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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 11**

 

**Chapter 20**

**Déjà Vu**

 Eying Mona’s cleavage, Larkin said, “Even if I tried to be politically correct

by referring to you as ‘they’ I’d be guilty of sexism. Can’t we all just get along?”

 “Be thankful I know your heart, Tom Larkin,” Mona huffed. “Too bad your

mouth is rarely connected to it.”

 “Why does every woman I know want to *rewire* me?”

 “Appreciate my goodwill, *Thomas*. . . and shut the hell up.”

 “Duly noted, Love.”

 He motioned Mona and Barnes to follow him away from the FBI agents and

New Jersey Troopers closing off Teterboro Airport exits. He led the threesome in the

dark through the adjacent swamp. Tall cattails swayed in the stiff breeze across the

Meadowlands.

 “Where are you taking us, Tom?” Mona complained. “My heels are sinking into

this mud.”

 “Then take them off,” he said over his shoulder. “I noticed something out of

place when we came here to the airport. Remember passing the Aviation Hall of Fame?”

 “Yeah. So?” Mona and Barnes said in harmony.

 “I used to come here with my dad when I was a kid. Knew it all by heart by the

time I was fourteen.”

 “Knew what by heart?” Mona asked.

 “The historical aircraft on display.”

 Barnes seemed to understand, but Mona was oblivious.

 “There had been a Huey Cobra chopper from Nam displayed over there.”

He pointed to a group of aircraft displayed around the building. “I can see only its

silhouette against the light from the tower, but that chopper looks familiar and

current, not a Huey from Nam. *Shh*. I hear someone coming toward us through

the swamp.”

 Barnes whispered, “Won’t be the Feds. They’ve got the exits.”

 “Maybe Sternweiss has been hiding back here in the swamp till he can run

to one of his private jets,” Larkin assessed. “That won’t work with the Feds and

Troopers cutting off access to the tarmac. Wait! What’s that sound?”

 Unguarded with law enforcement attention on the commercial aircraft on

the tarmac, the engine of the display chopper suddenly chugged and took off heading

toward them. They looked up and saw a helicopter fifty feet above them with no

lights and flying under the radar. Taking out his golf viewer with its laser light,

Larkin saw no FAA identification but, zooming in on its tail, he suspected its ID

had been painted over.

 As the chopper descended to the swamp and hovered ten feet above the

cattails, a rope ladder was dropped. Larkin heard the scurrying of footsteps nearby

heading toward the ladder. His laser viewer zoomed in on a figure in a black tux

running and stumbling toward the helicopter. It was Sternweiss, alone. Gisele

wasn’t with him. No doubt part of their exit plan was to divert by splitting up.

 “Go back to his townhouse and look for Gisele. I’ll get Sternweiss.”

 “But Tom! They’re taking off,” Mona said, grabbing his arm.

 He shrugged her off and nodded to Barnes. Tim knew to shield Mona from

any gunfire.

 “Get down!” Tim shouted, holding Mona close as they fell to their knees in

the soggy soil that smelled like dead clams at low tide.

 Watching Larkin leap for the swaying ladder as someone pulled Sternweiss

into the chopper, Barnes took a shot at Sternweiss, but missed. That alerted the Feds

opening fire on the chopper, but without a clear target and vaguely backlit by the

Manhattan skyline in the distance. Barnes waved them off to hold their fire for fear

of hitting Larkin.

 Mona watched helplessly as the chopper headed to parts unknown with Larkin

still dangling from the ladder like a fishing lure.

 Larkin watched Lady Liberty and the Verrazano Bridge to his left, realizing the

chopper was heading south toward the Jersey shore. Maybe he hadn’t been shot at for a

darker purpose. He wondered what fish were running tonight for Sternweiss to go trolling

with him as live bait.

 Larkin couldn’t see into the helicopter from his precarious position on the rope

ladder, but after an hour dangling fifty feet above the Atlantic, the bright chain of

boardwalk lights from Seaside Heights appeared. He thought of Tia. She tried to help

him, but merely scratched the surface of the Sternweiss sex-trafficking pipeline. That

had cost her life, a pattern for women who dared to trust him with their safety. Astrid

died next, a sequence of loss that plagued his conscience.

 In his mind, a flash of Mona’s scolding tone made him flinch thinking, *anyone*

*but Mona*. She was too dear, even to the reckless psyche that made him tick.

