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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 4**

 

**Chapter 7**

**The CI**

 Larkin had dinner at the motor lodge then drove north on Ocean Avenue and

parked on Lafayette Avenue a couple of blocks west for free parking on the street. He

avoided the boardwalk in case Tia was right about her being watched. He walked north

on Ocean Avenue then cut onto the boardwalk a few blocks before the end. He sat on a

bench beside an elderly couple to avoid standing out alone. Behind him as he faced away

from the ocean watching for Tia, was the sky ride, like a ski lift, which took pedestrians

from the Casino Pier amusements to the boardwalk’s north end overlooking Ortley Beach.

 He checked his watch in anticipation and saw it was 9:12 p.m. The elderly couple

got up from the bench, and Tia quickly slid onto the bench in their place. She smelled like

cantaloupe, a fresh scent that blended with suntan lotion off her deep tan emitting warmth

from her daily beach routine before checking in midday at The Beachcomber Bar.

 “You have my three hundred?” she asked with a tone that made him feel more

like a john than a PI.

 He nodded.

 She stood and gestured for him to do likewise then hooked her arm in his and led

him along the boardwalk two blocks south. She stopped and had him sit with her on a bench

at Carteret Avenue facing a parking lot to the west.

 “See that parking lot?”

 “Yeah. So what?”

 She reached into her shoulder bag and took out a No.10 envelope containing several

photos. The streetlight directly above them let him see the photos clearly. He saw a

twenty-foot, cinderblock cube with a small, unpainted, metal door facing south with

no windows, accept a screened sliver for an air vent ten feet high facing the ocean

to catch a sea breeze. The structure was covered with graffiti like a Bronx el train.

 Larkin shrugged. “Where was *this* taken?”

 She nodded towards the parking lot.

 “What is it and what happened to it?”

 “I was in that cage with Joy and three other girls. We’d all been on Spring

Break at different locations, but we all ended up right there,” she nodded towards

the lot.

 “Who put you there?”

 “Couldn’t say. We’d been drugged, and when we were locked in that dungeon

we had no idea where we were. It was as if we were all dancing at a week-long party

then suddenly woke up in a nightmare.”

 “How did youget away?”

 “I didn’t. I’m still under their control, but after seven years without showing any

signs of disloyalty, they’ve given me more freedom, hoping I’ll help bring in more fresh

meat to feed the beast.”

 “The beast?”

 “The beast takes many forms to avoid detection, but it’s out there, right in front

of your nose. You’ll never stop it or catch it, but you might save a few of its victims.”

 “Like Joy?”

 “She isn’t like the rest of us. She’s brilliant.”

 “She’s still alive?”

 “I don’t know for sure, but I hope so.”

 “Where did they take you from here?”

 “I don’t know where it is, but it’s tropical. Listening carefully, even when bound,

gagged, and blindfolded, I heard that we were brought here from there just to be rated.

Joy and I were sent here, but I’ve got no idea what happened to the other three girls.

I never saw them or heard them speak, so it’s a mystery to me whether Joy and I were

chosen as better than the other three or weeded out from them for being inferior for their

purpose. It wasn’t until we were sent back that I decided I was among the cream of the

crop, only because they thought I was at least on par with Joy.”

 “Did you speak with her?”

 “No. Once she was over the shock of being kidnapped and stopped crying all day,

we developed a sign language with facial gestures when no one was watching. Blinks,

nose twitches, and coughs. After six months of confinement together, we communicated

everyday undetected in silence.”

 “Does she know who drugged her and took her? If it was one of the three young

men she was with the night she vanished?”

 “She didn’t know, but we found one name in common—*Gisele*.”

 “A woman?”

 Tia nodded.

 “How was she connected to your abduction?”

 “*Still* connected. She runs the fucking show for someone else.”

 “So if this Gisele runs the show, what’s her connection to you now?”

 “I’m on assignment for her. She’s always looking for new girls and that’s why

I’m here at the Jersey shore for the peak season about to start up with school out and

Fourth of July in two weeks.”

