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Assassin

Written by Tom Cain

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Assassin

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1

Lara Dashian was as pretty as a pixie, as fresh and full of life as a wildflower meadow on a sunny spring day. At the age of eighteen, she was loving, dutiful and unsullied, her parents' pride and joy. Then she left her hometown of Armavir in western Armenia and caught a bus to the capital Yerevan to meet a man her aunt had said could get her a good job in the West. When her supposed benefactor took her papers and her meagre savings and then shut her in a cellar beneath a suburban bar, Lara learned the hard way that some people will sell their own family to buy a new TV.

The naive, innocent girl that she had been until then did not exist any more. She had been ripped apart

by the process of repeated sexual assault, punishment and intimidation that people-traffickers call 'breaking in'. Its purpose is very straightforward: to accustom young women to the inevitability of rape and the absolute necessity, for their own self-preservation, of acting as though they enjoy it. Lara had cowered in terror as another girl, brave enough to resist, was beaten to death before her eyes as a warning to the other unwitting slaves with whom she had been imprisoned. Her old self had been left behind for ever as a new Lara obeyed her tormentors and stepped aboard the plane that would take her, via Munich, to Dubai.

She had no idea where Dubai was, no more understanding of her final destination than a sheep has of the slaughterhouse. And just like an animal, she was traded along the way. The deal was done in a coffee shop at Munich airport between the trafficker who had flown her from Yerevan and another man, heavily built, with a puffy, unshaven face, heavy gold chains around his neck and wrists, wearing a black leather jacket.

'This is Khat,' the trafficker had said.

Lara sat in silence while the two men haggled over her selling price. While they batted numbers back and forth – laughing, switching from coffee to beer, enjoying themselves – Lara tried to come to terms with the

unreality of her situation. One man had brought her to the café, and another would take her away: her new owner. She rolled the words around in her head – 'my owner' – but could make no sense of them. It seemed impossible that such a thing could happen as all around her the life of the airport carried on regardless, still less that she would simply sit there and allow herself to be bought and sold. And yet it had been so.

Now she was bought and sold every day.

In the past week alone Lara had been with at least thirty men, maybe more. She did not count them any more, just the money they gave her. She had to make fifteen hundred dirhams a night, roughly four hundred US dollars, or two-seventy in euros: Lara was rapidly acquiring a head for currency calculations. If she succeeded, Khat would let her microwave a cheap frozen meal before he locked her away in the bare room where she and his three other prostitutes passed their days. If she failed, he would hit her with vicious jabs to the stomach that left her lying on the cheap nylon carpet, winded, weeping and retching.

Now another sale was in prospect. That evening, when Khat came into the room, he seemed upbeat, but also edgy. He looked the girls over, considered for a moment and then pointed at Lara. 'You,' he said. 'Get dressed, your best clothes. Take extra care when you paint your face. You're coming with me.'

On the way out, Khat told her that a wealthy Englishman had arrived in Dubai. He was very well connected to the city's most powerful men. He was looking to buy a girl for his own, exclusive use. And he was willing to pay up to thirty thousand euros to get exactly what he wanted.

Lara had gasped at the figure. Despite the income that prostitutes could generate, the sheer number of women on the market meant that they could usually be bought for less than the price of a rusty old second-hand car. In Munich she had fetched just 2,800 euros, inclusive of airfare. No wonder Khat was tense. If Lara caught the buyer's eye, he stood to make back more than ten times what he had paid for her.

'But if I have to bring you back here . . .' He gave her a cold, leering smile like a wolf eyeing its prey. '. . . I will hit you so hard, it will make all the times before seem like I was only tickling.'

2

Fifty years ago Dubai had been a dusty, insignificant speck on the map of the Persian Gulf. Yet by the time the twenty-first century dawned it was said to be the fastest-growing city in the world. Barely a week had gone by without the opening of another new five-, six- or even seven-star hotel, each claiming to be more luxurious, more outrageously indulgent than the last. Amidst this brash, relentless extravagance the Karama Pearl, an unimpressive structure barely a dozen storeys tall, was not the most obvious place for a wealthy visitor to conduct his business. It had one feature, however, that marked it out from anywhere else in Dubai: a nightclub that was one of

the city's prime locations for picking up prostitutes.

Tonight, as always, there were tarts wandering from table to table looking for business, but they were just the supporting cast. The stars were up by the bar that snaked down one side of the club. There stood six pimps, each with their most desirable property: six stallholders touting for a foreigner's custom in a human souk.