 \* \* \*

 Larkin heard the surf pounding the shore below. Although it was almost

4:00 AM, it was mid-summer so the boardwalk lights at Seaside Heights twinkled

and the aromas of fast food still wafted from below on the sea breeze that perked

his hunger. He’d passed on dinner with Mona at the four-star *La Clodotte* in

Manhattan to satisfy his innate appetite for criminals. A pedophile for breakfast

appealed to his own definition of justice—preferably fried. But as the dangling

rope ladder he clung to whipped him about with the chopper’s descent to the

ocean below, he knew he was surely primed as someone’s Catch of the Day.

 The sea breeze kicked up to 20 mph and his tuxedo trousers were soaked to

the knees from being bounced off the white caps rolling toward the beach. Spinning

and twisting, he still managed to ascend wrung by wrung closer to the cockpit. From

there, despite the ocean spray in his eyes, he confirmed what he thought he’d seen in

the predawn light back at Teterboro. Clinging to a landing skid, he reached up and

ran his fingertips between the fuel tank and the sliding door panel. Painted only hours

ago, the black paint was still tacky to his touch. Though the salt water stung his eyes,

like reading braille, the raised letters spelled out what must have been painted over in

haste . . . ***T R A S K***.

 Thankful he wasn’t in the Caribbean, at least shark attacks were rare at the

Jersey shore. He’d had enough of sharks off El Castillo to last him a lifetime. The

image of a saltwater croc flashed in his mind recalling his misadventure in the Florida

Keys to solve the murder of several innocents. His adrenaline pumped with his pulse

pounding in his ears anticipating what could be in store for him next. Then he saw a

familiar yacht about a hundred yards off Ortley Beach with the tag he’d kept and

retrieved from his phone: ***Stern Rules - Weiss Minds*** 069-057-352.

 It felt like déjà vu all over again, but he knew tonight wouldn’t be over till it

was over. There was no fat lady in sight, not even to sing him the blues.

 \* \* \*

 Sternweiss seemed to have tired of playing with Larkin tethered to the chopper

and bobbing above the surf. He was lowered softly onto a helipad on the yacht’s deck

Two henchman the size of NFL linebackers untangled him from the rope ladder then

pinned him down on the deck as the chopper touched down. The pilot cut the engine

and the main rotors came to a fluttering halt and the buzz of the tail rotor faded into

the hissing surf rolling toward the beach.

 Sternweiss emerged from the chopper, wearing a tuxedo like Larkin, but less

the worse for wear than his captive. His shock of curly silver hair and a broad grin of

perfect teeth glimmered in the moonlight.

 “You’re one troublesome fucker, Larkin. Might’ve used you, a guy with steel

balls like me, instead of Ray Sandler, a crooked cop who let my own product pussy-

whip him into submission. He should’ve kept his Mega Millions and gone off into the

goddamn sunset. High roller, my ass. Sandler was a fucking loser.”

 “*You* killed Ray?” Larkin asked, but felt like a six-year-old asking his dad

if Santa Claus was real.

 “I’ve never killed anyone. Others do that for me. You could’ve been one of

my elite to do my dirty work for me then you’d have had the chance to sample my

product as a bonus.” He nodded to his henchmen. “These two men know I keep my

promises.”

 “What about Ray’s daughter, Joy Sandler? Did your people kill her seven

years ago, or was it more recently after you decided trafficking her wouldn’t work

out.”

 “Jizz was right about you, Larkin. You’re like a shit house rat snapping your

teeth for a bite of anything that moves. Instead, you could’ve been coddled and hand

fed anything you desired.”

 “*Jizz*? You’ve got to be kidding. That’s what you call her. Did Gisele give

you your first ejaculation at twelve?”

 “She wasn’t born yet when I was twelve,” Sternweiss poured himself a Johnny

Walker Blue from the bar on deck and nodded for Larkin to join him. “Oops. I forgot.

You no longer imbibe. Damn shame. How’s that working out?”

 “I’ll take it, but neat after the chill on the flight down from Teterboro.”

 “Good idea. Hate to have you catch your death of cold when I’ve got some-

thing hot planned to see you off. You see there’s too much fucking DNA onboard to

keep this beautiful watercraft. I’ll have to torch it—and you with it.”

