***D*ead *O*n *A*rrival © 2021**

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 3**

 

**Chapter 5**

**The Senator**

 As a U.S. Senator, Bertram Williams may never have been a gambler, so

Larkin didn’t believe he would ever leave his son Brad’s political future to chance.

Since Larkin had no photo or any other tangible connection between Brad Williams

and the late high roller, Ray Sandler, he figured that a stakeout at Senator Bert’s home

in West Caldwell, New Jersey might be worth a gamble of his own.

 Although Senator Williams’s New Jersey residence was probably worth close

to two million dollars, even in a depressed real estate market, Larkin knew from his

Google search that it was just one of his five homes. The senator spent every spring

in this one as opposed to his Stone Harbor beach house in the summer, a villa in

Provence, France in the winter, a cabin in Maine in the fall, and a chalet in Switzerland

between Christmas and New Year’s. Working for the government was obviously a

a tough life with so much traveling. The only time Williams set foot in Paterson or

Newark was when he campaigned for his re-election, or to support his party’s

presidential candidate with a personal appearance as if inner city turf was in his blood.

 Sen. Williams knew he had New Jersey in his back pocket; even the Democratic

senator, whose name no one could remember, licked his boots in exchange for favors

that used to come off the Weehawken docks until the late Sixties. But since the United

Fruit Company went bust and was replaced with the Port Imperial ferry terminal to

Manhattan, graft worked its way through the Teamsters, rather than the Longshoremen.

Political perks arrived in Elizabeth now, while Lady Liberty turned her head the other

way, moving her torch from right hand to left as she scratched her private parts.

 Fuhgettabowdit!

 Larkin eased past a row of hundred foot evergreens as his GPS announced: *You*

*have arrived at your destination.* He expected a security gate and a guard to announce

him at the senator’s residence, but the well-lighted driveway appeared welcoming. Just

the same, he decided to park on a side road then enter the property along the driveway on

foot. He figured there must be some video surveillance along the winding driveway, but

he was surprised as he approached the pillared mansion. There was still no security gate

or even a speed bump just to slow down his intrusion. The closer he got to the lighted

steps leading to the front door, the more he instinctively sensed trouble, of what sort, he

tried to imagine. Not even a dog barked from inside the house.

 Then the front door swung open as if kicked by a foot. There it was, plain and

simple, but she spelled it out for him just the same.

 “I don’t know who the hell you are, but I’m sure you planned ahead and figured

a night when Bernie isn’t home from Washington and the hired help has the night off. So

if you figured to rob me, kidnap me, or even rape me, you picked on the wrong lady,

Buster. I’ll blow a hole in your chest the size of a bowling ball with this shotgun and

see daylight through it in the morning.”

 The senator’s wife was only seen in public on TV when Bernie’s landslide

victories were announced and his weary opponents conceded with promises to beat

“Bernie’s Brigade” the next time. These were the first words that Larkin ever heard her

speak. Petite and stylish, she was one of those custom-made D.C. political wives who

knew that appearance was everything on the arm of power. Her croaky, smoker’s voice

had sexuality stamped on it, but was probably grated twice over by the chardonnay I.V.

drip that went with the territory from noon to midnight.

 “I’m here for none of the three, Mrs. Williams, but rather to ask your husband

some questions in regard to a private matter.”

 “Who the hell are you?”

 “Tom Larkin, private investigator, and I need your husband’s help.”

 “You talk like a Jersey boy. Are ya?”

 “Not like *The Four Seasons*, can’t carry a tune, but I lived most of my life in

Bergen County as a kid and Ocean County later on. Like Senator Williams, I had to do

a lot of traveling for Uncle Sam, but mostly overseas with the DEA. I retired and opened

my PI practice in Manhattan.”

 “TMI, Mr. Larkin,” she croaked. “Don’t baffle me with your history. Bernie

isn’t home yet, but his private plane landed in Lincoln Park, so expect him home soon.

