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

A Tom Larkin Mystery

by

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**Episode 12**



**Chapter 23**

**Reprisal**

Larkin entered the courtroom unseen by the panel facing Judge Fairbanks,

a crusty old man with forty years on the bench who always seemed to be dozing off

behind his wire-rimmed granny readers after consuming a pint of liquor from a flask

concealed beneath his black robe. Larkin had appeared before His Honor on a few

cases and found him to be fair, even without sobriety. The proceeding had just begun,

so Larkin found a discreet corner to hide behind his baseball cap and sunglasses to

observe.

“State your client’s case, Mr. Addison,” Judge Fairbanks addressed Sally

Heidt’s attorney, a slick solicitor with a vaguely familiar face. It wasn’t till he

spoke that Larkin recognized him from CNN where Luke Addison Esq. had been

interviewed on CNN about his defense of Trask Enterprises in a property suit

over the installation of roulette tables at Trask’s Atlantic City casino. Addison

had claimed in David Trask’s behalf that the roulette tables were faulty with an

inordinate number of losses to the house. That case was all but laughed out of

Trenton’s Supreme Court, but with the disgruntled real estate mogul’s pointless

rebuttals on *Fox News* for months.

“My client, Ms. Sally Sandler Heidt, asks the court to end her many years

of mourning with the certification of her daughter Joy Sandler’s death after her

unfortunate disappearance on holiday on the Colombian Island of Isla Remaras in

the Caribbean seven years ago to the day.”

“Are you presenting [circumstantial evidence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumstantial_evidence) which, on the [balance of probabilities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balance_of_probabilities),

would lead a reasonable person to believe that the individual is deceased?” Judge Fairbanks

embarked with a yawn.

“Indeed, Your Honor. I present newspaper and magazine articles, as well as media

footage and official police files on the case involving our FBI, the Colombian National Police,

and the DAS, the *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*. All of these extended, detailed

efforts to find Joy Sandler have been tireless, but without success. Recently, even to the extent

of her mother hiring a private detective after all else had failed. That futile effort has cost her

half a million dollars in out-of-pocket expenses. On the weight of this abundant circumstantial

evidence of her death, we request the immediate certification of Joy Sandler’s death to abate

any further continuance of her mother’s grief. Sally Sandler Heidt must find at the very least

some small measure of peace moving forward in what remains her lifelong sorrow.”

Judge Fairbanks responded with a guttural clearing of his throat then said, “Since the

public has been aware of this case in the media and without rebuttal till this moment, I ask

now, does the State of New Jersey or any individual in our presence have any reason for

me not to declare the assumption of Ms. Sandler’s death with certification by the Trenton

Registrar.”

“I do, Your Honor!” Larkin called out from the back of the courtroom and was waved

up to the stand, much to Sally’s chagrin.

Sally whispered as Larkin made his way to the stand, “Loser.”

Larkin was sworn in and stated his credentials.

“Contrary to the volume of public evidence presented by Ms. Height’s consul,

what physical evidence can you provide us,” Judge Fairbanks asked with skepticism.

“I present just *one* body of evidence,” Larkin said, scanning the courtroom.

“The falsely assumed deceased.”

The courtroom thundered with agitated mumbling like icy water poured into

a sizzling frying pan.

“Order! Order in the court!” Fairbanks shouted, banging his gavel till his

granny glasses became askew on his red, rummy nose. As the courtroom silenced,

he asked Larkin. “You mean to claim, that after the failure of all this intense effort

by two countries’ highly respected investigative bureaus for seven years, you’ve

found Joy Sandler’s body in a matter of weeks?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“When and where did you find her, Mr. Larkin?”

“This morning, right here in this courtroom . . . alive and well.” Larkin read

Sally’s lips: *What the fuck, you bastard. You got my half-million dollars*.

Judge Fairbanks had to calm down the courtroom to a simmer before asking

Larkin to drop the other shoe by pointing his finger. “OK, Mr. Larkin. You’ve created

havoc in my courtroom before, but this time you’d better have the goods in hand. Where,

pray tell, is Joy Sandler?’

Larkin pointed his twirling index finger towards Sally, but she turned aside to

Joy’s best friend, Tracy Hoffman, seated beside her. Tracy stood defiantly and glared

at Larkin.

