pair of spectacles on his nose. Then he jotted a few words on a yellow legal pad.

Klandagi continued: “We removed the ribcage to examine the trachea, thyroid and parathyroid glands, esophagus, heart, thoracic aorta, and lungs. Then the intestines, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, spleen, and reproductive organs.”

“Did you find any abnormalities?” asked Dr. Rowan.

## The Eye Inside

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"The victim was as strong as an ox. All organs were perfect. But..." We were all waiting for her to finish her sentence, and I couldn't help but note that she left us hanging for effect. "...Caitlin Rogers was twelve weeks pregnant when she died, making this officially a treble homicide."

"Treble?" I asked.

"She was pregnant with twins," Klandagi explained.

A gasp made its way around the room. Francesca Diggs let out a small "Oh."

"Could our serial killer have known Caitlin was pregnant?" Mil asked. "Could be a motive if he did."

"Probably not. The killer's M.O. seems to be to choose his victims at random," said Klandagi. "That would make the triple murder just an unfortunate coincidence."

"Was there any semen at the scene?" Mil asked.

"I was just getting to that. The rape kit showed that the victim had sexual intercourse within two hours preceding her death. We sent the sample in for DNA analysis. We also sent some fetal tissue in for analysis."

"So the DNA in the semen sample could lead us either to the serial killer or to Dave," Mil said.

"Or to someone completely different," I suggested.

"Or to no one at all," Rodney reminded us. "I propose we suspend speculation until we've collected the evidence. Were there other pertinent findings? What had she eaten for dinner?"

We all looked at him quizzically.

## The Eye Inside

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"If she dined out prior to engaging in coitus, and what she ate leads us to a local restaurant or pub, we might be able to get some leads on who she was with," Rodney explained.

Sounded logical to me.

"The only contents of her stomach were milk and chocolate chip cookies," said Klandagi.

"Were there any abrasions on her buttocks or thighs?" Rodney asked.

"No, why?" Klandagi responded.

"If she was raped by the perpetrator then we would see some evidence of force. On the other hand, if she had engaged in consensual intercourse it would have most likely taken place on a bed. But where is that bed? Who owns it?" Rodney said. "To let the brain work without sufficient material is like racing an engine."

That sounded familiar somehow. While I was racking my brain to remember where I had heard those words, Rodney concluded by saying: "It racks itself to pieces."

"*The Devil's Foot!*" I shouted out in my megaphone voice that had earned me the nickname Mach.

While Drs. Rowan and Moorison, Mil, and the two footprint specialists looked on in befuddlement, Rodney said: "Very good, Mach. I am happy to see we have another Holmes fan in the group."

"What is this, English Lit 101?" Klandagi asked, clearly irked.

## The Eye Inside

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“Pardon the digression, Klandagi. Please go on with your presentation,” Rodney smiled at her, then winked at me...again. Those blue eyes twinkled with such ferocity it was more a twink than a wink.

Dr. Moorison gave her remote one final click. On the screen was a close-up photo of the other half of Caitlin Rogers’s body, laid out on a steel table. We all stared, aghast.

“For Chrissake!” Mil said. “She’s been scalped.”

The only one not visibly affected was Klandagi. “In autopsy, we determined that a #4 scalpel was used to cut a two-inch square portion of flesh and hair from the victim’s pubis. This is consistent with the three former victims of the Third Eyelid murderer.”

Dr. Rowan asked Rodney if this constituted a “trophy.”

“Very likely,” Rodney replied. “But impossible to conclude until we understand more about his modus operandi. Who is this murderer and what makes him tick?”

“Excuse me,” said Francesca Diggs, meekly raising her hand. The footprint experts had sat in near silence until then. “Jason and I examined the paw prints and have discovered what we think may be...” She looked at Rodney. “... pertinent.”

Jason jumped in: “Yes. The canine accomplice seemed to have stepped in a rubber substance prior to walking with the killer to the scene. We are trying to trace its origin now.”

## The Eye Inside

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“And the size of the prints would indicate a giant breed, say a mastiff or Rottweiler, but the depth of the paw prints confirms a weight of a miniature poodle or schnauzer variety,” added Francesca.

“Which methodology did you employ to establish these contradictory facts?” asked Dr. Rowen.

“The usual,” Jason stated. “We measured the distance between paw prints, which gave us the stride or height of the animal to be five foot two. Then we crosschecked using the Moresco method by measuring the depth of the print, multiplying by the height and then applying Moresco’s algorithm to arrive at a weight of twelve point six pounds.”

Rodney laughed. A deep, warm chuckle. “I should like to get a look at that creature.”

“There must be something wrong in your math,” Klandagi said.

“We checked it dozens of times,” said Francesca.

“Is that inconsistency in line with the previous murders?” I asked.

“We haven’t gotten those files yet,” said Jason. “Once we do, we will compare the old paw prints with the new ones.”

“One more thing,” Francesca said. “While it appears that no human walked there, we found remnants of fresh footprints under the snow, but they are useless to us for identification purposes. Whoever left those footprints employed an obscure Cherokee technique for hiding tracks that makes them all but disappear. It was used extensively in the southeastern United States in the late eighteenth century by the local

## The Eye Inside

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Indians so they could ambush early settlers. Maybe there's a connection with the, er, scalping?"

Mil rubbed his hand over his face. "So I'm totally confused. Are we looking for Dave or a serial killer or a medical doctor or an Indian chief?"

"Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth," said Rodney Hargrave.

"Holmes again!" I declared. "*The Sign of the Four!*"

"Right you are," Rodney replied.

Once Rodney and the two boot/foot/paw print experts filed out of the room, Klandagi dropped her professional pose. "Matthew, I would never challenge your judgment, you know that, but have you considered the repercussions of allowing a reporter to join our team?"

"Of course I have. Mach has proven her mettle and her trustworthiness. Plus, not to appear mercenary, but thanks to her excellent coverage of our efforts we've raised over thirty-seven million dollars from private contributions toward our budget shortfall. In a manner of speaking, she paid your salary this year."

I don't know about you, but I feel really uncomfortable when people talk about me as if I'm not sitting right there.

"Klandagi, I felt the same way about Mach in the beginning..." Mil started to say.

## The Eye Inside

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“Oh, shut up,” Klandagi said, this time pointing her finger at Mil as one would a dart at a board.

I watched the heat rise from somewhere under Mil’s collar all the way to the roots of his wiry hair. I thought he would spit.

“That’s enough, Klandagi,” said Dr. Rowan, the way a doting father might reprimand a rambunctious five-year-old. “We have entirely too much work to do here to act like children. Mach stays on the team, but...” We all waited on his words like preschoolers hoping the teacher would announce recess. “Klandagi is in charge. I’m too overwhelmed with management and fund-raising responsibilities. I appoint her as my proxy on this case.”

Mil was about to protest when Klandagi touched Dr. Rowan’s hand in such an intimate way, a subtle caress more than a tap of concurrence, that Mil and I exchanged a glance.

“Of course, Matthew. Whatever you say,” Klandagi purred.

“Good. I leave you all to your own devices then.” Dr. Rowan stood and left.

Klandagi resumed the meeting in a no-nonsense tone. “Let’s get the ground rules straight, people: Everything gets cleared through me. The team meets every day at ten a.m. in this room for updates and strategy planning. I want everything in writing. Don’t bother copying Matthew; he’s too busy. I will keep him abreast. Urquia, you be our interface with the NYPD; Dr. Hargrave will be our link to FBI resources – I’ll send him an email to that effect – and I’ll manage not only this team but all departments here at OCME deployed on this case.”

## The Eye Inside

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"And what will my role be?" I asked.

"Stay outta my way," she replied.

"I don't know who's getting fucked more here, but I'd bet my Powerball ticket it's Dr. Rowan," Mil said once we reached his office and he closed the door. It was the first time I had visited OCME since our last case closed, and I noted that Mil had gotten an upgrade from a cubicle to an office.

"You don't know that," I said, although I suspected the same. No matter how hard colleagues may try to hide an inter-office romance, everybody knows. All it takes is a furtive glance, a slip of a smile, an eager laugh, an intimate touch. Love is as hard to hide as a sunburn. I should know; after all, Scott and I tried to hide our affair for two years, only to find out after we broke up that there had been an office pool on when we would marry.

Mil offered me some chewing gum, which I declined. He arranged the Chiclets so they formed a fortress.

"Ever had a tryst at the office, Mil?" I asked.

He studied me. "Is no territory taboo for you?"

"Just that we've spent so much time together and not a peep about your female companions."

Silence.

"Oh Christ, Mil. How presumptuous of me. Are you...?"



## The Eye Inside

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“No, Mach. I’m not gay. Just...private. And, have you forgotten our little scene in the Broome Street Bar?”

No, I hadn’t. “Yup. Just like it never happened.”

“Well, to answer your question...we have to take this seminar given by the HR department once a year. It’s on the dangers of sexual harassment in the workplace. What a joke – can’t even comment on an opposite sex co-worker’s haircut. So, no...no office romances for me.”

“Well. I had a two-year affair with Scott.”

“Your boss? The Dude with those cucumber bands?”

“They’re called cummerbunds...” Scott attended all the society soirees in New York on behalf of the paper and became known about town for the cummerbunds he wore to accent his tux. He even had one with crosses for funerals. “Yeah. You know, it was awkward for a while, but now we’re best friends.”

“Are you telling me this so I’ll share the details of my very boring love life with you?”

“Not really – though if you feel like talking, I’ll listen.” I remembered all the years since my affair with Scott ended. And some of my other past boyfriends too, all of whom I’ve still stayed friends with and most of whom I’d do anything for. “It’s just that if you’re right about Dr. Rowan and Klandagi – whether they are in a relationship or it’s over – we will always be outside the glow. I’m not talking about tacky one-night stands after the office Christmas party, but if those two have ever been in love, the coals burn eternal long after the fire goes out.”

## The Eye Inside

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“That’s you, Mach. Your motives are pure. Not sure about Klandagi—Matthew might be nothing more than a rung on her ladder.”

“Maybe. But a good rung grips.” I had detected tenderness, not tawdriness, between the two. “Aren’t you still friends with at least some of your exes?”

While he was thinking, Mil took a ruler and flicked it with his finger in such a way that his Chiclet fortress blew apart as if it had been hit by a cannonball. “In my case, a third party always interferes—booze. If I date someone who drinks, she becomes my enabler. If I date someone who doesn’t, she becomes my mother. I can’t win.”

Knowing I had led Mil down this path, I figured I’d better shift course before he got caught in the brambles. “I’ve got an idea! Let’s coordinate our efforts off-line, so when we walk into those daily meetings we can impress Klandagi with our findings. You present them, I’ll stay mute.” Mil looked skeptical. “What? You don’t think that will work?”

“No. I don’t think you can stay mute.”

“Think of it as a game of bridge—you play the hand, I’ll be the dummy, but I’ll arm you with signals before you start.”

“Just wish we didn’t have to play these games,” Mil said.

“Me too. You’ve heard of corporate politics; just think of this as corpus delecti politics.”

“What about Dr. Rodney Hargrave?” Mil asked.

“For now, let’s think of him as a wild card.”

## The Eye Inside

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Mil and I laid out the cards we had been dealt thus far on his desk. Atop the victim column: Caitlin Rogers. The only photo we had of her face was cropped from her autopsy pictures. Her skin was so clear and thin that tiny blue veins were visible on her closed eyelids.

Under Caitlin's photo, Mil had written on an index card the names of the three young murdered women attributed to the Third Eyelid Killer, all of whose cases had gone cold.

Mil handed me a stack of index cards and a Sharpie pen. "For the suspects," he said. On the first card I wrote Suspects and placed it at the head of a new column. Then I wrote "Dave," with a heart, on a second card and placed it beneath the first.

"Now what?" I said.

"How about the Third Eyelid murderer?" Mil suggested.

I hesitated before I wrote. "Doesn't that strike you as a ridiculous name?"

Mil yawned. It was getting late. "Not as ridiculous as Dr. Rodney Hargrave," Mil said. "Think I'll call him B-Rod."

I liked the name Dr. Rodney Hargrave. It connoted seriousness and import. Granted, it had a distinctly British flavor to it and sounded better in the continental accent than the more familiar New Yawk – kind of like smoked salmon vs. lox. "B-Rod?" I asked.

"Yeah, you know – A-Rod is Alex Rodrigues, the famous New York Yankees third-baseman..."

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Oh Christ! What is it with these New Yorkers and their baseball? “Mil, I don’t even think they play baseball in England...”

“Yeah, they call it cricket there – CRICKET! After a jumping cockroach. Can you imagine?”

“So? What’s an intelligent, charming psychiatrist from a cricket-playing country have to do with baseball?”

Then he smiled at me. “I’m just wondering what base he’ll get to with you.”

