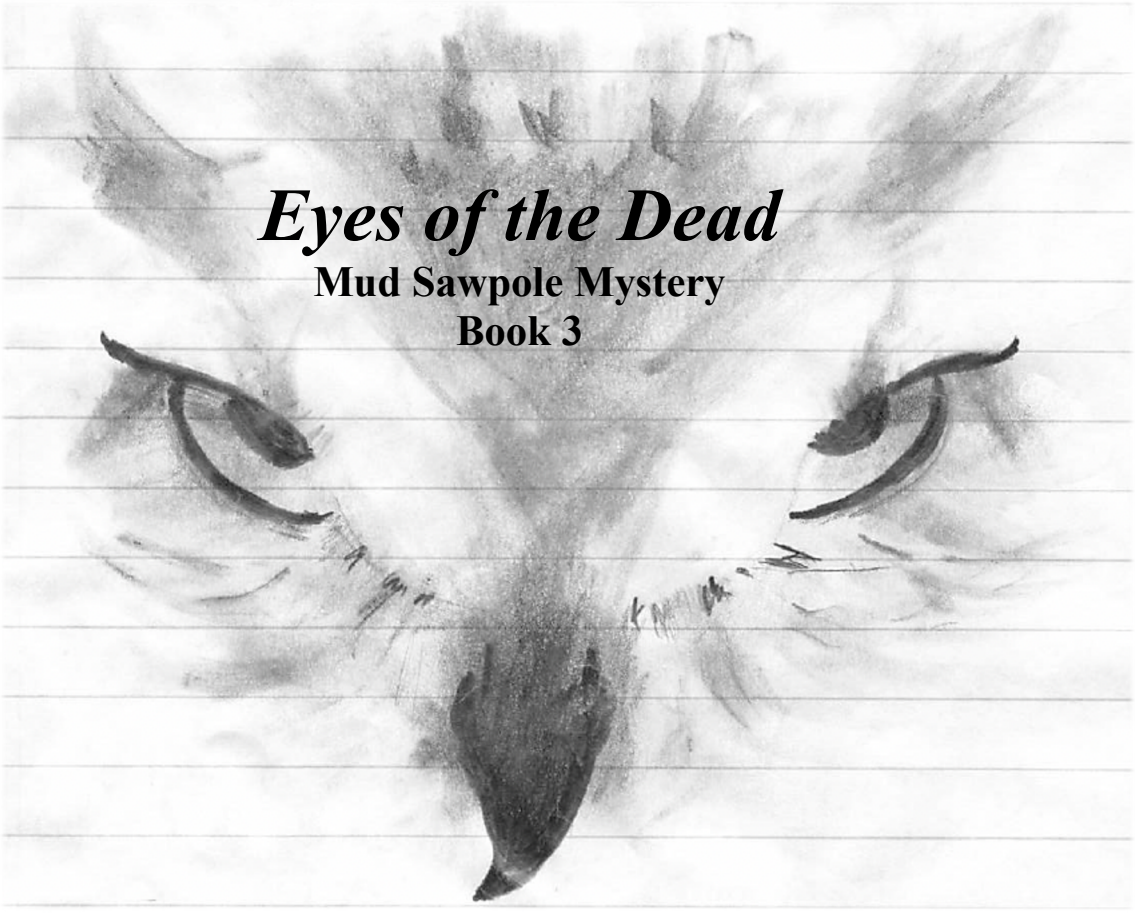

Eyes of the Dead

Mud Sawpole Mystery
Book 3

By

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Koyh Mi O Boy Dah

HUMAN AUTHORED

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Chapter One

Clouds swept by, rushing to wherever the winds insisted. I squinted to look intently into the swirling mists. A shape took form. Glowing yellow eyes emerged first; they stared deep into my soul. Curved wings with dark, brown striping glided towards me. Claws pierced my shirt as an owl soundlessly emerged out of the clouds and landed on my shoulder.

Sharp claws dug deep into my flesh securing its footing. The owl pecked at my ear, demanding attention. With three deep hoots that chilled me to the bone, the All-Seeing Owl's message delivered a feeling of doom. Task completed, the owl prepared for takeoff. Its claws digged deeper into my shoulder. Pain shot down my arm.

"Miss, wake up. We're landing in a few minutes. Please bring your seat to an upright position." The woman released my shoulder.

Disoriented, I said nothing; just stared into round, owl-like eyes. I tried to shake clouds from my mind. I struggled to remember, what had the All-Seeing Owl said?

The flight attendant, tired of my sleep-deprived stupor, reached across me to press the button that raised my seat to the proper upright position. Satisfied, she pursed her lips, shook her head and continued down the plane's aisle. The pursed lips only enhanced her owl-like appearance. I stared after her.

The pilot's announcement about landing at San Francisco International airport broke through the haze. Memories returned in a rush. After two sleep-deprived, adventure-filled days in Oklahoma. I was back home, just in time to get to the nearby Silicon Valley Conference Center for my most important client's hugely anticipated Initial Public Offering.