Consider me his private secretary and come in. There are no private matters between me

and Bernie—not since he knocked up a page his first year in office. I grinned and bared

it in public for the media but—you’ve heard of whisperers?”

 “For horses and dogs, sure.”

 “Well I’m a Bernie whisperer,” she assured him with a wink as she lowered the

shotgun and extended her hand to him. “I only had to say it once; Bernie’s never strayed

again, but we were able to build all this from that day forward. That’s why he always

comes home for three days whenever I tell him to—because I know where the bodies

are buried—figuratively speaking of course. Most of the dead bodies are bills that never

made it to the Senate floor because Bernie blocked them.”

 “Of course.” Larkin nodded, taking her small, smooth hand in his large grasp.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Williams.”

 “Cut that crap. Call me Susie.”

 “Well, I just—”

 “You’re in my home and I make the rules here—no formalities. Care for a drink?”

 “Thank you . . . Susie, but I’m a recovering alcoholic. But I like to watch, so

please, indulge me. Perhaps some water?”

 “Hell, you’re no fun! Come. Have a seat in the den and tell me what you want

to ask Bernie. If I don’t think it’s worth his time, it isn’t.” She handed him a bottle of

water from a mini-fridge in the den. “You can finish your water, even piddle, but then

you’re gone before he even gets home without wasting his time. So spill it, Tom. What’s

on your mind?”

 “It’s in regard to your son, Brad.”

 “Stop right there!” she warned. “Brad’s married and I’ve already whispered in

his wife’s ear and told her what to whisper in his. So no marital scandal is going to derail

our Brad’s campaign.”

 “This has to do with what happened before Brad was married.”

 “Oh, dear God! Is someone trying to dig up that missing girl’s case again? She

was drinking, doing drugs, and looking for sex wherever she could find it. How else

did she expect *that* to turn out?””

 “Sounds like a middle-eight phrase from a Country Western song. Regardless,

even if true, that was no reason to kill her . . . Susie,” Larkin took a look swig of the

bottled water and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

 She tried to stare him down but broke first. “That’s a good way to catch the

swine flu,” she said, raising an eyebrow as she lit a long, thin cigarette and glared at

him through the exhaled cloud rising slowly above her to the exposed wooden beams

across the twenty-foot ceiling with a skylight.

 As she went to the fridge and poured a glass of white wine, Larkin asked her,

“How’s that?”

 “Putting your hand to your mouth when you haven’t washed them.”

 “I used a hand sterilizer I carry in my car.”

 “Why didn’t I hear your car?”

 “I parked off the property on a street across the main drag.”

 “Ooh. Sneaky son of a bitch, huh?” she said, wrinkling her nose and sitting on

the sofa beside him as she sipped the wine.

 “Do you want to hear my questions or not?” he challenged.

 “Shoot.”

 “I was hired to review the entire case regarding Joy Sandler.”

 “Who would want to do that . . . and why? For God sakes! Bury the effing dead.”

 “Her mother wants me to do that . . . for the same reason you want to defend Brad

 —to protect your young. In Sally Heidt’s case, probably to protect Joy’s memory.”

 “Then you at least concede that the girl is dead, and the Caribbean chewed her

up without a trace, regardless of whatever may have happened to her before?”

 “I’ve just started, Susie—I concede nothing.”

 “She couldn’t possibly be alive after all this time. Come on now. Even if the

white slaver theory were true, someone would’ve seen her by now.”

 “Maybe they have, but just don’t know it,” Larkin said with a squint.

 “Brad made his statements for all concerned. So even if there were some

connection between anyone she was with before she disappeared, it wasn’t my Brad.

It was either the Mafia brat or the Colombian bar tender. Go find them and see what

else they’ve been up to all this time. Brad’s life and achievements are public; my

boy’s got nothing to hide.”

 “Maybe not, but I need to know more about any connection Senator Williams

may have with an estranged member of Joy’s family.”

 “Who might that be?” she asked.

 “Ray Sandler, Joy’s father.”

 “I don’t even know who that is.”