# The Eye Inside

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## IV

### The Nictitating Membrane

When I got home to my townhouse co-op on West End Avenue, Gloria Yap had just returned with Kitty. Gloria was filling out the specifics on her preprinted *Daily Poop Report*, which included details only a master would want to know. Gloria had plugged the hole (in a manner of speaking) in our last case, helping Mil and me solve it.

“Hey, Gloria, can you sit a spell for a drink?” Since I hadn’t seen any dogs tied up to mail boxes or No Parking signs outside my building, I figured Kitty was her last walk of the day.

“Sure. I’ll have bowl of water; I’m dying of thirst.”

Gloria Yap is a petite Korean-American whose life revolves around the dogs she cares for. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she suffered a bite from a rabid human when she was a child because her preference for canine company borders on the extreme.

“Gloria, ever hear of a third eyelid on dogs?”

“The nictitating membrane? Hasn’t everyone?”

Kitty climbed up on the sofa next to Gloria, settled her head in Gloria’s lap, and fell asleep. I felt pangs of jealousy akin to those I heard mothers feel toward the nannies who care for their kids. “Nictating?” I asked. “Rhymes with dictating?”

“No. Nic-tit-at-ing. It’s inside eyelid. See-through. Not so common seen in dogs any more. Mostly wild animals, wolves, birds.”

“What’s its purpose?” I asked, moving Kitty from Gloria’s side to my own.

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“Many purpose— depends. Hawks and eagles close it so chicks don’t poke out eyes when feed them; sharks protect eyes from bone and flesh when attack prey; polar bears eyelid keep safe from snow blindness, camels sand blindness; woodpeckers it keep eyeballs from popping out from force of beaks hitting against wood...”

I held up my hand! “O.K., O.K. I get the idea. And in dogs?”

“Canines in wild sleep with only third eyelid closed. That way detect movement, of predator, or prey.” She leaned over and gently pulled back Kitty’s closed lid. And there it was, the third eyelid. “Why so interest in this all sudden?”

So I told her about the case and that a serial killer nick(titatingly)-named the Third Eyelid murderer might be back for reruns. “I hate when I don’t know exactly what something means.” I grabbed Tonto off the side table and showed Gloria the numerous photos I had taken of paw prints in the snow. “What do you think? Great Dane?”

Gloria studied the prints for a long time. She flipped backward and forward through the different views I had captured with my lens. “Must be half-breed. Never saw these type prints on any pure-bred before. Besides, prints tampered with.”

“How do you mean?”

“Too perfect. Most dogs have cracks in pads, fur in between. These are too clean. Either this dog has own groomer or anatomically altered.”

Remembering what the print pros reported, I asked, “Gloria, is there any reason a master might dip his pet’s paws in rubber?”

## The Eye Inside

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“None that I can think of off-hand. But sell all kinds of dog boots and shoes now. Maybe paws picked up rubber that way?”

“Hmmm. Good lead. If it doesn’t pan out, can you think of any place a dog might step in molten rubber? A tire factory?”

“In New York?” Gloria asked. “More like taxi garage.”

The phone rang. It was Mil. “I got clearance to discuss the Third Eyelid...”

“You mean nictitating membrane,” I corrected him.

“Nick da-who?” he asked. “What are you talking about, Mach?”

“The Third Eyelid is actually a nictitating membrane. It allows an animal to see through it. It’s like the eye inside is...I dunno...behind a glass wall.”

“Well, I got the original case files. Wasn’t easy – any case that can cause public hysteria is the equivalent of Top Secret. Had to go up the ranks.” He paused as if waiting for me to be impressed. “You wanna talk about it or not?”

“When?”

“I was actually gonna ask you if I could stop by now. We can look over the file together to finish prepping before the morning meeting with Klandagi.”

I covered the receiver with my hand. “Can you stay for dinner?” I whispered to Gloria. “We could really use your help on this dog stuff.” She wagged her head to indicate she could.

“Gloria’s here, Mil. Come over. I’ll order in.”

Gloria and Mil knew each other from our last case. In her job as dog walker to the well-heeled, – the masters I mean, not their dogs – she provided invaluable insight into the

## The Eye Inside

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goings-on in the fancy condo building where the murder took place. She walked the walks and talked the talks or, more specifically, reported to us the conversations she had overheard.

When Mil arrived we perused the 30 or so takeout menus in my collection, from Thai Market to Talia's Kosher Steakhouse. It took longer than you'd expect because Mil is a meat and potatoes guy, I wanted ethnic, and Gloria doesn't eat meat. Only Kitty was flexible. Finally, we settled on the Greek coffee shop around the corner; its menu was a mile long and everything was cheap.

Mil spread out the file he'd brought on the dining room table while we waited for the food. We charted a timeline, starting when the multiple murders occurred and ending on the date we found Caitlin Roger's body in the snow. We began to review each murder carefully, intending to make a chart of every detail, looking for overlap and clues, when we came across a transcript from a FOX news report that had aired at the time. It was Michelle Santiago, an ambitious crime reporter with big hair who gravitated toward sensationalism the way a metal detector does toward loose change through a subway grate. It was Michelle who had coined the name Third Eyelid Murders.

"Do you have the note that spawned that eponym?" I asked.

Mil broke the seal on an envelope in the file. He pulled out the following picture and text:



## The Eye Inside

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DSDRO XFIJV DIYSB ANQAL TAIMX VBDMB GASSA QRTRT CGGXJ MMTQC  
IPJSB AQPDR SDIMS DUAMB CQCMS AQDRS DMRJN SBAGC IYTCY ASBCS  
MQXKS CICGX RSRCQ ACOGA SJPAS AQHDI ASBAK GCD AWSJN CMDKB  
AQHAR RCYAE

“What means?” Gloria asked.

Mil shrugged his shoulders. “Greek to me.” As if on cue, the intercom buzzed; dinner had arrived.

“Is it an anagram?” I asked walking to the door.

Gloria was strangely silent. Normally, you couldn’t shut her up.

“Our guys never figured it out. Then, after three messages – one following each murder – the case went cold and the code was written off as gibberish.”

“Three murders month after Christmas?” Gloria asked. “Dog prints at each scene?”

“Yeah. You remember reading about it or something?” Mil asked her.

“Uh huh, guess that it.” Gloria moved her chair back, and put a throw pillow from the sofa in front of her the way you or I might protect ourselves from the splash

## The Eye Inside

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when a bus speeds through a puddle. I handed out the aluminum tins: burger and fries for Mil, Greek salad for me, and steamed veggies for Gloria.

Mil and I inhaled our food, washing it down with diet Cokes. Gloria picked at hers. Kitty sat at Mil's feet and stared at him until he begrudgingly threw her a crumb. He looked at me disapprovingly.

"At least she doesn't whine," I said.

It occurred to me that Gloria might be feeling out of place, accounting for her weird behavior. Not often that the humans in her company outnumber the dogs. "Mil, don't you think Gloria will be invaluable to our case? Nobody knows more about dogs than she," I said, trying to make her feel more at ease.

"Glad you brought that up, Mach. Klandagi would have my head if she thought I was consulting a dog walker – no offense, Gloria – on a police matter. Especially the case of a serial murderer."

"Klandagi?" Gloria asked with distaste. "Isn't that name of African cat?"

I was amazed at how much Gloria knew.

Mil rubbed his face. "Yeah. She's the M.E. in charge of this case and a real bitch."

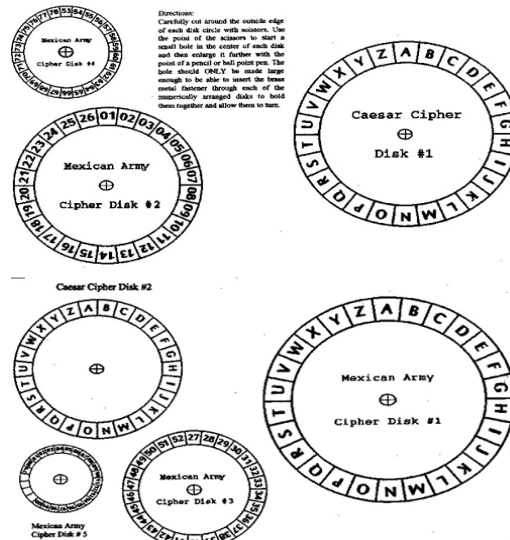
Gloria protectively covered Kitty's ears. "Just listening here, I think I can be helpful. Not sure yet. Need do some...research. I stay behind scenes. Cat-lady never know I exist. Unless, of course, you don't want me..."

"Gloria, believe me, we'll need all the help we can get," Mil said.

# The Eye Inside

With that settled and dinner done, I directed our attention back to the papers spread on my dining room table: “Well,” I said, studying that picture, “at least we know what a third eyelid is. And the other notes?”

Mil pulled the next one out of the file.



NKDIF SERLJ MIBFK FKDLV NQIBR HLCJU KFTFL KSTEN YQNDQ NTTEB  
TTENM QLJFS NOSUM MLQTL CTENC QNKRE BTTBR HKLQT ELCBQ QBSFS  
KLTML SSFAI NLKBR RLUKT LCJUK FTFLK FKSUC CFRFN KRYXB

“Looks like Ouija boards,” said Gloria, heading for my bathroom.

“More like birth control pills to me,” I interjected.

“Yeah, well, the detectives on the case at the time thought those dials were hints as to how to find the key that unlocks the code. What they found was nada.”

Just Mil and I examined the next note:

## The Eye Inside

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*"The Shambles"*

DSDRO XFIJV DIYSB ANQAL TAIMX VBDMB GASSA QRTRT CGGXJ MMTQC  
IPJSB AQPDR SDIMS DUAMB CQCMS AQDRS DMRJN SBAGC IYTCY ASBCS  
MQXKS CICGX RSRCQ ACOGA SJPAS AQHDI ASBAK GCDIS AWSJN CMDKB  
AQHAR RCYAE

"What is that a picture of?" I asked.

"The detectives on the case never found out. But it's the only one with a subtitle, so to speak, in English."

As we finished with each note, Mil carefully placed it back in a translucent glassine file and then in a manila envelope. He wore gloves and resealed each envelope, signing his name to the paper seal.

Gloria returned as we were studying the last of the Third Eyelid murderer's communiqués:

**QDFP FP S HTYWLR CFMDTO PTCOTQ JTPPSBT**

"That one came in right after the last murder, no illustration. After sixth months of no murders and no notes we figured he left the country or was dead. So we put the case on ice until last night..."

## The Eye Inside

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“Did news people get copies of all notes?” Gloria asked.

“No. Just the first one. After that appeared on the news, the subsequent notes were kept under lock and key. Everyone at OCME at NYPD was suspected of being a bean spiller until, unable to prove anything, we figured the killer sent the note himself to FOX.”

“That might explain why the code was never broken,” I suggested.

“Yeah. That’s why B-Rod was brought in. An outsider. Insurance.”

Next we looked at the paw prints from the original three murders and compared them to the ones found leading up to Caitlin’s body.

While Gloria studied the photos, I asked Mil, “Have Jason and Francesca seen these yet?”

“Not yet,” he replied.

“Definitely not same dog. Not even same species,” Gloria said.

“You mean breed?” I asked.

“I mean species,” Gloria reiterated.

Mil and I looked at each other. Then Mil rubbed his face. “Are you saying we may be looking for a monkey or something?”

“No no no. These prints have dog in them but not any I ever see. Maybe mutation?” Gloria said. “Or clone? You know, like Dolly...”

“Wasn’t Dolly a sheep?” Mil asked, perplexed. I was circling back to my werewolf theory when Mil suggested we stay with facts for now. “Let’s pass these suggestions on to Francesca and Jason and see what they come up with. For the

## The Eye Inside

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meeting tomorrow, let's lay the notes out and the other clues. If we can ascertain that the same guy killed Caitlin as those other girls at least we'll know who we're looking for."

"Then we just have to find him," I said.

## The Eye Inside

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### V

#### Co-de-pendent

"The Shambles..." began Rodney, peering over his reading glasses after inspecting the notes, "...is derived from the Anglo-Saxon expression "fleshammels," which translated into American means "the street of the butchers." It is a common street name, which still exists in many cities and towns throughout England. The best-known example is to be found in York."

"We don't have a Fleshammels Street in *New York*," said Mil, emphasizing the New.

Jason Pedergast fidgeted with his iPhone and confirmed that there was a Fleshammel Street in Canada and one in the U.S. in Detroit.

"Let's check it out, people," said Klandagi.

"We may not have a Fleshammel Street, but we have a Meatpacking District!" I tried to stay mute, I really did.

"I live near there," said Francesca.

Jason fiddled a bit with his iPhone again. "South of 14<sup>th</sup> Street on the West Side. Former home to 250 slaughterhouses, current home to 35 meatpackers, trendy hotels, galleries and...Francesca Diggs," he added.

Francesca turned and gently punched him in the arm.

