***D*ead *O*n *A*rrival**

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 10**

 

**Chapter 19**

***La Clodotte***

 Larkin gave Tracy Hoffman some of her own bile. “Maybe we should

play hide the tennis racket instead.”

 She hissed, “All spiffed up in your tux with gold cufflinks, but you’re still a

low life from across the tracks.”

 “And what does prostituting yourself for Gisele make you?”

 “A smart businesswoman within the select inner circle of wealth and power.

Gisele was right about you. You haven’t a clue what’s going on here and never will.

It’s not in your genes.”

 “I’m sure you’d be satisfied with what I’ve got in my *jeans*.”

 “What we’re doing is beyond your mental capacity. Time to put out the garbage,”

she said with a nod as Larkin felt a strong grasp on his shoulder from behind. Before

he could turn to see who it was, he fell into that familiar black abyss he’d come to

consider home . . .

 \* \* \*

 As he slowly came to, the shock of pain flashed throughout his body like bolts

of lightning in his joints. In the dank cave of what he discerned was an inactive subway

tunnel, he heard rats scurrying along the tracks. Probably left for dead, he wasn’t bound.

A sloppy job if his assailants assumed he was dead. If not, they’d return to collect him

and, as Tracy inferred, would put him out with the garbage.

 As he tried to get to his feet, he staggered off balance. His legs gave out

and he fell to his knees. There’d been a baseball bat, he recalled, not a wooden

Louisville Slugger with a chance of breaking, but metal with all the impact on

his knees.

 He lit his penlight to see which would be the best direction to take. His mouth

was bleeding so he took the decorative white linen handkerchief from his tuxedo’s

breast pocket. As he put pressure to his swollen bottom lip and removed the hand-

kerchief, he also saw another shade of red. He spit into the handkerchief and grinned

with a beam of recognition, but was discouraged to see in one direction that the

subway tracks led to a deep pit. Though intense, his penlight could see no bottom

to the pit. He wondered if Gisele had planned that black hole as his dead end.

 A distant squeal of a subway car on old tracks drew him in the opposite

direction. Putting his handkerchief in his hip pocket, he limped painfully along the

rails. He saw shadows cast by rats that looked as big as raccoons. His wad of cash

still in his pocket and his Rolex intact confirmed that his beating, for his assailant

at least, had been just for the fun of it.

 His watch said midnight as he came to a **T** with tracks running perpendicular

to his direction left and right. He shined his penlight at a switch in the tracks that

allowed a subway car to go straight in either direction or, if thrown, back to that

dead end he’d come from. The rails leading to the pit felt cold to his touch, but the

others felt hot from recent subway cars passing. Unsure of his direction, he waited

patiently for another subway car to come by.

 Ten minutes later, he felt the rumble of a subway car coming closer, then he

saw at a distance its beam lighting the tracks ahead of it. As it lumbered past, he saw

on the train some of the same male guests he’d seen earlier. The train was slow enough

for him to jump onto it from behind without being seen. Within a few minutes the train

arrived at a platform where those male guests were escorted by young girls dressed like

high-fashioned women. He was sure none was eighteen. Like the dressing room of a high

school musical, the teenage girls were role playing for the VIP members of this private

club.

 He patted his lip to be sure the bleeding had stopped and found a moment of

distraction to blend in with the other VIP guests to an escalator that led to a level at

least fifty feet above the subway platform. Halfway up the escalator his phone chimed

in his pocket, drawing the scornful attention of those on the escalator.

 He saw on the screen a text from Mona:

 Where the hell are you? I ordered oysters,

 but had to eat them all myself. Guess who’s

 at a table nearby – David and Sophia Trask

 with Gisele Honeycutt and apparently the owner,

 Jerome Sternweiss.

 She flashed him a photo of the foursome.

 I’m being eyeballed with scrutiny by the

 maître de so I’ve got to pay and leave

 without them seeing me. As usual, you

 owe me BIG TIME!!

