

DEAD WEST by Linda L. Richards

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

I'm sitting on a beach. It's a ridiculous proposition. Fluffy white clouds are scudding through a clear, blue sky. Surfers are running around carrying boards, often over their heads. Then they plunge into a sea that looks deadly to my non-surfing eyes. Palm trees are waving, and the air is so neutral, you don't have to think about it. Soft, welcoming air. You just float right through.

The view is beautiful. It's like a movie backdrop. A painting. Something skillfully manufactured to look hyper-real. Textbook paradise, that's what I'm talking about.

I'm sitting on this beach, trying not to think about the reason I'm here. But it's hard. Difficult. To not think about it, I mean. I'm here, in paradise, because someone has to die.

Someone will die.

I got the assignment a few days ago. I flew to this island to pull it off.

My target is a businessman who lives on this island in the South Pacific. He is the kind of self-made guy who has achieved every goal in life and would seem to have everything to live for. Only now, apparently, someone wants him dead because here I am, ready for business.

So I stake him out. You need to understand at least the basics of who someone is before you snuff them out. This is the idea that I have. I'm not going all sensitive on you or anything, that's just how it is. In order to do the best possible job in this business, you need to understand a little about who *they* are. It's not a rule or anything, it's just how I feel.

His name is Gavin White, and I researched him a bit before I got here. He made his fortune in oil and wax, which is an odd enough combo that you perk up your ears. Only it doesn't seem to matter: the source of the income would seem to have nothing to do with the hit. Would *seem* to, because there is only so much I can learn about that, really. On the surface, anyway, I can find no direct connection between Gavin White's livelihood and the death that someone has planned for him and that I am now further planning.

I follow him and his S560 cabriolet all over the tropical island. He makes a few stops. I watch what he does, how he moves and who he interacts with. Some of it might matter. I'm not doing it for my health. I'm watching him so I can determine when I might best have advantage when I go to take him out. There are always multiple times and different places to fulfill my assignment and usually only one—or maybe two—that are virtually flawless. Sometimes not even that. So I watch.

And it's more than an opportunity I'm looking for, though that can play a part. It's also a matter of identifying what will make my job not only easier, but also safest from detection. And so I watch. And I wait.

As I follow him, he stops first at a bank. Does some business— I'll never know what. After that he visits his mom. At least, I guess it is his mom. An older woman he seems affectionate with. From my rental car, I can see them through a front room window. There is a hug and then a wave. It could be a bookkeeper for all I know. But mom is what I guess.

After a while he heads to the beach. He sits on the sand, contemplative for a while. I think about taking him there; full contemplation. But it is crude and much too exposed.

More time passes before he takes off his shoes, leaves them on the beach, and walks into the surf. I leave my car and take up a spot on the sand, just plopping myself down not far from his shoes.

I watch him surreptitiously. It is obvious he did not come to the beach to swim. He is fully clothed and he hasn't left a towel behind there with his shoes. There is none of the paraphernalia one associates with a visit to the beach, even if this were one that is intended for swimming, which it is not. Signs warn of possible impending doom for those who venture into the water.

"Strong current," warns one sign under a fluorescent flag. "If in doubt, don't go out."

"Dangerous shore break," warns another. "Waves break in shallow water. Serious injuries could occur, even in small surf."

I don't know if Gavin White read the signs, or noticed them, but even though he is still fully clothed, he steps into the water anyway.

First, he gets his feet wet. Not long after, he wades in up to his knees. He hesitates when the water is at mid-thigh, and he stops there. For a while, it seems to me, it is like a dance. He stands facing the horizon, directly in front of where I sit. His shoulders are squared. There is something stoic in his stance. I can't explain it. Squared and stoic.

Waves break against him, push him back. He allows the push, then makes his way back to the spot where he had stood before.

Before long, he ventures deeper still. The dance. I watch for a while, fascinated. I wonder if there is anything I should do. But no. The dance. Two steps forward, then the waves push him back.

And now he is in deeper still, and further from shore. I see a wave engulf him completely, and I hold my breath. He doesn't struggle, but then I see him rise, face the horizon, square his shoulders.

The waves are strong and beautiful. And they are eerily clear, those waves. Sometimes I can see right inside them. Careful glass tubes of water, I can even observe that from shore.

For a while he stands like that, facing the horizon—a lull in the action of the waves. And then he is engulfed once again. I hold my breath, but this time he doesn't rise.

I sit there for a long time, considering. And waiting. My breathing shallow. But he doesn't reappear.

After half an hour, I text my handler.

"It is done," is all I say, just as I know she will expect.

It was not my hand, but the mission has been accomplished regardless. No one knows better than me that there are many ways to die.

CHAPTER TWO

There are many ways to die.

I think I have died many times. Certainly, I've wanted to.