 “What’s your assignment?”

 “I find a target, get chummy with the father as a distraction, and someone else

takes his innocent daughter to add to the stock.”

 “Sounds like cattle.”

 “Complete with branding,” she said, turning her forearm to show him a brand

the size of a quarter with a red swastika inside a red circle. She had so many other tattoos

and piercings, and with the pastel colors aglow from head to toe, the small brand was

obscured.

 “Can you connect me with Gisele?”

 “She’s bringing in a fresh supply of newbies here tonight.”

 “But the cell where you and Joy had been confined is gone.”

 “As was planned,” she said. “Gisele leaves no trail from her dirty work.”

 “So where is ‘here’?”

 “A half-mile north on the beach. Ever hear of a beach club called Joey

Harrison’s?”

 “Sure. I’ve been there. But it was destroyed by Super Storm Sandy.”

 “And chained with Trespassers Will Be Fined $1,000 signs around what’s

left of it.”

 “How can she keep the girls there without being seen?”

 “A wine cellar beneath its ruins with all the accoutrements of a survivalist’s

lair, including Wi Fi to connect with international as well as domestic clients.”

 “What kind of clients?”

 “Very rich, powerful, and connected.”

 “Are you a name dropper, Tia?”

 “A violation of my employment contract.”

 “If you work for these people and they have all this wealth to run their illicit

operation, why would you need five hundred bucks from me?”

 “I have a platinum business card so they can track me. I haven’t touched even

a dollar I could call my own, other than at the bar’s register. I’m closely monitored.”

 “Are we being watched now?”

 “Of course.”

 “Then why doesn’t someone shoot us?”

 “They think you’re a loser. No chance of figuring out what’s going on or who’s

behind it all. They made me call you to bring you out in the open and feed you some

half-truths.”

 “That’s what they were? Half-truths?”

 “No. What I’ve told you is the real deal, but I’m not wearing a wire, because

I’ve earned their trust. They’ll depend on my verbal report to Gisele. What I tell her

I’ve told you will be true enough to pass the test.”

 “What test?”

 “Sodium Pentothal, or some other experimental drug.”

 “Have you been tested before?”

 “Half a dozen times. I told half-truths the last three times and got away with it,

so I’m confident I can do that again without reprisal.”

 “What kind of reprisal, death?”

 “They’ve never had to kill anyone. The beast just scares them half to death.”

 “You don’t seem scared about telling me what you have. If they won’t kill you,

what will they do?”

 “Turn me into product, which is what Joy and I, and the other three girls were

intended to be. Sold on the open market to the highest bidder. I proved to be more useful

in the trade, I hope that Joy has as well.”

 “What time will Gisele make contact?”

 “Between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m.”

 “What about local law enforcement?

 “On the take.”

 “They know what’s going on?”

 “They think it’s drugs and don’t care.”

 “Hmm. Glad I’m no longer with the DEA.”

 “You were a narc, really? You don’t seem the type.”

 “That’s why I was good at it.”

 “What’s your plan tonight?”

 “Plan? There is no plan. I just want to observe.”

 “Is there any chance you can get me out of this mire as a free woman with a

semi-normal life?”

 “Scars run deep in that trade, Tia. If I can get you out, I will. But the life, even

*semi*, that’s on you.”

 “Fair enough. If you need to contact me, text me at 69696.”

 “Where are you staying here?”

 “Don’t get any ideas, Larkin,” she said with a smirk.

 “I’m on the clock, Tia. I never mix business with pleasure.”

 “I know where *you’re* staying, but I’ve been on my feet the past nine hours, so I’m

going home.”

 “Beats nine hours on your back.”

 “Just when I was starting to get the quivers for an older guy.”

 “Must be the night chill. Nothing to do with me.”

 “Since you’re a detective, I can’t chance you tailing me home. That could get

both of us killed. Unless you’re a track star, I’m gonna take the sky ride back so you

can’t catch up and follow me home.”

