**CHANTEUSE**

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode One**

 **CHAPTER 1 – DEAD TO RITES**

 Tom Larkin hadn’t heard the grim details of the attack on Vera. He was

 sitting on the divorce papers on assignment in Bangkok, hoping she would change

 her mind during their separation of three months. Ninety days to be exact, but

 Larkin had been counting hours, even minutes of regret that his behavior had been

 so unacceptable, that Vera wanted out of their ten-year marriage. At least no kids

 were involved. He couldn’t bring himself to make it official, to admit their marriage

 was over. He had no idea he’d never need to sign those papers—Vera was dead.

 Until he returned Stateside to prove his whereabouts at the time of her murder,

 everyone at the DEA pegged Larkin as the prime suspect.

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 The cloaked figure turned quickly towards the real estate office where Vera

 Larkin was working alone and almost ready to close the office. The figure peered

 through the office window where Vera was at her desk speaking on the phone.

 “I’m sorry I’ve had to work late again,” Vera said. “I’ll pick up cider and

 doughnuts on my way home.”

 At home, her niece, Dawn, paused as she did her homework at the kitchen table.

 “I’m worried about Uncle Tommy. He hasn’t sent me any letters from Thailand

 yet, not even a postcard like he always did from South American when you guys lived

 there. I haven’t heard from him in three months.”

 “Your uncle can take care of himself,” Vera assured her. “The mail is always

 slow from the Far East. I’m expecting an important package from him, too. Let’s work

 on your costume for the Halloween dance after school tomorrow when I get off work

 early.”

 “I’m still worried about Uncle Tommy. He’s like a dad to me,” Dawn said.

 “Come home soon, Auntie Vee. Please. The house is creepy when I’m home alone,

 especially when it’s pouring rain with thunder and lightning.”

 “See you in half an hour,” Vera said, still trying to keep the divorce from Dawn.

 Vera hung up, tidied her desk, and put on her raincoat. She went to the restroom

to primp her face and hair. Coming out of the restroom she felt a sudden draft. She saw

 wet autumn leaves blowing across the office floor just outside the bathroom.

 Thinking one of her co-workers had forgotten something, she called out,

 “Back so soon? What’d you forget?”

 Turning the corner of the open bathroom door, she ducked as a machete

 wafted passed her head and stuck imbedded into the door. She slipped on the wet

 leaves tracked in by the intruder whose face and figure were concealed by a black

 hooded cape. Sprawled face-down on the floor, Vera gasped for breath, unable to

 scream. She whimpered as she heard the intruder pry the machete from the door with

 a *squeak*, then pur­sued her slowly, patiently, to cut off her escape to the front door.

 “Don’t!” she pleaded. “What do you want?”

 With repeated slashes her assailant hacked at her, skillfully stripping away

 her clothing, but leaving only a few slivers of trickling blood from non-vital areas

 splattered across her flailing arms and kicking legs. Half naked, Vera tried to back

 away, crawling on her hands and knees, but the machete pinned what remained of

 her silk blouse to the floor. Her attacker prodded at her with the flat side of the blade.

 Vera heard hissing laughter emitted from within the hood concealing her

 tormentor’s face.

 For a brief moment of hope, she thought it could be Tom, that he was just

 role playing. The Grim Reaper had been one of her sexual fantasies with necrophilia

 and Ingmar Bergman-like images of Death personified. Those peyote mushrooms at

 college had started it all, but she and Tom had always kept their sex games private

 and confined to home. Maybe this was his way of showing her what she’d be missing,

 that she’d stop proceeding with the divorce if he could just give her a new sexual

 high one more time before he left for Bangkok. But hadn’t he already left? Of course,

 he’s been gone for three months. Could he have come back just to try and talk her out

 of the divorce. It was too late for that. He’s had too many chances already. Done deal.

 Aroused by brief thoughts of Tom, the touch of his hands, his scent, like

 teakwood, and always the taint of alcohol with his kisses, she saw something about

 the hooded specter’s gloved hands that couldn’t be Tom’s. With a rush of adrenaline,

 she was determined to fight and glared at the black void within the hooded cloak. She

 grabbed the blade as it swung towards her. It severed several of her fingers when her

 attacker jerked it from her grasp.