"Good thinking, Mach," declared Rodney. Just in time too. I could see from the expression on Klandagi's face that she had been searching for a way to discredit my idea, but, with the team warmed up to it, she couldn't without seeming petty.

## The Eye Inside

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Napoleon Bonaparte was famous for defining leaders as falling into one of two camps: petty or great. Which one would the Amazon turn out to be?

“Urquia – you and Piazza look into that lead. Report back day afta tomorrow.”

Then to Rodney: “What about those jumbles of letters – do they mean anything?”

“First, we need to determine if it is a cipher.” He was rifling through reports that had been attached to the killer’s letters. “Shame, really. These notes indicate that after a rather feeble attempt to decode by NYPD someone made the decision to give up without a concrete conclusion.”

Mil rubbed his face. “Happens far too often. We just don’t have the manpower. I guess once the murders stopped the team moved on to the next horrific homicide. It’s statistics...after the first forty-eight hours the solve rate drops to practically zero.”

“Can you pick up where they left off?” I asked.

Rodney glanced up at me. “I think so. There are rules which guide us in all forms of secret writing.” While I was busy trying to figure out if that was Holmes or the enigmatic Dr. Rodney Hargrave speaking (it was Holmes! *The Dancing Men*), he continued. “Then we have to find the key.”

“O.K. You’re on that one,” Klandagi said. “How long do you think it will take? Hours, days – we got a situation here. If he strikes again...”

“Cryptology is more of an art than a science. Decoding is a function of trial and error. I cannot predict...” Rodney said, gently shaking his mane.

“Yeah, well, we don’t have time. This wacko murdered three girls in the same month last time around,” she said.



## The Eye Inside

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“Even if I break this code, or we find out where he was three years ago, it is highly doubtful that our murderer stayed still. If the data were fresh...”

“Scuse me?” Francesca said, raising her hand. She was a tiny thing, long, thin brown hair, big round coffee-colored eyes magnified by her glasses. Timid as a mouse. “If we had a new note, would that help?”

“Of course,” said Rodney.

“But we don’t,” Klandagi pointed out. Her voice was raised and barely veiled her impatience. I hate that about bullies. They always pick on the ones who can’t fight back.

Rodney looked warmly at Francesca, as did I, encouraging her to go on. “Be careful what you wish for...” Rodney said.

“It’s just that...if we wait for a note another innocent girl might be murdered,” Francesca said.

“Or the perp might skip town...” Mil interjected, then stared straight at Klandagi. “Think of the negative PR. Dr. Rowan won’t be pleased.”

The corners of my mouth turned up. I had never seen this manipulative side of Mil. He had as many facets as the diamond engagement ring I’d never had.

“Do you have an idea? If you do, spit it out,” Klandagi said to Francesca.

“Well, Ms. Piazza here is a reporter, right?” I nodded. “Couldn’t you coax this rat out of his hole? You know, bait him...with some story in your paper.”

“Brilliant. Bravo, Francesca,” Rodney said. Francesca was beaming. “The standard profile of a serial killer includes the desire for control. They seek to be

## The Eye Inside

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published as a means to expand their area of control by terrorizing a larger audience than they have time to kill. Case in point, Jack the Ripper, Son of Sam, the Zodiac Killer...why, we already know this one – our Third Eyelid character – likes to write letters. If it is the same scoundrel, and we can elicit a new note, and we can crack the code, we might find our killer.”

All eyes were on me.

“I’d have to clear that with my editor,” I said, wondering if Scott would take the risk, considering the threatened takeover by Tai-Pan. Any unorthodox use of the paper infuriated Scott, and what could be less kosher than baiting a murderer with a bogus news story?

“So what goes in this article?” Klandagi asked Rodney. Not, I noted, me, who would actually be writing it.

“Ah, that takes some thought. And consultation with our resident writer here.” He smiled at me. “What do we know about the psychology of serial murderers? And, just as important, the copycats?”

“Copycats?” I asked.

“Umm...for example, there were hundreds of letters written to police and newspapers signed Jack the Ripper, but only three that might actually have been written by him – one from September 27, 1888, another from October 1, 1888, and the third from October 16, 1888. That last one was accompanied by a piece of a human kidney preserved in Scotch whisky.”

## The Eye Inside

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“Ew” slipped out of Francesca’s mouth. Immediately, she straightened her back and followed with “Sorry.”

“I think we need to closely study the Zodiac Killer...think we can get a copy of that file?” Rodney asked.

“The who?” Jason Pedergast asked.

Mil explained: “Before your time, mine too, but he was a serial killer who operated in northern California between 1966 and 1974.” I looked at Mil, impressed. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Case study at John Jay.”

“That’s right,” Rodney continued. “In the FBI archives are twenty letters he wrote at the time, many using ciphers, several still not decoded.”

“How many codes are there?” I asked.

“More than you can imagine. We have our ways, but if the cipherer uses a chapter of an obscure book as his key by substituting letters of the alphabet for a random chapter, for example, it could take decades to identify the source and decode the text.”

“Are we looking for somebody highly educated here then?” Klandagi asked Rodney.

“That I cannot yet say.”

Klandagi started writing on the white board at the front of the room. First she wrote Operation Blink and underlined it. We all looked at one another, as if we had missed the point of a story and sought either reassurance or explanation. Then she

## The Eye Inside

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wrote Victim and underneath Caitlin Rogers plus the names of the three other murdered girls.

Next she wrote in big block letters the word Killer. Here she referred to a dog-eared manual and began listing attributes such as male, white, 25-35 years old. I saw the handsome face of Dr. Rodney Hargrave wince as though he had been stuck by a needle.

“Klandagi, pardon me, but why do you conclude that our killer is a man?” he asked.

She thrust her prominent butt out as one might a chin, put the hand that did not hold the open book on her hip, and read out loud. “Says right here, paraphrasing a paper by Dr. Apsche of Harvard from 1993, and I quote: 88% of serial killers are male, 85% are white, average age is 28.5, 62% kill strangers, 71% limit themselves to one location...”

“Yes, I have read the text...” he interrupted her. “But much has been written on the subject since 1993.”

Francesca, I like to think emboldened by our support, piped up again. “And, statistically speaking that means 12% of serial killers are not male, 15% are not white, 38% kill people they know, and 29% travel!”

Klandagi glared at her. “Thank you, but I can calculate.”

“I bet she can,” Mil whispered in my ear.

“With all due respect to your excellent profiling skills, may I bring to the team’s attention the recent case of Ava Quantas.” Of course, his question was rhetorical, but

## The Eye Inside

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Rodney paused anyway, I suspected to allow us to ponder whether his comments about Klandagi's skills were facetious or polite. "While not technically a serial killer, more a mass murderer I should say, Ms. Quantas was an MIT-educated astrophysicist who unloaded her 9-millimeter gun on her colleagues at a University of Arkansas department meeting, shooting eight and killing four."

"What's your point? There's an exception that proves every rule?" Klandagi asked, bristling with authority.

Rodney Hargrave's eyes were dancing. I suspected he was pondering how he would answer her without usurping her authority, and I was fascinated by how he would respond, considering I've never been able to master such a technique. He was flexing his fingers, I supposed to release stress, and I couldn't help but notice that he wore no ring.

Suddenly Francesca, who'd been meekly squeaking her chair, stood up. "Scuse me, please. Just look around our own conference room. Dr. Moorison, you are so strong and accomplished..." I was a bit disappointed by the obsequiousness of Francesca's opening remarks, especially as I watched Klandagi gloat, but decided to give the mouse a chance to finish before I judged her unfairly. "...and you, Ms. Piazza, so intelligent and self-possessed..."

My green turned to preen.

"Is there a point to this?" Klandagi asked.

## The Eye Inside

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“My point is power,” Francesca said. “Imagine this room as a microcosm of society. Women have more power now. Makes sense there would be more female serial killers.”

“Dead on,” Rodney said, supporting her.

“Nothing like a gun to equalize the sexes,” Mil chimed in.

I was about to correct him and say “Nothing like a brain to equalize the sexes” when Rodney, in his diplomatic way, said, “People kill because they can. Most likely we are looking for a man who fits the description scribed upon the board by Dr. Moorison, but we must be open to a killer who does not fit the bill.”

“O.K., people. Enough speculation. We have a killer – male or female – to find. Urquia and Piazza, you hit the meatpacking district. Diggs, you dig into the paw prints found at all the murder scenes...” Klandagi seemed self-pleased by her play on words. “Pedergast, you assist Dr. Hargrave here in the decoding exercise...”

“Scuse me.” Francesca had her hand raised again.

“What now?” Klandagi asked.

“Shouldn’t Ms. Piazza work with Dr. Hargrave, you know, to compose the baiting article for the newspaper?” I was about to pose the same question, but she beat me to it. Francesca was turning out to be the mouse that roared.

With eyes as narrow as a cat’s about to pounce, Klandagi stared at Francesca. “All right. You two, Hargrave and Piazza, you work on getting the bait in the paper.” Then she looked at her watch, announced that she had another meeting, and left.

## The Eye Inside

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Francesca reached into a portfolio she had brought from the lab and spread before us enlarged photos of the paw prints left at the Caitlin Rogers crime scene.

“Those paw prints...” Mil said, pointing at the photos. “...I have it on good authority that they are not the same as from the previous murders.”

Jason asked: “What authority?”

Mil looked confused as how to answer without implicating himself, so I jumped in, although I hated to admit that such an intelligent and passionate expert as Gloria would be discredited just because she walks dogs for a living. “We cannot disclose our source!” I shouted. “Reporters never disclose a source.”

I admit I must have looked ferocious, because no one challenged me. I was glad Klandagi was gone.

Mil joined Jason and Francesca at the far end of the conference table to study the prints. Rodney leaned toward me and said softly, “Mach, how about meeting later over tea, perhaps, to discuss the ciphers and plan the story you’ll need to run as soon as possible?”

“As much as I’d like to, we’ve got a three p.m. editorial meeting, followed by deadline, then I’ve got to convince Scott to let me run a story...won’t be easy...”

“Supper then?”

I paused. “Uh...”

“I don’t bite, you know,” Rodney added.

To my horror, I felt myself blush from head to toe. “Uh...”

## The Eye Inside

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“Good. It’s settled then. I’ll meet you at the Spice Market at eight. Do you know it? Heart of the meatpacking district, on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street. We can stroll the neighborhood after we eat.” He tucked his reading glasses in his shirt pocket with his ring-less left hand and strode through the doorway before I could say a thing.

I arrived at my office in a bit of a daze. I felt light-headed and squeamish, as if I had just come off a roller-coaster ride at a theme park and was a bit wobbly from the speed. Something big had been set in motion, it was gaining momentum, and I felt powerless to control it as I was swept up in its force.

Across the newsroom, I could see Scott on the phone. He was nodding his head and tapping his fingers on his desk. I sent him an email suggesting that we grab lunch. While I waited for his response, I considered my approach. I knew that every decision Scott would make until the takeover played itself out would be colored by how its outcome would influence Tai-Pan.

In the cafeteria, we sat at a table for two in the corner by the window looking over Times Square. Scott barely touched his tuna on rye, and I noticed for the first time that he had lost weight since his problems began. I blew on my Italian Wedding soup, enjoying the fragrance escaping from my bowl. While I was contemplating how to begin, Scott said: “How’s the new investigation coming along?”

“About that—I need your help.”

Scott’s face changed. It became brighter and alert. I realized how much it meant to him to be useful, and I shuddered at the thought that he might be tossed overboard,



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like a fish thought to be too small. Especially upsetting with his new financial responsibility for his sister and her kids. "Shoot."

So I told him about the meeting at OCME and what the team had asked me to do. To his credit, instead of telling me to forget it right then and there, he asked me what I planned to put in the bogus article. "Still have to work that out," I said.

"Write your article, Mach. No lies. Nothing that can come back to bite us. No more than five hundred words. I'll hold space on the front page of the Metro section in tomorrow's paper. If you can produce something that does not violate any of our principles, we'll run it."

I gave him a broad smile and finished my soup. "By the way, Scott, I've been doing some research on Eric Rathbourne..." Scott's expression turned to something between a smile and a grimace. "He's quite the socialite. I'm surprised you haven't run into him at any of your black-tie dinners."

"Who says I haven't?" Scott raised an eyebrow. And before he had time to elaborate, Randy Ellis and Rowena Scanlon from the financial news department stopped by to discuss the over-the-moon bonuses Wall Street bankers would be paying themselves this year despite the fact that the rest of us were still reeling from the damage they'd done to our economy. "Bury them," Scott said.

And I wasn't sure whether he meant in the ground or on the last page of the section amid the Classified Ads.

# The Eye Inside

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## VI

### Sugar and Spice (Market)

I'm a small town girl from the bedroom community of White Plains, just outside of New York City, so I've never been to a real spice market, the kind found in Istanbul or Tangiers, for example. But I have a fertile imagination and I read a lot, so I wasn't totally surprised when I walked into the restaurant with its sherbet-colored scarves ballooning from the ceiling and the scent of cardamom, curry, and cinnamon tickling my nose.