 “Since I have so little time left, how about some answers, just among pals.”

 “Ask away.”

 “Without it, the FBI has only circumstantial evidence, so how did you dispose

of Joy Sandler’s body?”

 “Dispose? Hardly. Her assets may be hidden, but in plain sight.” Sternweiss

laughed.“You’ve spoken to her yourself, Larkin, but you know about beauty in the

eye of the beholder—and that’s the beauty of it.”

 Sternweiss grinned enjoying his captive’s confusion. Larkin’s mind spun trying

to understand how he could have ever spoken to Joy Sandler—a mystery engulfed in

smoke and kept in lockbox without a key.

**Chapter 21**

**In Plain Sight**

 Sternweiss sipped his scotch and sighed. “I was Gisele’s first, but her dear

mum was mine, an unbroken chain of lust. I was nearly nine when she taught me

the meaning of ultimate pleasure. Jizz’s mummy was my nanny and in her early

twenties, athletic and bold. She weened me off my need for her when I turned

twenty-one, Jizz was her gift to me when I graduated from college. Jizz was just

starting school. Her mum let me teach Gisele all she’d taught me.

 “That’s the perfect time to indoctrinate them addictively to ultimate sexual

ecstasy, the way it was intended, selfishly satisfying. Children are like Play-Doh in

my hands, easily molded, but if not obedient I throw them against the wall till they

stick. I love to cuddle children. They’re like kittens and puppies, affectionate and

trusting, but when they mature enough to bite and scratch, rather than simply drown

them, I prefer to make better use of them to propagate my stock.”

 Larkin clenched his fits, wanting to throw a punch at this sociopath.

 “No longer nubile, Gisele became my huntress, finding young girls, at first

just for us to share. It was glorious. But she got the idea of how to make us rich by

procuring young girls for the wealthy and powerful to provide us cover. Our product

is even more addictive than narcotics.”

 Larkin felt the scotch percolating up from his gut and burning his throat. For

the first time in his life he wanted to kill someone without hesitance or regret.

 “I’ll let you stew over that revelation while I shower and change. I’ll be

be shuttling from here to a special aircraft with diplomatic immunity waiting to

take me from Atlantic City to Riyadh and beyond where I have an island similar

to El Castillo, but much better protected from international interference by my elite

clientele. Even from a rogue wannabe spoiler like you, Larkin.”

 Larkin assessed his bleak position wondering if drowning was a better

alternative demise than getting burnt alive aboard the yacht. Still unbound for the

moment, he wondered how quick on the draw the two thugs guarding him might

be. They each shoulder-holstered MP-443 Grach/PYa pistols, current variants

evolved from the Makarov Russian military firearm with which he was more

familiar. He’d never fired or even handled that weapon, but knew from DEA

war stories these pistols had production issues which made them clumsy in a

pinch. They were geared more to safety than accuracy because they were used

by Russian police for crowd control. The heavy trigger-pull had often decreased

first shot accuracy. These new models had to be Black Market firearms of the

Russian Mafia in America, an odd connection in Larkin’s mind. Sternweiss with

Saudis, sure. But with Russian mobsters? Why?

 Then he recalled the fresh paint job on the chopper and its connection to

David Trask seen by Mona at La Clodotte with his wife Sophia and Sternweiss

with Gisele Honeycutt just five hours ago.

 As he tried to fathom their connection, Sternweiss called out from below

deck, “Help yourself to another scotch, Larkin! Enjoy! It’ll be your last in this life.”

 Larkin reacted to the split-second distraction of their boss’s voice to bolt

to the railing and dive overboard into the ocean. Their slow draw of their pistols

and the awkward design caught the two Russian-American henchmen off guard.

 “Idiots!” Sternweiss shouted. “Shoot the fucker!

 When Larkin didn’t come to the surface for five minutes, Sternweiss checked

his radar to be sure he wasn’t hiding beneath the yacht.

 “If he’s not dead from your gunfire he will be soon. Are the flammables

strategically placed?”

 The thugs nodded.

 “OK. We’re torching the yacht on take-off and heading to Atlantic City.”

 The pilot started the chopper as Sternweiss and his henchmen boarded.

Sternweiss dialed a number on his phone and checked with the pilot.

 “Are we clear?”

 The pilot nodded.