 Vera wailed in pain, shocked by her spurting blood. Grabbed by the back

 of her long, red hair, Vera gasped when the black hood engulfed her face with a

 sweet, florid scent emitting from that dark cavern. Suddenly, a long tongue thrust

 deeply into her mouth making her gag and choke.

 Pulling back with disgust, Vera desperately sunk her teeth deeply into her

 tormentor’s wrist before she fell back down to the floor. Raised above Vera’s head,

 the machete’s sharp blade came down with quick, silent execution. Vera’s regrets

 about her volatile marriage dissolved in the black void of her unconsciousness.

 From Vera’s purse, her assailant took her car keys and wallet, noting the address

 on her driver’s license.

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 Dawn sat at the kitchen table. She’d tried to concentrate on her homework,

some algebra equations, an essay on Macbeth, Act I, and a chapter for World History

on Carthage and Hannibal. She was a high school freshman. barely fourteen, naïve in

many respects, but tainted by her street-smart Uncle Tommy who’d taught her how

to clean, load, and shoot his 9mm Glock pistol. Only at the range, with his gun,

because her guardian, Aunt Vera, forbade any firearms in the house other than her

husband’s piece, and then only under lock and key, Vera’s key.

 Rain poured down the gutter spouts, lightning flashed, and thunder rolled

from a distance.

 She looked up from her homework to see the kitchen clock said 10:45 PM.

 Expecting its ring, she stared at her iPhone, hoping Aunt Vera would say the

 storm had delayed her trip home with flooding on the DC Beltway. Anxious, she

 popped candy corn into her mouth from the orange, pumpkin‑shaped dish on the table.

 She closed her textbook and put a kettle of water on the stove to boil. She paced,

 her arms clutched around her shoulders, shivering, and anxiously watching the clock.

 “Where are you, Auntie Vee? I wish Uncle Tommy were here,” she grumbled.

 The doorbell rang, startling her. She ran to the backdoor, where she saw the

 headlights from Vera’s car in the driveway. A shadowed figure holding a cake-sized

 box stood at the locked door and fumbled with keys. Pouring rain obscured the person’s

 features, but Dawn assumed it was Aunt Vera shielding her face from the driving rain

 with her familiar hooded raincoat.

 Quickly opening the door, Dawn chattered with relief, “Coming, Aunt Vee!

 Sorry. I locked the door. Didn’t hear you pull into the driveway. You must be drenched.

 I made tea to warm you up. I’m glad you’re home. I can’t wait for a doughnut.”

 As the chain swung loose, the figure’s face, concealed by the shadow of the

 hooded cape, looked like the specter of Death as it turned to her.

 Dawn’s mouth wasn’t in sync with the sudden impulse of fear sent to her brain.

 “Is that a box of doughnuts?” she asked, her own voice sounding as if she were underwater.

 Lightning flashed as the figure set the box down then pulled back the black hood

 with one hand. With wild, frizzled hair and half of a face painted white with a snarling

 grimace and one sparkling gold incisor, the nightmarish image made Dawn shriek in

 terror. This was no trick-or-treat.

 With a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder, Dawn slammed the door and

 tried to latch the chain. But a gloved fist crashed through the glass and pinned Dawn’s

 sweater to the wall with a machete then unlatched the lock as Dawn screamed, though

 no one could hear her over the thunder and pouring rain.

 The intruder muffled Dawn’s screams with a gloved hand and whispered in her

 ear, “Trick or treat, baby doll,” Then putting the box on the kitchen table with a free

 hand, the hideous figure shoved Dawn’s face down towards the box and flipped it open,

 “Auntie Vee is home,” the voice hissed hot breath into her ear and revealed a severed

 head with long red hair, the eyes staring at her, and the familiar mouth agape.” The

 hideous figure laughed, releasing the grip on Dawn’s mouth just for the sadistic

 pleasure of hearing her high-pitched scream that no one else would hear.