I perceived his presence at the bar before I recognized him. The light-blue brushed cotton shirt rippled across his back like a flag, as if to say: This is me. I am here. I stand for more than you see. Rodney was holding both palms in front of him, and as I approached I could see one held a small pillar of salt and the other an equal size tower of ground pepper. On the counter between his palms was a highball glass filled with cocktail cherries.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "What are you doing?"

You might have thought I was a refund from the IRS, the way his face brightened upon seeing me. "Just a little experiment to entertain myself while waiting..." He let the equal piles fall to the counter and rubbed on a comb he pulled from the back pocket of his jeans and then held it over the salt and pepper. I watched the pepper flakes fly to the comb the way iron shavings would to a magnet while the white crystals sat as still as rocks. "It's the static electricity...proof that salt is heavier than pepper."

## The Eye Inside

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Not quite sure what the hidden meaning of this demonstration might be, I asked him: "And what are the cherries for?"

"Those?" He brightened again and laughed. "Why, to eat of course!" And he popped a few into his mouth.

I slid onto the stool beside him. "I got permission to write the story we discussed."

"That's good, Mach."

"Um. But it'll be tricky. My boss won't run it if it compromises the integrity of the paper." I tried one of the cherries. It tasted like cough syrup.

Rodney became serious. "And this boss of yours...is he your lover?"

"What? No. Not that it is any of your business..."

"You are right, of course." Rodney was staring at me, studying me, as engrossed as he had been in his salt and pepper project. "I have a hard time keeping my questions to myself. Especially when the subject matter intrigues me."

The bartender interrupted and asked for our order. I was a bit ruffled by Rodney's sudden insight, so I forsook my usual diet Coke and ordered a glass of Cabernet. Rodney barely nodded to the bartender, but she immediately understood that he wanted the same. As soon as she placed our glasses in front of us I took a gulp of mine.

I was aware that I was blushing again. "So, where are you living while you're here?"

## The Eye Inside

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“In a sterile box of an efficiency apartment on 38<sup>th</sup> Street.” He paused, but I could feel his eyes concentrating on my face even though I was looking away. “Do I make you uncomfortable?” he asked.

Another gulp of wine. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you are avoiding direct eye contact, which signifies discomfort.”

“Is that your training talking or your intuition?”

“Both. Do you care to know what else I see?” he asked without waiting for my answer. “When you mentioned your boss, I noticed your head tilted slightly to the right, which told me there was something you wished to hide. But your open hands indicate honesty, your manner of speech sincerity...so I surmised you weren’t hiding a lie but a secret.” Unconsciously, I stroked my chin. “And that gesture there...rubbing your chin...that means you don’t know if you should believe what you are hearing or not.”

I finished my glass of wine and signaled for a refill. “Your professional training seems to give you an advantage over other men.”

“How so?” Rodney asked.

“You know...that old Venus and Mars thing. I suppose a woman can never feel misunderstood by you. You can read her as clearly as a welcome mat. Are you as good at reading ciphers?”

“I will let you be the judge of that. But I have educated myself about all forms of secret writings. It has been my life’s work. Deciphering enigmas, uncovering secrets.”

## The Eye Inside

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“How did you get interested in that subject?” Now that the focus of our conversation had shifted to him and away from me, I was starting to relax. Deliberately, I stared into his eyes to prove that I could, but it felt as dangerous as if I were moving into the headlights of an oncoming car.

“Believe it or not, I started out studying literature...”

“I can see that from your Sherlock Holmes references.”

“Ah...Conan Doyle led me to my fascination with crimes and the twisted minds that commit them. But the intricacies of language, specifically the written word, led me to ciphers. What is more mysterious than secret language...think about it...if language is the chief way human beings communicate, what better way to understand what exists in the mind than by deciphering a message masked in code?”

“Is that what you just did to me by interpreting my body language?”

“Why, yes. That’s one example. But a criminal who takes the time to craft a complex code and send it to law enforcement is conflicted. On the one hand, he wants to protect his secrets and identity...”

“And on the other, she wants to be found out.” I understood what he was saying very clearly.

“Precisely.”

“So how can I write an article for my paper that plays to the exhibitionist side but doesn’t threaten the self-protective side of our killer while not printing a single word that is untrue, misleading, or speculative?”

“Are those your boss’s rules or yours?”

## The Eye Inside

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“To be honest, both.”

“You need to make it personal. Engage the killer. Tease him.”

“Or her,” I reminded him.

“Yes. Or her.” Then he teased me by leaning in, engaging me in a stare fest, and adding: “Who doesn’t like a challenge?”

Rodney paid the bill, assuring me it was he, not the taxpayer, footing the bill in response to my protest, and I followed him and the chic Asian hostess to a booth not far from the bar. He spoke to her in a language unfamiliar to me, and she bobbed her head in collusion before retreating with the menus still in her hand.

“So, I went from literature to language to psychology to the psychology of language, or the written word, conventional and symbolic. In other words, full circle.” Rodney paused while studying my face again. I was thinking how I’d wear a burqa next time I had dinner with him! “Think of it this way,” he explained, “ciphers are like poetry – full of symbolism and hidden meaning. Beautiful and enigmatic. No better way to see inside the human heart and mind.”

I too had read things, poems and prose that touched me in a way conversations rarely did. The written word was superior to the spoken one, even when the words themselves were the same, and I wondered if this was true because in the absence of a human delivery system – a person expecting a response or capable of changing direction in a flash – one is more open, more receptive, to the message.

“I see you agree, Mach.”

## The Eye Inside

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This was getting creepy. “Don’t people ever complain when you read their thoughts?”

He chuckled. “Is that what you think? Would you believe me if I told you...” And he stopped, mid-sentence, because the chic hostess returned with a waiter who resembled a sword dancer, sleek and smooth in his movements, as he laid before us six small plates of exquisite appetizers. Rodney folded both his hands in a small prayer, bowed his head, and softly said a few foreign words of thanks or grace, I couldn’t be sure.

“What language are you speaking?” I asked.

“Vietnamese. Forgive me if I was rude to you.”

“Not at all. Were you in Vietnam?”

“Yes, during the war...as a cryptologist, of course, not on the front lines. Indirectly that is how I ended up in Washington. Hungry?”

“Reading my mind again?”

This time a deep laugh, a rumble like thunder in the distance. “That question was rhetorical.” He placed spoonfuls of everything on my plate, dictating which sauce went with what. “The Thai chicken wings go with the lime dipping sauce, the salmon sashimi with the lemon and soy, the shrimp Tod Mon Pla with the cucumber and peanut relish. I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty of ordering for you.”

Normally, I would object to anyone presuming to make a decision for me that I was perfectly capable of making for myself. But I really love it when a man surprises me with food, an edible cipher if you will. Never said I wasn’t enigmatic. “Not at all,

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but you already knew that, right?" This time I smiled. Using my chopsticks, awkwardly, I followed his direction and surrendered to the flavors of chili and lemongrass.

"I first learned to use chopsticks in Vietnam. Once I learned their origin, I gave up eating with a fork and knife. Does cause a stir at Smith & Wollensky's."

"I never really thought about it, but I'd assume the genesis of chopsticks to be as simple as wood being easier to come by than steel in South East Asia..."

"Perhaps, but the origin of the utensil is more, not exactly spiritual, more poetic." He picked up a tender piece of pork satay gently with the honed wooden sticks and fed it to me. "Ancient Asian cultures believed it was barbaric and disrespectful to stab one's food. *Tốt ngon miệng.*" After eating a piece of the satay himself from the same chopsticks with which he had fed me, he explained: "That means *bon appétit*, or good appetite, in Vietnamese."

"Are you bilingual?"

"Actually, octilingual."

I was pretty sure there was no such word as octilingual, but I had long since noticed, starting with the first time I read Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, that real genius doesn't let convention stand in its way. As long as Rodney didn't start galumphing around the restaurant, I'd leave his phonesthemic inventions unchallenged. "Tell me that doesn't mean you speak eight languages."

"It is necessary, in my line of work."

"How so?"



## The Eye Inside

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He shrugged his shoulders. “The most common form of ciphering is the use of a substitution alphabet. But what kind of alphabet? Greek? Cyrillic? Arabic? Hebrew? Phoenician? There are literally dozens in the world today. And those are just the systems based on graphemes, which are written symbols that represent a phoneme, or sound, in a spoken language. With me so far?”

“Absolutely.”

“Add to alphabetical symbols, logograms and syllabaries, language systems in which a character represents a word or syllable. Not to totally confuse you, but I have seen codes comprised in Braille, Morse code, and sign language, which are nonlinear. Once I conquered the alphabets, or characters in the case of Chinese and Egyptian hieroglyphics, I naturally got interested in learning the languages too.”

Oh – naturally. “So, theoretically, you could decode anything if you know the alphabet?”

“If only it were that simple. Don’t forget numerals, punctuation, mathematical symbols, rebuses, or some other such use of pictorial substitution, and the possibilities are endless. Ever read *The Dancing Men*?”

I had to think for a minute to recall the details of the story. “Yes! Sherlock Holmes decodes a message based on stick figures.”

“Precisely.” Rodney then pushed aside the plates and on the paper tablecloth drew a phrase composed of 15 childish-looking stick figures doing various pliés and arabesques. “So, what does it say?”

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Assuming he was being straight, and there was a message in this chorus line, I'd be damned if I let him know I had no idea without at least giving it a try. My immediate thought was a Scrabble game, so, following my gut, I tried to imagine those dancing men (and women!) as letters on a tile holder waiting to be unscrambled by yours truly. I stared at the ballet before me. "There are three of those dancers doing deep knee bends with their hands on their heads, more than any other position, so I'm figuring that's an 'e.'"

Now, I'm not trained in the art of reading people's expressions, like my dinner companion, but even I could see that he was impressed.

"Excellent! We call that frequency analysis. We can usually begin to decrypt a message by classifying symbols by their frequency and matching them to the rate of recurrence in whatever alphabet we believe the key is in."

I wasn't sure I could get past the key of 'e,' but I plodded ahead anyway. "Give me a hint?"

"In this case, the most frequent letter is 'u,'" Rodney said, chuckling. He was clearly having a better time at this than I. "And the second word is 'are.'"

I could decipher two more stick figures that appeared more than once, and I pegged them for an 'e' and an 'a'. Since the second word was A-R-E, I guessed the one doing a handstand was an 'a' and the one doing a jumping jack was an 'r.' I tried really hard and was almost there, but I realized we were getting distracted by this game, which I had come to think of as a slightly different version of the dance most men and

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women engage in on a first date. We needed to work on the article for which Scott was holding a prime spot on tomorrow's Metro page. "I give up. What does it say?"

Rodney picked up his pen again and filled in the blanks: YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL.

# The Eye Inside

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## VII

### Hook, Line, and Sinker

There is not a woman in the world who won't fall for the line You Are Beautiful (even if it is in code) or, more specifically, fall for the guy who said it. After outlining the points that would go in my article, Rodney and I walked around the area for an hour that passed like a minute and I knew I was in love.

We walked along the Hudson River, passing bars for gays next door to those for college co-eds. The air was cold but humid, and the wind blowing off the river sent my scarf sailing behind me like a song that was swelling in my heart.

"How did you get into investigative journalism?" he asked, folding my arm in his to form a double buttress against the wind.

"I was actually covering real estate, then I got interested in the unsolved murder of a developer's wife."

"That developer wouldn't be Barry Sugarman, would he?"

"Did you know him?"

"I Googled you."

I thought about Barry for the first time in weeks. My memories of him were mostly the moments we shared. He was a murderer, to be sure a count against him! But I've always believed that if any two people take the time to get to know each other, some fondness will result – and Barry didn't disprove my conviction. If two opposing armies sat down to break bread, talk about their families, their dreams and fears, battlefields would host picnics and impromptu soccer games instead of bloodbaths.

## The Eye Inside

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Rodney interrupted my thoughts: "He was a classic psychopath, you know."

"Who?"

"That Sugarman fellow."

Barry the philanthropist? Barry the empire builder? Barry with whom I had been semi-in-love? "How can you say that? You didn't even know him."

"To know him is to love him? Oh, dear Mach...first sign of an effective psychopath is that he can be very charming. Seduction to them is what a web is to a spider."

I was feeling uncomfortable, maybe because I knew what Rodney was saying had a bite of truth to it. "Well, maybe he was a little sociopathic..."

"Psychopath, sociopath, borderline personality disorder, bipolar, choose your terminology, but these disturbed individuals, capable of killing another human being, are all self-absorbed narcissists who want what they want, when they want it, and to hell with everyone else. They are often impulsive, callous, and completely unafraid of consequences. And, if you don't believe me, I have just paraphrased one of the great scholars on the subject, Dr. P.D. Lyle." He stopped and held my chin between his thumb and forefinger and bored into my eyes with his own. "Now, I haven't upset you, have I?"

