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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 9**

 

**Chapter 16**

**Mermaid Mortuary**

 Natasha remained unconscious as Larkin carried her through the A/C duct

towards the sewage outlet. Probably a mild concussion from her head hitting the wall

when Batman had thrust her against it. He raised her chin from against his chest and

lifted an eyelid. She was breathing but shallowly. When they reached his air tanks,

he’d have to give her the mask to breath then hold his breath until they reached the

 mini-sub then the *Sea Bee*. He hoped the mini-sub hadn’t been detected by the security

team on the island, at least not yet. There was bound to be gunfire before he could take

Natasha to safety. Based on Giselle’s prior performances, she’d prefer Natasha dead

than as a material witness against her, Sternweiss, and the masked VIP—an appalling

prurient pedophile—Batman.

 He unscrewed the plate keeping the sewage gas from seeping into the A/C

duct. He didn’t waste time refastening the plate when Natasha stirred from the

sudden stench with the effect of smelling salts. Regaining consciousness, she shrieked

but Larkin covered her mouth.

 “I’m taking you home to your parents, but I need you to be very brave. OK?”

 She nodded and he took his hand from her mouth.

 “Where’s Batman?” she asked.

 “We left him behind with the bat pole up his butt.”

 She laughed like any healthy, sound-minded adolescent, so he knew there was

hope for her in the future. They hadn’t screwed up her mind enough yet to keep therapists

on her family’s payroll for the next half-century. His own niece, Dawn, kidnapped and

held for ransom by a drug cartel for months, was finally leading a normal life five years

after he’d rescued her. Hopefully Natasha, or whatever her real name was, would have

an unscathed adult life without the fears she must have experienced on El Castillo.

 “We might have to take turns with the mask to breath from the air tanks, but I’ll

let you have it until I have no other choice,” he told her as they came to the outlet and

he retrieved his air tanks.

 She nodded as he strapped the tanks to his back.

 “I’m going to tie you to my waistband because there are strong currents that

could pull you away from me. If I need air I’ll tap your mask and you’ll hand me the

mouthpiece just for a breath before a give it back to you. OK?”

 “You’re much more like Batman than that fat old man with the costume,” she

said.

 “You’re the real hero, Natasha. Let’s do it.”

\* \* \*

 Sharks—tigers, bulls, and hammerheads—were already gathering near the

sewer outlet and they seemed to have the Pavlovian instinct to know when the

sewage release would come, which included a variety of seafood and carnal

leftovers from El Castillo’s restaurant and bar whose VIP guests had four-star

appetites, not just for fine cuisine, but also for Giselle’s fresh catch-of-the-day—

nubile nymphs anonymous.

 “This will protect you if a shark comes too close,” he told Natasha,

handing her Theo’s gobstopper stun gun. It will shock a shark within six feet,

but better to wait until a shark comes even closer so you don’t miss. If you do

miss, I have a real gun. Just be patient. Wait till you see the shark’s eyes. If its

eyelids close horizontally, it’s going to attack, so shoot.”

 She nodded but looked frightened.

 “Batman back there was more dangerous to you than any of these sharks.

You got this, Natasha. I can tell.”

 “My real name’s *Brenda.*”

 “Mine’s Tom. When this is all over I want you to meet my niece. She’ll

understand everything you tell her better than anyone else I know. Ready?”

 She nodded, put on the facemask, took her first breath through the mouthpiece,

and gave Larkin the three-ring sign—a girl beyond her years.

 With the sudden gush of sewage, Larkin and Brenda were ejected into open

water. They saw only sharks, at least a dozen, feeding on the ejaculated chum of

fish heads. Then, like a whale shark, the mini-sub appeared opening its underbelly’s

hatch to extract them from the cobalt Caribbean depths off El Castillo.

 Natasha tapped her mask to ask Larkin if he needed air. He shook his head and

pointed up to the white mini-sub. Though his lungs felt as if they’d burst, he kicked hard

with his flippers, confident he could make the twenty yards to safety where a deep breath

of fresh air awaited away from Sternweiss’s smothering lair. The other thought in his

mind was Batman kissing Brenda, long and hard. The facemask covered her nose

and mouth and the air tank’s line fed her air without exposure to salt water which

could destroy Batman’s DNA before they had a chance to collect it from Brenda.

