

ERIC LUSTBADER

Author of **BLACK BLADE**

ANGEL EYES

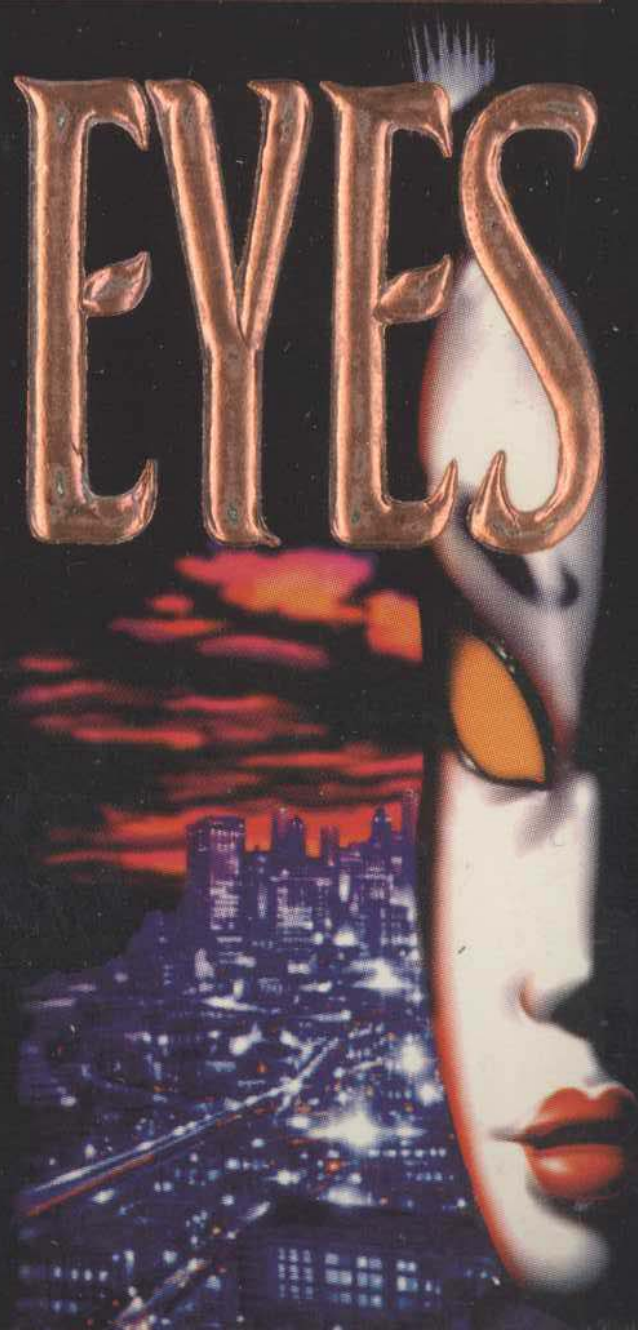
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Lustbader at the top
of his powers"**

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Eric Lustbader

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More praise for Eric Lustbader and ANGEL EYES

"ANGEL EYES has what Lustbader fans are looking for—action, some glimmers of faraway cultures, some hope for heroes of tomorrow."

Palm Beach Post

"Here, we meet modern-day women who, although they are feminine, also happen to be competent, intelligent and brave. . . . The beauty of ANGEL EYES is that there is no waste—every character and each twist or turn of the plot is there for a purpose."

The Miami Herald

"Global in scope . . . [It] has all the hallmarks of this popular author's work: heroic women and men in a complicated plot that hurtles along like a high-speed Japanese train."

The Trenton Times

"Has all the elements of a bestseller—travel, romance, violence, conspiracy and betrayal in high places—and Lustbader's attentions to martial arts and Zen teachings again spice the mix."