“The low-life loser’s right,” she proclaimed. “I’m Joy Sandler . . .”

**Chapter 24**

**DOA**

“Tracy was no fun,” Joy told the FBI agents as Larkin watched through the

hidden window with Tim Barnes and local police. “It was our first Spring Break at

sixteen, and at a Caribbean paradise crawling with rich horny Ivy League guys in their

twenties. I wanted us each to hook one for ourselves, but Tracy was just a nerd with

a great body. We’d cooked up the plan the year before with Mom’s help,” she said,

referring to Sally being interrogated in a separate room.

“My no-account father had a gambling addiction that was leaving us poor,

but after their divorce, the son of a bitch won the goddam Mega Millions. The only

way to get our share was for my estranged father to die. We had no part in that, but

when my father retired from the police on disability, he became associated with a

syndicate that made him a high roller in Atlantic City with lifetime perks. He

had to do favors for them in return for theirs. He offered Tracy as a target for a sex

trafficking ring backed by billionaires. He told my mom that he’d pay for me and

Tracy to go to Isla Remares for Spring Break but, because we were only sixteen, he

paid for a professional chaperone on the island to look out for us. Recommended by

my father’s associate, her name was Gisele Honeycutt.”

Larkin turned to Barnes. “And still is, Tim. With Sternweiss dead, I’ve no

doubt Gisele is covering her tracks. Better contact Theo and Sandy to be sure Brenda

and her parents remain safe at sea.”

On the other side of the two-way mirror, the FBI agent asked Joy, “When did

you and Tracy Hoffman switch IDs?”

“My mom became Tracy’s official guardian after her parents died in a car

accident when we were thirteen. She’d been adopted and had no other relatives so

Mom filed for guardianship. She was reluctant at first, because she’d gone through

a messy divorce from my father, but she saw that Tracy was like a sister to me. She

put us in a private prep school for girls in Manhattan sponsored by a billionaire

philanthropist named Jerome Sternweiss.

When my father’s lottery winnings financed our tuition, Dad came to visit.

I asked for his help in a prank against the school staff. He used his police contacts

to give us fake driver’s licenses and passports switching our information and photos

with each other. It began just as a howl between me and Tracy, but as we became

older teenagers, rather than naive school girls, for all intent and purposes, I was

Tracy Hoffman, and she was Joy Sandler. It began as no more than a schoolgirl

prank, but quickly escalated.”

“How did the real Tracy Hoffman die, Ms. Sandler?”

“In exchange for favors, my father let Mr. Sternweiss groom me, at first for

one billionaires’ pleasure, but Gisele came up with the idea to offer his “product,” as

they referred to us, for the pleasure of many billionaires at a high price. Sternweiss

was already ultra-rich, but Gisele had influence over him and wanted her own

wealth.

“It became apparent to me that Tracy had changed as we were maturing.

As “Joy” after our switch, she became Gisele’s special pet and we knew she was

a lesbian, and as such was no longer an asset to the Sternweiss pipeline to his

ultra-rich and powerful clientele, with one exception. His richest, most powerful

client and personal friend, wanted her as his plaything, a virgin daughter to

pamper.”

“Did that client kill her?”

“No . . . she died of a self-inflicted heroin overdose.”

“Where’s her body?”

“Powerful men have limitless means. I’d heard only rumors among the girls

at El Castillo that she’d been processed and fed piece by piece to the schools of

sharks off El Castillo. The three young men she was last seen with the night she

vanished weren’t involved in her death, but were scared to silence by the Sternweiss

sex-trafficking network that used the Russian American mafia as henchmen. The FBI

was undermined by local Colombian law enforcement on the take from Sternweiss.

Money talks, but can also keep people silent.”

“We’ll have more questions for you to answer later, Ms. Sandler.”

“Please, call me Tracy. That’s who I’ve become. But when the real Tracy

Hoffman came with me to Isla Remares seven years ago as Joy Sandler, she might

as well have been dead on arrival.