The girls who were coming up for sale cast quick, competitive glances at one another, each as fearful of failure as Lara, knowing only one of them could succeed. They toyed with their hair and tossed their heads. As they shifted nervously from foot to foot, their heels tapped against the floor like the shoes of skittish racehorses coming under starter's orders.

Across the room, on the far side of the club's dance-floor, sat the man for whom the whole display was being staged. Lara guessed he was probably in his late thirties. He was simply dressed in a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up below his elbows, faded jeans and loafers. He wore no jewellery besides his watch. He had short dark hair and a face whose sharply defined features suggested that the body beneath his clothes was lean and fit. Only his mouth, with its full lips and sullen expression, jarred with his clean-cut features. Lara had become an expert in reading men's faces. This one, she thought, might have a cruel streak. Yet

he was handsome, there was no denying that, and rich, too.

She wondered why he had to buy a girl when plenty of women would happily give themselves to him for free. Perhaps he already had a wife, or simply preferred to pay for what he needed. Some of her regular clients thought sex was simpler that way. All women cost money, they said, but at least with a whore you knew the bill in advance.

It still seemed strange to Lara, even now, that when they talked about a whore, they meant her.

Next to the buyer lolled an Indian, whose chubby physique and plump, smiling cheeks could not disguise the sharp, predatory glint in his eyes. Khat had pointed him out when they first walked into the club.

'That is Tiger Dey. He controls much of the market for foreign labour in Dubai: the labourers on building sites, the cleaners in hotel rooms . . .' Khat had given her a wry, almost resigned look she had never seen on his face before. 'He controls you and me, too. Every night, you give me the money, but in the end, Tiger Dey is the one you are working for.'

Now, Lara saw, Dey and the Englishman were looking towards the bar, running their eyes along the line of candidates, pausing from time to time to confer with one another. She could see Dey trying to be persuasive, emphasizing his points by gesturing with

his right fist. There was a bright-red cocktail cherry, taken from the drink in front of him, dangling between his thumb and forefinger. It looked absurd hanging there. Maybe that was why the other man was laughing as he held up his hands in mock surrender, letting Dey win the argument.

The Indian leaned back on the velvet banquette, popped the cherry into his mouth and threw away the stalk. Then he raised a finger to summon one of the bodyguards who were deployed around his table, pointed at the bar and dispatched him.

Lara soon discovered why Dey had been so insistent. One of the other prostitutes was Indian. She was a beautiful creature, with lush curves, heavy, sensuous features and turquoise eyes that dazzled against her flawless brown skin. The bodyguard stopped by her and jerked his thumb back towards the table where his boss was sitting. As she trotted away, her owner pumped his fist in triumph.

Khat snorted contemptuously. 'It will not be her.' He looked across the room to where the girl was arriving at the buyer's table. 'That one prefers white meat. I can tell.'

A few minutes later, he was proved right. The Indian girl came back to the bar, her haughtiness replaced by a look of desperate ingratiation. Her pimp screamed abuse at her and then slapped her hard in

the face. As she began to cry, he grabbed her upper arm and pulled her towards the exit; she pleaded with him frantically, her words punctuated by sobs. No one moved a muscle to stop him or help her. Whatever a man wanted to do with his property, that was his business.

Lara had no time to speculate about the fate that awaited the Indian girl. At the far table, the Englishman was pointing at Dey, as if to say, 'I told you so,' and it was his host who had to shrug and admit defeat. Again the bodyguard was sent over to the bar.

This time he pointed at Lara.

For a second she could not move. Then Khat gave her a stinging spank on the backside that sent her skidding across the polished wood of the dancefloor until she managed to stop, compose herself, tug her tiny skirt tight against her upper thighs and walk towards the men who now held her life in their hands. They were grinning broadly, amused by her attempts to restore a little dignity.

Lara hoped that was a good sign. She did her best to smile back.

The Englishman patted the dark velvet upholstery to the right of him, indicating she should sit there. Lara did as she was told, turning her body towards him. She placed her right hand on his inner thigh and leaned towards him, feigning a little gasp of

pleasure as her left breast brushed against his arm.

Lara waited for a second, expecting the reaction that such a blatant display of availability usually provoked. But when the man put his hand around her wrist, it was not to guide her fingers higher towards his crotch, but to gently push her back until she was sitting upright on the banquette. Lara could not stop the fear of rejection flickering across her face, but he smiled, much more softly this time, and said, 'It's OK, don't worry.' Then he looked at her quizzically. 'You do speak English, right?'

'Little bit,' said Lara, who was rapidly adding a whole new vocabulary to the smattering she had learned at school.

'OK then, what's your name?'

'Lara.'

