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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 8**

 

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**Chapter 14**

**Midnight Snack**

 “Well, well, Tom,” Theo said with his massive hand clenching Larkin’s. His

face was still youthful at sixty. His close-cropped hair was like sheep’s wool in contrast

with his face, as black as an eight-ball. The stars flickered in his eyes as night fell quick,

like a coffin’s lid slammed shut. “Must be your luck of the Irish, mon. I figured you’d be

twice dead by now.”

 “With you on my team—never happen. Great to see you, Theo, but I think we’ll

need a bigger boat.”

 “Likewise, mon, but this dinghy will take us to it. Come, let me show you all the

new upgrades I’ve made.”

 “You’ve still got *The* *Sea Bitch* *II*?”

 “Oh, no. She’s been laid to rest, mon. I call my new lady, the *Sea Bee,* because

she’s my honey.”

 “I don’t know how you convinced Theo to join us, Tim, but I’m surely grateful.”

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 Sixty-footer, the *Sea Bee* seemed an unpretentious yacht which on its surface

looked like many other sports-cruisers used for private charters on the Caribbean.

On his first impression, Larkin assessed Theo’s watercraft to be just that. With Theo,

Tim, and Sandy, he boarded the vessel embarking on a night cruise three miles north

of El Castillo to avoid detection from the private island’s armed security team.

 A half hour off Isla Rameras, Theo turned off the engine and his lights without

dropping anchor. Through binoculars Larkin saw El Castillo three miles west and lit

up festively like a Christmas tree. He handed the binoculars back to Theo.

 “You’ve already been inside our target, Tom, so what can you tell me?”

 “Upon my arrival the sun was setting, but I still caught a glimpse of an external

sewage system.”

 “So you’re saying—?”

 “There’s a subterranean outlet which, if purged, could provide an inlet.”

 “We’ll have to get much closer,” Theo said.

 “They’re already on guard since my stunt last night. They’ve been known to

blow vessels out of the water if they come too close.”

 “Without provocation? How’s that legal?” Theo grumbled. “Can’t do that in

Jamaica.”

 “They’ve got protection from the local law enforcement,” Tim confirmed.

“A thug who Tom and I know from our DEA past, Fino Salas. He’s the *Prefecto de*

*Policia.*”

 “Why don’t you try what you did in the Florida Keys to get onto Isla Premio?”

Sandy offered.

 “Not from *this* distance, too risky.” Larkin said.

 “Why?” Tim asked. “You’re scuba gear with double air tanks can get you that far

and back.”

 Larkin nodded to the port side and handed Tim the binoculars. He frowned and

handed them to Sandy then she back to Theo. Dozens of sharks’ dorsal fins made the

lethal danger obvious.

 “The security guards chum the area at sunset every night for good reason. The

sea around El Castillo is infested with a variety of sharks from bulls to tigers. Jerome

Sternweiss must have been given that advice from his buddy billionaire, David Trask.

The bartender at El Loco on Isla Rameras told me men have tried to get onto the island

by sea, but none have been seen again.”

 Sandy huffed, “Hmm. Just like Joy Sandler.”

 “We’re stymied,” Tim admitted with a shrug, and Larkin concurred.

 Theo began to laugh.

 Larkin shrugged. “What?”

 “I had a hunch my Sea Bee annex might come in handy.”

 Larkin flinched. “Your *what*?”

 Theo grinned. “Follow me below.”

 

 The Sea Bee slept four below. Besides her controls in the wheelhouse above

deck with a dashboard reminiscent of an Apollo space mission, below also sported a

bullet-proof safe room at her stern. Theo hit a control that slid the safe room’s floor

apart revealing an underwater exit.

 “OK. That’s cool, Theo.” Larkin nodded. “This can allow me to depart

in scuba gear undetected by anyone above water, but once I hit the water I’m

shark bait.”

 “Perhaps, Tom, but I can decrease those odds by getting you within a few

yards of that demonic retreat. Follow me, mon. All of you come below.”