**Chapter 25**

**Out of the Fray**

Gisele Honeycutt seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth with

no trail leading to her whereabouts. Though adolescent Brenda, with her parents’

permission, was willing to testify in court against Gisele, all remained on hold

until Gisele could be found. Meantime, Larkin spent the next month with

Kay Farr and incommunicado from his office and any potential clientele. He

texted Mona once a week, just to let her know he was OK, and Tim Barnes to

follow up on the prosecution of Sally Heidt and her daughter, Joy Sandler, AKA

Tracy Hoffman, in a civil suit against their estate and with criminal charges of

fraud still pending. They were also being held accountable for the death of the

real Tracy Hoffman as accessories to murder until her remains could be found to

determine her cause of death.

Brenda and her parents remained in protective custody in case Gisele

sought any retribution against the star witness against her. Even Larkin didn’t

know where Brenda and her family had been taken.

Larkin rented a beach house in Seaside Park where he and Kay could

stroll along the boardwalk to Seaside Heights and enjoy the fast food with aromas

that conjured their past as teenagers after their senior prom when life seemed so

simple and their only imagined path had been a long life together. Best laid plans.

Regardless, they were making the best of it, spending the last warm days of

October on the beach with the ocean still 75 degrees. The evenings after dinner were

more trying, continuing Kay’s cancer care and knowing it was only a matter of weeks

if not days she had left. The last glimpse of his first love with her dimming sorrowful

eyes would stay with him forever. But they both knew that her passing in her sleep

with him nestled beside her was a blessing to them both.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, Larkin scattered Kay’s ashes in the Seaside Park surf where

the restored sand dunes after “Super Storm Sandy” were her only grave marker.

As the ashes were taken out to sea by the tide, a text from Mona buzzed:

SOS - Brenda taken from Safe House. Parents distraught—HELP!! Mona.

Kay’s ashes rapidly disbursed in the lapping foam around his ankle, but

Mona’s text gave Larkin a sudden jolt. Gisele had her bargaining chip, but where

would she take Brenda?

Nothing had come up about it in the hearings regarding Jerome Sternweiss

and his underage sex-trafficking ring. His restaurant, La Clodotte, had been closed

as was his posh Manhattan residence, both draped with yellow, “Police Investigation”

barrier tape. The restaurant and his townhouse were connected, but his billionaire

patrons would never admit to their participation or how they were able to go from

one place to the other unseen—their clique’s *code of silence*.

*Unseen,* he thought. If there were ever a good place to hide. That was it.

Within two hours he was coming out of the Lincoln Tunnel then heading

uptown and across Central Park to the East 70s. He parked in a 24-hour lot then

waited till dark. There had been no police or civilian activity near the taped-off

restaurant for several hours, and by 8 p.m. the block was dark with sparse activity.

If there had been a security camera in front of La Clodotte, the investigators

had removed all the discs for evidence. He found some loose boards to pry open a

tight entrance. The only contentions to his entry were the dark and many rats, but

there was nothing else to keep him from retracing his steps to that underground

railroad where, mistakenly, he’d been left for dead.

\* \* \*

Larkin meandered through La Clodotte’s dark dining room and found the

staircase leading down to the restrooms. There was no sign of the French piss boy,

Jean-Louis, afoot so he headed for the green door that led to the escalator that

descended to the secret subway platform then, what Sternweiss called, “Nirvana”.

The muffled voices of billionaire patrons reverberated in his memory but, of

course, the escalator was left inoperable.

Other than scrambling rats the size of cats and the overhead drippings from

a recent rainfall that had trickled down to the tracks, the subway tunnel was like an

ancient tomb where the only anticipated sound was the pained utterance lost souls.

He cocked his head, thinking he heard a muffled sound coming from his right.

He lumbered cautiously to the tracks that ran perpendicular to his path. There was

darkness and silence to his left leading to the Sternweiss Townhouse, but he honed

in on that muffled sound coming from his right. He stumbled in the dark over that

subway switch he’d found the first time he’d been there. He leaned against the manual

lever used only for emergencies, because the train’s engineer usually controlled the

switch remotely from the train while viewing the tracks ahead.

Curious, he flicked the lever back and forth, but was distracted again by the

distant mutterings echoing through the tunnel from his right. Careful, he stayed on the

tracks without kicking up any loose gravel that could reveal his approach. He felt his

Glock holstered under his left armpit. He kept both hands free for any physical encounter

if he found Brenda held captive. He didn’t want to involve his weapon in any gunplay that

might endanger Brenda—though Gisele might leave him no other choice.

