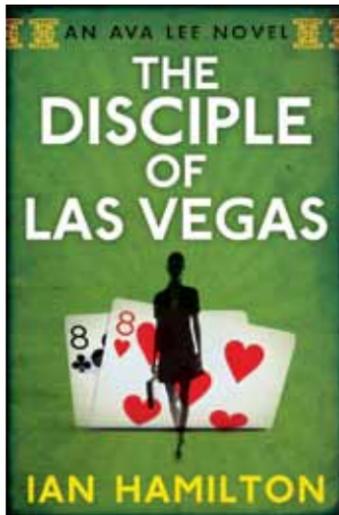


COMING SOON

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Read on for a preview of the next thrilling Ava Lee novel,
The Disciple of Las Vegas



(1)

WHEN AVA LEE WOKE UP, THE FIRST THING SHE FELT WAS A sharp pain shooting through her neck and shoulder. She stretched, causing the pain to become more intense, and then slowly relaxed her muscles. She knew from experience that the lashing she had endured wasn't going to cause any long-term damage.

She turned her head to look at the bedside clock. It was only 6 a.m. She had flown home to Toronto around midnight and had been in bed for less than five hours. She had thought that two melatonin capsules and a glass of Pinot Grigio would see her through the night, but the pain and a mind that was still a jumble of emotions were gnawing at her.

She lay quietly, hoping she could drift off again. After ten minutes she gave up and pulled herself out of bed. She kneeled to say a short prayer of thanks to St. Jude for her safe return, and then headed for the bathroom. Pulling off her black Giordano T-shirt, Ava turned so she could see her back in the mirror. The belt had hit her on the side of her neck and across her right shoulder, and

then again on the same shoulder and partway down her back. The marks were a deep black and blue, yellowed at the edges. They actually looked worse than they felt, and in a few days they would start to fade.

Ava went into the kitchen, made herself a Starbucks VIA instant coffee, and sat down at the small round table set against the window overlooking Cumberland Street and Avenue Road. She lived in the heart of Yorkville, the ritziest neighbourhood in downtown Toronto. Despite the early hour, the traffic below was barely moving while the January weather tried to decide if it was raining or snowing.

Normally she would have the *Globe and Mail* newspaper spread across the table, but she had been away for more than a week — travelling to Hong Kong, Thailand, Guyana, and the British Virgin Islands, tracking down and retrieving more than five million dollars that had been stolen from a client — and had cancelled the paper until further notice. So she opened up her laptop and turned it on so she could read the news online. That was a mistake.

After she signed on, Ava opened her email program, expecting to see messages from friends, a bit of spam, and not much else. She froze when she saw Uncle's name in her inbox. Uncle was her Hong Kong-based partner, a man in his seventies whose idea of high-tech communication was a Chinese knockoff iPhone he had bought for less than forty dollars at the Kowloon night-time street market and used strictly for making calls. He had sent her two messages in the past eight hours; she couldn't remember receiving that many from him in the past year. She opened them. They were identical, simply

stating that he needed her to call him. He didn't say it was urgent. He didn't have to — that he had sent two emails conveyed that fact well enough.

Ava groaned and went over to her hot-water Thermos and made another coffee. She knew what he wanted to talk about. While she was in Guyana they had been offered a job by a Filipino-Chinese businessman named Tommy Ordonez. Ordonez was the wealthiest man in the islands. They had put him off so they could finish the job they were on. Ava had hoped he could be put off longer, because that job had turned nasty, with unforeseen complications. What was supposed to have been a straightforward tracking and retrieval of misappropriated funds had turned into extortion. She had prevailed, but not without difficulty, as the bruises and welts demonstrated, and not without stress, some of which still lingered.

Ava had turned off her cellphone the night before and thrown it into the bottom of her purse. She had intended to leave it there for a few days, or at least until she felt her head was in the right place. She went to retrieve it and saw that Uncle had called as well. She sighed. She had to call him back. She couldn't ignore two emails and a phone message without insulting him. Insulting Uncle was something she had never done — and never wished to do. It was just past six in the evening in Hong Kong, and Ava knew she'd probably catch him at a massage, an early dinner, or his Kowloon apartment.

"*Wei*," Uncle said. Ava could hear his little dog yapping and his Filipina housekeeper, Lourdes, telling it to be quiet. He was still at the apartment.

"It's Ava."

“You are in Toronto?”

“Yes, I got in late last night.”

“And you are okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Good, I was worried about you . . . It is early there.”

“I couldn’t sleep, and then I turned on my computer and saw your emails.”

“We need to talk.”

Ava wondered if he thought she was being critical of his persistence, and felt a bit uneasy about being perceived as even mildly rude. “No problem, Uncle. Is it about Tommy Ordonez?”