 **CHAPTER 2 – WATER BABY**

 Bangkok’s steamy streets bustled at noon with gutter-to-gutter traffic,

 sputtering motorized pedi-cabs, and three‑wheeled, two‑seated tuk‑tuksmean-

 dering between honking cars and chattering pedestrians. The city revealed its

 conflict between an ancient Asian heritage and prostituted Western ideals as

 seasoned American DEA agent, Joe Troika, walked leisurely along Bamrung

 Muang Road where orchids, jasmine, and roses cascaded over fences of rich

 estates with lawns as plush as green velvet.

 Not far behind Troika, Pabo, a nine-year-old street urchin, wove in and

 out of the crowd in pursuit of Troika towards the canal, and finally reached him

 in front of a sidewalk cafe called “Puberty.”

 “Bad news. Come quick, Troiky,” warned the brown-skinned boy.

 Standing navel high to Troika’s six-feet-four inches, Pabo weighed just a

 quarter of his 220 pounds. He tugged at Troika’s floral silk shirt, damp from

 perspiration in the scorching noon heat.

 “It’s my lunch break, Pabo. I’m heading down to Phadung Klong. You

 know never to bother me when I’m off the clock. Scram!”

 “Klong girl can wait. You got big-big trouble. Your secretary sent me.

 ‘Quick-quick,’ she say. But she can’t find your partner, Larky, so I find you

 first.”

 “Larkin? What trouble?”

 “Come to office, quick. Secretary, she tell you. Only she knows—top

 secret! Come-come! Right away!”

 Troika spun on his heels back towards the DEA office. His face beaded with

 sweat as he approached Larkin’s Thai secretary, Ping, at the American Consulate.

 Eying Ping’s deep cleavage in her otherwise conservatively tailored, gray business

 suit, Troika barked, “This better be important!”

 “Stateside says you are trauma-school trained,” the sleek Thai said.

 Ping’s paralegal training and two hundred-words-a-minute keyboard

 skills were wasted on her exquisite beauty. Larkin had chosen her as Asian

 office décor, primarily as a sweet distraction from his divorce during work

 hours. Anything to take his mind off Vera and the divorce papers she’d sent.

 The legal-sized envelope remained unopened in his locked desk drawer.

 Troika hoped to have Ping all to himself when Larkin’s six-month

 tour ended, so he stifled his annoyance with his customary bluntness. “Yeah,

 I’m trauma-trained, so what?”

 “Agent Larkin’s ex-wife . . . *she dead—killed.”*

 “That can’t be. Aw, Jesus! They didn’t even file for divorce yet.”

 “Oh?” Ping was surprised, as if it mattered to her personally. “You

 knew her?”

 “Yeah, Vera is—*was*—a redheaded fox. Aw, damn! This news will

 kill’m.”

 “You must prepare Tom to go home,” Ping said. “There’s a niece, a

 teenager.”

 Troika eyes welled with tears. “Yeah, I know. Dawn. Is she OK?”

 “She’s missing—maybe dead—maybe a hostage. You must tell

 Special Agent Larkin—priority orders from Stateside.”

 “There’s something else you’re not telling me. What is it?”

 “You’re *both* going home. This NIACT immediate cable just came

 through—a catastrophe. All DEA offices overseas are on Priority Risk—

 Category One Alert.

 “What catastrophe?” Troika frowned. “Was Vera’s death DEA related?”

 “That’s unknown. Maybe, but there was a bomb in the DEA training

 school in Georgia. Thirty-nine cadets were killed.” She handed him the Extra

 Edition of the *Bangkok Post,* an English newspaper.

 American DEA Training Class Annihilated

 Drug Cartel Held Responsible

 39 Basic Trainees Perish

 Only One Cadet May Have Survived

 She is Still Missing from the Massacre

 “According to this, it just happened,” Troika stammered. “How could

 the story get out so fast?”

 She handed him the NIACT cable. Reading it, he said, “Whew! They

 think it was the Chinese Triad, not the Colombians. Damn! Larkin’s sleeping

 off a hangover with a new *Klong* girl.

 “Tom has a *Klong* girl?” Ping asked with a frown, looking betrayed.

 “Only since last week when the divorce papers arrived. He got stewed to

 the Mickey last night.” Troika swung around. “Where’d that little wretch Pabo

 go? He might know where Larkin’s klong girl lives. He’ll help me find him.”

 Troika found Pabo waiting on the street outside the consulate.

