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 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 2**

 

**Chapter 3**

**The Cheerleader**

 Tracy Hoffman was twenty-three now since she reported her best friend, Joy

Sandler, missing almost seven years ago at sixteen. Tracy had called Joy’s mother from

the Caribbean to tell her that her daughter had been missing for the past forty-eight hours.

When Larkin met Tracy face to face, only her driver’s license betrayed her age. Her

exterior presence spelled trouble, and not just from her face with rosy, high cheek bones,

full lips, and a turned-up, sculptured nose. Her blue eyes drew Larkin in like a bottomless

turquoise lagoon luring him to take a reckless dive from a high cliff.

 But beneath the surface of that azure *agua* lay sharp reefs that could draw blood

on impact. Larkin’s past warned him that just a single drop of blood in the water draws

sharks from miles away for a feeding frenzy. He wondered if that’s how Joy had perished

without a trace.

 How quickly addictions can drag you down at break-neck speed, Larkin thought.

 When Tracy extended her right hand and held her tennis racket in her left with

a defensive gesture, Larkin tried to look away from her shimmering baby blues, but was

caught scanning the rest of her alluring terrain so neatly packaged in her tennis whites

against her May indoor tan. She was enough to tempt him to break through his self-

imposed boundary, but Larkin figured if he couldn’t honor his own limits, how could

he expect her to honor hers? Tracy Hoffman exuded sex without borders. Aglow with

an alluring glance, her neon phosphorescence cut through his boundary like a laser

through flesh.

 He swallowed the bitter pill of self-denial when she gave him a look that he’d

come to know over the years—as far as Tracy was concerned, he was a definite “yes.”

He figured her mind hadn’t caught up to her bodily fluids in the bubbling stream of her

self-centered consciousness where “no” still teetered on “maybe” with each fluttering

of her eyelashes. She had an unmistakable aura of innocence, yet so well practiced he

had to consciously fight against it, like riptide sure to drown him unless he went with

the flow.

 “You’re the detective Joy’s mom hired,” she said with assurance.

 Her small hand squeezed his huge grip tightly then lingered playfully as her

eyes welled with tears that didn’t pour down her cheeks, but rolled along her lower

lashes sans spillage.

 “You’ve got to find Joy, Mr. Larkin. If you don’t, this will be on me forever

because I had taken too long to call her mom. I swear I thought Joy was just having a

great time. I didn’t want to spoil it for her by telling her mom that I hadn’t seen her for

two days. I would’ve expected her to cover for me in the same situation if some Latin

stud had turned me on. Joy was still a virgin and Spring Break was supposed to be her

big moment in the sun.”

 Finally, one tear escaped, but she quickly brushed it aside. Tracy seemed to be a

control freak, so Larkin concluded that she must have set up any romantic encounters for

Joy, but maybe at the tragic cost of her best friend’s life.

 “May we take some time to talk, Tracy?” he asked, motioning her towards an

empty table shaded by a bright yellow umbrella alongside the tennis court at Indian

Trails Country Club. He’d learned from Kay that Tracy would most likely be found

there in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey.

 She shrugged and followed Larkin’s lead. Sitting across from her, he detected

an air of prejudice in Tracy by the way she wrinkled her nose with disapproval of two

Asian girls coming off the court in a sweat after an aggressive volley.

 “Something wrong, Tracy?” he asked with a nod toward the two teenagers.

 “This country is headed in the wrong direction,” she said, flippantly. “I’ve been

out of high school only five years, and I never thought the face of my home town could

change so fast. Those people smell like spoiled fish.”

 “When you put your nose to it, spoiled pork can be just as rank—the other *white* meat.”

 “Now it’s clear,” she said, crossing her legs and folding her arms.

 “What is?”

 “Why Kay Farr dumped you.”

 “Oh. Is that the story that went out,” he said with a grin. “She surely hurt me, but

that’s because she wasn’t prepared for so much of a good thing at that innocent age.”

 “Wow! Aren’t you pleased with yourself—and for no good reason.”

 “I’ve got plenty of good reasons to be thankful that I left this snooty town, Darlin’.”

 “*Darlin’*?” she wheezed. “Jeez! Isn’t that a politically incorrect way to speak to

a woman you’ve just met? *Anytime* for that matter.”

 “We’re both over twenty-one, Tracy, though I’ve got twenty years on you, so

let’s cut the crap. Tell me why you wanted Joy Sandler out of your life.”