 The others followed Theo through a hole in the floor down a narrow winding

staircase until all had an underwater view left and right through portholes. They

observed a variety of marine life including several tiger sharks twelve feet long.

 “Is this what I think it is?” Larkin asked, familiar with the basic design.

 “It’s a clone of the *Neptune* my daughter designed.”

 Larkin flinched at Theo’s reference to his notorious daughter, Chanteuse,

who’d used a similar mini-submarine to escape from what was assumed her certain

death at sea in a Category 5 hurricane off Grand Cayman.

 “Theo—she’s not—?”

 “She may have had two lives, but I’d counted on you to be sure she hadn’t

a third.”

 “The Amazon at peak rainy season. It was an accident. She was gone before

I could try to save her. With a futile attempt, I would surely have drowned as well.”

 “Considered this a loan of her nautical design as payback, Tom. In this mini-sub,

I can get you very close to the sewage outlet, maybe within ten yards without scraping

a hole in the sub from the coral. Who’s in?”

 The foursome each raised a hand for a high-five cluster.

 Larkin knew from Astrid that the guests’ orgy festivities didn’t commence

until midnight and went non-stop till 4 a.m. He waited till 1 a.m. before he and the

other three maneuvered underwater in Theo’s mini-sub towards El Castillio.

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 After she checked his scuba gear, Sandy gave Larkin a thumbs up.

 “No good luck kiss?” he asked with a grin.

 Sandy pulled Larkin’s face mask down and snapped her finger against the plastic.

 “You’re your own good luck, Larkin,” she said. “Do serious harm to those

sons-a-bitches.”

 Larkin noticed a rack of weaponry and diving equipment from spear guns to

grappling hooks. He picked up an odd-shaped rubberized pistol.

 “What’s this, Theo?”

 “Ah! That’s my gobstopper, mon.”

 “What’s it do?”

 “Stuns a fish but doesn’t kill it. Comes in handy when I take naturalists for a

cruise to relocate dangerous predators near swimming areas. I’ve used it in saltwater

and brackish water on sharks and crocs.”

 “May I borrow it?”

 “You needn’t ask. Consider it yours, mon.”

 Larkin tucked it in his waistband and nodded giving Tim and Theo the three-ring

sign. He got into the empty torpedo capsule and prepared for ejection. Though armed

with a Glock-19, his more lethal weapon was the mini-camera attached to his infrared

spectacles to record the presence of the rich and powerful participating in El Castillo’s

illicit debauchery.

 Assuming his subterranean entry through the sewage outlet would give him

access, Larkin had a change of clothes in a waterproof pouch attached to his scuba

gear so he’d fit in with the guests. He put Theo on course with his mini-sub from

three miles out to move as close as possible to the sewage outlet without being seen,

but strong currents in the three-mile strait between the larger Isla Rameras and El

Castillo created a stronger current the closer he got to the smaller island.

 With no more than fifty people on the private island at a time, Sternweiss must

have applied the Native American Six-mile Rule which allowed tribes to use a river as

a toilet as long as they were six miles upriver from the next village—nature’s filter. The

clockwise currents around El Castillo sent the sewage far north in deep open sea with

no ill-effects on Isla Rameras or on Jamaica to the north and Baranquilla, Colombia to the

south, both 250 miles away. Without dependence on outside sources to remove refuse,

Sternweiss had a secure, private pleasure pit without intrusion—till now.

 Larkin found the hatch that would open intermittently to eject sewage, but he

didn’t know how often that occurred, with each toilet flush or at a set time. He checked

his Rolex and watched the hatch for his opportunity. Every muscle tensed ready to

lunge at the opening hatch. Twenty minutes had passed without success when he

was distracted by a sudden blow against his air tanks. Stunned, he thought he’d been

detected from above until he was hit again. An eight-foot bull shark was sizing him

up for a midnight snack.