He needed Brenda to testify against Gisele, but that was a given. More so, he

needed her as a material witness against Batman, most likely the kingpin at the top

of the Sternweiss sex-trafficking food chain. “The Beast,” as Tia had called him,

held all the marbles—or cards—whatever game this billionaire scumbag played

with the lives of innocent young girls to turn them into sex slaves.

Brenda might identify Batman by his voice and stature, though that was a

longshot. He did have DNA from Brenda’s mouth after Batman had given her a

long, sloppy kiss. What he didn’t have was Batman’s DNA because he had no

criminal record to match. Unless Larkin could find a way to obtain DNA legally,

there was no way to get a warrant against him to obtain it. He couldn’t search a

residence or business for other material evidence without a judge signing off

who hadn’t been bought by the billionaire clique that Sternweiss had relied on.

\* \* \*

Larkin saw a dim light coming from an idle subway car, probably the same

car that had carried him and the Sternweiss patrons from La Clodotte to his townhouse

weeks ago. There was a lighted candle between Gisele standing and facing towards him

and Brenda, bound and seated facing her. Gisele’s focus was on her bound prize and the

candle’s glow must have reflected off Brenda’s perspiring face. Gisele couldn’t see

Larkin as he watched and listened from the black void beyond the light. He nudged

his Glock with his left elbow as he listened to Gisele’s coercive babble to Brenda.

“Your parents will never find you, Natasha. We both know that’s who you are,

who you really want to be. That private detective tried to brainwash you against us.

You know you can trust me. You always have. The man who wants you will make you

his granddaughter. No one will question him. He’s powerful with limitless resources

that will give you anything you want. If you come willingly, no harm will come to your

parents. They’re young, so they can still have other children. But unlike you, sweet child,

you’re blessed with his adoration. He thinks you’re perfect. He wants you to join *his*

family and share in his prestige.”

Larkin felt the bile churning up to his throat as he had at El Castillo. He felt

felt sure his hunch was right. Batman was the kingpin of this sex-trafficking network.

If that pervert wanted Brenda so much, Larkin had some leverage to keep her from

being killed like others. Unlike Tia, Astrid, and the real Tracy Hoffman—Brenda as

Natasha—wasn’t expendable. She’d be his trinket, his trophy to display.

Still, he hoped the true brainwashing hadn’t already occurred as Natasha

before she’d been rescued. Would she revert and buy the false promises Gisele was

dangling in front of her? She was just a child, easily coerced and maybe convinced

that staying with Gisele was a safer, better deal than returning to her own parents. He

found that possibility disgusting, but to a child, a sparkling charm can often disarm.

“No! I want to go home with Mom and Dad! Batman was a creep! He smelled

like the swamp behind my house in Florida. Yuk!”

“What you smell is limitless wealth, Natasha. I’ve come to love that scent.

It’s what dreams are made of. Over time, you’ll get used to it, love it just like I do.”

“No! Never!”

Then I can’t spare you, Natasha. I’m sorry, but you could hurt me too much.

Even if I disappoint your benefactor by killing you, there will always be another

pretty little girl to take your place. Jerry taught me that when I was twelve.”

“No!” Brenda shrieked, but Gisele gagged and duct-taped her mouth shut.

“Time for a train ride to nowhere, Natasha. Off we go.”

Gisele turned to the train’s controls and started the engine. The train chugged

forward faster than Larkin expected. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted just in time

to catch the back stairs of the second car without being seen. His feet dragged until he

could pull himself aboard and get to Brenda.

He caught his breath and worked his way through the second car to get to the

front car controlled by Gisele with her back to him. Brenda sat bound and gagged in

behind her. As the train rumbled on the tracks and gained speed, Brenda saw Larkin

coming from the rear and motioning her to stay still. She rolled her eyes towards Gisele.

He nodded with a wink and took out his Glock. Turning off his pistol’s safety made a

*click* thatalerted Gisele. She drew her own pistol, pointing it at Brenda.

“Drop it asshole, or I’ll shoot the little brat! Now!”

Larkin complied setting down his pistol as Brenda began to whimper.