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BENEATH AN OPAL MOON

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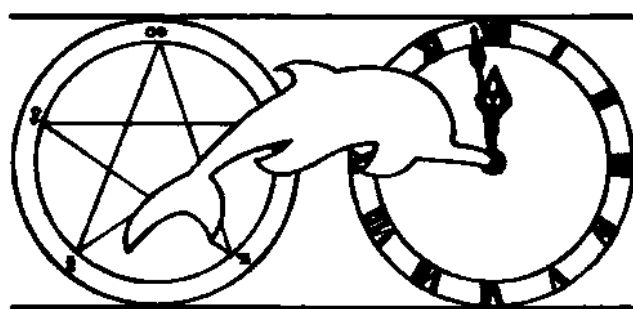
My father, for proofing the galleys

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Dolphin consultant: Mandy

*Who shall ascend the hill
of the Lord?
and who shall stand
in his holy place?
He that hath clean hands,
and a pure heart.
—PSALMS 24:3–4*

*Men must have corrupted nature
a little, for they were not
born wolves, and they have
become wolves.
—VOLTAIRE*



SANCTUARY

BUENOS AIRES/SAN FRANCISCO

Whenever Tori Nunn was bored, she went to Buenos Aires. Partly it was because Buenos Aires was a place she had never worked, so, essentially, no one knew her—what she had been. Partly, it was because in Buenos Aires, sitting beneath the natural awning of the jacarandas, their clattering shade striping her face, she could at last forget Greg. But perhaps more than anything else, she came to this incomplete city because here she could begin again to define herself, as if now even her own shadow had become unrecognizable.

Here, in Buenos Aires, inhabited by the *porteños*—the port dwellers, as the city's natives were known—controlled by the *alta sociedad*, there was a mix of stupendously beautiful, sensual people who were exhaustingly proud even as they were consumed by shame at being *South* Americans. They were, like college dropouts, inevitably embarrassed by themselves and their place in the world. When they went to New York, they always said, "I am flying to North America."

This is what made the *porteños* interesting to Tori: their inner hurt was protected by their cultural traits in the same way a tortoise is protected by its shell. The patrons of the Café la Biela and the nearby Café de la Paix proved this to her. They might

smell of imported suntan oil, of perfumes by Calvin Klein and Jean Patou, just as their city might smell of auto fumes and *maté*, the local herb tea, but beneath it all, Tori knew, the *porteños* and their streets were redolent of cigar smoke and marzipan.

This was their history, as Jorge Luis Borges wrote it, as their forefathers had lived it, where illusion, like the rich smoke from rolled tobacco, had come to create the past even as it obscured the present. In the decade after the Second World War, the fathers of these exquisite *porteños* had amassed their wealth by selling their slaughtered cattle and the fruits of their Pampa to a starving Europe. But by the middle of the fifties the excesses of the Peróns had bankrupted the country, throwing Buenos Aires and, indeed, all Argentina into chaos. Escalating terrorism from the far right and left began to tear the country apart. The result was the coming to power of a succession of repressive military juntas.

But the country's frightening, two-year bout with hyperinflation—12,000 percent per year—riots, and civil unrest had toppled a succession of elected governments. Despair had gripped the nation until some months ago, when a coalition led by Las Dinámicas, the two most powerful women in Argentine politics, managed to win control of the government. Their party, the Union of the Democratic Center, had pledged to end Argentina's long history of authoritarianism by instituting reforms granting extensive individual liberty and an end to the crippling control of the government in business. "The beginning of a free market economy," went their successful campaign slogan, "is an end to hyperinflation." The first priority had been to convert the official currency into American dollars, which had the effect of immediately stabilizing the runaway Argentine inflation.

Through all this bloody history, the *porteños* survived and, perhaps, even flourished, for it is said that every Argentine heart beats most strongly for myth, and myth cannot exist save as a balm against pain and suffering.

But myth was too often illusion. And the truth of illusion—the truth that no *porteño* can truly face—is that no matter how dazzling its exterior may be, there is nothing inside.

Tori knew this, knew the *porteños* almost as well as they knew themselves. Thus she was comfortable here in their city, strolling down their wide boulevards, sunbathing amid cocoa flesh on their beaches, surrounded by their aura of failure and by their very real sensuality and sense of style.

These people carried their pain as she did—deep inside them—though often through the chic facade in which they had wrapped themselves she could discern the stench of their desperation.