 He slipped off his air tanks and used them as a shield against his aggressive

assailant. The shark clamped its jaws onto one tank and shook its head like a dog

killing a rat. Then Larkin heard the grinding hatch opening behind him. Warding off

repetitive attacks with his air tanks, he swam blindly backwards towards the hatch

until he grabbed the door with one hand and pulled himself inside the sewage pipe.

The shark kept attacking Larkin’s kicking flippers, but the sudden expulsion of

sewage turned the turquoise Caribbean brown with the force of a firehose pushing

the shark away.

 With that sudden gush, Larkin let go of his tanks and held onto the hatch to

avoid being forced back into open water. Discouraged, he watched his air tanks sink

to the sandy thirty-foot bottom where the shark with two others continued to nudge

the tanks with curiosity. The four-foot-wide sewage pipe drained into the sea and as

the hatch closed with Larkin holding on, he pulled himself in.

 The stench was overwhelming but, on his hands and knees, he crawled

towards its source amidst rank sludge decorated with used condoms. He vomited

what little food was in his stomach and he felt faint from the toxic miasma that

paved the way towards his destination—Sodom and Gomorrah.

**Chapter 15**

**Gobstopper**

 Larkin cupped his hands around his face to ward off the toxic fumes in the

sewage pipe and was relieved to hear voices and music from overhead. He found a

square metal plate with rubber molding. The panel had four Phillips-head screws that

secured that outlet and blocked the sewage gas from seeping into an A/C vent duct.

With his Victorinox Swiss Army knife, he unscrewed the plate and crawled in to see

where it led. He used his rubber wetsuit to block the vent behind him. Following the

sounds from above and visualizing the main floor from the night before, he worked

his way towards a vertical A/C duct that he calculated led to Astrid’s bedroom.

 It was after 1 a.m. before he saw through the grating into Astrid’s familiar

room below. She wasn’t there, but at least no one else was there to hear him over

the music when he kicked out the duct’s grating to drop down into Astrid’s bedroom.

 He scrubbed down in her bathroom and changed into the clothes from his

waterproof sack. He had to use her scented conditioner twice to get the sewer stench

out of his hair. Coming from the bathroom back into her bedroom, he heard a click

at the door. Quickly, he slid under her bed. He recognized Astrid’s falsely accented

voice, but when the person accompanying her spoke he knew it was Gisele.

 “A special guest is arriving shortly,” Gisele said. “He’s been promised the

newbie, the one who looks like his daughter from his first marriage.”

 “But she’s barely twelve! Jerry has always insisted that no girls will be younger

than thirteen.”

 *Honor among demons*, Larkin thought.

 “Jerry? He may have given you permission to call him that, but get this straight,

Astrid, I’m the boss here. Our guest is depending on *my* choice. Don’t look so offended.

This client knows better than to hurt her. He just wants to role play with her—Daddy’s

naughty little girl. I’ve told our guest that she has a ten-million-dollar price on her,

reserved for a foreign dignitary. He knows better than to damage my merchandise. I

told him I’d cut off his cock and have it for breakfast if she isn’t flawless when he

leaves. I’ve earned my influence over men, so take heed, girl.”

 Larkin heard the door shut but saw that Astrid remained in her room.

 “Psst!” Larkin got her attention then rolled out from under the bed.

 “Are you crazy, Larkin? You’re a dead man if they see you here again.”

 “They won’t. I’m going back up into that air duct to take a video with my

goggles.”

 “Of what?”

 “The special guest and his victim.”

 She gave him a glare of outrage.

 “Don’t worry. The moment he touches her, I’ll step in and you’ll help me get

her safely out of here.”

 “You barely escaped last time. They’re ready for you or anyone else who tries

to spoil their party.”

 “Didn’t keep me from getting in.”

 “*In* is difficult, but out may be impossible.”

 “Even you said ‘may be,’ so I’m halfway there. But I need your help.”