 “He’s been under the radar,” Larkin said, stretching across the leather sofa

to a coffee table where the newspaper was still wrapped in green plastic, “Until now.”

 He pulled the paper out of the plastic and unfolded it to reveal the front page

headline:

 HIGH ROLLER TURNS HIGH DIVER WITH DEATH PLUNGE

 FROM TRASK CASINO SUITE

 “That’s our man, Susie. Your son says he doesn’t know him, but perhaps the

senator does.”

 “Perhaps the senator does what?” a deep voice bellowed.

 Both were startled, seeing the senator standing at the entrance to the den.

 “Darling!” Susie set her wine aside and got up to greet him with a hug and

kiss. “We were talking and didn’t hear you arrive. This is Tom Larkin, he’s a—”

 “A shamus—I know,” Bernie said setting his briefcase on a side bench,

loosening his navy, club crest tie, and jerking open the top button on his fitted,

white dress shirt, sallow around the collar after his flight home from the Capitol.

 “How did you know?” she asked as Larkin stood and offered a handshake.

 “I’ll shake your hand when you leave, Larkin. That’s what they call you—

right? You were with federal law enforcement—no formalities among your kind.

You just kick in the door and ask questions later.”

 “I apologize for the intrusion Senator Williams. But if you know so much

about me, you probably know why I want to speak with you.”

 “My son called me earlier today, so I ran your plates with New Jersey State

Troopers to get a bead on you, especially when your CBS reporter’s ID didn’t check

out. It’s a minimum of ten years for fraud in my state.” He puffed up his chest with a

deep breath. “I’ll let it go this time, but I’m not sure why you’re trying to open up this

can of worms again if Brad had nothing to do with the girl’s disappearance.”

 “Probably not,” Larkin conceded.

 “Then go away, and be quick about it.”

 “My questions are for *you*, Senator.”

 “I suppose my wife already told you who rules this roost—so if you see that

scowl on her face, it’s because she wants you to call me just plain Bernie. Right,

Susie?”

 She nodded with a Cheshire grin.

 “OK, Larkin. I’ll be straight with you, more honest than you were with Brad

today. Have a seat and tell me what’s on your mind. I’ve already spoken with Timothy

Barnes, former Overseas Director for the DEA, and he’s given you an A-plus on character,

so I’m assuming that anything we have to say here doesn’t leave this room.”

 “I’m not a journalist, Bernie, but I’d go to prison before giving up a source

of information that led to saving someone’s life,” Larkin assured him as Bernie sat

across from him in an easy chair and motioned for him to sit on the sofa and proceed.

 “Ray Sandler was a retired cop, a Mega Millions jackpot winner, and a high roller

in Atlantic City—until earlier today,” Larkin explained. “I saw him this morning at his

home in Margate . . .” he paused to see if Bernie was reacting to that information. When

he just got a cold stare, he decided to use the best weapon from his PI arsenal—he lied.

“Ray Sandler told me he was a big supporter of your continued Senate status, and voted

for you every time. He added that your son Brad might make a fine presidential candidate

in the future.”

 Bernie folded his arms with defensive body language that was disconnected from

his mouth. “This Sandler sounds like a smart man; I concur with his opinion of my son.

I’d like to shake his hand.”

 Larkin jerked the newspaper off the coffee table and flipped it over revealing

Ray’s photo and the headline.

 “You’d have a problem finding a hand to shake in the bloody pulp of his remains

after he fell thirty stories onto the boardwalk about an hour after Brad and I had spoken.”

 “An hour after, or a few minutes before, Larkin,” Bernie said with a smirk. “Maybe

I should call the State Troopers to hold you. You might be a prime suspect.”

 “My GPS tracked my trail and knows that I was a hundred miles away when he

jumped—or was thrown from his hotel balcony. How do I know you didn’t fly in from

D.C to Atlantic City. Can you prove you were in D.C. as Ray hit the boardwalk?”

 “Of course I can,” he laughed. “From the flight log to a dozen senators on my

committee.”