I swear that man could read minds...or are we all only a composite made from our various gestures and expressions? "It's just that when I think of a psychopath, I picture Hannibal Lecter, not Barry Sugarman. Oh Christ...I had Thanksgiving dinner with Barry Sugarman."

## The Eye Inside

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"You're lucky, Mach, that you weren't on the menu."

I lowered his hand from my chin with my own, and he held onto it as we resumed our walk.

"What other characteristics, besides charm, telegraph a psychopath?"

"The field of forensic psychology changes almost daily with new theories. We used to think that because the criminal brain exhibits less activity in the areas identified as involving emotion and reward processing, specifically the nucleus accumbens, that psychopaths were driven to impulsive criminal behavior because they lacked empathy."

"Used to think...and now?"

"Now we think killing gives them a chemical high, like endorphins do an athlete. This high compensates for their emotional void rather than making them act out because of it. Dopamine is considered a reward chemical because things that give us pleasure tend to increase the amount of dopamine within certain areas of the brain. There's a team at Vanderbilt that has documented this with some convincing studies."

"So rather than being unemotional, it might be that some sociopaths are driven by a chemical need? Like an alcoholic?" Mil crossed my mind, fleetingly, like a deer before an SUV.

"Exactly. Did Sugarman drink?"

"A bit." Never would I betray Mil's secret, but what harm could come from talking behind poor, dead Barry's back? "Barry had a thing for Glenfiddich, but I wouldn't call him an alcoholic. He said he liked his scotch old and his women young."

## The Eye Inside

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“What a stupid thing to say. Sounds like he was a bit of a wanker.”

Before I knew it, I was telling him about my relationships with Barry Sugarman and Scott, my penchant for picking the wrong guys, and my father’s death.

“I’ve got Kitty, so I’m never lonely.”

“Kitty’s your cat, I take it?”

“No, my dog.”

He scratched his head but didn’t question my choices – I liked that about him.

“I’ve got a dog too. Wish I could bring him up here from D.C. Old bloodhound. Name’s Watson.”

“Of course his name is Watson – elementary, my dear.” I laughed. “Your building here doesn’t allow dogs, huh?”

“Actually, it does. It’s just, who’d walk the old fellow during the day?”

I was quick to recommend Gloria, even writing her phone number down on his hand, never asking what I should have: “Who’s walking old Watson now?”

The article I wrote the next day followed the points Rodney and I had outlined together, but I added my own flourish. My words practically canonized “the world-famous cryptologist,” Dr. Rodney Hargrave, who was newly in town to “reopen the cold case of the Third Eyelid Murders.” No mention was made of the suspected connection between those previous murders and the death of Caitlin Rogers because I knew to do so might cause mass hysteria, with parents around the country pulling their daughters out of colleges in New York. But I did throw in the fact that the renowned Dr.

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Hargrave was “close to deciphering the letters” that had so baffled the NYPD and, thus, “that much closer to identifying the killer.” The quote I attributed to Dr. Hargrave, with his permission, of course, read: “This killer is a coward, or why would he have stopped writing if he hadn’t gotten scared away?”

Within minutes after the newspaper hit the stands and the electronic version of my story went online, my phone started ringing off the hook. At first, mostly other media. I’ve always wondered if the news-consuming public realized how few news stories there really were and how many writers spent their time following what other journalists are doing rather than looking for fresh material of their own. Not to knock TV news, but I know for a fact that they base their stories on the hard-researched news unearthed by reporters like yours truly. They have to, after all, to keep the air waves humming 24/7.

Between Twitter and a slew of bloggers who dedicate themselves to reporting what journalists are working on before they publish, it’s hard to keep your scoop from getting scooped. Problem is, without the code of journalistic ethics, and an accountable editor like Scott Screen behind that code, all it takes is a rumor or speculation by Gawker or Twitter or the bloggers who feed the always-on Web nest of hungry chicks, and an entire herd of media types can go stampeding off in the wrong direction looking for the story that isn’t.

Investigative journalism requires hundreds of questions and hypotheses, and, just like the cold cases I’ve chosen to defrost, these questions and hypotheses often end up back in the freezer or, in my case, a file drawer. But, despite my best efforts, the blog



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*News Views* posted speculation that the Third Eyelid murderer was back, that a top FBI consultant was in town to find him, and that a mere reporter – that would be me – had infiltrated the inner sanctum of the NYPD. How did I know this instantly? I had programmed my own name into Google Alerts, so that any time I appeared on the Web I got an automatic email with the link.

All lines on my phone were lit up; my cell vibrated my purse right off my desk; I let all calls go to voicemail as I stared at the *News Views* item on my computer screen and put my face in my hands. When I looked up, Scott was marching toward me with a scowl that I knew all too well on his face.

“I was afraid this would happen,” he said.

“It’s not so bad, Scott; nothing we published could get us in trouble.”

“It’s bad for you, Mach. Every reporter in town will be all over your story, like ants on a lollipop.”

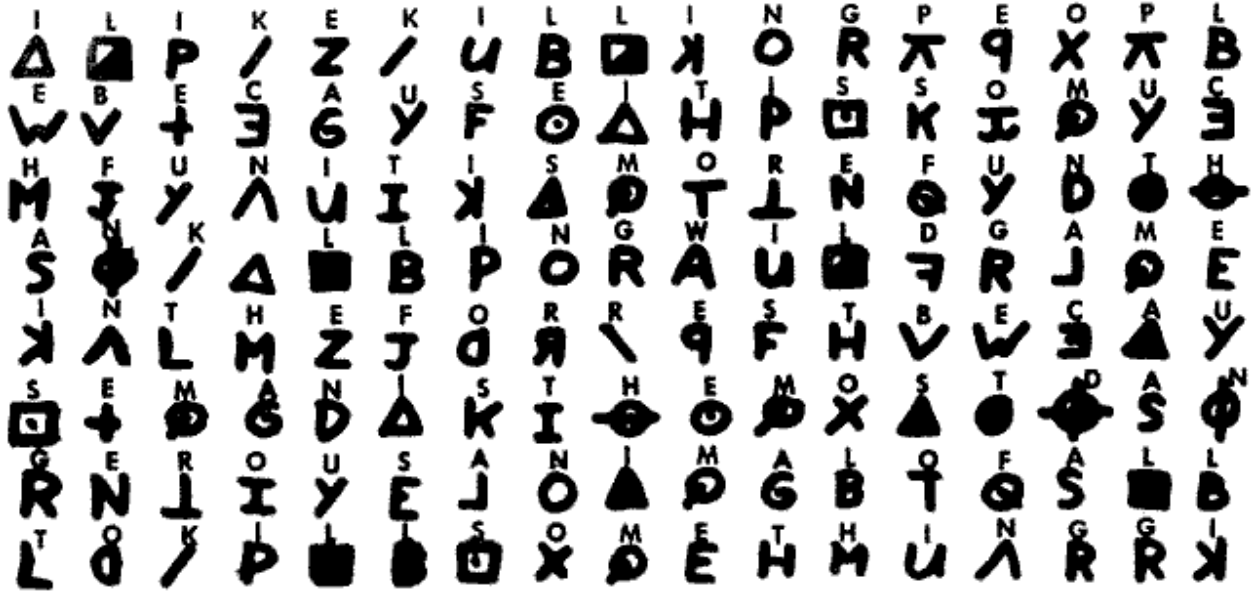
“I’m not afraid of a little competition.” The truth was I was terrified. My foothold on this new beat was just one case deep.

Just then Jeanette, who ran our Tip Line, waddled over with a piece of paper in her pudgy hands. “Sorry to interrupt, but I think you should both see this. It came in over the fax.”

I looked at the sheet. The code was different from the one that had been used in the previous notes. And this time it appeared that the key was included:

## The Eye Inside

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“What does this mean?” Scott asked. “Does he want to be found?”

“Seems that way, doesn’t it? I’ll turn this over to Mil and Dr. Hargrave right away.”

“It looks unfinished.”

“Yeah.” A chill ran up my spine. “That part is clear. Whatever he has to say, there’s more to come.”

I grabbed my vibrating purse and the coat I had thrown over my chair. Scott nodded, then headed back in the direction of his desk. I picked up the receiver on my desk phone to call Mil and tell him to meet me down at OCME if he wasn’t already there and to rally the troops to review this newest clue. So many questions were cluttering my thoughts – Is it him? Is it an imposter? Is this a precursor to another strike in the style of Osama bin Laden’s messages? What did he want to say before stopping mid-word? – that it took me a few seconds to realize my line had no dial tone. I was

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about to try another line when a most seductive male voice said, "Is this M. Jesus Piazza?"

Thinking it might be the murderer, I boomed: "Who are you?"

"My name is Eric Rathbourne. I am looking for Mr. Piazza. Are you his secretary?"

Ever see the Macy's fireworks display on July 4? Well, that's what was going on in my head. I had Tai-Pan on the phone, the biggest threat to my future, at least until Iran finalizes its nuclear weapons program, and he assumed I was my secretary. Well...two can play at that game.

"Eric who?" I asked, feigning a voice as shrill as Meryl Streep playing Julia Child.

If steam could travel through phone lines, my receiver would be raining.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Tell Mr. Piazza that The Eric Rathbourne is on the phone. He will know who I am."

"Hold, please." I let him stew while I contemplated my next move. I did a quick take of the news room, making mental note of the empty seats (and empty shirts). "Just a moment, please, I'm transferring you now." Then I transferred Eric Rathbourne to the voicemail of Roland Black, who wrote our paper's obituaries and was on vacation skiing in Okeemo. And then I raced to the elevator with the new message from the killer in my hand, figuring I'd take my chances on finding Mil at his desk and, O.K., I admit it, I couldn't wait to see Rodney again.

# The Eye Inside

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## VIII

### Two For The Show

As I read aloud the words from the code key sent to the paper in response to my article, Rodney paced the length of the room in long-legged strides. While he did so, his left arm was folded across his middle, supporting his right elbow, as his hand caressed his chin.

“Are you trying to figure out if you should believe this or not?” I asked. No one ever said I wasn’t a quick study.

“Did you say something, Mach?” Rodney was deep in thought.

“Never mind.”

“I think this is a good sign,” he said.

Mil rubbed his face. “How do you figure? We got a new code, no new murders so far, thank God, but these two things point to a different M.O. Has the guy changed his style, or is this someone new?”

“Only one way to find out,” Rodney said. “We need to plant another story in the paper, this time with something only the murderer could know.”

“Damn it, people! The clock is ticking and we’re playing pen pals with a murderer?” Klandagi finally chimed in. “You got twenty-four hours to surface some evidence, and then I’m shutting down this academic froufrou and we’re gonna hunt down this psycho the old fashioned way – with snitches and searches door to door.”

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When I got back to the office, I saw Scott and Lisa in a heated argument behind the glass walls of one of our small conference rooms. Lisa had her frosted blond locks tied in a tight ponytail. Everything about her was tight – her toned body, her jeans, her frozen smile, and the skin across her smooth forehead and high cheekbones. I watched her walk in her dogged way toward the elevators, saw her unwrap a mint and put in her mouth while she waited, suck for a moment, slide the mint back into the wrapper, drop the mint and wrapper on the floor, and descend, leaving her droppings behind.

After a proper passage of time – about ten minutes – I approached Scott at his desk. “Hey, I just saw Lisa.”

Scott sighed. “Do you have a question?”

I really wanted to broach the important and delicate topic of a second article aimed at the Third Eyelid murderer, but that question was stuck behind another one, like the #1 ball behind the #8 ball on a pool table, and I was helpless to get to #1 until I got #8 out of the way. “Why would Lisa suck on a candy for only a second and then throw it away?” I didn’t tell him she threw it on the floor.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that, Mach. I’ve got a goddamn newspaper to run. But if you’ve got to know, she’s always done that. Says it saves calories.”

“How many calories are in a mint? Ten?” I asked, genuinely fascinated.

“I don’t know, Mach. Is that why you came over here?” Scott’s tone was curt and his face colorless.

“No. Of course not.” I summarized our meeting at OCME for him and concluded by saying, matter-of-factly, “So we have to run another article today.”

## The Eye Inside

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To my surprise, Scott picked up a stack of papers and waved them in my face. "See these memos, Mach?" How could I not? He held them so close to my nose I could smell a paper cut coming. "These are all from senior management busting my chops about letting you plant fiction in a serious newspaper like ours..."

"It's not fiction."

"Will you let me finish!" Scott was shouting. Our colleagues were watching. "The lawyers are all over this, Mach. The liability! The provocation! If the paper is seen as inciting a murderer and another killing occurs, we will get sued!"

"Since when do we let the lawyers tell us what we can run in the paper, Scott?"