 The chopper rose off the helipad. Sternweiss tapped his phone, setting off an

explosion with an orange cloud that lit up the deserted Seaside beach at 5 AM.

 Sternweiss snickered aside watching the fire from fifty feet above, but the

chopper suddenly lunged with a penetrating *thud* in its tail boom.

\* \* \*

 Larkin hit the ocean and dived deep to avoid the gunfire from the yacht, but

before he could surface, something probed at him from behind. He jerked assuming

the worst, a shark. Then he saw her athletic legs and nodding facemask. She shared a

breath from her air tank and pointed behind him. A welcomed sight, the white mini-sub

flashed a signal. Sandy gave Larkin her usual underwater instruction by making the three-

ring sign with one hand and beckoning him with the other in her silent deep-water

dialogue meaning: “Follow me, asshole.”

 Once through the decompression chamber, Theo and Sandy gathered around

him slumped forward still catching his breath in his dripping tuxedo.

 “Must’ve been a hell of a wedding, shamus,” Sandy quipped.

 He looked up with a grimace, showing where he’d been grazed by one shot

from Sternweiss’s henchman. “As usual, Darlin’, I got fucked but not laid.”

 “Got the SOB in my sites, mon.”

 “What kind a sites, Theo?”

 “Harpoon.”

 “What the—?”

 “I would’ve told you about it at El Castillio, but it served no purpose there with

no clear shot. In U.S. waters it’s illegal, but I have a harpoon that can be propelled from

my mini-sub like a torpedo then releases at the target in a second stage like a booster in

outer space. I’ve practiced with it against drones at sea.”

 “The target’s not the yacht but a chopper. The yacht had DNA evidence. We

can’t get that after the explosion and fire, but maybe we can get Sternweiss in flight.”

 “Less talk and more action, fellas.” Sandy huffed.

 “I’ll bet you say that to all the boys,” Larkin snickered.

 “And the girls,” she added as they went to the controls to put the chopper

in their crosshairs.

\* \* \*

 With Theo and Sandy, Larkin watched the chopper on the tracking screen.

 “GPS at its ultimate,” Theo told them. “Anything within a hundred yards

is in range. Can’t miss.”

 “They’re hovering over the fire,” Larkin said. “Better shoot before they can

outrun us.”

 “I think this perv, Sternweiss, is watching to see you surface, but extra-crispy.”

 “Fire the harpoon, Theo.”

 “Thar she blows, Tom.”

 The harpoon made a direct hit to the helicopter’s tail boom, but the mini-sub

jerked.

 “What was that, Theo?” Sandy shrieked grabbing Larkin to avoid a fall.”

 “Got ’em tethered like a Zim-Zam. Just have to reel ’m in,” Theo said watching

the screen and the steel cable spinning to pull down the chopper.

 “I need ’m alive to tell us were Joy Sandler is,” Larkin said.

 “I agree, Tom,” but this bastard has other plans. He’s revving his engine, hoping

to shake the harpoon loose. A longshot, but it’s his only chance to get away from

us. The sub outweighs that chopper threefold. More chance of killin’ himself than

breaking free.”

 “Then treat the chopper like a marlin, Theo. Let ’m run with some slack

and slowly pull ’m back. Maybe he’ll run out of fuel and make a soft landing on

the water. Then we can grab ’m.”

 Theo tried that for a while, but the next time the chopper had some slack

in the cable, instead of trying to flee, it doubled back towards the sub and opened

fire at the periscope, the only visible target on the surface.

 One of the Russian bodyguards came out onto the landing skid and tried to

use a cable cutter to free the chopper because the harpoon had a treble hook around

its point preventing it from coming back out of the tail boom. Sternweiss kept out of

sight inside the chopper, but the main rotor began to sputter, and the engine began to

skip. The harpoon had punctured the gas tank and they were out of fuel.

 Unaware the chopper was losing power, Theo tried to take up the slack in

the cable again by accelerating the sub. The sudden jerk threw one Russian bodyguard

into the ocean before he could cut the line. Sternweiss sent a second bodyguard out

onto the landing skid to try to sever the cable.

 “More power, Theo!” Larkin shouted and the sub descended deeper into the

Atlantic with its acceleration.

 Just before the chopper’s landing skids hit the water, the cable snapped

propelling the aircraft like a stone skimmed across a pond with its parts projected

in all directions each time it hit the ocean’s surface.