 “Would that be the committee you chair to negotiate with Colombia about

the U.S. clamping down on the scavenging of pre-Colombia relics and artifacts

trafficked through the Caribbean in return for their tightening control of Colombian

narcotics smuggled into new Jersey.”

 “No such committee exists,” Bernie said, glaring sternly.

 “Not on paper, I’m sure. But my source tells me different.”

 “What source?”

 “We’ve already covered that, but your covert assembly is safe with me. I’m

just trying to find a missing girl for a friend. No emotions for me. I’m too far removed

to care about anything but the facts about Joy Sandler, dead or alive.”

 “Our son was checked head to toe for the girl’s DNA by the Prefecto de Policia

on Isla Rameras. I should’ve had my connections research the island’s origin and told

Brad to go to Cancun instead. He said Cancun was past history and wanted his last

college fling to be at the hottest spot in the Caribbean.”

 “Nice choice for sonny boy, Pop, the Island of *Whores.*”

 “We should have a fancy euphemism like that in English,” the senator said.

 Susie shrugged. “We do—the Speaker of House of ill repute.”

 “Good behavior in front of company, Susie. Never know who’s listening.”

 “Joy Sandler was declared missing seventy-two hours after she was last seen.

Her roommate got scared and called home. Lot of time to clean up a murder scene and

take several showers on a tropical island to scrub yourself if you were the killer or among

the killers.”

 “The Prefecto said a CSI team came in from Miami and found no evidence on

Brad or the other two guys.”

 “I’m gonna need a face-to-face with that dude,” Larkin said. “I’ve heard things

through my DEA sources about Prefecto Fino Salas.”

 “I went down to the island to bail out my son and bring him home after the

charges were dismissed,” the senator said with a scrunched nose. “Man smelled like a

goddamn goat.”

 “That whole island must stink,” Susie said with a sigh. “Had to have Bernie’s

unpacked clothes dry-cleaned twice, and one shirt I use only for wiping my windshield.”

 The senator stood and Susie followed suit as if they were controlled by one

puppeteer.

 “Good luck with your lost cause, Larkin. I need a shower and a home-cooked

meal.”

 Larkin extended his hand.

 “If I need to speak to you again, Bernie—”

 “You won’t. Drive safe.”

 Larkin nodded as he backed towards the door. “Been a pleasure Senator . . .

Susie.”

 Larkin walked to his car with crickets chirping on the humid evening. As he

headed toward Rte. 287 South, he sensed he had an escort, but when he got onto the

freeway his tail had vanished from his mirrors. He planned to take the Holland Tunnel

back to Manhattan, get a good night’s sleep, and book a flight to Miami then to Isla

Rameras, but his Blue Tooth lit up on his dash showing an unknown number calling

him at 9 p.m. with the summer sun already set and the western sky morosely mauve.

 Too late for a robo-call and Tim Barnes had an unlisted, undisclosed number.

 “I have information you want, Larkin” the muffled feminine voice said on

speaker phone.

 “I think you got the wrong number,” he said.

 “I’ve got the right number, but you’re barkin’ up the wrong tree, detective.

I’ll tell you all I know about what happened to Joy Sandler. It’ll be a wake-up call.”

 “How’d you get my number, Doll?”

 “Doll? Aren’t you cute, shamus. Listen old-timer, come to The Beachcomber Bar

on the Seaside Heights boardwalk. I tend bar at noon. I’ll give you an earful.”

 “Don’t waste my gas with a load of bullshit.”

 “No way, Larkin. This is heavy duty. We on?”

 “On.”

 The connection clicked off and the sound of “Back in USSR” blasted from his

satellite radio on *The Beatles* *Channel*. Instead of taking the NJ Turnpike exit he got on

the GSP South heading for the Jersey shore again.

 At this rate, he thought, I’ll put another five thousand miles on my car before

the summer’s over.

 He drove 70 mph most of the way on the GSP. An hour later, he got a room at

The Windjammer Motor Inn in Seaside Park a mile south of the Heights boardwalk.