 Larkin texted back:

 Go to 71st Street and 5th and wait for me.

 Call Tim to meet you there. If I’m not there

 by 1:00 AM, call Sloan at Homicide and say

 there’s been a murder on that block, hope-

 fully not mine.

 Mona texted:

 Got it. Be careful!

 Distracted by Mona’s text, Larkin looked up from his screen and saw all the

guest and escorts on the escalator glaring at him.

 He grinned as he said, “Sorry, but Gisele wanted to be sure I’m having a great

time. Of course, I gave her a thumbs up. Jerry says hi, too.”

 All nodded with smiles and thumbs up. For the moment, he hoped to survive

till 1:00 AM.

\* \* \*

 Larkin took note as he entered a vast ballroom of the forty-room townhouse

which Jerome Sternweiss called home. He recalled seeing Sternweiss interviewed on

FOX News when he purchased the multimillion-dollar property about a decade ago,

but an article in *New York Magazine* last year said it was worth at least seventy-five

million.

 The billionaire hedge fund manager had an eclectic taste for art from Picassos.

Gaugins, and Van Goghs, to Andy Warhol’s soup cans and LeRoy Neiman’s sports

illustrations. There were life-size nude statues of Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and

Angela Merkel that claimed to be anatomically correct. Asked once by the media,

in what artistic category these defamatory sculptures were classified, he’d replied

unabashedly, “Just a favor for a friend.” Though he hadn’t disclosed who that friend

was, media had speculated that the one most amused would be David Trask, who’d

considered running as a Republican with an aside to a Fox News host, “After all,

it is called ‘The *White* House’ for good reason, just as the forefathers intended.”

 There were also “Sternweiss Originals” displayed throughout the townhouse,

which may have been genuine self-portraits, but rendered with crayons by an eight-

year old Sternweiss with an exaggerated anabolic penis to confirm their authenticity.

There were also many nude photos of adolescent girls, some pregnant or breast

feeding a newborn. Another sculpture showed a large-breasted woman with a she-

wolf’s head. She nursed twin boys, titled “Romulus and *Uncle* Remus with the

former made of ivory and the latter of onyx. There was a satanic tone to much of

Sternweiss’ dark humor.

 Hardly a shock to Larkin after seeing his role-playing scenarios firsthand at

El Castillo, he’d literally blown that fecund fetish haven of the rich and fervid out of

the water. He’d gladly do the same in New York City, but leaving a ground zero crater

on Manhattan’s exclusive East 71 Street was beyond even his worst PI intentions.

 Larkin felt he needed a shower, not from the filthy subway tunnel where he’d

been left unconscious, but from the miasmic stench of body fluids cloying at him from

the orgasmic discharges of the ultra-rich. Lucifer seemed to dwell here rent free with

sexual vignettes abounding before his eyes. Sternweiss had created a ribald haven

that Larkin thought might have made Caligula blush. Not because of the sex. Larkin

felt nauseated by the flagrant abuse of underage girls to satisfy perverse desires of

the ultra-rich.

 “It’s neoclassical French,” Larkin heard one male guest say to another. “Jerry

has impeccable taste.”

 “Have you seen his den with the self-portrait over the fireplace mantel?” another

remarked.

 “I haven’t had the privilege,” the other said.

 “I belong to his ‘Million-a-Month Club’ by dollar-cost-averaging into his hedge

fund. Tripled my investments in five years with no tax liability. Man’s a genius.”

 “No wonder he let you into his inner sanctum,” the other huffed.

 “Not without an armed guard. Keeps his personal treasures in a safe behind

that self-portrait. But I expected his portrait to show 24 karat gold bling around his

neck the way he displays his wealth in public. Instead, a drab granite stone like a

doughnut with a hole in the center is draped from a lanyard around his neck.”

 “What’s that supposed to represent?” the other asked.

 “Said it was his defiance of Biblical prophecy symbolizing a millstone.”