 When they exited the decompression chamber to enter the mini-sub, Sandy

grabbed Brenda and wrapped her in a large fluffy towel. Larkin whispered in

Sandy’s ear what he needed her to obtain from Brenda. She nodded and told

Brenda why she needed to swab inside her cheek.

 Brenda complied jovially then kissed Sandy’s cheek and gave Larkin a

thumbs-up. She was a brave kid. Larkin was thankful he’d saved her, but there

were others, maybe a dozen young girls still on the island.

 They traveled underwater for three miles back to the *Sea Bee*. When they

arrived, all ascended the spiral stairs from the mini-sub to the deck of the *Sea*

*Bee*. Sandy tended to Brenda on deck and Larkin and Barnes followed Theo to

the wheelhouse.

 “They may make a run for it,” Larkin told Theo. “What can we do to stop

them?”

 “Not much now, mon,” Theo said, pointing to the island where a huge

helicopter was lifting off the helipad.”

 “It’s a *Hip,*” Barnes said, observing through binoculars.

 “A what?” Theo said.

 Focusing his range-finder, Larkin said, “It’s a Russian-manufactured Mil Mi-17,

used by the Russian Army, but sold in bulk to other countries.”

 Barnes nodded, adding, “The Philippines bought sixteen for five billion dollars,

that’s over three hundred million each, but that’s a private, custom model only a

billionaire or foreign dictator could afford.”

 “I can’t tell who’s onboard, Tim, but surely Sternweiss, Gisele, and at least one of

their VIP guests, if not all of them.” Larkin called out to Sandy and Brenda on deck, “How

many girls were on the Island with you, Brenda?”

 “They never let us see each other, only the guests!”

 Barnes shrugged. “They can carry thirty soldiers for battle, but that’s equipped

with military gear. A group of teenage girls won’t take up that much room on that big

chopper.”

 “Right, Tim. I’ll check the device I gave Astrid to see if she’s with them and can

tell us where they’re going . . . Astrid? Where are they taking you? Astrid . . . I’ve got

a signal but she’s not responding. She might still be on the island. They’ve probably left

their security force behind and plan to return, but we need to try to save Astrid.”

 All concurred, but before they could start up the *Sea Bee*, El Castillo exploded

with flames towering over the island. A wretched stench came towards them in the stiff

breeze from the fiery blast.

 Sandy covered Brenda’s face with the towel to protect her from the fumes.

 “What’s that smell?” Theo asked.

 Larkin huffed, “Crap! Literally—from the sewer gas. I didn’t replace the

plate that keeps the sewer gas from the A/C ducts. Someone might have lit a

cigarette or even a friction spark could’ve ignited the gas. It may have been the

smell that made them leave in such a hurry even though the security is heavily

armed with automatic weapons.”

 “They’re moving too fast for us to catch up with them,” Theo said.

 “Let ’m go for now,” Larkin said. “I’ve got forensic evidence, a video, and a

dependable material witness.”

 He nodded to Brenda and she grinned.

 As they headed towards El Castillo’s inferno, Larkin took out his range-finder

to scan the island to see if anyone was still there. He was picking up a signal from

Astrid, but it wasn’t coming from the island.

 “Look! A mermaid!” Brenda shouted and the signal got stronger as they

approached a woman floating face down naked and bobbing in their wake.

 “Sandy, take Brenda below,” Larkin said aside. “She shouldn’t see this.”

\* \* \*

 With a treble hook, Theo snagged the naked woman’s body and Larkin helped

pull her over the side. The floater rolled over on deck like a dead gator pulled into an

airboat seeming to still have some life with the roll of its tail. From her bluish pallor

Larkin knew she was dead. A moment of private silence was all Larkin allowed

himself to mourn for Astrid. Her mortality risk went with her undercover job with the

FBI. She’d played Gisele Honeycutt long and well. No matter how harrowing, there

were no medals or parades for doing her job. The risk is what drove her. Larkin

empathized from his twenty years with the DEA.

 Though hardened, Larkin still wasn’t conditioned from his law enforcement

experience to accept blunt brutality without motive. Essentially, Astrid had been killed

for her talent by lesser mortals posing as gods where extreme wealth afforded them no

respect for any lives other than their own.