Tori lifted her arm, ordered another hot chocolate, the richest, thickest in the world. With it, she knew, would come a silver tray of small sweets, an array as heady, as opulent as the smoldering stares of the *chantas* who came to the cafés with their mistresses to while away an hour or two between bouts under the sheets.

A small breeze, redolent of this city's peculiar perfume, stirred the long branches of the jacarandas, and Tori felt the caress of their tears patter across her shoulders, the excess water of these beautiful semi-succulent trees.

The *chantas*—Buenos Aires' wheeler-dealers—interested Tori most of all. She had even allowed one or two to seduce her now and again, but in the end they had found her too much even for them, disconcerted by her habit of watching them intently during the most intimate throes of sexual congress.

"What are you doing?" they would ask her at those moments. "This is a time for release, not concentration."

They did not understand—and she would not tell them—that for her sex with them was to be observed, that by doing so she could pierce their chic shells, feel the texture of their shame and hurt, comparing it with her own. This concentration that so puzzled them was to her as sweet and richly flavored as was her hot chocolate at the Café la Biela.

But this "strangeness," as the *chantas* called it, was hardly the only reason they held her in awe. They had heard stories that she had climbed barefoot the massive Iguazu Falls six hundred miles to the northeast, had, in fact, helped the male members of her party when their strength flagged or they were in trouble. They had heard she was courageous, indefatigable—which was, after all, why they sought to seduce her.

In her strangeness—the enigma of such brute strength and stamina in a female—the *chantas* sought answers to the mysteries that obsessed them: who were they, where did they come from, why were they such failures?

Tori sipped her chocolate, consumed a sweet in one voracious bite. Somewhere, along the Avenida Quintana, a man played a bandoneon, squeezing out a typical tango melody, infused with the bittersweet essences of Latin macho, unrequited love, and blood vengeance.

The Avenida Quintana, filled with swaggering *porteños* and

cliques of rabid Japanese tourists, was one of the main streets of the swank residential Recoleta district. The Recoleta had been born near the end of the last century due to a plague of yellow fever in the city's southern districts that caused the aristocracy to move north. Years ago, when the Recoleta was home to slaughterhouses, its streets ran red with the blood of cattle during the heavy winter rains. Now winter brought only melancholy, and a gathering sense of dissolution. Then, Buenos Aires was to be avoided.

By the time she had finished her second cup of hot chocolate, Tori decided it was time to go. The sun was low in the sky, turning the Recoleta's blocky white high rises the color of blood oranges. Blue shadows lay in the street like the dead, or unwanted reminders of "the disappeared"—those people taken by the military in its zeal to ferret out a group of young radical terrorists. In those days—the seventies—to be a teacher, a union member, or merely to be known as an intellectual, was to risk being drawn into *el proceso*, a trial without either lawyer or jury; it was to risk being "disappeared."

Her thoughts turning by moments more and more morbid, Tori gathered up her purse and small shopping bag. But before she could rise, she saw Estilo. He was a German-Argentine *chanta*, one of the few who had sought out her company but not her bed. He was different in other ways, as well. He was a square-jawed man in his early fifties with long steel-gray, slicked-back hair, a patrician mustache, and a sense of style no full-blooded German ever had. His manner was often brusque, but he told the truth more often than other *chantas*, and for this Tori forgave him everything.

Estilo made his way toward her table. He was smiling, surprised and happy to see her. He had with him a younger man, slim-hipped, wide-shouldered. The man, handsome, with the rugged outdoorsy face of an *estanciero*—a rancher—was most likely in his mid-thirties, roughly the same age as Tori. He was dressed in a pair of baggy silk trousers and a washed silk shirt, open at the neck, under a trim linen sport coat. He had the thick black hair, the heavy-lidded eyes of the Latin *porteño*.

Estilo caught her appraising look. "My darling Tori!" he exclaimed, clamping her in a fervent embrace. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would have made preparations!"

"I didn't know myself until the last minute," Tori said. "You know how my life is."

Estilo gave her a rueful look. "Too chaotic for someone in

so early a retirement." He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I keep telling you to find a line of work that interests you." He smiled, showing large, nicotine-stained teeth. "And if not, you have a permanent invitation to join my business."