 Her face flushed and a bead of sweat trickled off her upper lip.

 “That’s crazy! Joy was like a sister to me,” she huffed.

 “Really? Tell me about your *sisterhood*,” he said, stroking the side of his face,

already rough to the touch at 3:00 PM. “You know—the *cheerleaders’* code of silence.”

 “How do you know about that?” she asked with alarm.

 “Kiss ‘n’ tell,” he said. “Kay Farr told me everything about her girlfriends. No

secrets between us, until Joy’s mom broke us up.”

 “You need to bear some responsibility, too, Mr. Larkin.”

 “Does your husband know that you were in the ‘friends with benefits’ club

in high school?”

 Tracy’s face blushed as she wiped perspiration from her forehead and replied,

“That was a long time ago . . . and I’m divorced, so it doesn’t matter to me what my

ex-husband thinks.”

 “Any kids?”

 She stood, held her hands out, and outlined the curves of her athletic figure

with a proud gesture. “Does it look like I’ve had kids? This is my bargaining chip

for hubby number two. I won’t make the same mistake of marrying the high school

football star. Next time, I’ll check his balance sheet before—.”

 “Before he gets in your pants?”

 “Crude, too, huh. Whatever.” She shrugged. “I thought you wanted to know

about Joy, not me.”

 “Much can be learned about someone by the company they keep,” he said, then

to put her off guard, he steered away from Tracy’s connection to Joy. “Tell me about this

Latin stud, the Colombian last seen with Tracy.”

 “Julio?”

 “You tell me.”

 “It was in all the papers and in the news media years ago, so why ask me about

it now?” she asked, shaking her head. “Isn’t this a waste of time?”

 “I’m on the clock, Tracy, so time is money,” he said with a wink.

 “What’s the point of rehashing over what the FBI already knows?”

 “Having served at the low end of federal law enforcement with the DEA, believe

me, there’s plenty of reasons to rehash,” he said. “Tell me all you know about Julio.

Forget what you told the FBI, the Colombian National Police, and the DAS. I’ve read

those transcripts. Years have passed, but when you lose a close friend, I know from

personal experience, you go over the times you had together, even in your dreams,

where they’re often less distorted in that solitude than when they actually occurred.”

 She seemed taken when he let his own guard down. Seeing her weakened by

his sensitivity, he went in for the KO.

 “Believe me, Tracy, after seeing Kay Farr twenty years later, memories of our

intimacies ring truer now than when I was distracted by the rest of the world tumbling

down around me at the time.”

 She looked at him with a tilt of her head and a twisted, though enticing, mouth.

 “You’re kind of a whacko, aren’t you, Mr. Larkin?”

 He sighed with a stretch. “Only when I’m at my best. But please, call me Tom,

even if I come from the other side of the tracks. I won’t tell anyone. Tell me all you

know about Julio.”

 “He was a Colombian college student tending bar at El Loco, the main hot spot

on Isla Rameras.”

 “Where were they last seen together?”

 “In a car with two friends, Brad Williams, a Columbia University student on

Spring Break, and Tony Zano, an American, but not a student. Rumor was that Tony

came from a connected family in New Jersey,” she said. “He liked to talk tough. It was

Tony’s car, a BMW that his father had delivered to him on the island. That’s why we

figured he was mafia, but were scared to mention it.”

 “What about Joy. Was she scared of Tony?”

 “Joy and I talked about Tony’s connections, but only in our hotel room when we

were by ourselves. That was during the first couple of nights before Joy went off with

Tony and the other two in his car. Julio was the one Joy wanted to be with, you know,

sexually. She flipped for Julio and wanted him to be her first.”

 “How old were you when you *flipped*, Tracy?”

 “Fifteen. Why?” she challenged.

 “Who was the boy?”

 “No boy . . . Mr. Miller, my chemistry teacher,” she shrugged. “I needed an A,

and he was going to give me a B-minus. If I got straight A’s, my dad promised me a

yellow Mustang convertible.”

 “Down ‘n’ dirty spoiled.”

 “We were all spoiled . . . and there wasn’t damn a thing we could do about it.”

She grinned with a dismissive sigh.

 “Had he known, don’t you think your dad would’ve preferred your B-minus to the

alternative?”

 She shrugged and waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter. When I got married, I faked

it. My husband thought I was a virgin. Guys are clueless.”

 “How about the three guys last seen with Joy—clueless?”