 “Tim, relieve Sandy with Brenda below and keep her occupied,” Larkin said

aside. “I need Sandy to probe Astrid for her listening device. It will have recorded any

conversation with her killers before she was made.”

 “Sociopathic socialite” was how Astrid had painted Gisele Honeycutt, even

before Gisele added murder to the pot. That gave Larkin even less hope of finding

Joy Sandler alive. He already had little hope for Joy after seven years had passed

since she’d vanished. That was before he had any knowledge of Sternweiss and his

carnal elite.”

 Barnes nodded and went below. Larkin and Theo exchanged looks of mutual

disgust over such a waste of human life.

 All Larkin could murmur, more to himself than to Theo, was, “Sorry, Astrid.

I never thought they’d go this far. I won’t underestimate them again.”

 Theo nodded with commiseration. He’d had to declare his own “one love”

dead in Jamaica when Carmen Rabelle had been riddled by so many rounds of Uzi

gunfire that she could only be identified visually by her gleaming gold canine tooth.

 “Jesus!” Sandy said coming back up on deck. “No wonder you wanted me to

take Brenda below. “Was she your contact on the island?”

 “Yeah. I need you to retrieve a listening device.”

 “Under her tongue?”

 “She probably tried to spit it out as I’d instructed but somehow, they were onto

her. Her tracker attached to the listening device is elsewhere. I prefer you get it instead

of me.”

 “Oh?” she sighed. “Sweet Jesus. Turn around guys.”

 Sandy huffed and grunted.

 “What?” Larkin asked.

 “They must’ve removed it from her butt—all clear.”

 “You’re warm, but not hot, Sandy.”

 “You’re kidding?”

 “It was her idea. You’ll have to probe beyond the tampon she used to block a

search. Not fool proof, but at least a speed bump to delay her getting caught.”

 After a minute of more grunting and some cursing, Sandy huffed, “No tampon

—nothing.”

 “You’re sure?”

 “Uh-huh. Zip.”

 “What’s that discoloration on her throat?”

 “No stab wounds or bullet holes,” Sandy shrugged. She might have been dead

on land and not drowned. Maybe strangled.” She felt Astrid’s throat. “Something

blocked her windpipe. That may be what killed her.”

 “More than just that,” Theo offered. “I think her neck was broken.”

 With rotating motion, Sandy was able to turn Astrid’s head 180 degrees in,

both directions confirming Theo’s observation. Sandy opened Astrid’s mouth just

to be sure there wasn’t a listening device under her tongue.

 “Hey! Something’s stuck in her throat and there’s a string attached.” She

tugged easily not to break the string. “Effing sickos!”

 “What is it?” Larkin asked.

 “The tampon . . . but something else is attached to it.”

 Larkin assisted Sandy while Theo shined a flashlight down Astrid’s throat.

 “Careful . . . OK . . . we got it . . . easy now,” Sandy said, taking what was

wrapped around the tampon with a rubber band. “WTF!”

 Larkin took it from her.

 “What does it mean?” Theo asked.

 “It’s a matchbook from a restaurant called *La Clodotte.”*

Sandy asked, “Do you think Astrid swallowed it on purpose, knowing she

would die and hoped you’d find it? It could be a clue to where they were going in

that helicopter.”

 “I’d like to think so,” Larkin said. “Some consolation after losing her.”

 “But?” Sandy challenged.

 “*La Clodotte* is a five star French restaurant on East 63rd Street in Manhattan.”

 “Exclusive, but what’s the connection?” Tim asked.

 “Maybe a challenge.”

 “What kind of challenge, mon?” Theo said, scratching his wooly white hair.

 “The traditional kind—like a slap in the face with a pair of leather gloves.”

 “A duel?” Tim said.

 “Whatcha gonna do, mon?” Theo huffed.

 “Have a date—with a *tramp*.”

**Chapter 17**

**The Tramp**

The next morning, after taking a red-eye back to La Guardia, Larkin showered

and shaved, preparing to pull some strings through Tim’s connections to get a dinner

reservation at *La Clodotte,* which Larkin translated as “The Tramp.” He thought his

choice more fitting for its probable connection to Gisele Honeycutt than the mundane

“beggar” or “homeless” connotation. The roguish interpretation of “vagabond” was more

likely the restauranteur’s intent to project a picaresque taste for adventurous gourmet

patrons.