 “Fair enough. Thanks for your help.”

 “It’s for Joy. I hope you can save her, even if you can’t save me.”

 Larkin watched Tia as the sky ride seat met her tight butt and lifted her ten feet

above the boardwalk. The sea breeze made him shiver as he nodded to Tia. He saw her

wink then turn her head forward and get smaller and smaller with her long shapely legs

dangling from the sky ride as her vermillion coif vanished into the night.

 Larkin checked his watch. He didn’t fancy a stakeout on the beach, so he walked

south on the boardwalk to find refuge in his parked car until 2:30 a.m. before observing

the latest nubile contraband smuggled into America by the mystery woman, Gisele.

**Chapter 8**

**Gisele**

 Larkin got out of his car and walked toward the beach concealing himself in

shadows cast by moonlight. He heard the hiss and thump of the night surf. From

the dunes, he saw white sparkling foam slapping against the beach. He watched for

any sign of watercraft heading toward the deserted shore.

 He spotted a light about a hundred yards offshore but the watercraft stopped

and the light went off. The moonlight silhouetted the boat, maybe a hundred feet long,

against the flickering white caps on the flat ocean. Against the same background, he

made out a dinghy which had no light, but its movement toward shore was distinct

against the Atlantic’s shimmering ripples.

 When the dinghy beached, five figures got out of the dinghy and headed for

the abandoned shell of what had once been a loud, lively hangout for wise guys and

their molls on the QT from their mafia wives left at home. With a lot of blatant

ring kissing and a background of live music, Joey Harrison’s was an oasis for the

mob on New Jersey’s stark desert of rules and regulations. This was a rare niche

at the shore where you could drink and smoke on the beach—until Mother Nature

had her way with a tidal surge that gutted the building in Super Storm Sandy a

decade ago. Nothing had been done with it since, but apparently the FBI hadn’t

been paying attention, as witnessed by Larkin when the five silhouetted figures

walked up to the abandoned nightclub and somehow entered.

 Certain he’d stand out in the moon glow on the beach, Larkin shimmied on

his belly through the sand till he found refuge in the dark shadow cast by the nightclub’s

remaining structure. He listen against the outer wall, but the hissing surf dulled his hearing

so he took out his listening device pressed to the wall with a wired earplug. The voice

exchanges were loud and harsh:

 “Stop your whimpering!” a mature feminine voice commanded. “We’re leaving

you with food that won’t spoil and there’s enough bottled water for a week.”

 Larkin heard high-pitched complaints.

 “Shut up! No one can hear you. If you don’t settle down, I’ll have to gag and

bind you all again.”

 “We just want to know where we’re going, Gisele?” one girl defied their captor,

followed by a loud smack and more whimpering.

 “You’ll know when you get there!” Gisele shouted. “Come on, young ladies.

Didn’t you say you wanted to drive fancy cars and go on expensive shopping sprees

all over the world? I’m making your dreams come true.”

 “But I want to go back to my job at Mar-a-Lago,” another girl said. “I was

happier on minimum wage.”

 “You all asked for this. You’re all greedy and wanted more. You’ll all get

your wish, but my way. Someone will pick you up next week. The week after that,

you’ll change your tunes. It will be great, just like I’ve promised you. I’ll be waiting

to see your smiling faces, and you can thank me properly then. *Ciao*, my sweet

darlings. Mama loves you.”

 Larkin held his breath as Gisele and a man came out of Joey Harrison’s

ruins. Larkin wasn’t armed because his PI’s concealed-carry license was for New

York only. As strict as gun laws were in Manhattan, the entire Garden State was

in an arms lockdown and for good reason. He was more concerned about the girls

imprisoned inside the shell of the former nightclub, most likely beneath the main

floor. They had food and water, as he’d heard, which gave him more time to

contact New Jersey State Troopers and the FBI, but if he failed in an attempt to

overpower and capture Gisele and her henchman, who most likely was armed,

he could be sacrificing any chance to save the three captive girls. His failure

tonight would also endanger Tia as the CI who’d led him there.