My small agency had worked with Richard Forte's startup company, Cache-It, to formulate its story then translate that into compelling executive presentations that announced the

new company and its innovative products to the world. Cache-It's successful IPO launch would propel my corporate storytelling agency, VisualAdvantage, to national prominence.

At the sacrifice of other clients, I'd put in months of long hours to shape the newly formed company's image, logo, and story. Now we were just hours away from its introduction to the corporate world and the stock market.

I shifted in the uncomfortable airline seat, shook my head and tried to clear my brain fog. My mind was sluggish. I'd slept through the four-hour flight, but I'd had little sleep in the last couple days. My traditional Kiowa grandfather claimed I was in the midst of an untraditional four-day quest, this being the third day. I hoped he was wrong; I was way too busy to find myself.

Something lingered, a bad feeling I couldn't shake. It wasn't trouble with Richard and Cache-It. Bernie, my operations manager had all the elements of the executive presentations created and ready for an on stage walk-through before tomorrow's big event. It was tight, but I had time to get from my flight to the rehearsal. So no, that wasn't it. Where did this sense of foreboding come from?

What had I dreamed? There was an owl. I rubbed my shoulder where the airline attendant had squeezed. Owls were my Plains Indian Tribe, the Kiowa's messenger bird. Most in the tribe viewed the owl as a bad omen, bringing news of an impending death. Yet throughout the tribe's history, a select few had belonged to a secret society that was able to fly and speak with owls.

One of the most famous Owl Talkers was *Mamanti*, which translated to He Walks In The Clouds or SkyWalker. *Mamanti* saved the lives of hundreds of Kiowas during the last fifteen years of the Kiowa war with the United States, before Kiowa survivors were forced to live on scraps of lands called reservations. It is said that *Mamanti* would return from flights with the All-

Seeing Owl just in time to wake sleeping Kiowa camps and help them escape cavalry-planned dawn slaughters.

My *Tsi-yee,* great-aunt Cora, was an Owl Talker. It was a family gift passed down through the generations. Part of my adventures in Oklahoma had been a ceremonial sweat with great-aunt Cora. During the sweat, an owl had come and revealed critical clues to a murderer's identity. After our sweat, owls had been hooting at me, or, as Aunt Cora insisted, "owls had selected to talk to another Sawpole." I just had no idea what they were saying. *Tsi-yee* said that would come. First, I must learn to listen.

Everything was a lesson with my great-aunt.

In Kiowa, *Sawpole* means owl. My family name came from my grandfather's grandmother, *Sawpole Gyah,* Owl Talker. Soldiers in a hurry to register and Americanize the captured Kiowa had changed her name to Gina Sawpole and added Sawpole to the names of her kids. Owls have always been important to us Sawpoles.

I'm Mae Sawpole, in Silicon Valley anyways. Where I grew up on what had been the Kiowa, Comanche, Apache Reservation, everyone called me Mud. The more I resisted, the more it stuck. That is until I moved to the west coast to attend UC Berkeley and reclaimed my birth name, Mae. After the last two days in Oklahoma, I had come to terms with my names and kinda missed being called Mud.

I had been living in separate worlds since leaving home in the back country of the former Kiowa Camanche Apache Reservation for college in Silicon Valley ten years before. Two days ago, no, it was three … ever since Grandpa summoned me back to Oklahoma, my life had spun out of control. Now I found myself torn between worlds; out of balance with both, struggling to find my way forward.

Maybe Grandpa was right. After days of little sleep and mostly just water, I was on a vision quest of self-discovery. Unconsciously, I fingered the soft leather pouch I wore around my neck. Aunt Cora had cleansed my spirit bundle. She said she had prepared it for my coming needs. She also claimed our spirit bundles carried medicine for our souls. Inside my leather bag, she had found the buffalo hair given to me by Grandfather Buffalo after he nearly stomped me to death. Aunt Cora added two small owl feathers to the growing collection in my spirit bundle. They were to help me listen and see clearly. She had also woven a tuft of buffalo hair and an owl's flight feather into my scalp lock coming from the spiral at the top of my head, where our spirit enters at birth and leaves at death. As I touched the feather just now, a memory flashed. Owl. That's what I had dreamed about. The All-Seeing Owl had come to me with a warning.

The thought chilled me.

Chapter Two

The jet's abrupt landing jarred me from my thoughts. The moment that the seatbelt light turned off, the plane's aisle filled with people in a hurry. The near-adult sitting in the window seat next to me, sprang up and pushed over me to join the people-blocked aisle. I pulled my lime-green messenger bag from under the seat and tried to stand. I couldn't extend to my full five-foot seven height; instead, I hunched below the overhead compartment waiting for an opening in the packed aisle.

Without warning, the overhead compartment door dropped, hitting me across my forehead. I staggered, falling back into the seat from the unexpected blow.

“Uh, sorry dude,” came from the man-boy that had sat at the window seat. He gave me a crooked grin that expressed no regret while he pulled a faded blue duffle bag from the overhead compartment.