 “You must be kidding, Tom,” Mona said. “There’s supposed to be a minimum

two-year waiting list for that place. Since the pandemic, closer to three years.”

 “Would I kid you, Love?” Larkin smirked fastening his 24 karat cufflinks.”

 “When haven’t you?”

 “True. But I’d never ask you to wear that diaphanous strapless evening gown

in jest. You look bedazzling, Mona. The gown shows more of you than my wildest

imaginations.”

 Ignoring him, she burst out with, “Oh my God! I’ve drooled over their online

menu for years. Thanks, Tom.”

 “Thank Tim. He got us in. Besides we owe you for your unforeseen kidnapping.

Does this make us even?”

 “Jury’s out till *after* dinner.”

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 Having done favors for both parties when highly positioned with the DOJ,

even in retirement, Tim Barnes still had pull with the elite on both sides of the political

spectrum. For a four-star restaurant on the cusp of the illusive five-star nirvana, Tim

could swing only a 9 p.m. reservation at a table for two in a dark corner near the kitchen.

At *La Clodotte*, the sound of Chef Jacques’ infuriated commands to his cowering staff

reminded Larkin of old black-and-white movies about the French Foreign Legion like

*The Lost Patrol*.

 “I’m impressed, Tom,” Mona said sipping her Grey Goose martini. “But I wish

toilet-mouth Jacques would shut the hell up and send us our oysters.”

 “If our oysters come while I’m gone, start without me, Mona. I need to check

out the plumbing.”

 “Yours or Jacques’?”

 “Both. That’s why they call it *La Clodotte.* I’m here for adventure, Love.”

 “I guess you’d call me *Ms. Adventure*.”

 Larkin winked at her then went to the men’s room, which he found down a steep

staircase that made three turns in his descent as the walls turned to porcelain tiles like

the New York City subway system. Over a door marked “*Monsieurs*” he found a

French restroom attendant with the presence of a smarmy **sommelier.**

 **Several other gentlemen stood at ornate urinals and, after washing their hands,**

were offered towels and a choice of cologne to tap on their wrists. Larkin noted that the

valet was taking nothing less than a Franklin for his services. Though he’d often been

told by women that he “cleaned-up nice,” even in his tux and with a mock one-percenter

attitude, Larkin knew he didn’t make the grade with this French piss boy.

 The man ahead of Larkin at the sink gave “Jean-Louis,” as his name tag read,

five Franklins. Larkin had been carrying more cash on him since his half-million advance

from the reward money against his expenses from Joy Sandler’s mother. Tonight he had

five grand on him to pay for dinner and unforeseen accessories.

 “*Monsieur,*” the valet said, handing Larkin a soft white towel with a gold

calligraphic “**C**” for *Clodotte*.

 “*Merci*,” Larkin said taking the towel, drying his hands, and dropping it in a

container.

 “Cologne?” the valet asked with a nod towards the line of a half-dozen expensive

scents lined up on the pink swirled Rușchița marble counter.”

 Larkin shook his head with a nod towards the man who’d just been ahead of him

leaving through an interior door marked: Management Only – Keep Out.

 “No, thanks. Your manager had enough cologne for the three of us.”

 The valet’s expression of accommodation melted into a frown like strawberry

sorbet in an August scorcher.

 “That is *not* my ma-na-ger, *monsieur*,” he snapped, but his Inspector Clouseau

manner of speech made Larkin try to stifle an audibly laugh, but without success turning

Jean-Louis’ face *tres* *rouge*.

 “The gentleman is a VIP guest of the owner.”

 “Who is?”

 “Monsieur Sternweiss of course.”

 “He just asked me to test you, Jean-Louis,” Larkin said, tucking five Franklin’s

into Jean-Louis’ breast pocket and turning towards the same private door as his predecessor.”

 “But, monsieur!” Jean-Louis touched Larkin’s elbow from behind. I must have your

token.”

 “Token?”

 “But of course . . . the matchbook.”