 “We’ve lost him!” Larkin shouted.

 “Not if he stops bouncing soon enough,” Theo assessed what he saw on his

screen. “What’s left of the chopper is heading towards the Shark River Reef but

there’s not much left of the chopper but the tail rotor.”

 “*Shark* River?” Sandy balked.

 “Just a name,” Larkin shrugged.

 “He’s gone!” Theo alerted them. “But I’ve got the coordinates where he went

down . . . what’s left of him.”

 The sub ran along the Shark River reef at a 75-foot depths clearing the bottom

by 50 feet.

 “What the hell is that?” Sandy asked. “A subway car a hundred feet below the

surface?”

 “Retired subway cars from New York and buses from New Jersey and a variety

of commercial boats have been donated over decades to create this artificial reef to

preserve marine life and protect the coast,” Larkin explained to Theo and Sandy

who were out of their Caribbean element.

 “Looks like a global warming disaster after the ocean flooded a major city.”

 “Consider it a warning,” Theo said. “Hey! Look there’s the tail rotor still

spinning underwater as it sinks.”

 “What’s that hanging from it?”

 As the sub outran it, they had a clear close-up view through their side windows.

 “My god!” Sandy blurted.

 “Ain’t that something, mon.” Theo said.

 Larkin eyes followed the tail rotor’s descending revolutions weighted by

a round object the size of a bowling ball. As the sub came within a few yards of the

spinning rotor, Sandy gasped at what they all saw. Larkin recalled the self-portrait

at the Sternweiss townhouse in Manhattan. Ironically, the expression on the severed

head seemed blissful, as if the painting had been prophetic of such a demon’s demise.

The spinning rotor made the billionaire’s jaw open and close like a ventriloquist’s

dummy in laughter.

 Ironically, like the biblical millstone, the tail rotor hung around the billionaire’s

severed neck. His silver locks fanned out like an octopus’s tendrils as the tidal currents

dragged Sternweiss out to sea to drift endlessly towards the dark depths east of the

Atlantic’s Continental Shelf.

 Perhaps this wasn’t the last laugh, because what haunted Larkin for several days

afterwards was what Sternweiss had said on his yacht about Joy Sandler: “Her assets may

be hidden, but in *plain sight*. You’ve spoken to her yourself.”

**Chapter 22**

**Body of Evidence**

 As Mona handed him a cup of coffee in Larkin’s Manhattan office, Tim Barnes

grumbled, “We have no body, Tom?”

 Mona rolled her big brown eyes at Larkin with his wounded leg propped up on

a hassock.

 “I’ve got something better,” Larkin said, winking at Mona over the brim of

his coffee mug. “A twelve-year-old victim with a sharp mind and wise beyond her years.”

 “Brenda?” Barnes huffed.

 “AKA: Natasha.”

 “I doubt her parents will let her testify?” Mona huffed. “Hasn’t the poor girl

been through enough? Let her put it all behind her and get on with a normal life. The

media coverage will scar her. Find another way, Tom.”

 “Like our only material witness, a grand jury hearing is *premature* without any

DNA evidence,” Larkin said. “I want certain parties to believe we already have their

DNA from Brenda just to flush them out of their den.”

 “Their den or *his* den?” Barnes challenged, having come to know Larkin’s mind

from what seemed a lifetime working undercover for the DEA.

 “Maybe *her* den, Tim. Let’s get to work.”

 “What can we do?” Mona asked, always ready to pitch in.

 “Learn from our mistakes. Tim. I need you to help Mona establish a “Safe

House” for young Brenda with her parents. Ask Sandy to help, and if you need Theo

and his resources, ask him to assist us. Mona and Tim have already been made by

Gisele, so you’ll be Brenda’s and her parents’ inside protection at a safe location

Tim chooses. Use no one else because our target has unlimited cash resources to buy

favors—like our Safe House location. Trust no one except the five of us.”

 “What about Chief Detective Sloan for backup?” Mona asked. “Isn’t he your

friend?”

 “Not a friend exactly, but I do trust him. Yet that will spread us too thin. Don’t

forget how one of Gisele’s three captive girls was an inside plant right here in my office

after we rescued them at the Jersey shore. Theo understands that we need a tight ship to

get the leader of this under-age sex-trafficking ring.”

 “Gisele?” Mona asked.