"Are you kidding me? How long have you had your head in the sand, Mach?" Then he lowered his voice. "We are a company in play, Mach. A lawsuit could weaken us, drain our cash reserves, depress our stock price. No risks. We can take no risks. That is an order."

I needed some air. I grabbed my coat and headed to the elevator, noticing as the doors closed that Lisa's unwanted calories were still on the floor.

The air had the smell of false spring in it. There are always a few days in the dead of winter in New York that taunt us with that hint of warmth to come, and they are always followed with a blast of arctic air or dump of snow to remind us who's boss. I walked across Times Square's pedestrian zone, caught a glimpse of the naked cowboy posing in front of the new recruiting office for the armed services. I made a loop through the

## The Eye Inside

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theater district, noticing how the theater marquees read like movie posters with all the Hollywood stars appearing on Broadway these days.

I hadn't eaten lunch, so I popped into Junior's for some cheesecake. I couldn't decide between the marble and the cherry, so I ordered one of each.

First, Scott had a lot of dark veins running through his life – Lisa, Tai-Pan, his finances...kind of like the marble cheesecake I had just taken a bite of. Then there was Rodney, as sweet and bright as...cherries! The dilemma before me was how to choose between the marble and the cherry, and, as I've already told you, I couldn't. They were both right, in their own way, but saving lives would always outweigh politics in my book, so I'd have to figure out how to implement Rodney's plan without hurting Scott's career.

As I waited for my check, I saw a waiter walk by with the special of the day – plum cheesecake – and I had an idea. I hated to do it, really, but I couldn't think of any other way.

"Terribly, terribly sorry, Madam, but no one talks directly to Mr. Rathbourne," said the supercilious voice that answered the phone when I dialed the number that had showed up on my caller ID.

"But he called me!" I protested.

"They all say that." The disembodied voice was getting testy. Then it disconnected.

## The Eye Inside

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I stared at the receiver. Beckoning my Meryl Streep as Julia Child voice, I redialed. “Oh, hello. This is Mr. M. Jesus Piazza’s secretary calling to schedule an appointment with Mr. Eric Rathbourne.”

I was put through to a professional but harried-sounding executive assistant who identified herself as Marge. She seemed relieved to find me or, more precisely, me posing as my secretary, on the phone. “Thank God you’ve called. Mr. Rathbourne was furious before he stormed out for lunch that you accidentally connected him to the wrong person. Hell has no fury and all that...”

I gritted my teeth and bore it, although I hate it when people misuse quotes from my beloved authors. The complete quote to which she was referring, *Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned / Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned*, is from a play called *The Mourning Bride* (1697) by William Congreve, and it couldn’t possibly apply to Mr. anybody. Well, at least Marge hadn’t misattributed it.

“Yessiree, William Shakespeare sure had my boss pegged. So, how soon can Mr. Piazza come in? Does three o’clock today work?”

The executive offices of Tai-Pan’s empire resembled the China pavilion at Epcot. Chinese harp music played softly, Oriental vases held stalks of water lilies, and the furniture was upholstered in red silk. Two forbidding antique closed doors led to what I could only presume was Tai-Pan’s inner sanctum. Either that or The Forbidden City, transplanted to the West. The scent of jasmine incense was everywhere.



## The Eye Inside

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There was a bit of confusion that I was a she. But that passed as quickly as the memory of communist China, and I was seated in a conference room that reminded me of Bill Hong's restaurant on East 56<sup>th</sup> Street. I was offered the black lacquered chair with the view of the water (very feng shui, I was assured) and brought tea in a clay pot.

Suddenly, from behind me, I hear: "Welcome, Ms. Piazza. What do you think of our view?"

I turned. And, there he was, surveying the vast sweep of water visible from the lower tip of Manhattan, just below where his offices were located, between the Statue of Liberty and Ground Zero. "Beautiful," I said. "Very freeing."

"Ahhh. Qi rides the wind and scatters, but is retained when encountering water," he replied as he slithered into the lacquered chair across from mine. I was wishing I had brought Rodney with me to help me decipher his meaning. "To what do I owe this honor."

"Actually, you were looking for me first."

"If you know both yourself and your enemy, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss. Those words are from my role model, Sun Tzu, the famous sixth-century B.C. Chinese general."

I was beginning to think I had made a terrible mistake. "You phoned me because I'm the enemy?"

Tai-Pan shook his head and laughed. "I phoned you to discuss the beguiling article you wrote that ran in your paper yesterday. To be precise, it was what I read between the lines that beguiled me. The article itself was rather banal."

## The Eye Inside

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“Banal?”

“Oh yes. Banal and cowardly. Now, we at *The New York Leader* would have been much more direct and creative in attempting engage our opponent. You’re lucky no one else was murdered, because you are no closer to the truth than you were before yesterday’s plant.”

True. “How would you have done it differently?” Fortunately for me, he was playing right into my hands. The best thing about chauvinists like Tai-Pan is that they always underestimate the women they are with. He didn’t see me as the enemy, just a vessel—a Trojan horse—with which to penetrate the enemy’s lines.

“First, we would have put Caitlin Rogers’s murder in the lead paragraph, stating clearly that the police suspect the gruesome Third Eyelid murderer has returned.”

“Why do you suspect they are linked?”

“It’s all over the blogs. Besides, we have our sources at NYPD too.” It was a frightening thought that a deep throat existed within the ranks, maybe the same person who had a couple of years before leaked the Third Eyelid photo to the news. I’d let Mil know about that as quickly as I could. “Second, I would put the article on the front page with a catchy headline, such as ‘Third Eyelid Murderer Makes Cops Blink.’”

Grimacing at his crassness, and reminding me of Klandagi’s silly Operation Blink, I asked: “What if it’s someone else?”

He ignored my question. “And, third, we would run the dead girl’s high-school graduation picture and describe in detail the prize he took home to remember her by.”

“How does this elicit the response we’re looking for, exactly?”

## The Eye Inside

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“What response are you looking for?” he asked wryly.

“We are trying to find a murderer, of course! Preferably before he murders again.”

“Ho-ho. Can’t promise that. But I can promise we’d sell lots of newspapers.”

I sipped my tea. There was something Faustian about the moment, and I knew I was about to make a pact with the Devil himself. But there was beauty in the solution that I could see. “I’d like to help you.”

Eric Rathbourne rubbed his chin. Now, thanks to Rodney, I knew that Tai-Pan wasn’t sure whether to buy it or not. “Help me what?”

“I think there is a way we can both accomplish our goals, but I must remain completely anonymous.”

He snickered. “Do you think our goals are aligned?”

So, taking one of those risks Scott had warned me not to, I confided in Tai-Pan my plan.

“Why are you bringing this to me? It feels like a trap.”

“No trap. Frankly, my paper won’t let me run it. They’re afraid of repercussions.”

Chuckling, he added: “They should just paint a big red bull’s eye on the side of that expensive building they reside in.”

That made me wince. Even though I was choosing the lesser of two evils, and I knew I was protecting Scott, I still felt as though I had just betrayed him. “You in or not?”

## The Eye Inside

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“Hmmm. How much do you want to be paid? We are not the *National Enquirer*, you know, or *Hello!* magazine.”

Just like an empire builder, looking for the best deal, even before a deal is struck. “Nothing. I don’t want to be paid. I just want to write an article that you run on page 1. Tomorrow’s paper. The article has to contain a piece of information that only the murderer could know. This time we direct all replies to a mailbox here at *The Leader* that only I have access to, and, with any luck, we catch our guy or gal.”

Eric “Tai-Pan” Rathbourne went quiet on me. With his eyes squinted and his brow furrowed in thought, he looked as I imagined a sixth-century B.C. Chinese general would. “Two conditions: I also have access to the responses...” I started to protest, but he held his hand up to stop me. “Non-negotiable. And we run the story on Sunday, cover of the paper. That’s when we have the largest circulation.”

“What if...?”

His hand went up again. “Sunday’s deadline is tomorrow at four.” Tai-Pan looked at the watch on the wrist of his upheld hand. “That gives you twenty-four hours, Ms. Piazza, and don’t be late.”

“Done,” I said. And we shook hands.

While I waited in the conference room for Tai-Pan’s warriors to set up an email account and mailbox for my use, I started to craft the article in my head. No one had thought to offer any advice about that elusive yet critical detail that only the real murderer would know. I wrote down the facts as I remembered them from the file we had all reviewed

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and decided I could use a little help from the team. Rodney had left for D.C. at noon for a “home visit,” he’d called it, and Mil would be in his Friday departmental meeting until at least six. When I emerged from Rathbourne’s building, I felt I had been submerged in a sea of suits as Wall Street shut down for the week. I was lucky to find a cab to take me to Gloria’s place in Greenwich Village.

Gloria rented the ground floor of a nineteenth-century townhouse at 4 MacDougal Alley with a large garden for her canine regulars. I rang the bell under the brass plaque that read Gloria Yap, Pupiotress, Cave Canem, LLC.

The bell ignited a 21-gun salute of barks and yips. I barely heard Gloria shout, “Out back.”

I walked along the barrel-shaped red-brick wall, dodging the deposits left by the dogs, to find Gloria cleaning the yard with an industrial-sized pooper-scooper. She wore a blue paper surgical mask, medical waste gloves, and yellow goggles.

“Five minutes,” she said.

No sooner had I sat down on the garden bench than Ginger and Chester, twin English spaniels, brought me a slimy tennis ball to toss and Fang, Gloria’s teacup Chihuahua, jumped in my lap. It was still nippy – the weather, not the dog – and Fang was shivering.

I heard the aluminum top to the waste can slam shut and smelled the citronella torches that Gloria kept lit to mask the scent of the dogs. She glided past me through the French doors to her kitchen, where she washed her hands and brewed us her special dogwood-leaf tea.

## The Eye Inside

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“You feel like telling me why you were acting so weird the other night?” I asked her. Fang and I had followed her into the kitchen.

Gloria’s arms and legs tensed and her back arched, more like a cat than the dogs she so loved. “Hard to tell. Split loyalties.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fact is... not read about those murders couple of years ago. Newspapers around here serve more urgent purpose, if you know what mean.”

I did know. And if I hadn’t, Fang was demonstrating as we spoke. “Yeah, go on...”

“Every Friday evening, meet with a group. It sort of like book club, but no books. We all dog lovers, you see, which how got involved.”

“A dog admiration society?” I was wondering if I should join too.

“So first thought. But turns out more of ...cult.”

“A dog cult? You mean like a witches coven? Do you do animal sacrifices and...”

“NONNONO. Never animal sacrifices...only...human.”

I covered my ears. “Gloria, say no more. I’m an unofficial quasi-associate of the NYPD...”

“Mach, don’t be stupid. I could never hurt a fly. Mostly, we practice growl chants, pray to Doglord, exchange stories – nothing out of ordinary.”

No way was I going to get into the definition of ordinary with Gloria.

## The Eye Inside

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“So what does this dog...cult...have to do with why you went mute the other night when Mil and I were discussing the Third Eyelid murders?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Sworn to secrecy. We seal oath by drinking from cup of Doglord’s blood...”

“You drank blood?”

“Actually, Manischewitz, but it symbolism that counts!”

I groaned. More symbolism, to go with the already confusing ciphers, codes, and cryptics, not to mention the confusing signals that always surround new love. Craving some straight talk, I turned to Fang, who responded with a clear, meaningful bark.

“If you think this cult has anything to do with the murders, you’d better speak up right now!” I insisted. Fang’s self-assurance encouraged me.

“I do one better. I can bring guest if you might join. We encouraged to recruit. You have to bring Kitty as cover.”

“No problem. So, tonight?”

“Meet me here just before midnight.”

I had never been to a cult meeting before, unless you count the nine a.m. core fusion class at Exhale, so I hadn’t a clue what to wear. I figured animal prints were a no-no, and furs, but I didn’t own any of those. I ended up wearing the black pants and sweater I had last worn to my father’s wake a few months before.

## The Eye Inside

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While Kitty and I nibbled on leftovers, I decided to Google Doglord. I doubted anything would come up, but was I mistaken! As I chewed on prosciutto and picked at a hunk of Parmesan cheese, I read: “The Brotherhood of The Dog is a new cult revolving around a being called the Doglord. It began in June 2006, in NW Australia, when its two leaders, the recipients of the Dogvine, first began to inform others about the Doglord and his teachings. It has now spread to three countries, and continues to grow.” I surfed a while longer, until it was time to go.

Kitty loved car trips. I opened the windows of the cab and let the brisk breeze blow in her face. Her nose twitched as she inhaled the city smells – bacon and fries from the greasy spoons on Broadway, popcorn from the multiplex near Lincoln Center, roses from the corner Korean markets – and those other secret scents, the ones too subtle for humans to detect.

When we pulled up in front of Gloria’s place, she was waiting outside. She looked nervous. “Didn’t want wake sleeping dogs.”