\* \* \*

Gisele bared her teeth at Larkin and snarled, “You really know how to fuck

up a girl’s day. I checked my sources, Larkin. You’re on a lot of important people’s

shit lists. Surely mine—for keeps.”

“You can wipe your butt with that list, *Jizz.*”

Her nickname made her jolt, a private joke between her and Sternweiss for the

past twenty years, their intimacy never shared with anyone else. Her glaring stare seemed

to ask Larkin, *How could you know?*

Larkin grinned. “You’ve been scrambling on the run to capture Brenda to save

yourself and Sternweiss from prosecution, but that’s no longer necessary. We’ve kept it

out of the media until we go to trial, but your boss told me he called you ‘Jizz’ just before

all this excitement made him lose his head—literally. Now he’s a decapitated capitalist.

My condolences.”

“I have someone else to protect me after I get rid of you two, Larkin.”

“You mean *The Caped Abuser*?”

She flinched, confirming Larkin’s suspicion.

“Too late, Jizz. We’ve already got his DNA from Brenda. Just a matter of time

before it all blows up in the media.”

Resolved, Gisele huffed then raised her pistol. “You’ve merely disappointed me,

Natasha, but I’m thrilled to kill this son of a bitch.”

Willing to take a bullet with a chance of saving Brenda, Larkin lunged with an

evasive twist that allowed one shot into his left shoulder, all flesh and cartilage, no bone.

Bleeding like a stuck pig, he used all the strength he could muster to wrestle the gun

from Gisele and toss it out of the moving train swaying from side to side around turns.

He punched her in the face and she dropped like a sandbag to the floor.

He untied Brenda and removed her gag.

“Trust me?” he asked her.

“Always,” she said tearfully, but with a grin.

He took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. He picked her up

and tucked her head beneath his chin as Gisele regained consciousness with a groan. She

scrambled to her feet hoping to find her pistol, but Larkin was already on the bottom step

to the train’s exit. He grasped Brenda tightly with his back to the subway wall, just a whizzing

blur of ceramic tiles five yards from the speeding train.

Brenda pressed tightly against his wounded shoulder to slow down the bleeding. He

grinned at Gisele and calmly nodded as he fell backwards off the train with Brenda in his

Arms, using himself as a buffer against their hard landing.

With the train disappearing down the tracks, Brenda asked. “Are you OK?”

“Stung but not smitten.”

“But Mr. Larkin, she got away.”

“Mm. Maybe.”

Then they heard a thundering crash, and the bright flames lit the tunnel from

a distance where the train had vanished.

“Maybe not.”

“What was that?” she asked.

He said with a grin, “Bait ‘n’ *switch*.”

Her naïve expression told him she had no idea what he meant.

Seeing in his mind the subway cars falling into that bottomless pit at the end

of the tracks made him realize he must have left the switch in that direction when he’d

been distracted by Gisele’s voice from a distance.

“Also luck of the draw,” he said. “Help me stop this bleeding by tearing my

shirt and tying a tourniquet. I can’t do it with one arm, but I’ll tell you how. Then

we’ll see where this tunnel leads in the other direction where the train came from.”

“Is Gisele dead?” she asked.

He took a deep breath. “One can only hope . . .”

\* \* \*

They saw a light ahead, but dim and concentrated. As they approached, Larkin

saw that his hunch was right. He checked his phone for a signal, weak at first but, as they

ascended towards the brilliant light ahead, the cell’s bars were full. He contacted Tim

Barnes and told him to bring Mona to the Trask Trade Center at once, where Brenda

was safe to return to her parents.

Larkin kept Brenda in the dark with him until Tim called to say his black Escalade

was outside the Trask Trade Center on Fifth Avenue.

“There’s some big to-do going on here tonight, Tom,” Barnes said.

“OK, Tim. I’ve got Brenda wrapped in my jacket and I’m going to bring her

to you now.”

“I’ve got Sandy and Mona with me. Want them to take her in my car and have

me stay behind to help you? Or are you coming with us?”

“I’ve got unfinished business, but I need Mona here with me. You and Sandy

look out for Brenda. We’ll catch up later.”

Mona cut in with, “What outrageous thing do you need me to do this time, Tom?”

