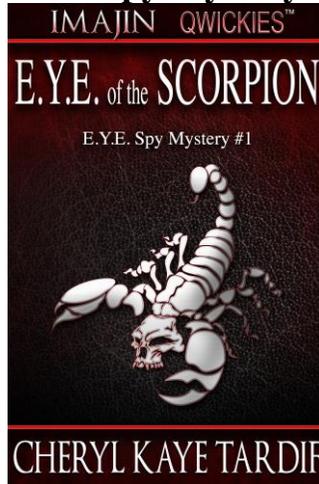


E.Y.E. OF THE SCORPION

E.Y.E. Spy Mystery #1



CHERYL KAYE TARDIF

E.Y.E. OF THE SCORPION: E.Y.E. Spy Mystery #1

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E.Y.E. OF THE SCORPION by Cheryl Kaye Tardif

Chapter One

The Grim Reaper often came knocking when it was unexpected. That was something Eileen Edwards had figured out years ago. So when the phone on her desk rang at just after eight in the morning on Sunday, February 8th, she knew it wouldn't be good news.

"Call from Law-ree Nor-man," the androgynous call display voice told her.

Constable Larry Norman was a detective in Vancouver's Gang Task Force—and her former partner.

Eileen picked up the phone and grimaced as a twinge of pain shot through her right hand. "Sorry I can't come to the phone right now. Please leave your name and—"

"Really, Eileen? Is that the best you can do?"

"—after the beep. *Beeeeep*."

There was a slight pause. Then Larry said, "You done?"

She sighed and adjusted her reading glasses. "I hope this is a crank call."

"I need a favor. I need you to find a street kid named Zipper."

"You do know this is Family Day weekend *and* my first weekend off in forever."

"But you're already up and working anyway," Larry said.

Eileen leaned back in the chair and glanced across the room. The white letters on the glass door of the office reminded her that *E.Y.E. Spy Investigations* had bills to pay. "How do you know? Maybe you woke me."

Larry chuckled. "You're in your office. I can hear your printer gasping for breath in the background."

She glared at the hefty, aging machine that was busy groaning and vomiting up paper like Linda Blair puking up pea soup. Maybe the printer needed an exorcism. Papers scattered on the floor told her she'd forgotten to extend the catch tray again. Another sheet shot out, and she caught it before it hit the floor with the others.

"You know, you should really trade that antique in for a modern printer," Larry said. "Maybe one built after 1990."

"It works fine. Now what's so important about this Zippy kid?"

"Zipper."

"What did he do—kill someone?"

"No, the opposite. We think he witnessed a murder."

"Poor kid." She sighed. "What do you know about him?"

"Not much. He's about fourteen. No priors. His mother is dead. Father unknown. He's not a big kid—wears a Canucks cap and gets around by skateboard."

Eileen scribbled notes on the back of the paper. "What's his real name?"

“No idea. He was raised by the street. Everyone calls him Zipper.”

She frowned. “Is he a prostitute?”

“No. He’s just fast on a skateboard.”

“Then they should have called him Zippy. Tell me about the murder.”

“You know I’m not supposed to talk about an active GTF investigation.”

“I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“Okay,” Larry said, lowering his voice, “but you didn’t hear this from me.”

“Hear what?”

There was a brief pause before he spoke again. “There was a gang hit on Thursday around 2:00 a.m.”

“Any casualties?”

“One body. Chen Li, a full-patch member of the Silver Scorpions.”

“Guess Li will be riding Hell’s highway now.”

The Silver Scorpions Motorcycle Club was a multiracial gang that ran illegal narcotics up and down the west coast. It wasn’t unusual to see a convoy of intimidating riders wearing black leather vests with the silver-on-red colors and silver scorpion logo on the back as they cruised south on Highway 99.

“What was Li’s rank?” she asked.

“He *was* Pablo Alvarez’s VP.”

A few years ago Eileen had a run-in with Alvarez, the president of the SSMC. The man had a violent temper. “Alvarez must be pissed off losing his vice president and right-hand man.”

“Oh, he’s more than pissed off, Eileen. Alvarez is dead too. Fell down a flight of stairs just over a week ago. The Scorpions kept his death under wraps. Literally. Yesterday a health inspector found him buried in a crate of tortillas in the storage room at Mama Mia’s Casa.”

“Ugh. Remind me never to eat there.”

“With Alvarez dead—”

“—Li moved from vice president to president,” she finished.

“You got it. Except Chen Li’s reign came with an early expiration date.”

“So who’s inherited the gavel now?”

“We have no idea.”

“Where was Li found?”

“In an alley just off East Hastings Street. I’ll text you the address.”

“How did he die?”

“Two bullets to the head. Word on the street is that Li was executed by a rival gang over a shipment of botched counterfeit casino chips. Everything points to the Indie Warriors. We’re interviewing two of their prospects now.”