 “Brad was,” she said. “The other two knew the score.”

 “Would that have caused some jealous conflict among the three guys? Were

they competing for Joy because they knew she was a virgin?”

 “Tony was the only hot-tempered one,” she said. “He broke some guy’s nose

at El Loco the first night we were there,” she recalled. “Another reason to believe that

he was from a mob family; anyone else would’ve been locked up for the night by the

local police. They must’ve known his father was a big time mobster.”

 “So the other two were passive?”

 “To be honest, I think Julio might’ve been gay . . . he was just too good

looking.” she sighed. “His eyelashes were longer than mine. But according to Joy, he

was well-endowed. She felt a bulge along his thigh when she put her hand in his lap

on the second night. That was when they sat in a corner booth at El Loco after he got

off from work.”

 “Did they have sex . . . I mean the real McCoy, not like home—the complimentary

BJ for sharing notes before a final exam?”

 “Not before the four of them went off together,” Tracy said pensively. “I’d

warned Joy not to go off with more than one of them at a time, but she wasn’t herself

that night. I don’t know if it was the tequila shots, if someone slipped her ecstasy,

or both. Her mother had primed us to be wary of rape. Gang banging ran rampant

on Isla Rameras that week, but we were selective about the guys we hung out with.”

 “Do you think something went awry, that Joy was drugged and raped, maybe

gangbanged by the three of them, then left to die?”

 “That would be too easy to assume,” she reflected. “They seemed genuine

about liking Joy. She was so honest and fun. It’s difficult for me to imagine anyone

wanting to hurt her, even if things got out of hand and they were all drinking too

much. I want to believe that if any sex got too rough for her, they would have

respected her if she said *no*.”

 “Aren’t you giving too much credit to these guys, perhaps even to Joy?” he

asked. “I was with the DEA for twenty years, so if drugs were involved, all bets are off.”

 “You’re a little anal about the subject, huh?” she prodded.

 “Too many decent people have gone down the tubes,” he said. “I can’t let it go.”

 “If you ever change your mind, *Tom* . . . let me know,” she taunted. “I can still

get a hold of some of the best coke right here in Urban Farms. But that’s about what

it would take for me to roll over for an older like you—I’d have to be stoned.”

 Tracy seemed to want to slam the brakes on their trip down Memory Lane,

but Larkin felt sure they’d have another go at it, so he tossed one fresh coal on the fire

before leaving her citadel of snobbery.

 “If Julio was gay, is it possible one of the other two in the free-for-all realized

that he was of the same ilk, maybe even for the first time, so that Joy became the source

of competition for Julio, rather than their shared object of passion?”

 “I don’t think so,” she said, standing with a gesture of dismissal. Larkin followed

suit and stood to leave. “I’d been with Tony Zano on the first night . . . hot Italian sausage.

He was a few years older than the rest of us, so he was more of a man while the other two

were still boys. Brad Williams was a linebacker at Columbia, so I think that tendency

would have shown up in the locker room earlier. Will that be all?”

 “Depends,” he said with a shrug. “If you really want me to find Joy, or prove who

might’ve killed her, I may need to ask you some more questions to tie things up.”

 “Is that what you do?” she teased. “Tie things up?”

 “That’s what I’m paid to do.”

 “If you change your mind about the forbidden fruit,” she said, “while I’m still

between husbands, maybe you’re even better at *untying* things. I’m sure you already

know where I live.”

 He nodded then watched her departure with the short, pleated, white tennis skirt

swaying above her firm, tanned legs to the rhythm, in his mind, of “The Girl From

Ipanema.”

 As her skirt swished back and forth, he noticed a red tattoo the size of a quarter

on the back of her right thigh just below the curve of her butt cheek. It was actually a

brand from the same high school sorority Kay Farr had pledged twenty years ago.

Whoever began the clique knew nothing about Greek and named the group Theta Chi

with no association with the men’s college fraternity. The brand was the letters “T” and

“X” rather than the Greek Theta signΘ**.** The “TX” was within a triangle within the circle.

According to Kay when they were in high school her sorority had a sworn code of secrecy

and loyalty.

 With that code, he figured Tracy Hofmann knew much more than she was telling

about the last night Joy had been seen alive. Though he had the transcript to rely on to fill

in some of the holes in her story, Larkin knew he had to meet the three young men Joy had

left El Loco with that night. He headed south on Rte. 287.