 “A symbol of his hard work grinding out profits to become a billionaire I

suppose.”

 “That’s what I thought, but he said it was something more darkly profound.”

 Larkin got the connection to a Biblical proclamation that if anyone harmed

even a single hair on the head of a child, they’d be better off thrown into the depths

of the sea with a millstone tied around their neck.

 This monster is fully aware of his heinous crimes without qualms of guilt,

Larkin thought with his mind churning over how he’d create a distraction that would

allow him access to the den.

 From the main ballroom, he took the wide-open staircase to the second floor

where, he gathered from conversations, the den was located with a view of 71st Street

twenty feet below. As he neared the head of the stairs, he saw descending the stairs

an Ecuadorian diplomat he recognized from his DEA tour. Knowing how the man

had gotten away with killing one of his DEA informants and the nature of his debau-

chery at the Sternweiss townhouse, Larkin quickly stuck out a foot, tripping him into

a somersaulting descent to the first floor.

 As the guests’ and security guards’ attention was drawn to the diplomat, Larkin

casually took the other direction towards the den. Confronted by an armed guard, he

pointed back to the head of the stairs.

 “They need you on the first floor. A guest has fallen down the stairs and may

have broken his neck.”

 

 The guard must have been retired NYPD making big bucks with Sternweiss to

pad his pension. He drew his weapon and in a puffing sprint left unguarded the ten-

foot double doors to the den. Flanking the doors were knights’ suits of armor, labeled

“15th Century Panoply.” Without a second thought, he grabbed a longsword from one

 and pried open the lock, damaging the fine oak.

 He entered and went straight for the self-portrait over the mantel. Behind it

he found the safe, coincidentally the same brand as his own wall safe at his office,

for which he’d paid dearly with a fail-safe device that he kept on a keyring with

his penlight. In seconds, he opened the safe and took photos he found in manila

envelopes with names and dates on the back of each photo of adolescent girls

in compromised acts of sodomy. As he unzipped a leather bag with a shoulder

strap and saw thumb drives labeled with names and dates, he stuffed the envelopes

into the bag, too, and zipped it closed.

 A roar of voices came down the hall towards the den. Impulsively, he went

to the center Beaux-Arts style window with two rows of five panes each. Though it

appeared from the street to be a window like the two others that flanked it, the center

window was also a door leading to a small balcony with a decorative wrought-iron

railing. As he leaped from the railing to the closest Callery pear tree, the limbs gave

way with his weight making his drop to the curb a soft landing.

 Security fired one shot that grazed Larkin’s right calf, but before he took

another step, Tim Barnes’s black Cadillac Escalade came to a screeching halt beside

him. Mona opened the sliding back door and pulled him in.

 

 Mona shrilled, “You’re shot, Tom!”

 “I’m OK. Stop for nothing, Tim. Next right on Madison then left on Seventy-

second through Central Park, but north at the circle in case were tailed. With Mona

aboard I like our chances going north through Harlem.”

 “That’s as racist as it gets, Tom!” she snapped.

 “My apologies, Love. It was a practical statement in an emergency without a

goddamn ethnic taint to it whatsoever. Scouts honor.”

 “Hmph! Only scout you ever honored was a Girl Scout.”

 “Maybe at age twelve, but not at fifty like Sternweiss.”

 Tim turned right onto Madison with a tire squeal then took a left on Seventy-

second through a red light.

 “When we make it to the park, slow down, Tim. Did you flip your license plate?”

 “The moment you came aboard. Never pegged you for a purse snatcher, Tom.

What’s in the shoulder bag?”

 “Dynamite.”

 Mona’s eyes glowed at him with flickering neon lasers from storefronts on

72nd Street as they sped towards Central Park.

\* \* \*

As Tim drove his Escalade north through Central Park, Mona told them, “Gisele

got a call while she and Sternweiss were dining with the Trasks near me. There was a

glance of recognition at me as she got up to leave with a scowl on her face. She whis-

pered something to Sternweiss, but he shrugged it off excusing her to leave.”