 It pained him to let Gisele go, but he was glad for this chance to hear her

henchman say in words carried on the sea breeze to Larkin’s ears: “Let me give

you a hand into the boat, Ms. Honeycutt.”

 Larkin thought, *Gisele Honeycutt*. *Gotcha!*

 When the dinghy got to the big yacht anchored a hundred yards off the beach,

the lights on the larger craft lit up enough for Larkin to read the name and ID number**:**

*Stern Rules Weiss Minds* 069-057-352.

 He made note of that information on his iPhone and added Gisele Honeycutt

to his long list of suspects in the Joy Sandler MIA cold case, which could make him

flush if he solved the mystery of her disappearance. That’s if he was still alive to spend

his windfall.

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 Larkin took out his pocket laser flashlight and, once the yacht took Gisele

Honeycutt out of sight, he lit up the cavernous entrance to the ruined nightclub, which

was concealed by a pile of wreckage from the hurricane destruction in 2012. He had

to crawl on the sand beneath the canopy of broken beams and shattered dreams of

the boisterous entertainment spot it had once been. He’d been here once at its prime

with his secretary, Mona, but the portentous memories of being rendered unconscious

in his unwarranted departure that sunny summer day then waking up to a beating and

near drowning, now perked his survival instincts to flag caution.

 Though he saw five figures enter, only two left in the dinghy. There was

no guarantee that the three captive young women were left unguarded by one or

two henchmen already inside expecting Gisele’s delivery of fresh flesh for—as Tia

had said—“The Beast.”

 A steel door must have led to a wine cellar, now padlocked with a thick

chain. At least it had no deadbolt to deal with. He had the padlock opened by his

third attempt with an adjustable, multi-faceted skeleton key from his overseas

DEA days. When the three girls saw him enter they cowered in a dark corner.

 “Is anyone else here besides you three?” he asked.

 “No. Who are you?” one girl asked.

 “I’m here to get you out. Is anyone’s coming back soon?”

 “They left us with several days’ food,” another girl said.

 “I don’t know how I got here,” the third said. “I was a wine server at the pool

patio in Mar-a-Lago and went to lunch on my day off with a woman who wanted to hire

me for better pay at another resort. She said I could make a thousand dollars a day plus

tips.”

 “Gisele?”

 “Yes,” they all said in unison.

 “OK. I’m going to take you to a Safe House for now, then we’ll have you contact

the police. I know some people in high places, but when you speak to the cops, you can’t

mention me. Tell them you broke out on your own. Put together a story you can all agree

on.”

 “But you’re saving us. How can we thank you?” one girl asked, more self-assured

than the other two.

 “By doing just as I’ve told you. There are other young women who’ve been in

this same trap. Some may have died trying to escape. I don’t want your captors to know

I’m involved in your rescue. The lives of other victims may be at stake if I’m not free to

stop the organization behind this human traffic pipeline.”

 “But who are you?” one asked.

 “I’m not even going to tell you my name. You may never get to know who I am.

It’s better for all concerned that you don’t.”

 He led them out and they remained in the shadows together until he got them into

his car. After calling his secretary, Mona, he drove the three girls for over an hour to

Manhattan and took them to his 45th Street apartment where Mona was waiting.

\* \* \*

 As instructed by Larkin, Mona had contacted Chief Detective Sloan of NYPD

Homicide. Sloan was often a thorn in Larkin’s side and that feeling was mutual, but

Larkin’s last case had created a DMZ between them with mutual cooperation to solve

a murder.

 “What’s this all about, Larkin?” Sloan grumbled. “It’s almost midnight? Who

are these three girls. Who was murdered? This better be in my jurisdiction, Larkin.

Not like that Hemingway’s trunk fiasco trying to get a body exhumed from the Florida

Keyes. Don’t talk all at once, shamus. C’mon! Gimme the god-damn the facts!”

 Mona rolled her big brown eyes and said, “I’ll make some coffee.”