 “Larkin’s been with a different river princess this week,” Troika told

 Pabo. “I don’t know where they go. Show me.”

 “How much you pay?” Pabo grinned with outstretched hands.

 “You’re a fucking lil’ thief, Pabo.” Troika grimaced as he handed him

 some change.

 “But most honorable thief, Troiky.” He bowed.

 “What’s his new Klong girl’s name?”

 “He calls her *Min*. She’s new to the Klong. I don’t know her, but I can

 find her. Come quick!”

 They rode a *tuk‑tuk* through crowded afternoon traffic. They soon

 left the flower‑lined streets towards the old town. The quick ride took them to

 Phadung Klong across a small, arched bridge and along the canal where the

 water-babies, adolescent Thai girls, sold their bodies for a Western pittance—

 a letch’s Nirvana and a pedophile’s paradise for only a few bucks a day, an

 all-you-can-eat pubescent buffet.

 The *Klong* girl Troika had planned to meet on his lunch break called

 to him from the thatched hooch of her boat.

 “Why you late, Troiky!” she called to him. “You come here now!

 We have really good time!”

 “Not today!” he shouted with a wave as they continued along the

 *Klong* where shacks on stilts lined the riverbank.

 Pabo paused to question locals until he finally nodded to Troika. They

 continued on foot towards the shack Pabo pointed out. Wary, Pabo stayed thirty

 yards back as Troika went boldly ahead. Troika recognized some of Larkin’s

 custom-tailored silk shirts draped over the bamboo balcony.

 Troika called out: “Larkin! Get up! We’ve got trouble! Hey, Larkin!

 Wake up, damn it!”

 Min’s shack was 100 square feet with a small kitchen alcove, a narrow

stall shower and an exposed toilet. The single cot where Larkin lay sleeping close

to the edge of the balcony was open to the elements except for a tattered bamboo

blind. Red‑eyed from drink, unshaven, hair unkempt, and sprawled naked on the

cot, Larkin blinked and groaned at the sound of Troika’s bellowing to him from

the riverbank below.

 Rubbing his eyes, Larkin saw Min’s supple, naked figure gyrating as if

 she were spinning a hula hoop. She ironed his shirts and hummed some golden

 oldie tune with an occasional, high-pitched, off key shriek of indiscernible lyrics,

 not unlike the many orgasmic shrills that had come from the shack during the wee

 hours of their all-night session.

 Min stop her gyrations and song as she went to the balcony and shouted

 angrily to Troika,“You no wakey Larky! He big-time sick! Too much party!

 You must be Troiky. Hel-lo, partner! You come back tonight! Larky gonna party

 again! You meet my sister, Ling! Bring friends!”

 Troika looked to the balcony where Min peered down at him seductively,

 Then he shouted back, “Larkin’s got to leave and go Stateside. Right now!”

 Disappointed but still seductive, she asked, “Larky go home? You, too?

 If you not go, then come see me tomorrow. Larky say Min best *Klong* girl,

 Number One, Triple A, even if I’m almost grandma. He don’t like child. He

 needs mature woman like Min. How ‘bout you, Troiky-boy? You like what

 you see?”

 Groaning and stretching, Larkin said, “Jeez, Min, stop shouting. Whew!

 My head. Tell Troika to come up. You can sell your tight little ass to him *after*

 I leave Bangkok. I’m not done with you yet.”

 Min grinned down at Troika and nodded. As she caressed one of her

 pert nipples, Troika stopped suddenly to ask her, “Grandma, huh? How old

 are you?”

 Winking, and fluttering her tongue, she said, “Min will be twenty-two,

 but not for three months. Larky say you come up. I drop the ladder for you.”

 Instinctively sensing trouble, Pabo slowly backed farther away from

 Min’s shack towards the riverboat as Troika climbed the ten-foot rope ladder

 to the center of the hut.

 Min turned back towards Larkin and stroked both of her brown nipples

as she straddled his lap where he sat on the edge of the cot and lit a cigarette.

 Min said sadly, “Troiky say Larky go home now. I want you stay, OK?”

 “Don’t worry. I’ll show you off to Troika,” Larkin assured her. “He’ll

 be between *Klong* girls next week. By then you’ll forget all about me.”

