A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 7**

 

**Chapter 12**

**Game Over**

 “I’ve got to hide you, Larkin,” Astrid said. “Quick! Follow me.”

 “Where?”

“My room. She’ll never check there. She trusts me.”

 “Won’t someone see me on a security camera?”

 “No. That’s part of the owner’s contract with Jerry’s clients—no blackmail and

total confidentiality. That’s what’s made it so hard to find a way inside. I’m the only

one to break through their security. Enough about me. Let’s go to my room, but here,

wear this mask until we get there.”

 She handed him a Richard Nixon mask. He put it on and made the peace sign

with both hands with a trembling shake of his head.

 They meandered through the crowd at the pool bar and she handed him a slide

card to unlock her room.

 “I’ll give four short knocks on my door for you to let me in. Once I know Gisele’s

gone to bed for the night, I’ll get you on the first chopper back to Isla Rameras. If you’re

hungry or thirsty there’s a small fridge under the widescreen TV. Help yourself.”

 “What if you bring a customer back to your room?”

 “That’s never happened. I usually go to what we call “The Family Room,” where

it’s safer in the open for the security guards to handle any problem customer. You’d

need twenty-five grand to come to my room and I’d expect a minimum five-grand tip.

Besides, I’m having my period so I’m off tonight’s *billet de faire*.”

 “What if I have something else in mind?”

 “You do test my patience, Larkin. I was starting to like you, but now I wonder.”

 “Trust your instincts, Astrid. I’m just testing your sense of humor, which may be

all that can get us both out of here alive tonight. Gisele already knows who *I* am. Maybe

she knows who you are, too. She could be stringing you along as a means to her own

end.”

 “That would end badly. I hate that bitch for what she does to young girls.”

 “Then take this honing device so I’ll know where to find you, and this earpiece

that goes in your ear far enough that it can’t be seen when we communicate.”

 “Where does the honing device go?”

 “Where the sun don’t shine. You’ve got two choices.”

 “Not with my period I don’t.”

 “Actually, if you don’t mind the discomfort, one of my female DEA partners

took that preference knowing if she was searched by a man, most would prefer search-

ing her butt than messing with her cycle.”

 “I’ll make that decision when I close the door in the ladies’ room booth.”

 “See you later, Love. Don’t forget to write.”

 She grimaced and turned back towards the pool as Larkin entered her room and

closed the door behind him. He found the fridge and drank a can of V-8. He didn’t want

any food in him in case he had to leave in a hurry by sea without a boat.

\* \* \*

 Ten minutes later, Larkin felt a buzz in his ear.

 Astrid said, “I scotch-taped your GPS to a fresh tampon. I’m meeting Gisele

at the bar. Wish me luck.”

 “I’ll be listenin’, Darlin’.”

 Having seen Astrid and Gisele up close, he envisioned their expressions as he

listened in:

Gisele: I brought in the two girls from New Jersey, but there was a mishap.

Astrid: How unfortunate. Is all OK now?

Gisele: Of course, but Jerry’s upset about it. He liked our Jersey shore operative, but

 she betrayed us. We’d groomed her since she was a runaway at fourteen. She

 took special care of him when he was up north. He enjoyed the kink of her attitude with the tattoos, clit piercings, nipple rings, and spiked rainbow coif

 with matching pubes.

Astrid: I think I met her once at Ray’s in Margate—Tia. Too bad. I liked her.

Gisele: Tia’s betrayal has made me more cautious. There’s that PI from New York

 sniffing around again. I thought showing him that I knew who he was and

 what he was up to would scare him off, especially when I let him see that

 his secretary was within my reach.

Astrid: If you have her here, I can work her over for more information about her boss.

Gisele: She’s nothing. I let her escape in Florida. Catch ‘n’ release. But Larkin doesn’t

 scare. Keep your eyes open. You know what he looks like, but he tried to disguise himself as a Texan asshole. He only got the last part right. Next time he’s dead.

 Larkin heard a disturbance in the background from the bar.

Astrid: What’s all the commotion over there?