 “First get some blankets for the girls,” Larkin said. “They’re cold from exposure

to chill winds on Ortley Beach.”

 “Ortley Beach! That’s not my concern,” Sloan said, heading for the door.

 “Hear me out, Chief Detective Sloan,” Larkin said, knowing from experience

how to get his way with NYPD’s notorious curmudgeon. “Yes, this is outside your

jurisdiction, and the FBI will need to get involved.”

 “On that note I’m ready to take the plunge out your window just to get away

from you,” Sloan huffed. “I’m a year from retirement Larkin. No way am I gonna let

you screw that up for me.”

 “Sit down, Chief. Take a load off and listen to what I have to say. Could lead to

a promotion that’ll step-up your pension benefits.”

 “Promises, promises. How so?”

 “These three young ladies will tell you their stories about how they were lured

then kidnapped into a sex trafficking ring. This may be international, well beyond any

FBI jurisdiction, but first things first. I’ve rescued these three, so we have to protect

them while, with your department’s help, I go solo getting deeper into the pipeline to

the source, referred to by one of my CIs as ‘The Beast.’ I’m even going to reveal my

client’s name to you, but only because that will assure you of the seriousness of this

case I’m working on. Tell me I can count on you, Chief.”

 “Who’s your client?”

 Larkin took Sloan aside in another room while Mona helped the girls take hot

showers then wrapped them in blankets for a good night’s sleep until Larkin could

convince Sloan to provide them protective custody. He saw Mona smiling at him from

the kitchen with a wink of approval for being the honorable man she’d come to know

he was. He winked back.

 “Got something in your eye, Larkin?” Sloan grimaced.

 “Stop calling me by name. It’s better if the girls don’t know who am so nothing

can leak out about me to whoever abducted them. My plan is to go into deep cover as a

potential buyer from the source. I’ve got a nice bundle for an advance to pull it off—half

a million.”

 “Jesus, Larkin. No more peeper work for you in some divorce case.”

 “Hardly, Chief. It’s the reward money from Joy Sandler’s mother.”

 “Sandler—Sandler. How do I know that name?”

 “The missing girl on Spring Break in the Caribbean seven years ago.”

 “The FBI gave up on that cold case.”

 “I know, but my CI is a connection that could prove she’s alive and a victim

of this sex trafficking ring run by an individual she called ‘The Beast.’”

 “The Beast?”

 “Uh-huh.”

 “You know I’ve got three daughters, right?”

 “No, Chief. I didn’t know. We’ve never been that close.”

 “Well, shamus. I guess we are now. I’m in. But we have to keep this just between

you and me.”

 “Thanks, Chief.”

 “I never really paid attention to all that ‘peeper’ crap they say about you in my

precinct.”

 “That makes two of us, Chief.”

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 Larkin anticipated a call from Mona as he drove back down to Seaside Heights.

Her call came after a couple of Cokes at The Beachcomber Bar.

 “The girls are at the West Fifty-seventh Street Holiday Inn. Chief Sloan provided

two off-duty detectives to cover the lobby and their room. He said you’d have to pay

them out of your reward money. Whatever that means. I explained to the girls why

they shouldn’t contact their families yet because you needed to keep their location and

circumstance a secret so the traffickers’ guard will be down when you work undercover.”

 “Good. Sorry to put so much on you, but this is crucial, Mona, a matter of life or

death.”

 “Working with you? Who’d have thought?”

 “I’ll make it up to you. I promise, Love.”

 “Well, it may be time to turn in my Porsche for a Lamborghini before it becomes

an antique.”

 “If I solve this case and get the reward, that’s a deal.”

 “Your generosity, as usual, exceeds your capability, Tom?”

 “If you’re with the girls now, stop calling me by name.”

 “No, I’m home. Where are you?”

 “Seaside boardwalk. I’m making contact with my CI at six tonight. I’ll call

you later.”