“You think an IW killed Li to get a patch?”

“You know how these MC initiations work. Prospects have to prove their loyalty and worth.”

“Are you expecting blowback from the Scorpions?”

“Retaliation is always possible. If there’s a gang war brewing in Vancouver,

we need to stop it before innocent people get caught in the crossfire.”

Eileen couldn't agree more. “What makes you think this Zipper kid saw Li go down?”

“Zipper hangs out in that area. There's a bookstore two buildings down from where Chen was killed. The owner of the store often gives Zipper old books to read. Problem is, no one's seen the kid in days.”

“Since the killing,” she guessed.

“Exactly. Intel says he's on the run. And he won't last long without our protection.”

“If I take this case,” she said, “you'll owe me big.”

“Thanks, Eileen.”

“Thank me when I find the kid.”

“I'll do that. By the way, no one else at the department knows I've called you in to locate him.”

“Got it. One more thing, Larry.”

“What's that?”

“Since it's my day off, I'm billing you for today. Double time.”

Eileen hung up the phone and stared down at the scribbled notes, contemplating what Zipper must have done to survive. Drug trafficking, theft, prostitution—those were only three possibilities out of many.

The slithering underbelly of Vancouver had calcified scales, while its half-hidden face had razor-sharp fangs that injected a devious poison of hopelessness into its prey. Survival of the fittest reigned supreme on the streets. Most long-term runaways ended up joining one of the prominent gangs like the Silver Scorpions, which were responsible for the city's drug and prostitution problems. No one living on the streets of the city was immune to the seduction of a street gang posing as a motorcycle club and replacement family.

A decade ago the Demonios de Los Muertos (DLM) had sauntered north of the US border, smuggling hardcore military-grade weapons into Canada. There were even whispers that the Scorpions and DLM were negotiating a merge. Then there were the Indie Warriors, which consisted of various First Nations bands. The IW laundered dirty money for the other gangs through the casinos.

As a former police officer and now a private investigator, Eileen knew all about the part of the city most tourists never saw—the ugly and often deadly part. They saw the beauty of the ocean and mountains, but they complained about the traffic and the rain.

Removing her reading glasses, she tucked them into her blouse pocket and peered out the window. A dismal gray stained the winter sky, as though someone had thrown a can of watery paint into the air. A few splatters of rain hit the windowsill, but mostly the moisture clung to the ashen clouds, expanding by the minute like some kind of alien mold. It would pour later, probably when most inconvenient. Like rush hour.

She drew in a deep breath. Then she rose from the chair, locked the glass

door that led outside and headed toward a second door at the far end, which deposited her in the living room of the three-bedroom Coquitlam bungalow she'd bought with Frank almost seventeen years ago. During the divorce, she'd fought to keep her home. It held too many memories, and she couldn't find the courage to move away, even though some of those memories were painful.

She shook her head. *Don't think of that now.*

Her gaze drifted across the massive room with its semi-open floor plan, "semi" because of the narrow wall featuring a wood-burning fireplace that stood between the living room and the kitchen. At the far end, wall-to-wall windows overlooked a lush backyard. Above her, a vaulted ceiling with a cedar beam ran along the peak, and a ceiling fan dangled from a brass cord in the center. To her right, the granite kitchen counters gleamed in various shades of sand and gold. The walls were pale beige, with a hint of peach. The warm color carried through to the rest of the house, except for two rooms. Her bedroom at the end of the hall was a pale aqua.

"Sand and ocean," she'd told the painters when she'd repainted the interior. Since she couldn't afford a house with an ocean view, she'd created her own beach world, her sanctuary.

She strode to the kitchen island and made a cup of chai tea. She never drank coffee anymore. She had enough bitterness in her life without assaulting her taste buds too.

Settling into the chocolate-colored leather couch, she sipped her tea and listened to the music that wafted through the speakers below the flat-screen television Larry had bought her as a housewarming gift. She'd argued with him that it was too expensive a gift, but he'd insisted.

Now if she could only figure out how to use the remote control. Apparently she had a PVR too, if only she could figure out how to record her shows on it. There was another remote for that. When the Shaw guy had installed it, he'd spent ten minutes explaining how the machine worked. In one ear and out the other. No matter how hard she tried, anything to do with technology simply didn't stick, and since she couldn't figure out how to do anything other than watch TV, she used the music channels instead of the stereo that Larry had kindly programmed into the TV remote control.

Something buzzed beside her. Her cell phone. It was a six-year-old LG model with text. Nothing fancy like kids had these days. What did she need with FacePlace or whatever it was called? And that Tweety thing everyone did? Who needed all those distractions?

Larry's text message had arrived, and she made a face when she read the address. Not a part of the city she liked to be in.

She checked her watch. 8:48.

Downing the remainder of the tea, she let out a sigh then stood. It was time to go find a missing kid.

What was his name again? Zippy?

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