In a daze, I ran my hands through my dark curls, and stopped at a pulsing spot on my forehead. It felt hot to my touch. Shaking my head, I started to respond to the man-boy just as a gust of stale wind blew past, an escape hatch had opened in front. As one, people in the aisle surged forward. The man-boy forgot me in an instant, rushed down the aisle only to wait a few feet ahead before starting a slow shuffle toward the door. He never looked back.

I pushed up from the seat, adjusted my messenger bag and, taking advantage of a gap in the traffic, merged into the aisle. There, I hesitated a moment to look into the now empty cargo compartment before I remembered the flight attendant had taken my roller case when I boarded. She had promised my bag would be waiting at the door for me. I hope the flight attendant kept her word. I needed a quick getaway to make it to the Conference Center in time for reviews and rehearsals with Cache-It executives.

As I shuffled forward with the crowd, I peered toward the open door. There was no sign of my roller case. I stepped out of the aisle, and stood next to the owl-like attendant. She finally halted her automatic good byes, and turned her head toward me. She didn’t speak, just gave me a questioning look.

I reminded her, “You took my roller case at boarding and said it would be here at departure.”

The attendant gave me a blank stare before pursing her lips, beak-like, to announce, “Your bag must be at baggage claim.” She abruptly returned to giving departing passengers her forced smile.

I refused to leave and nudged a bit closer to her, providing a bit more space in the small aisle for the remaining passengers to exit the plane. Finally, the flight attendant rotated her head back in my direction. “Yes?”

“When I gave you my roller case, you said it would be here.” I indicated the doorway. “I didn’t check it, so I don’t have a claim ticket.”

She huffed, “Just a minute,” and started to dig through her pockets, finally coming up with an orange ticket. “Here, I gave it to the baggage handler. It will be in the baggage area.” She thrust the cardboard ticket into my hand, turned and disappeared behind a curtain.

As I glanced at the orange claim ticket, I spotted the time on my watch. Shoving the ticket into a pocket, I rushed out of the plane and down the enclosed tube into the airport. The crowd was gone. A few people early for the next flight lingered about, but most passengers were well on their way to baggage claim. My next stop.

While in motion, I pulled my phone out. No text from Bernie. I sent one advising I was on my way to baggage. My phone gave me a red alert. The battery was low. I glanced at my watch. The flight was slightly late and it was going to take more time to get my bag. Bernie would be anxious about the delay, but it couldn’t be helped.

Though I didn’t expect her inside the airport, I scanned the baggage area for Bernie. At barely five-two in heels, she didn’t stand out in a crowd, but Bernie always made her presence known. Not spotting her, I didn’t worry. If she didn’t have someone with her, Bernie would have to stay with the car at curbside.

I watched the near empty luggage carousal circle several times in the hope of seeing my bag suddenly materialize on it. But it didn’t. As I turned towards the airline’s information booth, I spotted a bag that looked similar to mine. Very similar. The case was being rolled towards the

automatic doors out of the airport. An orange tag fluttered from the bag's handle, next to my rainbow-colored name tag.

I chased after the bag. Eying its flapping orange tag, I finally made out the claim number. It matched. I stepped alongside the man escaping with my case. "Excuse me, sir! You have my bag."

A squat block of a man stopped just outside the door and turned towards me. "Mae Sawpole?" His voice was rough; it matched his bristled face.

"Do I know you?" I examined the man wearing wrinkled khakis and a faded blue polo shirt as I reached for my case.

He pulled the handle away from my grasp. "I'm to pick you up. My car is right outside. We must hurry." The man turned and rushed to an older grey sedan parked at the curb with its trunk open.

"Wait! Who are you? Did Bernie send you?" My questions bounced off his back. The man marched toward the car with my suitcase rolling behind. Saving my breath, I chased after him. As I got closer, I made out a faded *Red Eye Taxi* and a phone number across the side of the four-door sedan. Before I could stop him, the man slammed the trunk closed with my roller case inside. The squat man moved to a back door and held it open for me. I looked around at the busy passenger pickup area—a traffic officer waved cars on, horns honked. There was no sign of Bernie.

I asked again, "Did Bernie send you?" The man reached for my messenger bag, tugging it from my grasp and tossing it into the back seat. "Yes, we must go. You cannot be late." He looked over to the traffic officer glaring and waving a baton our way. Engines revved past.

He was right. We were on a tight time table. I called Bernie again; my phone gave a feeble ring before the battery gave up on life. The gruff man stood at the car door, urging me in. My messenger bag laid inside, sprawled across a grungy-looking bench seat. I slid onto the dirty blue back seat; the interior smelled of stale smoke and beer. The door slammed immediately. The man waved to the gesturing officer, got into the car and abruptly entered the traffic flow. His driving jerked me from one side of the bench seat to the other.

I called to the driver, “Hey, hey! Take it easy,” and searched for a seatbelt to no avail. From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a frantically waving hand. I shifted in the seat to look out the rear window. Bernie chased after the accelerating car, frantically waving. I could just hear her shout, “MAE, COME BACK!”