'Hi,' he said. 'My name's Carver.'

3

The Englishman called Carver looked Lara up and down. His face betrayed no indication of what he thought of her.

'I very good at sex,' she blurted, not knowing what else to say. 'You take me please, we have good time.'

Now Carver laughed. He looked past her, towards Tiger Dey, and said, 'I'll give the girl one thing, she's enthusiastic.'

As the Indian smiled in agreement, Carver looked at Lara again, leaned towards her and, almost to himself, murmured, 'But you're not enthusiastic really, are you, Lara? I can tell.'

Lara felt confused, unable to decide if she was doing

well or badly. She could not read this man's eyes. At first she had thought they were blue, but close up she wondered if they might be green. In the dim light of the club it was hard to tell. Either way, there was something not quite right, almost unnatural about them.

Before she could pin it down she was distracted by a movement at the very edge of her peripheral vision. Even while he gazed at her face, Carver seemed to be doing something with the drink on the table beside him, though she could not tell what it was.

Then suddenly the spell was broken.

'I like her,' said Carver, relaxing back into the seat and talking to Tiger Dey again. 'She'll do . . . my little Lara,' he continued, giving her bare thigh a friendly squeeze.

She gave him a nervous smile, hardly daring to believe that he had chosen her, still uncertain that the deal was done.

'What do you think that ape is going to want for her?' Carver asked.

Tiger Dey smiled. 'He will want whatever I tell him to want. You will give me thirty thousand, and I will give him half of that. He will not dare to complain.'

'Excellent,' said Carver and Lara, watching him, was struck again by the sense that something about him wasn't quite right. She realized that Carver was acting,

just as she so often did. He was giving a performance. But why, and what would it mean for her?

She knew at once that such questions were futile. Her only hope was to make him like her. So Lara put a happy look on her face and giggled sweetly when Carver asked her if she wanted a drink to celebrate. She laughed again when Carver told the waiter to put a cherry in it.

'Don't worry, darling, it's not for you,' he said. 'It's for Tiger. He can't resist those cherries, can you, mate?'

'Indeed, they are my fatal weakness,' the Indian agreed.

'Hang on, what have we here?' said Carver, reaching into his own, empty glass and pulling a waxy red fruit out by its stalk. 'There you go, have a cherry on me!'

He lobbed it over the table. Tiger Dey caught it one-handed and popped it in his mouth, to a cheer from Carver and an excited squeal and burst of applause from Lara.

As the merriment subsided, Carver reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, took out a tightly stuffed envelope and slipped it across the table. 'Thirty grand in five-hundred-euro notes,' he said as Tiger Dey picked it up. 'I won't even try to beat you down.'

'You would only end up paying even more. In any case, this one is worth the money.'

Within minutes, Khat had been led across to them and given his share. Lara could see him biting back the urge to complain.

So he is scared too, she thought, relishing his fear. Then she heard Tiger Dey telling Carver, 'She is yours, my friend. Do with her as you will.'

'In that case, I'm going to find out exactly what I've just bought.' Carver looked at Lara and, mimicking the patronizing tone of a husband to his wife, said, 'Finish up your drink, darling, I think it's time we left.'

He took her by the hand as he helped her up from the table and then slipped his arm around her waist as they left the club, crossed the lobby and took the lift up to his top-floor suite.

It struck Lara as Carver held the door open and ushered her in that she would never be going back to Khat's apartment, the locked room and the beatings. She did not have to make fifteen hundred dirhams tonight. She just had to persuade this strange, disturbing, handsome man that he had been right to buy her, and that he wanted to keep her. Perhaps, if she were very good, he might want to make her his proper girlfriend, or even his wife. Her eyes welled up, though she did not know if it was from relief, from hope or just because she was a young girl, far from home and weary to her bones.

Carver ran a finger under her eyes, wiping away the

tears. 'Don't cry,' he said. Then he took her in her arms.

It began as a hug of consolation, but soon he pushed a little harder against her, and Lara found herself pushing back, although she could not say why. In all the times she had been with men, she had only ever given them what they wanted – no matter how much it disgusted her, no matter how badly it hurt – because the consequences of not doing so were even worse.

So was it fear that made her long to please the man who was taking her now? When he picked her up and carried her across the room, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled her mouth to his, so that he had to jerk away, laughing, just to see where he was going. And then, very gently, he lowered her down to the bed.

4

Lara lay with her eyes shut, expecting at any moment to feel Carver's weight upon her, wondering if this would feel different to all the other times. It took her a few seconds to realize that he was not joining her on the bed. She opened her eyes to find him still standing, fully clothed, taking more money from a leather wallet.