“I understand. So where to?”

Gloria shouted the address through the thick plastic dividing the driver from us. Ten minutes later, with the driver rolling slowly, trying to read tarnished numbers over darkened doors, Gloria added: “It on 15<sup>th</sup> Street just off Tenth.”

“The meatpacking district?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?”



## The Eye Inside

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And before I could explain, we pulled up in front of an old loft building with a bar on the ground floor called The Shambles.

# The Eye Inside

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## IX

### Cult-ivate Your Own Backyard

I called his cell and woke him up.

"Urquia, here."

"Mil, you won't believe this. I'm sitting in a taxi in front of The Shambles."

Silence on the line. "The one in the note."

"Are you alone?"

"Gloria is here but she's not listening." I saw Gloria gesticulating madly, signaling that I should get off the phone and out of the cab. She was pointing at her watch. The driver was shooting arrows of impatience at me with his eyes via the rear-view mirror.

"What the hell are you doing there, Mach?" Mil asked. Now that he was fully awake I could hear the agitation in his voice.

"Gloria and I...oh, never mind. The question is, why didn't the cops pick up on this place after the last batch of killings?"

"I doubt they were looking for a bar."

"You mean they screwed up."

"Guess so. What's the address? I'll be there soon."

"Uh...I've got this one, Mil. Gloria and I are just two girls out on a Friday night."

"Bar hopping? Doesn't sound like you, Mach." Kitty growled at a Doberman pinscher walking his master past the window of the cab. "Is that your dog? You take your dog out partying? Now I've heard it all..."

## The Eye Inside

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I paid the driver and joined Gloria in front of the large steel door leading upstairs to where the cult met. Scratching Kitty behind the ears to calm her down, I said, "At least you don't have to worry, Mil. I have protection."

The elevator opened to a huge unfinished loft above the bar. I recognized the Doberman and his owner. There were about 16 or so other people there but only two other dogs. Gloria explained: "Only new members bring dogs. Think of it like co-op interview."

"What do I have to do if I'm accepted?" I whispered.

"Believe it or not, nothing. This group doesn't insist followers actually believe any teachings or claims, not required to do anything. Information provided to members about cult's beliefs and cult-related activities and roles, and left up to member to decide whether or not to do or believe anything. Many members stay negative on both choices, as can be expected, considering nature of cult's beliefs and suggested activities."

"So why join?"

Gloria shrugged. "Good networking for my business."

At exactly midnight, a gong was struck. A man, about 30 years old, emerged from behind a black sheet, and the rest of those present took seats on the floor in a large circle.

"Greetings," said the leader. "I see we have some newcomers. I am Fido. I receive and interpret the Doglord's teachings, which are sent to me and my brethren over the Dogvine. Please state your code name and introduce your spiritual alter ego."

Really, it was all I could do not to laugh.

## The Eye Inside

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The guy with the Doberman stood up. The Doberman snarled, baring tartar-covered canines the size of one of Mil's bullets, and I'd bet they were just as dangerous. Kitty hates bullies as much as I do, so she glared at him until he cowered behind his master. "Hello," said the dog's master, a gentle-giant type, soft-spoken and towering. A 40-something African-American with shiny skin and cropped hair. "I'm Jim, and this here's Huck."

"Welcome, Jim and Huck," rippled through the circle as everyone said it. But for the absence of folding chairs, and the substitution of People crackers for Oreos, the scene was eerily reminiscent of Mil's AA meeting at St. John the Divine.

A young woman with a nose ring, a peace tattoo on her wrist, and a magenta spike introduced herself as Candy and her chocolate Lab as Snickers. I leaned over and whispered in Gloria's ear: "From Mars!" I was silently snickering at my own joke when I suddenly realized all eyes were on me. I gulped.

I stood up with Kitty in my arms. "Uh...this here is my dog... Russell. And I'm Jack!" Lame, I admit, but it was the first thing that popped into my head!

"Welcome, Jack," circulated. It sounded like the air slowly escaping from a balloon.

Fido shifted on his hind quarters. "The beliefs of the Brotherhood of the Dog are confidential and must not leave this room. Those who violate this command will be punished."

How? No bark-park for a week?

## The Eye Inside

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Kitty had had enough of this puppycock and was squirming in my lap. Gloria took her from me and whispered in her ear; Kitty immediately calmed down. She snuggled close to Gloria and closed her eyes. "Witchcraft," I muttered under my breath.

"Not at all," said Fido, clearly the alpha in this pack with extra sensory hearing. "We are a secret society of dog worshippers. The Doglord for whom I speak teaches us how to unleash our inner dog, by performing various actions encouraging it to come out, and once unleashed, we achieve Doghood." He stared at me as if he would bite. "Anyone, human or canine, not willing to respect our rites, please take your leave now."

I raised my hand. "I'd like to learn more before committing."

"Fine," he barked. "But whether you join or not, you must drink the blood of the Doglord and keep all that you witness here secret."

Nodding my head, I sipped from the goblet of Manischewitz that had made its way around the circle to me. "So how do I get in touch with my inner dog and become unleashed?"

"The actions required to encourage this unleashing are varied. For example, on the third new moon of each year the 'rite of basking' is performed. If you join, details will follow."

Suddenly, Jim spoke out. Loudly and clearly. "I'm in....all my life I wanted my inner dog to be free."

"Hallelujah," said Candy sweetly.

## The Eye Inside

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Oh Christ. What had they spiked the Manischewitz with?

Fido continued: “Excellent! The cult also has its own special day, Dogmas, which is four weeks after Christmas, and during the month leading up to Dogmas cult members are encouraged to make offerings to the Doglord and give treats and presents to dogs, whether those dogs be their own pets or strays. Of course, these offerings may be in the form of a sacrifice instead...”

Gloria pinched my thigh but she didn’t need to. I got it. It was easy to see how some twisted mind could believe sacrificing beautiful young humans to the Doglord could win him the pick of the litter when he went to the great kennel in the sky.

And the sermon continued: “...as long as these sacrifices occur in sets of three during the four weeks before the big day.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that it had been five days since Caitlin Rogers’s body had been found and twenty-six more days until Dogmas. That would mean, if the Third Eyelid murderer was back, two more girls might be dead before the end of the month.

Fido kept yapping while Kitty and I headed for the door. We had not a moment to lose. Gloria was on our tails.

Back on the street, we decided to step into the Shambles to check out the place. Outside the bar I put on Kitty’s Service Dog vest (it’s legit – I’m an emotional mess without her). And who should be sitting at the bar nursing a Coke but Mil.

His face brightened when we walked in. “Boy, am I glad to see you three. Where have you been? I’ve been sitting here for twenty minutes.”

## The Eye Inside

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"We were snooping out dog cult," Gloria said as if it were the most normal activity in the world. Like having our nails done.

Mil laughed. It was clear he thought we were kidding.

"No, really. Gloria gave us a lead on the Rogers case." I filled him in on the sacrifices to the Doglord in pursuit of one's inner dog as described by Fido.

The wine at the cult meeting had left a bad taste in my mouth, so I ordered a diet Coke. I didn't like to drink alcohol in front of Mil anyway. Gloria had a Perrier.

Mil rubbed his face. "I thought I'd heard it all, but I've never heard of a dog cult before."

"Quite common," Gloria replied. "Lots of weirder things to worship."

"Still..." Mil kept laughing, so loudly that a man at the other end of the bar stared.

I could see that Gloria was getting irritated by Mil's treatment of the subject. "You need some training!" she said. Mil stood up. "Sit!" Gloria continued. "Animal worship preceded modern religion. Many ancient myths about gods disguising themselves as animals to hide from enemies. Then people began to worship the animals their gods disguised themselves as, just like god itself."

"How come my Sunday school teachers said that animals have no souls?" I asked, polishing off my diet Coke and a bowl of peanuts.

"There was a time when animals were center of religion. Especially in Africa, deity incarnate was the belief that gods presented themselves as animals so could live among human beings. Monotheism, by definition, rejected notion. It elevated the

## The Eye Inside

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concept of divinity to something otherworldly," she explained. "To complete switch, monotheists had to debase animals by claiming they were unclean and had no souls."

The guy at the end of the bar was still staring. "Shhh. Maybe we should lower our voices," I said.

"Because of Mr. Red and Black hunting jacket down there?" Mil asked.

Gloria whispered, "He been watching us since we walk in."

"And what about dog-specific animal worship?" Mil asked Gloria, so loudly and deliberately that Rodney could have heard him down in D.C.

I noticed our ecouteur from down the bar move a couple of stools closer.

"Dogs have major religious significance among Hindus, who believe dogs guard doors of Heaven. To ingratiate themselves with canine gatekeepers, they celebrate Dog's Day. Nosarii of western Asia and Karang of Java worship dogs. In this country, I only find Bony Dog cult that believe in dogs as being from an alternate plane of existence..."

"That's just plain weird!" Mil exclaimed.

"...and Brotherhood of the Dog, newly imported from Australia. That meeting Mach and I just come from."

Our eavesdropper from down the bar stood up, threw a few dollars on the counter, and headed for the door. As he passed us, my normally gentle Kitty growled with the ferocity she usually reserves for ferrets and Doberman pinschers.



## The Eye Inside

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Gloria said Goodnight and gave Kitty a nuzzle. Mil offered to drop me off at my place on West End as he headed home to Upper Manhattan.

“So, how’d you make out with Scott?” Mil asked.

“You’ve read about the takeover threat, I presume?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Scott, one of my dearest and oldest friends, practically bit my head off when I suggested another article aimed at engaging the murderer. Says it’s too risky.”

“Damn. What now?”

“I took a risk of my own. I went to *The New York Leader* with the story. It’ll be on Sunday’s front page.”

“What will Scott say when he finds out you gave your scoop to a competitor.”

“Mil, I’m praying he doesn’t find out. And swear that you won’t tell anyone about this. Especially your colleagues.”

“Why, Mach? Nobody at OCME or NYPD talks to the press...”

“Oh yes they do. Mil, you’ve got a mole. Maybe two. One who leaked the Third Eyelid picture and note to Michelle Santiago and one who talks regularly to Tai-Pan...”

“I always wondered if that first note was leaked. Didn’t make sense that the murderer would send one and not all of his messages. Not unless he ran out of stamps.”

Mil and I parted company but I had the strangest feeling I still wasn’t alone as I wrote the subway up Broadway. I kept looking over my shoulder on the walk toward

## The Eye Inside

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West End but the streets were as empty as a bachelor's fridge. That sense of eyes on my back stayed with me right up until I closed the building door and went upstairs.

'Twas the night before Saturday, whilst searching my soul, a creature was stirring, I'd bet 'twas the mole...

## The Eye Inside

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X

### The (Jeff) Bridges to Nowhere

All my life I've gotten small crushes on male characters in books and movies. That's a lie. I've fallen head over heels, imagining myself in their arms, weeping at their pain. I dream about them. I know it's absurd, especially for a practical girl like me. But I figured out that it's a safe way of filling that desire I have for love without the responsibility that comes from having to return it.

What started as a teenage crush on Mr. Darcy from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* had blossomed into romantic fantasies about men whom I would never meet, much less men who might return my affections; I am as those women are who only have platonic relationships with other women's husbands — committed to unrequited love. But at least my way doesn't hurt anybody else.

So on this frigid Saturday night, alone with a quart of Edy's Slow-Churn Low Fat ice cream (Kitty and I are partial to the French Silk flavor), I watched a bunch of Jeff Bridges movies. From *Last Picture Show* to *Crazy Heart*, I imagined myself loved by this crazy "Dude" (that from *The Big Lebowski*) who embodied all those qualities I wished I could find in a real man: humble charm, intellect, depth, humor, and blatant sex appeal.

Halfway through *Crazy Heart*, and the quart of French Silk, while I was wishing Bad Blake was in love with me instead of that other newspaper reporter played by Maggie Gyllenhall, it hit me, like a rear-end collision, the origin of my sudden obsession

## The Eye Inside

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with Jeff Bridges. It was his intense, bright-blue-eyed stare that made me think of two headlights in the dark...uh-oh.

The buzzer from the downstairs vestibule rang. It was nine p.m., and I was already wearing my sleeping attire, namely a pair of flannel Disney-character PJ bottoms and one of Scott's old Amherst T-shirts that I had pilfered back when he and I were an item.

"Who's there?" I asked into the intercom. You'd have to be crazy, or from Kansas, to buzz anyone in blind.

"It's me."

Oh Christ! I pressed the button to release the downstairs door. Then I flew like a tornado, throwing my night clothes under the bed, my ice cream container in the trash, and turning off the DVD. Kitty had run to the front door and was scratching and growling at the crack beneath the frame. I fluffed my hair, applied a touch of lip gloss, and donned the still-new purple kimono I had bought at the Japan Society on East 47<sup>th</sup> Street years ago.