“It’s way beyond the call of duty, Love, but you’re perfect for the part. Are you

wearing that sexy evening gown that I asked for?”

“As ordered.”

“Then see you in one minute,” he said. “Ready, Brenda?”

She gave him a thumbs up before he covered her face and shoulders and took her

through the revolving doors to Tim’s SUV double-parked on bustling Fifth Avenue.

“Gotcha, Honey!” Sandy said embracing Brenda in the back seat as Tim nodded

to Larkin.

“Gotcha, Honey!” he said to Mona, taking her by the hand and pulling her out

of Tim’s car.

“Don’t I know it,” Mona huffed. “Tom, you’re bleeding. You’ve got to go to

the ER.”

“I’ve got a tourniquet on it and the bullet went right through. Give me back my

jacket Brenda.”

He covered his shoulder so the wound wouldn’t show.

Mona huffed with impatience, “What do you expect me to do that you can’t

do yourself?”

He leaned close and whispered in her ear. She tried to shrug him off, but he

held her tight for a minute until she agreed that it might be the best way, if not the

only way, to trap *The Beast*.

**Chapter 26**

**Belly of the Beast**

Larkin remained nonchalant as if he were window shopping in the high-end retail

stores of the Trask Trade Center’s main lobby. Blood from his gunshot wound began to

seep through the shoulder of his jacket. He tried to imagine what all the excitement was

among the crowd gathered in the lobby. He twisted his neck to see beyond those gathered

in front of him. He caught Mona’s attention where she stood at the bottom of the long

escalator that descended from the second floor.

Then, like a twelve-point buck sending his does and fawns out into the meadow

to take any gunfire ahead of him, David Trask sent his notorious trophy wife with their

seven-year-old son, Damien, down the escalator ahead of him to provide his unencumbered

grand entrance before the cheering crowd. Apparently, there was an announcement to be

made, perhaps another child by wife number four to inherit some of his real estate fortune.

Larkin sensed this was something even more astounding than a seventy-year-old

man impregnating his thirty-five-year-old retired supermodel wife of one-name notoriety—

“Sophia”—tagged *World’s Most Beautiful Woman* seven years ago.

A podium with a microphone had been set up at the bottom of the escalator

and a Trask Security team, like an NFL defensive line guarding a quarterback,

surrounded the podium. Larkin wondered how Mona would try to make her move,

but he’d learned over the past ten years going back to his DEA stint in Jamaica, that

Mona could be even more resourceful than he was.

He couldn’t imagine what she’d said to the security guard to divert his attention

as David Trask stepped towards the podium, but it disarmed him enough in that moment

to let her lunge through security and throw her arms around Trask. The mogul was always

willing to accept any public adoration. Firmly in her clutch, she kissed him and thrust her

tongue into his mouth. He responded in kind, even in front of his glaring wife. The world

was expected to bow to any indulgence by this sociopath. The world was his oyster.

Convinced she’d completed her mission, Mona withdrew, but Trask continued

to hold her close, slipping his card into her hand and whispering, “Call my secretary and

leave your number so I can call you sometime.”

When the security team surrounded Mona, Trask waved them off and winked at

her as he stepped up to the podium. Mona waved to the applauding crowd and worked

her way towards Larkin.

“We’ve got to swab this DNA quick before I vomit,” Mona said.

Larkin nodded and Mona took out the Genotek saliva kit Tim had brought. They

took a cab to Lt. Frank Scardo’s NYPD CSI lab where he’d had Mona bring the DNA

obtained from Brenda when Batman had kissed her on El Castillo. After she spit into the

DNA collection kit He offered her a white handkerchief to spit again rather than swallow

and lose any DNA available from Trask’s long sloppy kiss.

“That was the worst thing you ever had me do for you, Tom. What a pig!”

“Moi?”

“No, fool, that beast was revolting! Swab me quick or I swear I’ll puke.”

\* \* \*

After dropping off the sample with Frank Scardo at CSI, Mona insisted that

Larkin go to the ER to have his gunshot wound attended to. Mona helped him fill

out all the required forms and he used Chief Detective Sloan as his reference

regarding his wound happening while apprehending a felon in a child abduction

case.

Later that evening, waiting impatiently for the DNA results at Larkin’s PI

office apartment, Mona put on a pot of coffee and turned on the news.