“Yes, he and his closest adviser, Chang Wang, each called me twice yesterday, after calling me twice the day before. I have been telling them they need to be patient.”

“And how did they react?”

“Impatiently.”

“Uncle, you did tell them we never do two jobs at the same time, and that I was still working on one?”

“Of course, but it only seemed to frustrate them more. Especially Ordonez. He is a man who does not think he should ever have to stand in a queue or have someone else’s interests take precedence over his.”

“Did he say that?”

“He didn’t need to. Ava, the last time I spoke to him he could barely contain himself. I could feel him eating his anger, and I know that if he had been talking to anyone but me he would have exploded.”

Ava finished her second coffee and, holding the phone to her ear, went to the counter and emptied another sachet into her cup. “What do we know about the job, Uncle?”

“Not that much. Just that it is a lot of money, and that one of Ordonez’s younger brothers is involved. They want to meet us face to face to provide the actual details.”

“Is it a firm contract?”

“If we want to accept it.”

“You haven’t committed?”

“I thought it would be best for us to hear the full story before signing on.”

“What I don’t understand, Uncle, is why, with all the resources and power they have, they need us in the first place.”

She had asked that question when the job offer was first made, and it had generated an awkward response from Uncle. Now he was just vague. “They will explain everything when we are in Manila.”

“So you want us to go?”

“I told Chang Wang that we would discuss it with them, and they are insisting on doing that in person . . . I’m told the sum of money involved is more than fifty million dollars. I think that is worth a trip to Manila, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course it is,” she said, and then realized that Uncle had twice referred to Ordonez’s right-hand man by both his family and given names. It was a form of respect he rarely used for clients, and she guessed there was some kind of bond between the two men. “This Chang, Uncle, do you know him well?”

“He is from Wuhan, like me, and over the years we have done each other many favours. I would still have ten men rotting in Filipino prisons if it wasn’t for him, and he would still be waiting for permits to build cigarette factories in Hubei province if it wasn’t for me.”

Ava was accustomed to Uncle's Wuhan connections. He had been born and raised in a village on its outskirts, and he and the other men from there who had escaped the Communist regime had remained intensely loyal to each other. "And Chang hasn't confided in you about the nature of Ordonez's problem?"

"His first loyalty is to Ordonez, and we need to understand and respect that."

"Earlier you mentioned that Ordonez restrained himself when he was talking to you. I didn't think you knew him."

"Chang introduced us once, years ago, when I was at the top of my heap and he was scaling his. It was a passing encounter that seems more important to him than it is to me. I did not even remember the meeting until he mentioned it."

Ava was now standing by the kitchen window. The falling rain was beginning to freeze on it. She watched a car skid into the intersection below and slide into a SUV. She hated this kind of weather. At least Manila would be warm. "Can you buy us an extra day or two?" she asked.

Uncle hesitated. She knew he didn't want to push her too hard. "I would like to get there as soon as possible. But if you need to spend more time in Toronto, then I will deal with Chang Wang and Ordonez as best as I can."

"Would they walk away from the deal if we delay?"

"I really don't know."

"Well, I guess that's something we shouldn't risk," Ava said.

"No, we should not. Their impatience could get the better of them."

She did a quick calculation. “If I catch the Cathay Pacific flight late tonight, I can be in Hong Kong the day after tomorrow, early morning your time. That at least will give me all of today to get caught up here, and I’ll have a sixteen-hour flight I can sleep through.”

“Good. We can leave for Manila the morning you arrive. I will have those flights booked,” said Uncle. “I will let Chang Wang know right away that we are coming. Ordonez’s office is near the Ayala Centre in Makati City. The Peninsula Hotel is nearby. I will have them book us rooms.”

“Okay. I’ll call you when things are confirmed on this end.”

“Fine. And Ava, I think this is the right thing for us to do.”

She shrugged. “Ordonez is a big man and it’s a lot of money.”

“That does not mean we cannot still say no,” Uncle said. “We will go and talk to them, and then you and I can talk about what we want to do . . . I have to tell you, though, I have a feeling that it will be worth it in the end.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Now I have to call Chang,” he said.

As she hung up the phone, Ava tried to remember if she’d heard Uncle mention Chang’s name before, and came up blank. That wasn’t unusual. He had a network of friends and associates that spanned Asia, though his closest contacts were those who shared those long, deep Wuhan roots.

Is Ordonez from Wuhan as well? she wondered. She knew he was Chinese-born, but nothing more specific

than that. She'd find out soon enough, but her interest was far more aroused by the kind of problem a man as rich and powerful as Tommy Ordonez couldn't handle himself.