 “She must have been tipped off by Tracy Hoffman,” Larkin said.

 “Who’s that?” Mona asked.

 “Maybe the key to Joy Sandler’s disappearance. Her best friend with her at Isla

Rameras the night she vanished.”

 “How would she know Gisele?” Mona asked.

 “She’s a keeper, an adolescent who reached maturity and now solicits new

girls to join the Sternweiss harem of nubile victims”

 Mona winced. “You’re making me want to puke, Tom.”

 “Please, Mona. Not in my Cadillac,” Tim said over his shoulder.

 “Figuratively, Tim. Are you sure you’re OK with that wound, Tom?”

 “Just a graze. Nothing a dowse of peroxide and a binding won’t cure.”

 “Check the sliding compartment in the back of my console,” Tim said. “There

should be all you need to clean Tom’s wound and stop the bleeding.”

 “I got it,” Mona said. “You sit still, Tom.”

 “You’re awfully sweet to a guy you called a racist, Love.”

 “You’re not a racist, but sometimes you just piss me off, Tom! No wonder

Vera divorced you and Chanteuse tried to kill you.”

 “Ooh!” Tim grimaced behind the wheel. “Low blow, Mona.”

 “You must really care to try to hurt me that way,” Larkin said.

 “Don’t try to dangle your charm with me, Tom. You’re my paycheck and I

expect a decent raise and bonus if there’s any of that half-million retainer left when

this case is over. So don’t bleed out till after I’ve got my cut.”

 Barnes laughed and Larkin tried to retort but was cut off by a call on his cell.

It was Chief Detective Sloan from Homicide.

 “You better have a sweet alibi, Larkin, because even though the Sternweiss

townhouse on Seventy-first has no video surveillance to protect the privacy of his VIP

guests, every description of a man who broke into a safe and jumped off a balcony

rings true of someone I know only too well. I need you to come down to the precinct

for questioning about where you’ve been between midnight and one AM.”

 Larking put his phone on speaker.

 “No need for that, Chief. I’ve been with the same people all night and I still

am. Working on that teenage girl gone missing in the Caribbean seven years ago.

Would you care to talk to Mona and former DEA Overseas Director, Timothy

Barnes. Both can vouch for me.”

 “Hi Chief,” Barnes said. “Been a while since we helped you solve that murder

at Trask Arms. Larkin’s been with me and Mona all night on this case.”

 Sloan grumbled, “Fuuuh . . .”

 “Say, Chief,” Larkin said to Sloan. “When you helped us with those girls we

rescued a few weeks ago, and we sent the El Castillio perpetrators in flight in a chopper,

did you ever find that chopper?”

 “Abandoned in Overpeck County Park in Leonia, New Jersey. A safe place to

land at three AM with no one around.”

 “Was it checked for prints and DNA?”

 “It was burnt to a crisp. Even the Bergen County K-9 Squad got zilch.”

 “It crashed with no bodies?”

 “It most likely landed safely, then the pilot must’ve torched it to a crisp.”

 “No serial numbers or FAA identification, licensing or the like?”

 “Literally under the radar, Larkin.”

 “Has Jerome Sternweiss returned to his townhouse to talk to you about

motive on the robbery?”

 “I’m told he’s in Europe and won’t return till next year. Apparently, nothing

of great value was stolen from his safe, according to his company Vice President.”

 “Who’s that?”

 “Let’s see here . . . name’s *Ga*-zelle Honeycutt.”

 “It’s pronounced ‘Jezzel’ not gazelle, Chief, but better tail her in case

she tries to run. If you can meet us ASAP at Teterboro Airport in Jersey, I think

Sternweiss isn’t in Europe yet, and he’s with Gisele. They’ve planned a getaway.”

 “A getaway? Like a vacation?”

 “No, Chief. A flight from the Arms of the Law.”

 “Roger that.”