 “A major player crucial to their organization, but someone else pulls Gisele’s

strings.”

 Flustered, Mona started to ask, “You don’t mean—?”

 “No accusations without material evidence. Innocent till proven guilty. Are

we all onboard?”

 All agreed, including Sandy and Theo by phone.

 “What are *you* going to do, Tom?” Mona asked the loaded question the others

were waiting for, from Larkin’s history, always a scary proposition.

 “Begin at the beginning. Best advice I got by example from Ernest Hemingway.

Papa would begin each day by reading everything he’d written yesterday to be sure it

made sense up to where he’d stopped before he’d continue writing further. It gave him

momentum, like running then jumping onto a moving train.”

 Mona glared at him with her usual concern. “Just don’t spin us off the tracks

and turn this case into a train wreck, Tom.”

 That image gave Larkin a premonition of a pending disastrous outcome, but also

sparked an idea in his head with the bolting force of a third-rail electrocution.

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 Confident with Brenda and her parents guarded by Tim and Mona at a secluded Safe

House, Larkin called his old flame Kay Farr to have lunch at The River Palm Terrace

in Edgewater. Kay made excuses but reluctantly agreed to meet him there on the weekend.

 That next Saturday Larkin had a crystal-clear day with twenty-mile visibility

crossing the George Washington Bridge. On the Jersey side, he cut through Fort Lee

to River Road into Edgewater with a view southward of The Freedom Tower glistening

in the noonday sun. He took that vision as a favorable sign, especially after most of his

life’s escapades had turned out more like Ground Zero.

 Inside the posh restaurant, the maître d’ told him his party had already been

seated and led Larkin to a quiet corner table. His mind had been piqued anticipating

seeing Kay again, especially since he’d seen her for the first time in twenty years last

month. His expression of gleeful expectation quickly soured when he was thrown off-

kilter by seeing that the woman seated at the table was a stranger, or so he thought

until she spoke. his stomach churned with familiar fermented resentment.

 “Long time, Tom,” she said.

 “Where’s Kay?” he asked with a scowl.

 “She wanted to be here, really.”

 “Isn’t that the same goddamn line you gave me when you handed me her

engagement ring to tell me she didn’t want to see me ever again?”

 “Whew! Somebody enjoys carrying a grudge for decades.”

 “If you’ve come to ask me where I stand on finding your daughter, Joy, I’m

getting very close, Sally. Or did you just come to say you want back what’s left of my

half-million-dollar retainer?”

 “I don’t want any of the money back. I’m sure you’ve earned it, Tom. I just want

you to stop.”

 “Stop what?”

 “Stop looking . . .”

 “You must be fucking kidding.”

 “Ugh! Still with the potty mouth. No. I’m satisfied you’ve done your best, so

keep the money.”

 “You may have hired me, Sally, but I was asked to do this by Kay. Why isn’t she

here to tell me this herself?”

 “Well . . . you know with her condition . . . the time has come so—”

 “What *condition*?”

 “You know.”

 “No. I don’t.”

 “She didn’t tell you?”

 “Tell me what?”

 “Breast cancer—stage four—months to live—maybe weeks.”

 He lost his appetite with bile in his throat and felt sudden cramps in his gut.

 “You don’t look so good, Tom. I’m sorry. I thought she’d told you.”

 “I don’t care about the fucking money. I’m not dropping this case, but I need to

see Kay. She never gave me her contact information only yours. Give it to me. Now!”

 “As we speak, she’s at Holy Name Hospital getting chemo just hoping in

desperation for a little more time.”

 “Enjoy your goddamn lunch!” he said, throwing a handful of Franklins at her.

 The maître d’ sneered at Larkin ih his rapid departure.

 Brushing past him, Larkin vented with, “Fuck you, dipshit.”

 \* \* \*

 Larkin turned off Teaneck Road into the Holy Name’s parking lot to the Cancer

Pavilion’s entrance in the rear. He found Kay in a recliner hooked up to her chemo drip.

Her eyes were closed making him think of Sleeping Beauty. He wondered if she’d kept

trim over the past twenty years with diet and exercise or if the cancer had been eating her

away internally. He felt more broken hearted seeing her like that than when she’d told him

their engagement was off and had sent Sally to return his engagement ring.

 He touched her hand, which felt cold. She shuddered fluttering her eyes open.