Gisele: Jerry’s arrived with some political cronies. Get ready to party.

\* \* \*

 Larkin waited a half hour before he heard a male voice speak to Gisele.

Gisele: You remember Astrid, Jerry. Our eyes and ears on Ray Sandler in AC.

Jerry: Of course. Glad we cleaned up that matter quickly. I’ve got Senator Bert

 Williams from the Garden State for a sleepover tonight. He’s got some

 campaign funds he needs laundered. Make sure you use the best detergent.

Gisele: With a Downy rinse, Jerry, for that refreshingly untraceable scent.

Jerry: Show the old boy around and let him have one of the nubile virgins

 from the Garden State. Glad you brought them in time. Your timing’s

 always perfect Gisele.

Gisele: I don’t know, Jerry. Maybe that’s too close to home.

Jerry: Nah. His son Brad is running for the House and soon we’ll have Congress

 in our pockets for years to come.

Astrid: I know the Lolita crop best, Mr. Sternweiss. Let me guide him through

 the ripe fruit orchard.

Jerry: If you make the old boy happy, you can call me “Jerry” at breakfast tomorrow.

Astrid: Consider it done, “Jerry.”

Jerry: Hmm. Spunk, too. I like her. You busy tonight?”

Astrid: I aim to please, sir.

Jerry: If that old fart leaves here tomorrow with a grin, you can come to my

 suite at midnight tomorrow for a private after-party party. A trifecta.

 What do you say, Gisele?

Gisele: Astrid’s not my type. Any girl over sixteen gives me no buzz.

Jerry: Sorry, Astrid—she’s really the boss here. I just reap the harvest.

Larkin thought, *more like rape than reap.*

Astrid: Is that the Senator next to the former Mayor?

Jerry: In the flesh. Go to it, girl.

 Larkin heard the sound of the bar crowd.

Astrid: You getting all this?

Larkin: Roger that.”

\* \* \*

 After several minutes of mumbled voices and loud music Astrid blared to

Larkin’s earpiece.

Astrid: Houston—we’ve got a problem, Gisele’s French connection just arrived on

 the boss’s Paris Puntang Express.

Larkin: Who is it?

Astrid: Jean Lareux, a model agent who brings in the cream of the European crop here

 for Gisele’s special occasions. I think she overbooked tonight, so I may have to

 bring a client to my room. How’s your disappearing act?

Larkin: One of my specialties. You’ll never know I’m here.

Astrid: I’m not that hardened by this job yet. I hope I won’t blow my cover by being

 conscious of your presence.

Larkin: Hopefully that’ll be all you have to blow tonight.

Astrid: How reassuringly gross you can be. Stay low.

Larkin: Or high. Won’t matter. You won’t find me.

Astrid: Promise?

Larkin: Like Joy Sandler—vanished.

\* \* \*

 Larkin could see every corner of Astrid’s room from the A/C duct vent which

he’d backed himself into. He took deep, calming breaths to take his mind off his cramped

legs, but less than an hour later Astrid led the Napoleonic Frenchman into her room.

 With an oily French slur, Jean Lareux was led by Astrid to her circular bed

with a mirrored ceiling above.

 “A bit too warm in here, my sweet,” he said. “Turn down the thermostat

because it will get even hotter soon. Won’t it, *Bebe*?”

 “Surely. First let me freshen up,” Astrid said, heading for the bathroom.

 He grabbed her from behind. Standing on his tippy toes, he put a choke hold

on Astrid, taking her to her knees.

 Larkin waited a moment to see if she would recover. About to break out of

the vent to rescue her, he relaxed when she reached one of her long arms behind

her and grabbed his crotch with a vice-like grip.

 Lareux gasped, shuttered, and fell unconscious to the floor.

 “Where the fuck are you?” she huffed.

 “Nice work,” Larkin said, bursting out of the vent.

 “We’ve got to work fast. He’s six inches shorter than you.”

 “Both coming and going.”

 “No time for jokes. Good thing he wears baggy clothes. Switch clothes with

him and you’ll walk out of here wearing his mask—who the hell is he supposed to be?”