\* \* \*

 Mona turned to Larkin. “When those two were dining with the Trasks, David

Trask took Sternweiss aside to discuss something. Looked clandestine to me.”

 “Doesn’t everything seem so to you, Love?”

 “Anything involving you, Tom. But doesn’t Trask have private planes? Maybe

he keeps an aircraft or two at Teterboro. If the Sternweiss chopper is kaput, he may be

relying on Trask’s help to escape.”

 “Good point, Mona. Head for the GWB, Tim. We’ve got Sloan for backup.”

 “Won’t the Jersey State Troopers give a New York PI and a retired Fed a hard

time in their jurisdiction,” Tim asked.

 “Maybe you, Tim, but they know I was a Jersey cop before I joined the DEA.

We’re Brothers of the Spear.”

 Mona huffed, “Now that’s got to be *racist*, Tom!”

 “No, Love. It’s cop talk, no matter what race you are.”

 “Roger that,” Tim said.

 “To bloody hell with both of you!” she huffed.

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 Larkin and Barnes spoke to airport security with Major Simmons of the NJ State

Troopers as Mona led Chief Sloan to join them with his team of NYPD backup. Larkin

felt relieved to learn that Simmons and Sloan had worked cooperatively on prior cases.

No introductions and de-icing over authority was needed because it was clearly an

FBI priority. Two field offices had responded to Tim’s call, Paterson and Manhattan.

 “Someone needs to call it,” Larkin said, taking a quarter from his pocket in jest.

 “Who’s this joker?” ASAC Lopez from the FBI Paterson Field Office asked Tim.

 “He’s PI Tom Larkin who has material evidence of human trafficking that spans

from Manhattan to Jersey to the Caribbean and beyond.”

 “Swell,” Lopez huffed. “But who the fuck are you?”

 Tim flashed his retirement ID from the DEA showing his former rank was

equivalent to Lopez’s SAC superior.

 “Old narcs don’t fade away,” Lopez snorted. “They just interfere.”

 Barnes showed Lopez a card from the President that gave him unquestioned

security clearance.

 Lopez passed the card to his counterpart, ASAC Sweeney of the Javits Center

FBI Field Office in Manhattan, who commented, “He’s right, Lopez. We’ll need to

cooperate on this for now till we can sort it out.” He turned to Larkin. “Why do you think

this Sternweiss character will try to make a run for it from here at Teterboro?”

 “He has three private jets kept here and we’ve already put him on a no-fly list.”

 “What’s this material evidence?” Lopez asked.

 “Photos of adolescent girls in compromised sexual activity with him and with

others in high circles.”

 “Where are they?” Sweeney asked.

 “In my safe keeping,” Larkin said. “Until he faces a Grand Jury.”

 Major Simmons from the Jersey Troopers nodded to ASAC Lopez and asked,

“Didn’t we work a case together years ago?”

 “I dunno,” he shrugged. “How long ago?”

 “It was that car chase in the Meadowlands when a Jersey cop got shot, retired

early on Disability, then won the goddamn Mega Millions. Lucky son of a bitch.”

 “Oh, I remember that guy . . . Ray Sandler. Didn’t his daughter get kidnapped?”

 “Funny you should mention it,” Larkin intervened. “Sandler was killed by a

Sternweiss associate a few weeks ago. Shoved off a balcony from thirty stories in

Atlantic City. I’ve been hired by Sandler’s ex-wife to find her daughter since everyone

else has failed. Following the blood trail led me to Sternweiss, but he’s just the grease

that oils this human trafficking machine. If she’s still alive, I won’t find Joy Sandler or

her killer if she’s dead, until we take Sternweiss into custody.

 The circle of law enforcement exchanged nods.

 “OK, guys, let’s get ’m,” Larkin said.

 Standing beside Larkin, Mona nudged him with an elbow and whispered, “*Guys?*

Sexist. I’m in this too, Tom . . .”

 **(continued next issue)**