 “Sorry, I have a lot on my mind,” Larkin said, reaching into the hip pocket of his

tuxedo jacket and handing him the matchbook that had been swallowed by Astrid to lead

him to the restaurant.

 The valet took the matchbook gingerly but was appalled at its condition as he

opened it.

 “Sorry about that,” he said. “Got caught in a downpour on my way here.”

 The valet just shook his head and motioned with a bow and a wave of his hand

for Larkin to enter the exclusive VIP portal poetically painted Kelly green.

**Chapter 18**

**Behind the Green Door**

Larkin caught up with the man who’d tipped Jean-Louis five hundred bucks for

a towel and a spritz of Tom Ford Fucking Fabulous eau de parfum. He was surprised to

find three men standing on what had to be a disused subway platform. He didn’t recog-

nize any of the men ranging by his assessment from fifty to seventy. He figured their

silk pajamas at home must be gold embroidered with “One Percenter.”

 As if none of the others were present, none spoke, so Larkin tested the waters

with, “I figured for five hundred smackers, Jean-Louis might’ve blown in my ear with

a firm grasp on *junior to keep me* from splashing the marble floor.”

 One gentleman cut his stone façade with a faint crease, but quickly resumed

his stoic stare with the sound of a subway car about to emerge from the dark tunnel.

Several well-dressed gentlemen came off the single subway car, all cut from the same

affluent cloth as the three Larkin followed into the car. The bald conductor was an

anabolic bodybuilder in a black wife-beater providing a carnal showcase for his ornate

tatts on both arms, around his 24-inch neck, and down half of his surly face. He asked

them to show their tokens. When he saw Larkin’s matchbook he laughed.

 “Did you kill a member for his token just to get in?” he asked Larkin with an

unnatural grin like a pedophile handing out Halloween candy.

 “Close, but you should see the other guy’s token.”

 “Funny,” he said with a sneering shrug. “You must know someone in high

places to get behind the green door, Slick.”

 “Gisele owes me,” Larkin said matter of fact.

 “Oh . . . sorry, sir. Come aboard. Please give ’er a good word about me.”

 “Five stars on Google,” Larkin said.

 Though social distancing had become passé since herd immunity had finally

taken hold, the other three guest aboard the Silver *Sex* Streak sat well apart while Larkin

held onto a pole. He wondered if a Sternweiss orgy had ever spilled back into the secret

subway with teeny-bopper pole dancers as an appetizer before the main course. After

what he’d seen back at El Castillo, nothing would surprise him.

 “First time, huh?” the conductor asked rhetorically.

 Nodding, Larkin asked, “Really as good as Gisele promised me?”

 “Couldn’t testify, sir. I’m just the help. Only patrons, bartenders, and pixies

get any further than the Erotic Express Train to paradise.”

 “Pixies?”

 “Never seen any of them myself, but I’ve picked up on some of the asides

between patrons leaving on the train. Spinners and gobblers, all nubile nymphs of

every sort. Take your pick. Sounds like Al-Qaeda heaven. Ya know—a hundred

virgins from Allah for being loyal.”

 “How do these pixies get in if not by train?”

 “This line is just for guests, there’s another track somewhere down that tunnel

with a switch. Just listening to the guests, I heard a dozen or more sweet things arrived

by chopper from—who knows where? How they get from there to where we’re going is

the best kept secret in Manhattan.”

 The subway car came to a stop at a platform with the same city subway tiles

as before, but the platform was cobblestone and painted bright yellow. The other three

got out and seemed to know their way. The conductor grinned at Larkin.

 “This is my favorite part,” he told Larkin. “Just follow the yellow brick road.”

 As Larkin caught up to the others the soundtrack from *The Wizard of Oz* was

piped through a speaker system.

 Under his breath he said, “Disney World for perverts. Sick fucks.”

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 Walking to the bar, Larkin’s eyes darted looking for Gisele or Sternweiss, but

there were only bartenders, members of this exclusive club, and what he quickly realized

were “keepers,” women in their twenties who may have been part of Gisele’s stable but,

by attritional maturity, were now off the menu, much like the late Tia at Seaside back at

the Jersey Shore.

 “Your usual?” a bartender said from behind making Larkin turn around. “Tonic

and lime—hold the gin?”

