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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ THRILLER

Key West Revenge

Lee A. Sweetapple
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The action in Lee A. Sweetapple's *Key West Revenge* begins swiftly. LP Thomas and his beautiful female partner, Morgan Smith, are visiting Key West to converge on a project with one of LP's old friends, Jim Stillwater. Jim has enlisted the assistance of Steve Yamoto and Joe Golflink—also former associates from their days in the military—due to their expertise in matters of intelligence and subterfuge.

Just as readers begin to acclimate to LP and Morgan's banter, the couple is kidnapped. Morgan sees an opportunity to escape and grabs it, but the ordeal she faces to reach safety is grueling and arduous. By the time she is rescued, she discovers LP has been framed for the bombing of a military base and is presumed dead. Since LP's friends have already assembled, they quickly join forces to rescue him before his life and reputation come to harm.

As Jim, Steve, Joe, Morgan, and Steve's wife, Tanya, plan their tactics, they bring in additional confederates. Some are former cops, one is a forest ranger, another a firefighter. Meanwhile, corrupt individuals who are involved in politics, the military, and drug wars make their own plans to benefit from LP's misfortune. Some of the more colorful characters are a drug kingpin called El Diablo, an exotic dancer named Fiona, and Special Agent Pesto.

Information on the book's back cover states that Sweetapple has "thirty years of experience as an intelligence officer, combating terrorism and drug cartels"; his authority in this arena lends *Key West Revenge* its greatest strength. The content of this gripping, absorbing thriller is intelligent and convincing. Sweetapple clearly has accrued the knowledge over his long career to weave a narrative that is vivid and credible. However, there are times when it seems he is writing for clarity over expediency, spelling out information that could easily be inferred. Throughout the novel, he finishes chapters like this: "Very well," Guterez said, ending the call. This practice presumably lends an air of finality, but it isn't necessary. That being said, novels in this genre can often become confusing, so some readers may appreciate the author's explanations.

Sweetapple's weaknesses are negligible. However, while surprises are generally a positive attribute, a narrative can only sustain a certain number of plot twists before contrivance eclipses authenticity. In addition, the author's plainspoken style is admirable, but some readers will likely long for language that contains a bit more richness and finesse. Occasionally he slips playful moments into the story, as when an evening interrogation of a duplicitous military officer culminates in a Sapphic dalliance between Fiona and Tanya; at times like this, Sweetapple needs to shift gears into prose that feels less like reportage.

Key West Revenge is, overall, a successful novel. Engaging and entertaining, it is an excellent choice for readers who enjoy action, intrigue, and some notably strong and competent female (as well as male) characters, along the way.

CHRISTOPHER SODEN (November 9, 2012)

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