 Pouting, she said, “I never forget, Larky. You forget Min so soon?

 “Not likely,” he said, stretching with a grimace, “but ain’t life a bitch?”

 With the creak of Troika coming up the rope ladder, Min took a long

 drag on Larkin’s cigarette and exhaled dual smoke trails from her delicate nostrils

 as she slid down to her knees on the floor to display her skills to her prospective

 client, Troika.

 Troika’s face appeared through the hole in the floor, where he saw Min’s

 hard, petite body get up from the floor and straddle Larkin’s lap. The open-air hut

 reeked of fish, curry, and yeasty sweat, though Larkin seemed oblivious to the stench.

 Min posted as if on horseback and glared at Troika with allure. So small next

 to Larkin, the top of her head bobbed just beneath his rough cleft chin. As Larkin

 nodded to Troika, Min suddenly shuddered. Larkin exhaled with release, but unlike

 his body, his mind remained detached from Min and alert to danger. He sensed

 Troika’s uneasiness, a man rarely phased by trouble.

 “Big-ass problem at home,” Troika said. “No time for fun. We’ve got to go.”

 Min slumped back against Larkin’s chest and licked her delicate fingers.

 Larkin slapped her buttocks to make her get up, so he could dress.

 “No time to pack, Tom. Leave your damn shirts. We’re outta here.”

 Min dismounted Larkin and went to a stack of clean towels in the dark

 corner of the hut as Troika handed him the cable sent from home.

 “All of our BAT cadets— killed?” Larkin asked with disbelief, trying

 to shake off his hangover

 “All but one—a female, “Troika remarked offhand.

 “Figures. She’ll end up being our next Supervisor,” Larkin huffed.

 “Not unless they find her.” Troika shook his head. “She’s still missing.”

 Larkin froze in thought for a moment then exchanged a nod with Troika.

 They’d compared enough war stories and put in enough time in the field together

 to know when something didn’t feel right.

 “Min, toss me my pants,” he said.

 “I like my Larky better with *no* pants,” she teased, but complied, tossing

 them playfully to him. Then she backed into the dark corner of the shack again

 and grabbed the stack of fresh towels in both hands as she moved slowly behind

 Troika.

 “There’s more, Tom, but I’ll tell you the rest at Don Muang. Our flight’s

 out a here in an hour to Seoul for a debriefing before we get to Quantico. The

 ONCB has arranged our safe departure. We’re on red alert in every DEA office,

 but especially in the Far East—”

 Suddenly, Troika’s eyes glazed over, a familiar sight to a vet in the field.

 Larkin knew that look up close and personal—Troika was a dead man standing.

 After she’d stabbed Troika from behind, Min drew a small pistol from the

 towels she carried and used Troika’s body as a shield. She tried to shoot Larkin

 while he was still off guard, but he drew a .38 Japanese Liberty Chief revolver

 from under his pillow and shot through Troika’s soft abdomen, catching Min by

 surprise with the same bullet through her throat.

 As Troika fell forward, Min’s knife handle protruded from his back. He

 fell down the open stairwell and hung from the rope ladder like a sack of potatoes.

 Min dropped her pistol and clutched her bleeding throat with both hands.

 She choked on her blood with her eyes dilated in shock. Gurgling on her

 blood, she asked, “Larky, how could you shoot Troiky?” She trembled as blood

 streaked from her mouth and throat down her naked breasts.

 Glaring at her, Larkin said: “He was already dead, but you might last

 another hour. Maybe I’ll send you one last trick before your tight little ass turns

 cold.”

 She slumped to her knees, her hand shaking as she reached for her gun.

 She picked up the pistol, but she was too weak to point it at Larkin. Instead,

 she put the gun to her lips and whispered, “Death to the *gwailo.*” With shaking

 hands, she jammed the barrel down her throat and pulled the trigger.

 Larkin didn’t even flinch then casually wiped her splattered blood

 off his bare chest with a towel.

 “For once, that was more than you could swallow,” he said, leaving

 her eyes wide open so she’d see the devil waiting for her at the gates of hell.