 “It’s a stretch, but I think it’s *Mr. Rogers*.”

 “How fitting with his taste for young girls.”

 “You don’t quite fit that bill.”

 “Gisele said he likes sadomasochism even better.”

 “Where we gonna hide’m?”

 She nodded towards the air vent. “From whence you’ve come.”

 “Better gag and blindfold him. Got any duct tape for his wrists and ankles?”

 She gave him a thumbs up.

 With Jean Lareux safely tucked away, Astrid warned Larkin, “You’ve got

to leave here while you still can.”

 “But—”

 “No buts. Gisele already wanted you dead. With Jerry Sternweiss here over

night, your presence could screw up years of my undercover surveillance.”

 “When Lareux comes to, you’ll have a lot a splainin’ to do.”

 “I’ll bring him down and say I gave him a sex-enhancement drug that made him

so excited he passed out after his third orgasm—to my five. He’ll buy it—he’s a creep.”

 “OK, when’s the next chopper back to Isla Rameras?”

 “Ten minutes. Put on the mask, *Mr. Rogers*. Let’s go.”

 “Where are Gisele and Sternweiss?”

 “A private party with them, the Senator, and the two Jersey newbies. They’ll be

busy for the next few hours.”

 “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

 “No offense, Larkin. But I hope I never see you again. You could get me killed.”

**Chapter 13**

**El Castillo**

 Larkin waited till the last moment to give Astrid the mask back before the

chopper took off. She nodded to him from the helipad and turned back towards the bar

with the Mr. Roger’s mask in hand. Lareux’s python-skin jacket had a broad collar

 which Larkin pulled around his face so no one would recognize him—a good thing

since one of the other passengers seated in front of him was Paco Sanchez, Colombian

cartel kingpin.

 He hadn’t seen Sanchez in more than ten years when Larkin was still with the

DEA. Paco was only up-and-coming back then, but his father’s murder by the Mexican

cartel a few years ago made him *Numero Uno* in the narcotics trade. Larkin had seen

only surveillance photos of Sanchez when he was still in his twenties. Larkin figured he

wouldn’t be recognized, but Paco was accompanied by Fino Salas, once Paco’s father’s

personal bodyguard who’d become *El Jefe* of the DAS. Salas didn’t make the cut when

the corrupt national security agency was replaced by DNI, the *Dirección Nacional de*

*Inteligencia.* From the patch on Fino’s shoulder and the epaulettes on his tan sweat-

stained uniform, he’d become the local authority on Isla Rameras, the *Prefecto de*

*Policia*. Nice work if you can get it, and with no term limit before the grave.

 The news media videos flashed in Larkin’s mind, recalling that Salas had

been interviewed by the FBI in regard to Joy Sandler’s disappearance seven years ago.

Listening to their conversation in Spanish, Larkin assessed that an excursion to Jerry

Sternweiss’s private island, *El Castillo*, was a must see for the young capo accompanied

by his godfather. Salas was a looming thug with a pock-marked face and crooked teeth

yellowed by cigars. Heavy with a bloated gut and dowsed with heavy cologne, Salas

stank like a sack of decayed flowers after a funeral.

 The two Colombians were discussing their shared experience with a twelve-year

old red haired girl with freckles as a rare delicacy, which made Larkin want to puke even

more than the putrid stench of Salas in the close quarters of the chopper.

 “How about you, s*eñor*?” Salas motioned over his shoulder to Larkin seated

behind him. “You must agree that we, men of power, must be entitled to drain the world

of its feigned innocence with the flow of nubile virgins’ blood.”

 “Only if such men of power could walk on water or fly,” Larkin said calmly, but

his Spanish subjunctive with its florid, poetic license confused the brutal thug void of

empathy.

 “What the fuck?” Paco said. “Kill him!”

 Before Salas could respond, Larkin put a choke hold on Paco and kicked

open the chopper door beside Salas. With his gut too big for the seatbelt it hadn’t

been fastened, so Larkin’s next kick sent him out the door into the Caribbean. The

chopper was only fifteen feet above the sea and a hundred yards from the helipad

on shore.