 “Tommy?” she said, weakly calling him by his high school nickname he hadn’t

heard in so long. “Oh my god, have you found Joy?”

 “Joy can wait, Kay. For the moment, I’ve found you and I’m not about to let

you get away as easily as the last time.”

 “Don’t waste your time, Tom. I’m a lost cause.”

 “Walking disaster meets lost cause, unlikely a favorable result, yet my high

school algebraic grey cells still tell me, when multiplied, two negatives equal a positive.”

 “If you’d found Joy, Sally would’ve told me. What’s happening?”

 “Unresolved, but a work in progress.”

 “Are you at least close?”

 “I think so but, as you know, Sally wants me to drop the case.”

 “What? Why? Has she run out of money?”

 “Sally didn’t tell you?”

 “I’m sure she didn’t want to trouble me with *this* going on,” Kay said

flicking at her I.V. drip nearly drained dry.

 “Sally told me to keep what’s left of my retainer. That’s still over four hundred

thousand dollars. Makes no sense. Is she that rich?”

 “Not yet, but with her ex now dead, she expects to get what’s left of his assets

when his estate is settled. Unless Ray gambled it all away before he jumped from

thirty stories in Atlantic City.”

 “He didn’t jump, Kay. Pushed for sure, but more likely thrown, just for

good measure.”

 “My god! I thought Ray was slimy, even for a cop. Never understood Sally’s

attraction to him, especially when she’d always been so critical of you.”

 “Your drip’s gone dry, Kay. Can I drive you home?

 “Sally usually brings me and drives me home. She’s been great to me. But she

was meeting you for lunch so I was going to call a cab.”

 “I want to take you home, Kay. Don’t say no. Please, let me.”

 She nodded and weakly sat in a chair as he put her shoes on her small feet, cold to

the touch. He helped Kay into a wheelchair then saw from the back of her head as he

pushed her towards the exit that her hair was already thinning out.

\* \* \*

 Larkin drove to Kay’s luxury condo in Hackensack off Summit Avenue, a short

drive from the hospital. They sat close on a sofa and held hands, hers icy and trembling.

 “If Sally wants me to drop the case, maybe I should, Kay. She told me to keep the

money, so how about I take you wherever you want to travel until you no longer can? I’d

like to spend whatever time is left with you, Kay.”

 She patted his hand and entwined her fingers affectionately in his.

 “I shouldn’t have listened to Sally back then, Tom. I think you’ve turned out

to be a better person than either of us . . . even if you came from the wrong side of the

tracks,” she kidded him the way she used to when both could see no end to their life

together.

 “I want to kiss you, Kay.”

 She shook her head with a soured grimace. “Chemo makes my mouth dry and

and gives me bad breath.”

 “Just let me touch your lips with mine.”

 She stared at his mouth, put her slender fingertips to his chin, and guided him

slowly to her lips, dry and cracked, yet, though from a distant time, still felt like yesterday.

 “I can’t be your charity case, Tom. I’d rather say goodbye now than feel your pity.”

 “Pity? More like envy from all your girlfriends wondering how you attracted such

a catch as *moi*.”

 He made her laugh as he always had as a cut-up in high school classes they’d

shared. Kay was a cheerleader and President of National Honor Society. Larkin was

often kept after school with detention for his disturbances in study hall when he stood

up to bullies a head taller. Cafeteria brawls always ended with Tom Larkin standing

over his assailants strewn all around him on the floor.

 “A born loser,” as Kay’s best friend, Sally Heidt, referred to him, but Tom Larkin

served in the Navy after college and joined the Hackensack PD’s Narcotics Squad before

being recruited by his older Navy buddy, Tim Barnes, into the DEA. The Navy quenched

his thirst for travel. The DEA put him undercover overseas to enjoy many perks with

license to drink, fuck, crash ‘n’ burn. Mostly because of his inner rage over losing Kay.

 Though he’d mellowed somewhat over the past twenty years by eliminating the

drink, the other trio in his DNA, at best, made Tom Larkin unique, his own man in his

own time. His attitude and presence were loved or hated with nothing in between.

 Recognizing his unbridled passion for her in his eyes, Kay sighed.

 “I didn’t think I’d have to do this to discourage you, Tom, but it seems I’ll

have to show you something to put you straight.”