 “Been there, done that. You’re pressing *my* luck.”

 “I’ve got a white whale in this equation. If you do your part, I’ve got the rest.”

 “Let’s hear it.”

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 “Do you like to swallow?” he asked Astrid.

 “You’re a real charmer when you want to be, huh, Larkin?”

 He held up a micro-chip.

 “I’m being monitored with one of these. Because of your closeness to Gisele,

I don’t want you to swallow it. Just hold it under your tongue.”

 With a scowl, she put the micro-chip under her tongue.

 “If you swallowed it, they might scan you and find it. This way, if you think

your cover’s blown, you can spit it out where it won’t be found, in a potted plant, in the

pool, wherever.”

 “What’s your objective?”

 “First, to save as many of these young girls as possible.”

 “I’m in for that.”

 “But in so doing, I’ll need them to testify in court and lead me to this human

trafficking’s main lair, the helm where Sternweiss operates. He’s too successful in

business not to have his main base close to Wall Street. This island is just his play pen.

I want to find all the international strings that lead to Manhattan.”

 “Manhattan? Based on what?”

 “Past experience and a hunch.”

 “What past experience?”

 “Too intricate to go into now.”

 “Your hunch?”

 “Gisele’s special guest tonight might be someone I know.”

 “Aren’t you afraid your personal grudge could get in the way of thinking

clearly about achieving our goal, the ultimate future safety of these young girls?”

 “If you see that happening, shoot me.”

 “You can count on *that.*”

 “But can I count on you to get this VIP client into your room?”

 “I got *you* here, didn’t I?”

 He nodded as she secured the A/C duct with Larkin behind the grating ready

to record the special guest with a child. She gave him a thumbs up as she closed her

bedroom door to join the VIP client at the bar. He traced her on his watch then heard

her introduction:

Astrid: Are you ready for your special experience?

Guest: I’m always ready for anything and everything. Gisele assured me I’m in your

 good hands, Astrid. Show me the way.

 Larkin saw from the tracer that the guest’s thermal image was massive

compared to Astrid’s well-toned hard body and a foot taller. He tried to identify

the voice, but this man was shrewd. Besides wearing a full rubber mask of some

known character he’d also strapped a voice modulator around his neck to protect

himself from being blackmailed. Apparently, he didn’t believe Gisele about the

same assurance Astrid had given Larkin about no recordings at El Castillo to assure

total client confidentiality.

 There was an exchange at the bar with another female figure, most likely

Gisele accompanied by a small figure, no doubt a young girl.

 Through the music at the bar, Larkin heard:

Gisele: You go with Astrid and Batman, sweetie. See all those fancy boxes Astrid is

 carrying. Those are presents sent here just for you. None of the other girls are

 getting gifts tonight, only you. Batman will show you what he’s brought for you.

 *Batman?* Larkin thought following the three thermal images until Astrid’s

bedroom door opened and he could see them firsthand. His insides churned with

anxiety for the young girl as he zoomed in to record.

 “These are treasures just for you, honey, only you, because you’re so special,”

Batman said. “Astrid will be right outside the door if you need anything. OK?”

 Shy, the girl nodded.

 Astrid showed a glance of concern to Larkin at the A/C duct above, but she

gave the girl a pat of confidence and left the room where Larkin saw her thermal

image, as promised, standing guard outside the door.

 Batman opened the first box and pulled out a sheer silk nightie.

 *Jesus!* Larking thought, hoping Batman with those pointy ears couldn’t hear his

stomach churning in the A/C duct.

 “I’m going to help you put on your new costume,” Batman said.

 “What is it?” she asked. “Am I a princess or a fairy?”

 “You can be whatever you want, sweetie.”

 “Gisele calls me ‘Natasha.’ I like that name.”

 “I like it even more, Natasha. Lift your arms so I can remove your dress.

Your costume is much prettier. It will make you sparkle.”