 He texted Tia on the ride down to the Jersey shore, and she was able to switch

her bar shift at The Beachcomber. They exchanged subtle nods as she cashed out and

headed north to the end of the boardwalk where they’d met before. They kept their

distance from each other, sitting on separate benches and exchanging texts.

 Larkin: Are you sure you haven’t been followed?

 Tia: Never sure, but always cautious.

 Larkin: Got a name and contact address for me?

 Tia: Middleman between the lowlifes and Ms. G is Jim Pascal. He runs girls

 from Miami and the Caribbean to Europe. Another, Rick Spano, runs

 girls to the Middle East. I’ve had no contact with the runner to Asia,

 but even though more girls come out of there then go in, I’ve overheard

 the name, Fuk Yo Mah, a joke among the lowlifes. You can find Pascal

 at Mar-a-Lago where he makes his contact with Ms. G, usually on the

 golf course with no surveillance.

 Larkin: Do they know I freed three captive girls last night?

 Tia: WHAT?

 Larkin: Ms. G. brought thee girls by boat to store at Joey Harrison’s ruins.

 Locked in a wine cellar, but unguarded, I took them to a Safe House.

 Tia: Are you trying to get me KILLED?

 Larkin: The girls said no one was coming back to get them for a few days.

 Tia: They’re not safe and neither are we.

 Larkin: Why?

 Tia: Ms. G uses girls to keep others in line. That was my role when

 I was with Joy Sandler and another girl before they turned that

 deserted cell into the parking lot in front of us. One of those

 girls was working for her. She’ll track this back to me. You’ve

 got to get me OUT!!

 Larkin: OK. Don’t panic. My car is parked on Lafayette near Town Hall.

 Take the Sky Ride from here back to the end and look for me on

 Lafayette.

 Tia: OK.

 Tia got on the sky ride and Larkin walked briskly south on the boardwalk

watching her until she rode too far ahead in the dim light towards the Casino Pier

brightly lit in the distance. He called Mona’s cell, but got no answer. He left her a

message:

 One of the three girls at the safe house is a plant. Call

 Sloan and weed her out. Keep them separated for now.

 Call me back ASAP to let me know you got this message.

 Larkin’s heart pumped as he stepped up his pace in reaction to Tia’s revelation

about one of the girls being a plant loyal to Gisele. His mouth got dry and his breath

short with an instinctive alarm to danger. Then he saw a commotion ahead at the Casino

Pier where a crowd had gathered, and several Seaside Heights Bike Patrol officers had

gathered to keep the crowd back from a crime scene.

 Larkin’s pulse pounded in his ears as he edged his way through the crowd,

all murmuring like a flock of geese. He tried to tell himself that what he already

envisioned in his mind couldn’t be. Then he saw her shock of brilliant hair and her

glassy-eyed stare. Tia’s throat had been cut, cleanly, professionally, as he’d seen

many times inflicted by the Colombian cartel when he was undercover with the

DEA in Cali. This was a new threat, international and from an even darker pit of hell.

 He’d failed Tia, but he could only hope she was in a better place. He couldn’t

be identified at this crime scene, so he kept his head low as he backed away from the

crowd. He took a side street to Ocean Blvd. and headed to Lafayette. He looked in

all directions before getting into his car. He started the engine and got onto the

causeway just in time to see a roadblock being set up by SHPD to keep a killer

from escaping. Larkin knew the killer had already departed the scene by boat.

 Just when he breathed a sigh of relief his cell buzzed. He saw it was from

Mona and pressed his hands-free Bluetooth as he got onto the GSP North. A

strange female voice came on:

 “Don’t know who you are yet, but we’ve got your friend. She’s not in

our favored age range, ten years older, but still a negotiable piece of merchandise

to a special bidder enticed by her darker shades of grey.”

 The caller hung up. Larkin floored his gas pedal as if that could make a

difference. He always seemed to fail the women who cared the most about him.

He slowed down to 70 mph so he wouldn’t get pulled over by a New Jersey

State Trooper. With deep calming breaths, he called Chief Detective Sloan.

 **(continued next issue)**