Larkin sat back in his recliner and closed his eyes thinking he’d dozed off

and was dreaming when he heard David Trask’s voice.

“Bloody hell!” Mona screeched, making Larkin jolt to his feet.

He turned to the TV screen and saw a close-up of Trask at the podium earlier

that night. Mona turned up the volume and they heard Trask say:

“Put your trust in me as your president, not Washington bureaucrats. America

needs fixing, and I’m the only one who can fix it. Like Superman, I’m bullet-proof.”

In an “Elvis” moment, Larkin drew his Glock and aimed at the screen. The

empty chamber made a hollow click when he pulled the trigger.

Wide-eyed, Mona glared at him as her mouth dropped open.

He took a deep breath realizing all the protective mechanisms that would fall

in place for Trask if he made it to the White House. Mona watched him drift into a

trance. He was reaching for his inner consciousness that transcended time. He’d been

mentored by a Thai monk in Bangkok after his wife Vera had been murdered. He

seemed to find a comfort zone, a private place where he could be at peace.

She leaned close and kissed his cheek then left him in his revelry to sort out

his feelings.

\* \* \*

Next morning, he got the call from Scardo at CSI.

“Is it a match?” Larkin asked.

“Never got a chance to make the test. The FBI took over the case.”

“Why?”

“Never got a straight answer, but you know Trask and the FBI Director are

pals from Queens. Could be the usual Trask whitewash.”

“Thanks, Frank.”

Larkin was about to start a pot of coffee when Mona came through the door.

“You OK, Tom?” She handed him the mail she’d picked up in the lobby.

“Not really. The FBI took our DNA samples from NYPD.”

“What? Don’t tell me I kissed that pig for nothing!”

“Remains to be seen, but I’m thinking . . . yes . . . it was a waste of time.”

“Jeezuz! What about Brenda?”

“She’ll be OK. He won’t go near her now that he’s in the national spotlight.

“With Sternweiss and Gisele dead and only circumstantial evidence from Brenda,

she’s no threat to him,” he said with a huff as he sorted his mail.

“What are you going to do now, Tom?”

Staring at a letter he’d just opened, he frowned.

“Fly to Chejudo.”

“*Who*-judo?”

“A Korean island south of the peninsula.”

“Why? A vacation?”

“I wanted to get the hell away after this case anyway, but I just heard that an old

friend was just murdered there. Jack Stark was CIA when I was a green DEA agent in

Guadalajara, Mexico. We shared information and became close. Tim Barnes, too. I’m

sure Tim will join me there.”

“How long will you be away?”

“At least a week. Maybe two, just to see if I can help find his killer.”

“What should I do while you’re gone, Tom.”

“What’s left of Sally Height’s half a mil is still on the account in the bank, so

pay the bills on time for a change. Get ahead of it and take a couple of weeks off for a

decent vacation—anywhere you like. I’ll cover it.”

“What about Trask?”

“Patience, Love. He’s too confident. He’ll eventually slip up and I’ll be there

waiting.”

“Travel safe, Tom.”

“Always.”

“Before I go, one favor?” she asked catching him off guard. “If I give another

kiss like that one last night to Trask, I want it to be for someone I actually care about.”

Before he could respond, the warmth of her lips made his hair tingle and his

toes curled up in his shoes when their tongues touched, hot and silky sweet. Mona had

been the best thing in his life for the past ten years, but he only just realized it.

Both backed away, each with searching eyes, but Mona broke the spell and

made him laugh with, “Don’t go killing anyone in *Who-*judo, Tom Larkin, ’cause

I got enough of your DNA now to put you away for life.”

She wiped her mouth with a handkerchief and swirled saliva off her tongue

into the wet, scarlet splotch from her lipstick.

He winked.

Mona stared blankly at him as she folded the handkerchief with the reverence

of Old Glory at a military funeral. She winked back then silently went out the door.

He took a deep breath watching her depart, knowing Mona deserved the last word.

**END**

Tom Larkin’s next serialized novel, will take him to Korea to find his CIA friend’s

killer in the land of *The Morning Calm*.

**The Morning Calm**

A Tom Larkin Mystery

by

Gerald Arthur Winter