 Larkin clenched his teeth and tried to keep his tight grip on his Glock from

trembling with his fury. He’d come this far and had to bear witness against this monster.

If only he’d remove his Batman mask so he could put an end to this sacrificial lamb’s

abuse, but it seemed the man needed to do everything at a snail’s pace from removing

all the child’s cloths then putting on her silk transparent garments with the precision

of an underwater ballet.

 “Are you really Batman?” the girl asked as she pranced around the room like

a ballerina.

 “Don’t move so fast!” Batman shouted. “Be graceful, Natasha. Always graceful

and elegant so you’ll grow up to be a natural beauty. Everyone will want to kiss you.”

 “Do you want to kiss me, Batman?”

 Her question seemed to take his breath away.

 “Of course, I do. I want to kiss you everywhere.”

 “You can kiss my cheek, but only if you take off your mask.”

 *My, God, it’s as if she were working undercover for me*, Larkin thought.

 “Without my mask, I’ll lose my powers,” Batman said.

 “The mask is too scary. If you take it off, I’ll kiss you back.”

 Batman seemed to tremble beneath his cape as if his greatest wish in life had been

granted.

 “Do you know how to kiss, Natasha?” he asked.

 She shrugged with uncertainty.

 “Want me to teach you?” he asked.

 She nodded repeatedly as he took a plastic Tic-Tac dispenser from his pocket and

popped several into the toothy gash beneath the sharp black nose of his mask.

 “I want some candy, too,” she said.

 He gave her only one and offered it to her in his upturned palm.

 “No hands,” he said, puckering his lips.

 She imitated him, then put her puckered lips to his palm and took the Tic-Tac

with a slurp that left his empty hand shaking. He suddenly stood, sweeping Natasha up

in his arms.

 “I want to see my other presents!” Natasha shrieked.

 “Don’t be a brat, Natasha,” Batman said softly with her head cradle against

his collar bone. They get spanked—very hard . . . unless they make Daddy very

happy.”

 *Daddy?* Larkin thought. *Shit!*

 “I want my presents!” she shouted squirming to get out of Batman’s grasp.

 Larkin took the safety off his Glock. He was unwilling to get what he wanted

to see on his camera at the expense of this adolescent’s safety, even if that might save

all the girls on the island. As he aimed at the base of Batman’s masked skull facing

away from him, he held his breath to fire without hitting Natasha. She gasped pointing

to the A/C duct with the gun muzzle’s silencer protruding through the grating.

 “Who’s that up there?” she shouted.

 Batman whirled around, but only as fast as his lumbering figure would allow.

He threw Natasha against the wall like a ragdoll, and she fell limply onto the bed.

The VIP covered his head with his black cape, more like Dracula than Batman,

but with enough time for Larkin to drop his Glock and shoot Batman in the chest

with Theo’s gobstopper.

 “Come in now and hand me the girl!” Larkin’s voice shocked Astrid through

her device.

 She burst into the room. “What the fuck!”

 “She’s OK. Lift her up to me.”

 Astrid lifted Natasha up to Larkin taking her into the A/C duct.

 “Lift off his mask so I can see Batman’s face for my camera.”

 As Astrid bent over the hulking figure on the floor and reached for the

mask, all Larkin could see was a familiar coif often ridiculed by the media as

the “skunk” with its white streak down the middle of his otherwise salt ‘n’

pepper hairdo. Before she could turn the man’s head to face Larkin for confor-

mation, Gisele burst through the door.

 Larkin had no choice but to shoot Astrid with his Glock as the only way

to protect her from suspicion as if she were taking the shot to protect Gisele and

Sternweiss.

 With Natasha strapped to his chest, Larkin nestled her head under his chin,

but heard Gisele shout into her phone, “May day, Jerry! We’ve got to get him off

the island, now! We’ve been infiltrated—again! How? I dunno . . . Astrid? I don’t

think so. She’s been shot, but she’ll live . . . at least long enough for me to question

her.”

 **(continued next issue)**