 Certain a heavily armed security escort would be waiting for Paco Sanchez

at the Isla Rameras helipad, Larkin released his choke hold on Paco and dove out of the

chopper. The Caribbean was 85 degrees even at night, so he began to swim, not towards

land but to a fishing vessel coming directly towards him. The boat was long enough for

him to let it pass and still have time to grab hold of a ladder near the stern without being

seen.

 He saw from a distance as the boat neared a commercial marina a mile from

the helipad that the chopper landed and took on two of Paco’s henchman to search

for Fino Salas.

 “Shit,” Larkin huffed when he saw the over-stuffed Jefe extended a rope

ladder from the chopper. He hadn’t intended to kill anyone, but the sound of two

perverted sociopaths discussing their abuse of a child triggered a nerve from when

his fourteen-year-old niece, Danielle, had been kidnapped by a Jamaican posse and

held for ransom. Despite rescuing her, his guilt over Danielle’s exposure to such

helplessness because of his DEA position brought out his killer instincts. He realized

with the burning sensation in his gut and his pulse pounding in his ears that his anger

went beyond any danger to himself. He had to stop this sex trafficking ring, no matter

what it took.

 \* \* \*

 Larkin knew that once Paco Sanchez had rescued his godfather, Fino Salas,

from the Caribbean, their search for the mystery assailant would quickly lead to the

fishing vessel he clung to, so he swam along the bulkhead and hid under the dock,

working his way to another boat out of service. From there he meandered along the

dock on foot and hid in the scrub pines along the beach road. He checked his watch

and saw headlights approaching on the deserted road. He took a deep breath when the

vehicle slowed down as if looking for something until it came to a stop. The driver

flashed the high beams.

 Larkin huffed and scrambled out of the brush to the passenger side and got in.

 “Can’t you ever do anything the easy way?” the driver asked.

 “Thanks, Tim.”

 “Without that GPS up your butt, you’d have been shark bait.”

 “Go to the hotel. I need a hot shower.”

 Tim Barnes grinned and slapped Larkin’s knee. “If you weren’t so set on finding

that missing girl, I think you would surely have killed those two in the chopper.”

 “I’m a PI not a hit man, Tim.”

 “Only on a good day, Tom. Only on a good-fucking-day for the enemy.”

\* \* \*

 Showered and fed next morning Larkin shared his experience on *El Castillo* with

Barnes.

 “The owner, Jerome Sternweiss, was on the island last night with Gisele. So was

Senator Bertram Williams. I was at the son of a bitch’s Jersey home earlier this week.”

 “You had a lead on him?”

 “Not on him, but his son, Brad, one of three young men with Joy Sandler the

night she vanished from Isla Rameras.”

 “Other than depravity, what’s their connection to Sternweiss?”

 “Campaign contributions for father and son. Sternweiss is a billionaire, but also

 a good friend of David Trask. I’d love nothing better than to make a connection between

human trafficking and Trask Enterprises.”

 “Hmm. I dunno, Tom. Are you in it to find Joy Sandler or is this payback to even

the score with Trask because his wife tried to kill you a few years ago.”

 “You knew the bastard in college, Tim. Your remaining friends with him doesn’t

add up.”

 “People can change, Tom. Some for the better. Otherwise, like Trask, for the worse.

You don’t really think he’s involved in this *El Castillo* underage sex slave trade? He’d have

a lot to lose if caught. Not just his brand, but he’d spend the rest of his life in prison.”

 “Only if caught. The way his power and influence nullified my attempt to put away

his trophy wife, Sophia, for multiple murders and an attempt on my life, showed me his

avarice. He’s void of empathy for anything but himself. Trask might be using this sex

trafficking operation to blackmail his way to power. The undercover Feeb on the island says

Sternweiss guarantees confidentiality to all participants on El Castillio, but Astrid may be

mistaken in that regard. Do the math—Sternweiss may be just like Trask, declaring one

thing publicly while doing totally the opposite.”