"Just what is your business?" Tori asked.

Estilo threw his head back and laughed, then he grabbed at the sleeve of the younger man, pulled him down to a seat next to him at Tori's table. "Tori Nunn, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Ariel Solares. Ariel is a *norteamericano* who spends a majority of his time here. His most fervent desire is to become a *porteño*, no, Ariel?"

"My friend exaggerates, as usual," Ariel Solares said. "Actually, I wish to *understand* the *porteño*. I come to Buenos Aires to soak up the air of the mythical yesterday." He took a deep breath, let it out. "Can you not smell it, perfuming the air like a rose?" He shrugged. "My own past—my whole life up until now—could not be more prosaic, so I visit Buenos Aires to let this city touch me, perhaps in some way to change me."

"Nonsense," Estilo said. "You come here to do business." But Tori could see that he was impressed with what Ariel had said. Estilo, like all *porteños*, was drawn to myth and all its fascinating ramifications. For him, ancient gods dwelled in the rain forests and in the Pampa, and, because they had been written about, spirits inhabited his city, sitting like gargoyles upon the cornices of the modern buildings. This was the power of myth.

"You speak of Buenos Aires as if it were Lourdes," Tori said, suddenly wanting to draw Ariel out. "As if it had mystical healing powers." It did for her, why not for him?

Ariel Solares cocked his head. "Well, I never thought of it in just that way, but perhaps there is some truth in what you say. But 'healing,' I don't know whether that is quite the correct word. I am not sick, merely bored."

"But, my friend, surely boredom is a form of sickness," Estilo said, his gaze swinging from Ariel to Tori. "A person—all people—need a purpose. Without one, life becomes meaningless, and further sickness—of a deeper, more serious nature—will surely follow."

Now Tori knew that Estilo was speaking directly to her, and she averted her eyes. The tango music, drifting along the avenue, had turned bitter, introspective, a harbinger of the last burst of violence and fury that was, inevitably, to come.

"I'm quite all right," Tori said softly, not looking at either man, but rather into the heart of the dark tango.

"Of course you are, my darling," Estilo said, patting her hand affectionately. He had big hands, blunt and strong. "I did not mean to infer otherwise"—although Tori knew that was precisely what he had meant to do. "I merely assumed your boredom needed alleviating. In that event, I would be delighted if you joined me tonight at my home." His mustache arched as he smiled. "A very private party. If you aren't a friend of mine, you aren't coming." He paused a moment, then said, "Ariel will be there."

Tori turned her head, looked again at the younger man, his skin burnished by the sun and the wind. She could imagine him riding the infinite pampas or, bending slightly, his hair swept back by the wind and the speed of his mount, swinging a polo mallet at Palermo Fields. But there was something different about him; he was not a typical *porteño*, or even trying to be, and these things intrigued her.

"All right," Tori said.

"Wonderful!" Estilo beamed at her as he rose. "Until tonight, then!"

For a moment Ariel sat facing her, his coffee-colored eyes staring into hers. Then he took her hand, kissed it lightly, and was swept away by Estilo.

After the men were gone, Tori sat and sipped a brandy. It was, to her mind, a melancholy drink, invoking intimations of broken promises, lost dreams, the ashes of desire.

When at last she rose, the tango had finished its haunting tale, and only the unlovely noises of the restless city remained.

Estilo's home was an apartment that took up the entire top floor of an anonymous-looking high rise in the Recoleta. It was just a few blocks from the cemetery, the *ne plus ultra* address in all of Buenos Aires, which perhaps told you as much about the *porteños* as you needed to know: the dead possessed a presence that made them in some subtle, mystical sense less dead than the dead of other cultures.

The vast apartment which snaked from east to west was furnished in Italian high fashion, which was to say with equal amounts of chic and money. Each piece of furniture exhibited low, sleek lines and the distinctively patterned fabrics of Ungaro and Missoni.