'This is for you,' he said, placing the money on the bedside table. 'Twenty thousand dirhams. Now I must go.'

It took a second or two for Lara to understand what he meant. He was leaving her. She had failed somehow. He was going to return her to Khat and demand

his money back. She sat upright, terrified, pulling a sheet across her chest.

'I no good?' she asked. 'No please you?'

'You were very good,' he said. 'That's why I'm setting you free.'

'But Khat, Mr Dey, if they find out—'

Carver held two fingers to her lips. 'Shush, don't worry, they won't cause you any trouble. Do you understand?'

Lara did not. All she understood was the price she would pay for failure. Her tears had returned as he took a hotel Biro from the table and wrote on a scrap of headed paper.

'Listen,' he said. 'This is important. Are you listening?'

She nodded miserably.

'Good. This is the address of a place called the House of Freedom. It's a shelter for women who have been trafficked. That means forced to come here, forced to go with men. It's in Jumeirah, not far from here. I want you to go there. In a few days, the police will come to speak to you. It's nothing serious, they just want to check you really were trafficked. But don't tell them about me, OK? That's important. Say that you escaped from your owner. Say that you want to go home. They will help you.'

Lara looked at him in bleak desperation. 'Can't go

home. My family will say I am bad girl, I am whore.'

'Here,' said Carver, pulling more notes from his wallet. 'That should help change their mind.'

Lara wiped the tears from her eyes and the snot from her nose. Then she asked the question that had been troubling her since they first met in the night-club. 'Who are you? Why you do . . . all this?'

Carver smiled. 'I can't tell you what I do, or why,' he said. 'But my close friends call me Pablo. Why don't you do that?'

'Don't go, Pablo,' she said. 'Please . . .'

'I'm sorry, I've got work to do. But you can stay here for a while if you like. Have a shower. Get something to eat. Don't worry about the bill. But don't stay more than one hour. In sixty minutes, you go, OK?'

Lara nodded. 'One hour, maximum.'

'Good girl.'

He walked over to the door, half opened it, then paused. 'Goodbye, Lara,' he said. 'And good luck.'

Before she could say, 'Goodbye, Pablo,' he was gone.

Over the next few hours, Tiger Dey was gripped by violent stomach pains. These were the first effects of ricin poisoning. The 1-milligram dose – several times the estimated minimum required to be fatal – had been concealed within a sugar-coated pellet less than

two millimetres across, designed to melt at human body temperature. This, in turn, was secreted inside the maraschino cherry given to him by an assassin he knew as Carver.

Ricin acts by breaking down proteins within cells, causing them to cease to function. There is no antidote to the poison, which is swiftly metabolized in the body, leaving no trace. It is, however, identifiable by its effects, which are incurable. In Tiger Dey's case, these progressed to repeated vomiting and bloody diarrhoea. Within two days his kidneys, liver and spleen would all collapse.

Dey's semi-legendary status, the controversy that surrounded him and the gruesome predictability of his demise attracted the kind of blanket media coverage that Dubai's rulers do not particularly enjoy. Outside the hospital, cameramen and reporters jostled for position. Inside, Dey's doctors tried their best to ease his pain. That aside, there was nothing they could do. There are few good ways to die, but this is arguably one of the worst.

Khat, whose given name was Kajoshaj Bajrami, met a swifter, more merciful end. He was shot in the back of the head, at point-blank range, when he went to collect his car in the lot behind the Karama Pearl hotel. No one heard the silenced shots or saw his assailant. His wallet was missing, however, and several witnesses

testified to the fact that Khat had spent the evening at the bar in the basement club, boasting to anyone who would listen that he had just taken fifteen thousand euros in cash off Tiger Dey for a whore he'd bought for less than three thousand and was past her best earning days. The motive for his murder was therefore obvious, even if the culprit was, as yet, unknown.

At around 1.55 a.m., the man who had called himself both Samuel Carver and Pablo stopped by a dumpster behind a fast-food restaurant in the Deira district just north of the airport. He deposited a brown wig within the dumpster, making sure that it was well covered by a thick pile of stinking waste. He had already flushed his green contact lenses down a lavatory and swapped his white shirt for a black one. Back with his natural colouring of deep red hair and icy blue eyes, he made his way to Dubai International. Having checked in online and carrying only hand baggage he was in plenty of time to walk straight through security and on to the 2.45 a.m. Emirates flight to London. His ticket had been issued in the name of Damon Tyzack.

Tired by his hard work, but delighted by its outcome, Tyzack settled himself into a first-class private suite, lay back and soon fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.