 “Trask has plenty of power. He’d be a fool to endanger his image, even by mere

association with an underage-sex trafficker like Sternweiss.”

 “Trask always wants more, Tim. He wants to wear the ring.”

 “What ring?”

 “Like in *The Lord of the Rings*, Trask wants a loyal following, even an army

to do his bidding. He’s evolved from the selfish bully you knew in college to something

far worse. He wants to crush anyone who stands between him and ultimate wealth and

power. We’ve got to stop him, Tim.”

 “Whaddaya mean, *we,* Kemosabe?

 Larkin grimaced.

 “Just kidding, Tom. In for dollar in for a dime. He was my roommate in the dorm,

not a matter of choice back then. Now? Fuck ’m.”

 “I’ve got to find a way back onto that island sex inferno.”

 “I have my DEA contacts here. Let me check our available resources so we

can put together a plan tonight.”

 “But low profile, Tim.”

 “Look who you’re talking to.”

 “These creeps have a Nazi attitude. Like the concentration camps in Europe,

they could shut down and eliminate any evidence.”

 “You mean?”

 “Exactly. They’ve killed before to cut off infiltration. The girl Tia in Jersey

for one. Maybe Joy Sandler was a fly in the ointment to their well-oiled machine. If

one young girl could quickly vanish, why not the others? All of them if necessary.”

 Tim took a deep breath. “I’ll be back by dark with my proposed strategy, Tom.”

\* \* \*

 Tim Barnes called Larkin at 8 p.m. as the sun was setting.

 “Salas has his local police force working overtime to find you, so the package left

outside your hotel room is what you’ll need to wear to avoid being recognized. I have a

cab picking you up at the entrance in fifteen minutes. Don’t be late. Any delay will

arouse attention from Salas’s death squad backed by the Sanchez cartel.”

 Larkin went to his hotel room door as Tim instructed. He saw an evening gown

draped from the hook on his door.

 “This must be a mistake, Tim”

 “No mistake. Think*—Some Like It Hot*.”

 “No way.”

 “Yes, way. Put your own clothes in the knock-off Gucci bag to change into later.

The heels are size 10 ½ so you won’t fall on your face before you get into the cab.”

 “How will I know it’s your cab.”

 “Trust me. You’ll know.”

 Larkin quickly shaved his face then his forearms. He fastened a padded bra then

slipped into the black evening gown meant to obscure his athletic masculine proportions.

A pair of designer sunglasses, a blond wig, lip gloss, and costume jewelry completed the

image as he dropped his Glock pistol into the knock-off Gucci bag. He took a deep breath

and envisioned the strides of various women in his mind to mimic. His strut was a com-

bined effort visualizing his decease wife, Vera, his secretary Mona, Sophia Trask, and

the femme fatale who still haunted him, Chanteuse.

 He took a deep breath. Straightening his fake breasts with both hands, he said to

himself, “Forget the banks. *These*, are too big to fail.”

\* \* \*

 Coming out of the elevator to the hotel lobby, Larkin put his doubts behind

him when the bellhop gave him an ogling once over. He saw a cab with an arm waving

to him from the open driver’s side window. He saw no other cab, so he went to the rear

door and got in.

 “Where to?” Larkin asked.

 “That’s supposed to be my question, Larkin,” the driver said in a familiar

feminine voice with its smoky growl. Then she hit the accelerator and began her

throaty laughter. “Now you’ve finally turned me on, shamus.”

 She adjusted her rearview mirror, giving them mutual eye contact.

 “Jesus,” Larkin huffed. “What’re you doing here, Sandy.”

 “Tim offered me this freelance gig with a change of scene from my last DEA

assignment in Chicago. Two feet of snow there last week and I was bored, so a chance

to reunite the Anti-Trask Task Force was a no-brainer. I’ve missed those tropical breezes

we’d shared in the Florida Keys. But with that getup, Larkin, I’m not sure if you’re

coming out or going back into the closet. Regardless, nice boobs.”

 “Does it matter to you, one way or the other, Sandy?”