 Beneath Min’s shack, Larkin stuffed the dispatches from Quantico into

 his pocket and freed Troika from the rope ladder’s entanglement. He carried him

 over his shoulder to the riverbank as local Thais chattered with curiosity and

 speculation. Seeing Pabo cowering beyond the crowd, he called him over.

 Warily, he came to Larkin’s side.

 “You know the ONCB Chief on New Road. Get him here right away

 before the regular khakis show up to arrest me and hand me over to Min’s

 local boss.”

 Pabo nodded and ran off as Larkin sat cradling his dead partner. He

 reached into Troika’s pocket to read the dispatch.

 Inform Special Agent Larkin—wife killed—

 niece missing—return to Headquarters ASAP

 **CHAPTER 3 – SEVERANCE PAY**

 Tall and burly, seasoned Foreign Office Chief, Tim Barnes, stared from

 his fifth-floor office window, watching a training exercise on the Quantico

 grounds. With his tie loosened and his white shirtsleeves rolled up on his thick,

 hairy forearms, he saw a black government car pull up to the entrance. Three

 DEA agents got out of the car with Tom Larkin. All wore black armbands,

 dark suits, and solid-gray ties with crisp white shirts.

 As an official trauma team escort for Tom Larkin from the airport, their

 mood was somber. All were in mourning for the thirty-nine DEA trainees

 honored at Arlington Cemetery that morning, with one still missing, a black

 female cadet. The American flag in the courtyard was at half-mast.

 Like Tom Larkin, the trauma team wore black arm bands on both arms

 because they were also in mourning for Larkin’s wife, Vera. When a DEA

 agent’s wife or husband was killed, it was the same as killing one of their own.

 If the killer was an enemy of the DEA, from a punk on the street to a drug

 kingpin who gave the order, it was war. Like the female cadet from the DEA basic

 training class, Larkin’s niece, Dawn, was still missing with little evidence to find

 her abductor. As far as motives went, there were too many to count from Larkin’s

 sordid past. Though he usually left havoc in his wake, Larkin always got the job

 done. For that he was hated, even by some of his own.

 Chief Barnes spoke to his secretary over the intercom: “Mary, send

 Special Agent Larkin into my office immediately. Ask the others to wait outside.”

 Anticipating Larkin’s entry, Barnes buttoned his sleeves, pulled on his dark

suit jacket, and put on his black arm band. He turned to the door and straightened

his posture. The President’s photo faced him from the wall as Larkin entered with a

faint smile when he noted the Chief’s shiny new name-plate on the door. His Chief’s

tough exterior softened as they embraced. Then with teary eyes, they parted with a

sharp sniff and a composed nod.

 Barnes motioned Larkin to sit as he went around his huge desk and sat in his

high-back, leather chair with a creak from his weight. Taking a pencil from his blotter,

he nervously tapped the eraser against his desk blotter as he struggled for the right

words.

 “Do I have to call you ‘Chief’ now?” Larkin asked, breaking the tense, somber

mood.

 “Not important when we’re alone. You’ve lost too much, Tom. We go back a

long way together overseas—Guadalajara, Quito, Cali. A year ago, I never thought

I’d be sitting in this chair. I owe much of my promotion to you, but still . . .”

 Barnes shrugged and silently shook his head.

 “I know the score, Tim,” Larkin said. “Vera’s dead because of me, and my

niece, Dawn, may be better off dead. Who knows what these creeps will do to an

innocent teenager, just to get back at me?”

 “We can’t be sure who’s responsible.” Barnes huffed. “Not yet.”

 “Too many suspects to count, but I still know each one’s face.”

 “That’s why you’ll take no part in the investigation. It’s an FBI matter,

 a kidnapping. They’ll find Vera’s killer, and they’ll find Dawn—one way or

 another.”

 “It doesn’t matter who did it, Tim. They killed Vera just to make their

 point. They must’ve taken Dawn, just to draw me out. If I don’t take their bait,

 Dawn’s worthless to them. Her life depends on me falling into their trap, so

 don’t try to stop me!”

 “I sit in this chair now for one reason,” Barnes said calmly. “My

 predecessor let his personal friendship with you obstruct his judgment. I won’t

 make that same mistake. You’re on the next plane to Jamaica. If you go any-

 where near your home in Arlington, I’ll suspend you without pay and give you

 an early retirement *without* benefits.”