The place had been designed by Estilo's current mistress,

Adona, a stunning black-haired Argentine woman from the *alta sociedad*—the cream of *porteño* society—who, in some ways, reminded Tori of herself. She had wanted more from her relationship with Estilo, and had insisted that he take her into the jungles of South America, where many of his dangerous business dealings took place. Adona was as good at dispelling distrust as she was at disarming Estilo's enemies.

She was an unusual hostess in this snobbish city, for she genuinely loved people, and attended to their individual wants. She and Tori embraced warmly, in the manner of sisters too long kept apart.

She drew Tori aside. In the kitchen uniformed servers were loading chased-silver platters, enormous chafing dishes, with food. Adona ignored these people.

"You look tired, Tori."

"Perhaps I am, a little. But if so, it's only the fatigue of inaction."

"Yes." Adona nodded. "I know you well. You need passion. Like with Estilo and me, there is a passion. But your passion is for what? This violence, living on the edge of the great abyss?" Her eyes were sad. "I think this is not healthy."

"Estilo said much the same thing to me this afternoon."

Adona smiled. "Estilo is very fond of you." She laughed, a beautiful musical sound. "Did you know that in the beginning I was quite jealous of you?"

"You had no reason to be," Tori said.

"Why not? Estilo is no angel. But then who is? Me? Are you?"

"No," Tori said, abruptly thinking of Greg, soaring like an angel above Earth's atmospheric envelope. And then, while crawling outside, along the skin of his vehicle, something had punctured his EVA suit, and all the oxygen had been sucked from his lungs. A matter of seconds, that's all it had taken. From heaven to hell, with only the brittle blue starlight for company. "Death by hypoxia," his death certificate had read, but that was so cold, so clinical. It had not described his iced body, blistered and bruised beyond recognition by the cruel vacuum of space.

"Tori." Adona was gripping her arm. "Here, take some brandy, you've gone white."

"I'm all right." But just the same, Tori downed the liquor.

Adona shook her head. "There was a time," she said, "when I longed for the life you lead: armed to the teeth, in the jungle, the enemy just ahead. It made me feel so . . . I don't know,

alive.” She took the empty glass from Tori’s hand. “But times change, *I’ve* changed. The truth is that the only time I felt safe was when I had a MAC-10 in my hands and a knife on my hip. Then I knew I was the equal of any man—not sexually, and certainly not emotionally. But still I felt equal. A man could kill, and so could I. I was respected, even at times deferred to. Then, at last, there was no difference between us. You understand.”

Tori looked at her. “What changed?”

Adona shrugged. “The world turns on its axis, the seasons change, day into night. Who really can say with certainty? But I suspect that I have found that whatever I was reaching for is nonexistent or, at least, illusory. I feel as though in trying to measure up to men’s standards, I’ve been sucked whole into their world. And I’ve discovered I don’t like it.”

“What does Estilo say to all this? He met you in the jungle; that’s where you fell in love.”

“Estilo doesn’t know.”

“But you must tell him,” Tori said. “Estilo loves you; he wants you to be happy.”

Adona’s liquid brown eyes locked with Tori’s. “Yes, he loves me. But happiness, now that’s another matter entirely. Estilo is the consummate businessman—he lives for the deal, it doesn’t matter what the deal is. Because each deal is well-defined, and Estilo’s world is well-defined. I have spent so much time and effort to become a part of that world, and now, as far as he’s concerned, everything meshes perfectly. He couldn’t let me go. My role is too well-defined. If I were to leave, a black hole would appear, an undefined gap he could not tolerate.”

“But do you want to leave him?”

Adona gave off a little smile, like the glow of a tiny candle as darkness falls. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t let him go,” Tori said. “He’s a good man.”

“Well, at least he’s a little good.”

Adona suddenly leaned forward, kissed Tori on both cheeks. “Go enjoy the party. Too much gloomy talk is bad for the soul.”

Tori squeezed Adona’s hand, left her to monitor the coming food. The rooms were filled with people—Buenos Aires’ most famous artists, models, *chantas*—and smoke, but somehow Estilo found Tori, pushed a Kir Royale into her hand, kissed her on the cheek, murmured an endearment in German. He used German infrequently, only when he was slightly drunk, and