 “As you well know, I’m AC/DC, so I find your outfit intriguing, especially

knowing if I unwrap your package, there’s a bonus inside. Just not sure if I prefer to

let that sleeping dog lie.”

 They exchanged grins in the mirror.

 “Got any more surprises for me, Sandy?”

 “Of course, but—hold on! I think we have a tail.

 \* \* \*

 Larkin’s neck snapped and his wig tipped askew as Sandy floored the gas pedal.

 “Yer boobs still holdin’ up, shamus?”

 “Mine are fine. How about yours?”

 Her cab fishtailed, whipping from side to side along the beach road with the surf

below pounding against the base of the hundred-foot cliff. The sun was setting on the

Caribbean horizon and glaring in their eyes. Larkin tried to change clothes, but the

cab’s erratic jerking knocked him back and forth. He tossed his padded bra out the

window to distract their tail, an IRPD van with flashing lights They swerved from

shoulder to shoulder on the winding road, outmaneuvering the van until they got far

enough ahead to jump from the cab as it went over the cliff and crashed in flames on

the rocks below. They hid among scrub palms and watched two of Jefe Salas’s *Isla*

*Rameras Policia* get out of the van.

 The officers called in their successful mission to Salas. They had a brief

discussion then headed down the cliff to verify the results of the crash. When they

reached the taxi it was engulfed in flames.

 Unseen from below, Larkin and Sandy scrambled from the brush and she

jump-started the police van. Larkin rode shotgun.

 “Ya know your way around this island?” he asked.

 “Enough to get you where you need to be.”

 “Good. Because we won’t get too far in this vehicle.” He nodded to the

dashboard indicating it had a tracer from Headquarters.”

 Despite her usual rough demeanor, Sandy, merely mimed the F-word. “OK.

Reach under the glove compartment. Feel it?”

 He nodded.

 “Don’t diddle it like you would me. Just rip it out and chuck it.”

 He did then asked, “Where we goin’?”

 “To see an old friend.”

 Larkin drew a blank.

 “A *close* friend.”

 “Except for Tim, most of those guys have bought the ranch.”

 “This one brought the means you’ll need to get back onto *El Castillo*.”

 “I figured you were the only man in a boat I’d see today, *Sandra*.”

 “In your dreams, Larkin. Seems your buddies are just like your women—out a

sight, out a mind.”

 Shaking his head with a grimace, he said, “I give up. Who is it?”

 “First we’ve got to leave this van at the gas station ahead,” she said. “We can

walk from there. But wipe that lipstick off. I may go both ways, but knowing you as I

do, that’s freaking me out.”

 He licked his lips and rubbed his mouth against his forearm, which felt strange

after shaving his arms earlier.

 “OK?” he asked with a grin.

 “Men are forever boys. Com ‘ere.”

 She licked a tissue and finished the job. He clutched her wrist and their eyes

played games as if watching an old movie of their past. Then both let out a short gasp

like being underwater for a couple of minutes and suddenly coming to the surface for

air.

 “Not now, Tom,” she said, calling him by his first name only when her guard

was down. “Consenting adults or not, this case is too important for any side shows.”

 “Roger that. Let’s go.”

 They parked the police van at the gas station, and she motioned for him to

follow her along the beach road through the brush. They meandered down the

cliff and came to the shore. The sun was down leaving just a chalky mauve halo

above the Caribbean horizon where he saw the silhouette of a dinghy rowing

towards them. There were two men in the boat whose silhouettes he recognized

by their familiar statures, one by its many years of proximity and the other by

its distinctive profile, full-bodied and authoritative with the pride of a man

devoting his life of service to his country and its storied heritage, Jamaica.

 Sandy must have sensed from Larkin’s grin that he knew who was coming

to fight the good fight with him again. He knew from the twinkle in Sandy’s eye

that he was right. Larkin raised his chin and stretched his shoulders back with respect

for his honored colleague, Jamaican Constabulary Force’s retired Commissioner,

Theo Witt.

 

 **(continued next issue)**