 She unbuttoned her blouse. She took it off, set it aside, then faced him in

her lacy white bra, making him short of breath.

 “Help me, Tommy,” she said twisting aside for him to unhook her bra from

behind.”

 “Are you sure?”

 “Do it—quickly. We need to put this behind us,” she said with a whimper

as she cradled her breasts and slowly turned to face him, letting her bra straps

slide off her shoulders and her bra fall onto his lap.

 A tear ran down her cheek as he took in the sight of—what were shaped

like breasts, but with a variety of horizontal patterns of scars from her recent

double mastectomy. The threads remained from the surgeon’s fresh stitches.”

 “Some slices were taken from my tummy-tuck surgery, and some from

butt reduction.”

 She stood and dropped her skirt to show him the long horizontal scar below

her navel. Then she turned away and pulled down her panties to show him where

more of her flesh had been cut away from her butt and distributed to reconstruct

both breasts that had been surgically removed.

 “My nipples are fake. My own flesh twisted and died artfully, but with no

sensation.”

 Though Larkin hadn’t cried since hearing of his wife Vera’s murder five

years ago, he felt his eyes burning and ready to flow, but fought the tears. Instead,

he smiled at Kay to let her know his feelings for her were so much more than skin

deep. They’d grown up together.

 “Sally is usually here to help me dress my wounds before I go to sleep,”

she said, which seemed to Larkin, a question hanging in the air like ripe fruit

about to fall from a tree branch.

 Shifting from the cloying sadness between them, Larkin said with a shrug,

“I’ve treated gunshot wounds in the field. Piece a cake. I’ll do it . . . if you’ll let me.”

 “Yes . . . please, Tom.”

 Kay had forgotten how gentle Larkin could be when he had to. The tenderness

of his touch reminded her of the first time she had given herself to him at eighteen.

He patted her scars with a damp wash cloth then dried her breasts with a soft fluffy

towel that stained with residue from her surgical wounds. Vaseline dabbed on the

stitches soothed the irritation and was expected to subdue scarring to a minimum.

 He saw a bottle of prescribed medication on her nightstand.

 “Should you be taking this, Kay?”

 “It’s for nausea, but I have a kettle of chicken noodle soup on the stove.

I’d rather eat something easy on my stomach than take medication.”

 He joined her at the table, and they ate the soup slowly, just looking into each

other’s eyes—until she bolted from the table and ran to the bathroom to puke all she’d

eaten that day.

 “I should’ve taken the meds like my oncologist recommended,” she said short of

breath.

 “Take a pill now and lay down for a while. We can try the soup again later.”

 “You’re being too good to me, Tom.”

 “I was always good to you, but you listened to Sally’s negative bullshit instead

of judging me for yourself. Regardless, there’s no one in my life I’ve loved then stopped

loving, not for any reason.”

 “Is that your usual enigmatic way of saying something else more directly.”

 “I loved you then. I love you now. I always will.”

 She smiled then swooned into slumber. He took off his shoes and nestled

alongside her till both were fast asleep.

\* \* \*

 Larkin stayed with Kay uninterrupted for three days. The ritual of dressing her

wounds had put Larkin into a dreamscape of expecting Kay to recover. The phone rang

on the morning of the fourth day to snap him back into reality.

 “Where have you been, Tom?” Mona asked. “We’re off the coast of Long

Island’s south shore on Theo’s yacht with Brenda and her parents.”

 “Long story, Mona.”

 “Mona? Not Babe or Doll? Hmm! You havin’ a good time bein’ a gentleman

in front of a lady?”

 “Yes—a childhood friend.”

 “Oh? The same who got you hooked on this case in the first place?”

 “The same.”

 “I didn’t call you for nothin’. New development.”

 “With Brenda?”

 “No. With the MIA.”

 “Joy Sandler?”

 “Secondarily.”

 “How so?”

 “Seven-year itch . . . Mommy is having her missing daughter declared

legally dead . . .”

 \* \* \*

 Staring at his phone Larkin’s mind raced.

 “What is it, Tom?” Kay asked. “You look how I feel. Has something bad

happened?”

 “Yes and no. I’ve got to see a judge.”

 “That’s OK. Sally will help me dress my wounds tonight.”

 “Don’t count on it. I’ll be back tonight.”

 He was out the door in a flash leaving Kay bewildered.

 **(continued next issue)**