 “Jesus, Tim, do you think I give a crap about my pay or goddamn

 benefits? Vera’s dead and Mexicans could be wiring Dawn to a car battery.

 The Colombians could have her hooked on drugs by now, or the Triad could

 be gang‑banging her while I stand here with no balls listening to your bullshit.”

 “Let the FBI handle it., Tom. You’re too emotionally involved.”

 “I can’t sit on my hands knowing Dawn could still be alive. They’re

 *expecting* me to come looking for her. It’s a trap. Payback, and she’s the bait.”

 “If you *don’t* follow their lead, they’ll have to make Dawn visible as a

 lure to get your attention. Let them come to you, Tom. Follow my logic. If

 they knew where Vera worked and how to get to Dawn, they sure as hell

 will know your next assignment is Jamaica.”

 “But there won’t be an opening there for three months. I checked.”

 “There won’t be, but even our own people won’t know that. I determine

 those orders now.”

 Larkin balked. “Why do I feel there’s a catch here?”

 “Yeah, there’s a fly in the ointment for sure. You have to resign from

 the DEA before you leave this room. I can’t let you go to Jamaica as a federal

 agent. The office I set up in Montego Bay is bogus, but not even Jim Riley, the

 Special-Agent-in Charge at the Kingston DEA office will know you’re working

 freelance—for me.”

 “Freelance? What the hell does that mean? Who’ll have my back?”

 “No one, but that never stopped you before. You’ve been flying by

 the seat of your pants in the DEA since day one. Now you’re out. But if you

 succeed by nailing someone we’ve been unable to touch in Jamaica, you’ll

 get your full retirement package as a G-15 with no more time to serve. A

 decent package if you ask me. It’s seventy-five grand a year at age forty—

 unprecedented—but if you succeed, I can swing it with the AG.”

 “So the other DEA agents will think I’m one of them,” Larkin pondered

 the setup, “but I’ll be like a private dick overseas.”

 “The *private* part I’m not so sure about,” Barnes shrugged, giving him a

 jab, “but according to my sources, you’ve always been *a dick*, at home and

 abroad.”

 Larkin sneered. “So everyone at the Kingston DEA office will believe

 I’m one of them. Hmm. Almost sounds like fun. If I can close this case without

 getting killed, I’ll have seventy-five Gs a year for fuck-you money—in early

 retirement, maybe I could become a legit PI and take only the cases I want.”

 Barnes nodded. “In a nutshell—yes.”

 “OK. Where do I sign?”

 “You’ll sign *off*, not on. We never had this conversation, Tom. Until

 you’ve either arrested or killed Jamaican drug lord, Guy Jasparre, I doubt

 we’ll ever get a chance to speak to each other again. Your boarding pass to

 Montego Bay is in this envelope with the few leads and contacts your

 predecessor left behind.”

 “Predecessor? Where’s he now?”

 Barnes raised a brow. “He went into deep-cover—and vanished.”

 “Swell. While I’m in Jamaican, will you at least tell me if you learn

 anything more about Vera’s killer?”

 “I think that’s a question I should be asking you. You know, Tom,

 it’s almost a blessing that you were in Thailand when Vera was murdered.”

 “Why?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

 “Without a solid alibi, you’d be the prime suspect. The murderer used

 *your* machete to kill her. Her killer got the machete from your house and brought

 to her real estate office to frame you.”

 “Ours was a knock-down, drag-em-out passion, but we loved each other

 in ways no one else could ever understand. Though I won’t give her killer the

 satisfaction, Tim, you know better than anyone how I’m dying inside over losing

 her, especially this way, when I could’ve been here with her to save her life.”

 Barnes had blocked Larkin from any access to the homicide reports—too

 gruesome for even a hard-ass like Larkin to see, let alone contemplate. Vera’s

 decapitation was confidential information that the FBI wouldn’t release.

 They embraced again then Larkin signed the resignation papers Barnes

 had already prepared for him.

 “Just so any havoc you wreak in Jamaica won’t come back to haunt

 the DEA,” Barnes warned him, “you’re officially retired from government

 service.”

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 **(To be continued in the next issue)**