"Hello, Mach." And before I could say, "Hi, Rodney. What are you doing here? And who's that big black dog with the sad eyes?" he kissed me with the passion shown Isolde by Tristan, Juliet by Romeo, Cleopatra by Antony, Lady by the Tramp!

Then he unleashed his dog (the outer, not the inner one), tossed a few puppy biscuits on the floor of the living room, carried me into the bedroom, and kicked the door closed.

## The Eye Inside

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A couple of hours later, sated beyond my wildest dreams, knowing this night would replace all my fictional lovers with the memory of this flesh-and-blood one, I slipped into the kitchen to get us a couple of bottles of Poland Springs. Kitty had Watson cornered. She was guarding her puppy biscuit as if it were the last one on earth.

I gazed longingly at Rodney, who lay supine on the bed. Mil had no idea how apt his nickname for my now lover would turn out to be. "We can go with the dogs to Central Park tomorrow with Gloria's group. Have you ever seen the penguin house at the zoo? How about dinner tomorrow night at Spice Market, for old times' sake?" I was percolating like a coffee pot as I handed him a bottle of water.

"Yes," he said before making love to me again.

We must have dozed off because I heard the dogs barking before I heard the buzzer again, persistent as a horn through a cloud of fog. There'd be hell to pay with the neighbors in the morning, if that wasn't one of them at the front door now.

"Who's there?" I whispered into the intercom for the second time that night.

"It's me."

Oh Christ! I pressed the button to let him up. Through the crack in the bedroom door, I could see Rodney still asleep. I tiptoed over to shut the door.

Before my new guest could ring the bell and set off the alarms, so to speak, I opened the door. When he stepped off the elevator, overnight bag in hand, I said:

"Scott, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

## The Eye Inside

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"I'm so sorry, Mach. I hate to wake you up, but hotels are so expensive and I didn't know where else to go."

"Did you have a fire? A flood?"

Scott strode past me and sat heavily on the sofa. "No. Worse. At least those disasters are insurable. It's my sister again. Rob has the kids this weekend, so she went to a party and met a guy..."

"I see. So this guy doesn't have a place of his own?"

"Apparently he lives with his mother."

"You're kidding?"

"Lisa thinks she's Demi Moore." Finally Scott noticed Watson in the corner. "I feel the way that poor old hound looks. Who does he belong to, anyway?"

"Uh...I'm watching him for a friend."

From the bedroom, Rodney called out: "Mach, are you talking to the dogs out there? Get that gorgeous arse back in this..." And before I could warn him we had company, he walked stark naked into the living room. Unperturbed, Rodney thrust out his hand and said, "I'm Rod. Good to meet you."

I thought Scott would faint. "Oh, Mach, I'm so sorry, I should have called first..."

"It's O.K., Scott," I said. "You couldn't have known."

A nervous titter rose from the back of Scott's throat. Kitty, always one to seize an opportunity, dove through the open bedroom door, I presumed to reclaim her

## The Eye Inside

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accustomed position on the pillow next to mine. Watson, free at last from his jailor, shifted position and moaned.

“It’s just that of all the people I know, you’re the last one I suspected might have a...” He looked Rodney up and down, settled his gaze in the middle “...overnight guest.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Now, now, Mach, I’m sure your friend has a very good explanation for his middle-of-the-night intrusion. A fire? Or a flood perhaps?” Rodney was still naked.

“What did you say your name was again?”

“Scott.”

“As in the toilet tissue?” Rodney asked.

Oh dear. “Scott is my boss, Rodney. I’ve told you about him. And, Rodney is...from the FBI.”

Scott sneered. “What’s that? Friendly Bedders International?”

“Now, boys, let’s play nice. You are both very important to me. This is worthy of a good laugh and a glass of champagne. I mean, could it be any more awkward?”

In that moment of silence, while both men were considering my question, Kitty emerged from the bedroom and dropped Rodney’s boxers at his feet.

Thus dressed in his boxers (I hadn’t noticed the pink whales when he had taken them off!) and relaxed by the champagne we all shared, Rodney helped Scott pull out the sofa bed and I handed Scott a pile of linens, a comforter, and a pillow.

## The Eye Inside

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Rodney and I, and Watson and Kitty, filed into the bedroom and closed the door. Now that we were all friends, I fell quickly asleep in Rodney's arms without a care in the world.

I was wakened by a jackhammer.

"Who is bloody drilling on Sunday morning, Mach?" Rodney groaned.

"That is odd. I think the city has nondisturbance laws. Let me check." I looked out the window and saw a street as abandoned as a ghost town. Then I realized it was that damned buzzer again.

I pressed the button. In a weary voice I asked, "Who's there?"

"It's me."

Oh Christ!

By this time, Scott and Rodney were both awake, as well as Kitty and Watson. They all followed me to the door as if I were the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

"Holy sugar!" Mil said. "What's this? A mélange fois gras?"

"It's a ménage à trios, Mil," I corrected him.

"Whatever. I didn't think you had it in you, Mach."

"What the hell does that mean?" I know I shouldn't have been insulted, but I was.

Mil rubbed his hand over his face. "Never mind. I came over here to show you *The New York Leader*. Front page, look at that headline."



## The Eye Inside

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“Third Eyelid Sets Sights on Pregnant College Coed,” I read it out loud. Beneath the headline was a photo of a beautiful young woman in a graduation cap and gown. It was Caitlin Rogers.

“May I?” Scott grabbed the paper out of Mil’s hand and sat down on the sofa. Rodney joined him. While they read, Mil filled me in on the content.

“How did the *Leader* know she was pregnant?” I asked.

“How did the *Leader* know any of this?” Scott wanted to know. “And who the hell is Anonymous? I wonder if Tai-Pan has our phones bugged.”

I gulped. “Now don’t be paranoid, Scott.”

Scott slammed his fist on my coffee table. Good thing it’s wood, not glass. Then he stood up and took a step toward me. “Don’t you see, Mach? It’s a strategy. First he scoops us and then he scoops us up.”

I put my hand on his arm. “Please don’t overreact. After all, the first story was all over the blogs; you said so yourself – it was bound to happen. And you wouldn’t let me write another story for us.”

I noticed a spark of understanding in Rodney’s eyes. He moved protectively between me and Scott.

“Alrighty now,” Mil said. “Let’s not worry about how they got the story but what it means for our case.”

“Excellent proposal, detective,” Rodney chimed in.

“Why, thank you, B-Rod,” Mil said.

“B-Rod?” Rodney looked at me quizzically.

## The Eye Inside

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I shot Mil a disapproving glance. "It has to do with baseball," I explained. "It's a compliment!"

The situation felt as though it was careening out of control. It really didn't bother me that my lover, ex-lover, and partner were standing in my tiny living room in varying degrees of cover; neither did it trouble me that Kitty had Watson cornered again, nor that they both needed to be walked. What was causing me distress was that I had lied.

"Scott, there's something I need to tell you. You'd better sit back down."

He took it pretty well, considering. After a few moments, during which he digested what I had just spoon-fed him, he broke into hardy laughter and couldn't stop. As laughter is nothing if not contagious, we all joined in. And that's how Gloria found us when she stuck her key in the door to pick up Kitty, and now Watson, for their walk.

# The Eye Inside

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## XI

### The Morning After

Scott went home to set some ground rules with Lisa and Mil stepped out to buy coffee and bagels. Rodney and I showered (together!) and were dressed and ready to work when Mil returned.

It was cold but crystal clear in New York that January day. After eating, we walked the few blocks from my place to Central Park, where we caught up with Gloria and her charges including Watson and Kitty. We all settled down on a green park bench.

"I liked your article for the *Leader* Mach. More sizzle than your usual fare." Mil said.

"Let's just say that what I actually wrote bears little resemblance to what was published."

"They tampered with your prose?" Rodney asked. "What dogs they are."

Gloria curled her lip at Rodney's slanderous comment but before she could nip Rodney said to me, "Your mobile is awfully quiet. Hope our killer bites."

"My name isn't associated with the article so any feedback or replies will go to an email box at the *Leader*. We can log on and check it when we get home."

"You're the only one with access to it, I hope," Mil said. He was rubbing his hands together and blowing on them for warmth.

"Only me...and Eric Rathbourne."

All three faces turned to look at me.

## The Eye Inside

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“Shit!” Mil said.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t like it either. But it was a deal-breaker.”

“Can we go soon? I’m itching to see if your piece got any responses and I’m freezing my nuts off,” Mil said.

Gloria looked at her watch. Putting two fingers in her mouth, the way some people call for cabs, she whistled. Within seconds, all eight dogs with us that day bolted in her direction, lining up like horses at the gate, waiting to be re-leashed rather than released. She handed the leashes for Watson and Kitty to Rodney, saying as she did, “Mach tell you about weirdo in bar. He dressed like tablecloth. Listen to every word we say. Got my dander up. That for sure.”

“There are always some lunatics about. It would be a dull world without them,” Rodney replied. “Recognize that one Mach?”

It took me a minute to review my Holmes repertoire. “*The Adventure of the Three Gables?*”

“Spot on,” he said.

“You know, one of these days you’re going to run out of stories,” I said, not knowing then how true that statement would turn out to be.

In my apartment, I set my laptop up on the dining room table so all of us could see. New York would just be getting up – it was only around 10 am – there were dozens of letters to Anonymous in the box, mostly parents panicked about the fate of their college-age co-eds. There were a few letters protesting the graphic nature of the photos,

## The Eye Inside

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a couple professing to know who the murderer was, one touting the services of his crime-scene cleaning service. None, so far, in code.

Our little band had decided to disperse and to reconvene later in the day or as soon as a viable lead presented itself. I made my bed, cleaned up the kitchen and living room. Tidying up the bathroom, I waffled for a while about whether or not I should toss or keep the now used spare toothbrush before deciding to allow it to occupy a place of honor next to mine in the ceramic holder I had picked up last summer at the Pottery Barn clearance sale. Ordered restored, I lay down on the couch. Kitty jumped up and pressed close to my thigh, resting her chin near my knee. I felt the slightest sigh of contentment make its way from her belly to escape from her nose. That tiny expression served as a catalyst for my tears.

I sobbed buckets that afternoon. By the time I was done, my eyes were swollen shut and my chest felt tight. With so many disappointments in love I thought the dam I had built up was impregnable but the rushing of my tears made me realize the gully Rodney had formed and I couldn't help but wonder how long my reservoir of self-protection could last.

From my belly to my nose I felt fear.

## The Eye Inside

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XII

By four o'clock that afternoon the television media were all over the story like ants at a picnic.

Michelle Santiago was giving live breaking news updates from the Columbia University campus. In the lull between regurgitating the facts revealed in my article in *The Leader* and waiting for new news, Michele performed as admirable as an admissions tour guide, French-manicured fingers pointing to Columbia's Low Rotunda, St. Paul's Chapel the Dodge Miller Theater and Buell Hall, from her perch on the steps in front of the massive sculpture Alma Mater. She was saying, "...coincidentally my mother is a professor here at the Columbia School of Journalism, where I also earned my degree..." when the phone rang. It was Mil.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Crap."

"Maybe he's laying low, Mil. I'm watching TV - it's a feeding frenzy out there."

"Tell me about it. CNN has posted a countdown until the next murder."

I flipped the channel from Michelle Santiago's on the scene report to Wolf Blitzer in the Situation Room. "How do they know when the next murder is scheduled? It's not a movie...it's life."

"Maybe this was a mistake. Who died and appointed B-Rod in charge anyway?"

Never could figure out the logic in valuing a consultant's view over one of our own."

## The Eye Inside

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"I guess it's the objectivity..."

"What a load of bull. Just the department feeling insecure about its abilities.

Everybody always thinks the other guy's is bigger."

He had a point there. "Maybe. But, in this case, Rodney is smart and possesses skills none of us has. I trust him."

Mil snorted. "Yeah. And you think you're objective?"

"So how do you think CNN thinks they know when the next murder will take place?" I asked, changing the subject. But before Mil could speculate I knew the answer as Wolf Blitzer introduced CNN's new expert correspondent, Josh Hartsdale, AKA Fido.

"Thank you for joining us remotely today from your headquarters in New York City," Wolf said in his usual polite way.

"Mil, are you watching this?"

"You bet. Wolf, Fido...this friggin' world is goin' to the dogs."

"Hang on a sec...call waiting."

I hit the flash button on my phone. It was Gloria. "Mach, you see CNN! It Fido - from dog meeting."

"Uh-huh. Watching it now. Mil's on the other line...I'm gonna conference you in."

Gloria was spewing expletives in her Korean accent so there was no reason to let Mil know she had joined our call. "He so full dog shit...he say cult secret...now he on national TV! He no better than televangelist ... he like, he like...."

## The Eye Inside

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"The Billy Graham of the Doglord?" I suggested.

"Shhh," Mil said. "Let's listen."