I died when I lost my child. Died later when I lost my husband, even though by then there was little love left between us. Still. I died.

I died the first time I took someone's life. At the time it felt like living, but I didn't yet know the difference. And then there was the time I had to kill someone I loved. I died that time, too.

Sometimes I believe I have died so much that I've forgotten how to live. That I should most correctly walk into a waiting undertow just like Gavin White did. I don't know what stops me, honestly. I don't. Though there are days when it's a very close thing.

This isn't one of those days.

When my phone rings, it tells me the call is coming from Kiribati, a place I've barely heard of before. All of her calls are like that. Routed through some other place. They might be chosen for their convenience, but I think they are also selected for the mirth they might provide. I'm not certain she has a wicked sense of humor, but I suspect it, pretty much.

She never used to call me. For a long time, it was text and email only, secure channels always. And then the calls began. I imagined that it meant we had developed some sort of connection. I no longer wonder about that now.

Whatever the meaning, the calls have never been from normal places; they don't come from the places one might expect. And none have been from the same odd place twice. They are chosen for some reason I don't understand. Some inside joke I stand outside of. She can be cryptic that way. Another reason I guess I imagined for a while that we belonged.

"That was efficient," is what she says by way of greeting.

"What do you mean?" I figure I actually know, but it makes no sense to admit that going in.

"He walked into the sea," she says. How does she know that? It makes me wonder, but not deeply. It would not be the first time I've wondered if there is someone who watches the hunter. It would even make a dark sort of sense.

"Yes," I say, unquestioning. She has her ways. "That's right. He did."

"Hmmm," she says. And then again, "Hmmm."

"There are many ways to die," I say, and by now it feels like gospel. Something sacred. And more true than true. "What I really don't understand," I say, sailing into a different direction, "is that you said things weren't going to be like this anymore."

"Excuse me?" I am put off by her tone. Surprised. It comes to me from a new place. Unexpected. And she doesn't back away from it. Goes on just as strongly, instead. "What do you mean by that?" It's a challenge.

"I'm trying to think how you put it," I say. "Something about how things have been wrong with the world. How we could . . . how we could make it right."

"Did I say that?"

“You did,” I reply.

“I do maybe remember something like that. Maybe.”

I feel my heart sink a bit at her words. And why? I can’t even quite put my finger on it. It felt, maybe, like I might be part of something. Again. And now? Now I’m not.

“You did say that,” I say it quietly though. Almost as an aside.

“These things take time, as it turns out. One can’t just flip a switch.” I can hear her pushing on, rushing through. “Meanwhile, I’ve got another one for you,” she says, and I’m relieved that she has tacitly agreed to leave the drowned man to sink or swim. Disappointed by how easily the hopeful words she’d fed me not so long ago could be pushed to one easy side. Disappointed and relieved all in one gulp. It’s an odd thing to feel. I find I don’t like it. “So if you’re ready,” she says.

“Another what?” I ask it, but I suspect I know.

“Job,” she replies, and I wonder why I wasted breath.

“I’m ready enough,” I say, though I’m struggling. I struggle every time.

“Good,” she says. “I’ll send you the details, but I think the juxtaposition of these two will amuse you.”

“How so?” And I try not to digest the irony around any aspect of a contract killing being amusing.

“Well, you’ve just been in the Pacific. Water, water everywhere.

And now you’re heading for the desert.” “I am?”

“You are. Right out into it, in fact. The target is in Arizona.” “Phoenix?” Which is all I really know of Arizona.

“You’ll fly to Phoenix, but, no: the target is near a national park.

Rural. A place you won’t have heard of before, I’m betting. I’ll send the details once I’m off this call.”

When I first get off the phone, I try not to think about it too much. It’s like my brain doesn’t want me to pay attention. Or something. But I put off checking my email. I’ll do it later. Right now, there are things that need my attention.

Okay. “Need” would be an overstatement. There are things. I choose to give them my time. Walks in the forest with the dog. Cooking succulent meals for one. And recently, I have taken up plein air painting, simply because it was there.

When I want to paint, I take the dog and my gear and we hike out to some remote spot and I set up my stuff and I paint what I see. Try to paint what I see. The dog meanwhile amuses himself— chasing squirrels, digging holes, sniffing his own butt. He’s very skilled at self-amusement. I’ve never seen anything like it.

In less clement weather we hunker down and brave it out. I make a fire in the fireplace because it’s beautiful, not because we need the warmth.

There is something idyllic to this life. Easy. After a while it gets even easier to forget . . . forget what? Everything, really. It gets easier to forget to remember.

I paint the dog. My online classes have gone well enough, and I have proven to be a good enough student—and the dog a good enough subject—that I end up with a pretty credible

representation of him; something I am proud to hang. And even if I wasn't, it's not like anyone is ever going to see.