The motel was slow on a Sunday night in June before schools let out for the summer.

He slept soundly with the window open and a cool breeze coming off the pounding

surf and across the dunes. Like on stakeouts with the DEA, he was uncomfortable in the

solitude of his mind, trapped in thoughts about his poor choices. Most of his bad turns

involved women . . . and booze—too much fucking booze. He felt sure the unfortunate

outcomes were never the women’s fault, and had nothing to do with bad luck. He blamed

no one but himself, especially in these lonely hours. He could only hope that the woman

who wanted to meet him would help him find resolve for Joy Sandler, dead or alive.

**Chapter 6**

**Tia**

 After a late breakfast, Larkin walked the mile and a half north along the

boardwalk till the fast food aromas of sausage with peppers ‘n’ onions, pizza,

and raw shellfish along with the honkytonk sounds of games of chance piqued

his senses. All provoked nostalgic images from his senior prom of forbidden sex

with Kay Farr at seventeen under the boardwalk.

 The Beachcomber Bar was already serving alcohol at 11 a.m., but he sat

on one of the memorial benches dedicated by lifetime Jersey shore patrons post-

Super Storm Sandy, which had washed away the roller coaster and a quarter mile

of prime beachfront real estate at Seaside in 2012. The benches were well made

and the back rests swung back-and-forth to face the boardwalk or the ocean. He

faced the ocean for half an hour, thinking about the vastness of the sea and

how the surf in Jersey was all connected to the Caribbean surrounding Isla

Rameras, yet the life of one teenage girl hadn’t yet surfaced from its depths.

 At 11:45 a.m. he shifted the bench’s back rest to face the open bar of

The Beachcomber with the joggers and cyclists passing between him and the bar.

He had no idea what his would-be confidential informant looked like, or if she

knew him by sight. He watched for any signs of a bartender looking around for

someone, but with no luck, so he strolled towards the bar with caution. The

taint of brew was rough on a recovering alcoholic. That put him on edge, like

someone deathly afraid of snakes and gators wading waist-deep through the

Everglades.

 He entered the open-air boardwalk bar facing the beach. The Beachcomber

Bar, formerly part of “Snookie-ville” was among the stomping grounds of *The Jersey*

*Shore* TV reality series. It was a Father’s Day Sunday crowd. To Larkin’s knowledge,

he had no connection to this celebration, having had a vasectomy by choice after his

childless wife was murdered almost ten years ago. Too many people he loved had been

maimed or killed in his wake, so he wanted no legacy to leave, other than his own last

gasp.

 His father, Jim Larkin, had been a member of NYPD, but swallowed his

own .45 Winchester Mag and sent the back of his head through the kitchen window

into the alley where feral cats quickly made short work of his grey matter, a visceral

image forever stamped in Larkin’s memory at fourteen.

 His mom died sticking to her story that her husband was cleaning his piece

and it was an accident. Larkin knew better, even at fourteen. Back then his father was

tagged a suicidal alcoholic. Now he’d be called “clinically depressed.” A euphemism,

often with the same outcome—self-inflicted termination.

 *Freddy and the Burn* blasted popular favorites to the gyrating crowd all clad

in revealing swimwear on the small dance floor in front of the bandstand. Sliding

onto a barstool and surveying the sea of tattoos and piercings, seen and unseen,

Larkin scanned the sun-block-funky crowd for his snitch. He'd spoken to her briefly

on the phone, but had no visual to connect any face in the crowd with her voice.

She had something to tell him about the teenage girl who'd disappeared on Spring

Break almost seven years ago, and soon would be declared *officially* dead.

 As he tapped his fingers on the bar, Larkin couldn't help thinking, if T & A

grew on trees this was Muir Woods—“*From the redwood forest to the gulf stream*

*waters: This land was made for you and me.”*

 His blissful reverie was yanked from his libido like a tusk from a narwhal as

he turned to the bar to order a Coke and saw an exotic bartender with a name tag:

*Tai.*

 Her face was attractive in ways he'd never imagined before, as if he'd just

landed on another planet. Her short, spiked coif was vermillion and matched her

lip gloss and eyeshadow. Each turquoise eyebrow was pierced, as were her nose

lips and navel exposed between the belt of her tight white shorts and the fringe at

the hem of her neon pink halter.