 “Julio. You’re a long way from Isla Rameras. *Que pasa*?”

 “My benefactor at El Loco had a major property loss and sold out all his

Colombian holdings. Small world, huh?”

 “Did you find out who your benefactor was?”

 “No, Mr. Larkin—a silent partner till the end.”

 “What happened to El Castillo?”

 “Gone. There was still smoke for days from the smoldering ruins, but it was

anyone’s guess what happened on that island fortress. There was no news coverage,

as if someone pulled strings to hush it up.”

 “How did you get *this* job?”

 “A woman hired me—persuasive looker with attitude.”

 “What’s her name?”

 “She never said, but I’ve heard some club members refer to her as *Gisele*.”

 “Is she here?”

 “She never shows her face in here. This bar is like a holding cell where

you’re buzzed to go through that door for better things. She hired me over the phone

on Zoom for my interview. Said she’d gotten word of how well I managed El Loco.”

 “What else do you know about this place?” Larkin asked slipping him a twenty.

 “A fucking Jackson? You did a lot better than that at El Loco. This is New York

City—luxury tax, amigo.”

 Larkin added a Franklin, got a frown, and added another.

 “Rumors from the staff, just hearsay.”

 “Just when I was starting to like you, Julio. What was the tenor of these rumors?”

 “Lot of VIPs. Ya know, politicians, foreign diplomats, and billionaires.”

 “Money, sex, or politics?”

 “A-O-T-A.”

 “You see anyone you recognize?”

 “A few—mostly from the news. The big wigs have another way in and usually

by-pass the bar so they won’t even be seen by the standard security. How’d you get in?”

 “Gisele owed me favor.”

 “So you know her.”

 “Up close and personal.”

 “Then why the twenty questions? Just ask her.”

 “She’s never discussed business with me, only pleasure. Speaking of which,

how do I get to the next level, ya know, the high-end perks?”

 “It’s a lottery. When you came through the green door you were assigned a

number. It’s a blind draw because, to protect the guests, there are no security cameras

here. Though everyone at this bar is filthy rich or, like you, owed a favor, the drawing

provides excitement knowing the chosen will enter the *Nirvana* stage of the evening,

rub elbows with the moguls of power and partake of what delights Gisele has provided

for your pleasure.

 Something behind Larkin distracted Julio.

 “I’ve got your number,” a feminine voice said with a gentle touch on his

shoulder.

 He expected to see Gisele, but instead a blonde in her late twenties, a keeper

like Astrid and Tia had been. She smiled with a mouth that seemed familiar, but she

wore a neon pink mask with blinding glitter that kept him guessing. She took him by the

hand and led him through the bar crowd of several dozen men who clapped and chanted,

“Nir-va-na! Nir-va-na! Nir-va-na!”

 Though distracted at first by the cheers and chants for the lottery’s chosen one,

Larkin noted the shapely, athletically toned legs in mesh stockings and a tight butt like

a prima ballerina’s as his guide led him through the door that said NIRVANA.

 “You lucky, lucky boy,” she said closing the door behind them and turning to

face him. “I knew you’d be trouble, Larkin, but you’ve come this far, so you deserve

some recognition for your efforts. Kiss me. You know, the way you dreamed of kissing

me the first time we met. Make it count because it could be your last breath. Make it

really, really count, bad boy from the other side of the tracks.”

 Her voice struck a familiar tone that made his head spin.

 “Tracy?” he said, but her name was quickly muffled as her mouth engulfed

his and her tongue, tasting like the best birthday cake he’d ever had as a kid, swirled

with his, like cobras mating in a snake pit.

 He hadn’t kissed a woman like that since Chanteuse, but that was a kiss of

death on the Amazon’s headwaters in Ecuador. When their mutual lust ebbed enough

to catch his breath, Larkin asked, “What the hell are you doing here, Tracy? I don’t

get it.”

 “Is that all you want to know with your last gasp?” she mocked him. “I know

men’s thoughts. I’ve known them as if they were my own since I was thirteen. I’m a

better detective than you, Larkin. I knew you wanted to fuck me even before *you* did.”

 Larkin huffed, “Roger that.”

 **(continued next issue)**