 "What'll ya have, Hon?” she asked, leaning over the bar with her forehead

touching his so she could hear his order over the band’s throng covering *KC and*

*the Sunshine Band*’*s* hit, “Boogie Shoes.”

 “Information,” he said.

 She pulled back jerking her neck. She looked from side to side then nodded

to the other two bartenders that she needed a pee break. She gestured towards the rear

restrooms and exited the circular bar through a lift hatch. He followed her tall, wiry

figure, sculptured like a ballerina’s. She passed the restrooms and took a short staircase

to the employees’ entrance. With the band a muffled murmur, she leaned against the

wall inside the door facing Ocean Avenue North., took out a cigarette, and lit it, blowing

smoke in his face.

 He blew the cloud aside and asked, “You called me, right? So what can you

you tell me about Joy Sandler?”

 “What’s in it for me?” she said with a deep inhale.

 “Twenty bucks . . . for openers.” He snapped a crisp Jackson from his pocket

and waved it in front of her face, tight-jawed and glaring.

 “I actually saw her *after* she was reported missing, Mr. Magnum PI, so a

*Franklin* just for openers or get fucking lost.”

 Larkin noticed a discoloration around both her wrists as she held the cigarette

in her right hand and gestured with her left.

 “Nice shoes,” he said with his gaze descending to her scarlet stiletto heels

where he noted the same discoloration around both ankles. “Expensive for a Jersey

shore bartender, worth a month’s tips in peak season.”

 “This conversation’s not about me, Larkin. That’s what they call you, right?”

 He nodded. “Only on a day without the expletives.” He snapped a Franklin

from his wallet and put it in her free hand.

 She clutched it tightly like a Venus fly trap on a bug, then tucked it in her

cleavage.

 “That’s worth an hour’s tips on a summer Sunday, but if you can’t tell me where

you saw Joy, we’re done.”

 “I’ll *show* you where . . . tonight, because I’ve got to get back to the bar in two

minutes. I get off at nine tonight. Meet me at 9:15 where the boardwalk ends heading

north from here.”

 “Why there?”

 “It’s near where I saw her a month after she was declared missing. I’ll show

you what they did there to cover their tracks.”

 “They? Who do you mean by *they*?”

 “All I can tell you is what I’ve seen. You’ve got to put it together. My time’s

up. Got to get back to work. I feel I’m being watched. Not sure. I want another hundred

just to show up tonight, but if you like what I show you, I want another three hundred.

That’s five hundred for everything I know.”

 “Five hundred twenty. How can they let you work the register?”

 “Cab fare and still cheap for what I’ve got to show you.”

 “Why didn’t you say something to the FBI when it happened?”

 She smirked. “Too complicated. Let’s say I was indisposed.”

 “Withholding information on a kidnapping is a felony, Tai.”

 “I’d rather be a live felon than a dead snitch, Larkin.”

 “You’re being a snitch now, or will be tonight.”

 She poked his chest with a sharp-nailed index finger polished purple.

 “You’re not a cop and hopefully enough time has passed to let me off the hook

for keeping my mouth shut so long,” she said.

 Larkin gave her another Franklin. This better be good, Tai . . . is that really

your name? Sounds Asian, but you’re not.”

 “It’s a joke at the bar. I’m really *Tia*, but the dumb-ass manager is dyslexic.”

 “What should I call you?”

 “Whatever you like hunkster,” she said, brushing her lips across his then heading

back to the bar. He didn’t want anyone to see him following her, so he left through the

employees’ entrance and went back to The Windjammer Motor Inn. He booked another

night for a safe place to flop if his rendezvous with “Tia” got squirrely on the boardwalk.

 **(Continued next issue)**