**Chapter 4**

**The Jock**

 Larkin’s Colombian sources from the DEA were working on locating the

the bartender, Julio Baquar. He also had a few mob connections to find Tony Zano.

His first contact the next morning was Brad Williams in Bernardsville, New Jersey

where the only son of Senator Bertram Williams was now practicing law and aiming

at a political career in his father’s footsteps.

 The drive heading south on Rte. 287 to Bernardsville was hazardous with

driving rain, so he figured Brad would be at his law office rather than on David

Trask’s elegant golf course a mile away. On a winding country road with views

of rolling fields and barns where thoroughbred horses were raised, the vintage

early nineteenth century home faced the road at an angle. The fieldstone edifice

presented a solid yet quaint air in an exclusive area for the privileged, which was

surrounded by expanded acreage for the headquarters of several multi-billion-dollar

pharmaceutical companies.

 With the façade of a country lawyer’s office, the inner sanctum of Brad

Williams’s practice was ironically a hubbub of political rancor. A month before the

primary election, Brad was running for a U.S. Congressional seat with the GOP and

positioning himself to defeat his senior Republican adversary and to challenge the

Democrats in November with a theme of fresh, young blood for New Jersey in D.C.

 The fresh, young blood Larkin had in mind was Joy Sandler’s, a subject the

rising attorney preferred to put behind him and keep off the political agenda if he got

to face the Democrats in the fall.

 When Larkin entered the front door, he was mistaken for a news reporter.

He played along with that guise for as long as it took to get a one-on-one with Brad,

even to the extent of flashing one of his fake CBS Radio News cards to gain access.

 “As you can see, Mr. Larkin,” Brad said, coming toward him with his hand

extended and ready to kiss an imagined baby in Larkin’s arms, “I’m a little under

 the gun today with the race for Congress heating up in the primaries.”

 His hand was dry and warm with a jock’s chokehold on Larkin’s hand.

Larkin held his ground against Brad’s tight grip, which seemed to surprise the

young attorney.

 “Did you play college football?” he asked, as if scanning Larkin’s resume.

“You’ve got some grip . . . for an older guy.”

 “Must be all the late hours on my PC keyboard.” Larkin winked. “You

know, like in the story about Boggie.”

 “Don’t think I do,” he said with a shrug.

 “All that finger and metacarpal exercise on a typewriter,” Larkin explained. “That’s

why Truman Capote beat him handily in arm wrestling with a grip like a vice. Bogey fumed

over that embarrassment, but made up for it by doing an impression of Capote in *The Big Sleep*,

an old film noir before your time.”

 “No sports?” Brad asked, seeming ready to pass him off to an assistant. The

jabberwocky Larkin spouted of half-truths seemed to bore Williams rather than entertain.

 “High school, but a torn knee kept me from anymore sports afterwards . . .

except for watching the submarine races at the local drive-in theater,” he said, certain

from Brad’s dilating pupils that his reference went over his head . . . and once around

the block. “I got kicked out of the Paramus drive-in for that with someone you might

know by association.”

 “Who would that be,” he pouted and cocked his head.

 “My high school sweetheart . . . she’s the best friend of the mother of someone

you once dated in college.”

 If Brad was off balance before from Larkin’s jive, he was about to fall on his

face.

 “I didn’t date much in college,” he said as if testifying. “I was too busy with

football and trying to maintain a four-point-O GPA.”

 “Really? Not even on Spring Break?” he said, sticking in the knife. Then he

gave it a twist. “Or was your last date with Joy Sandler just a night out with the boys?”

 Brad’s expression morphed as if he’d been clipped on an end run and was about

to make Larkin pay for it on the next down. The whites of his blue eyes turned pink and

his upper lip twitched like an Elvis impersonator.

 “What radio station are you from again?” he asked. “Because if you have

something to ask, just ask me straight . . . or get the hell out!”

 The hubbub came to a halt and the crowded office went silent.

 “May we talk privately?” Larkin asked, nodding towards Brad’s office

where the door was open. He saw an expensive leather chair behind a custom-

designed, mahogany desk.

 He motioned with his hand for Larkin to enter. Before closing the door behind

him, Brad told his personal secretary, “Call *CBS*  to see if they employ a Thomas

Larkin. I’ll be back in a minute.”

 “I’ll save you the trouble,” Larkin said, “I’m a private detective.”

 “Forget the call, Betty!” he said, closing the door and eying Larkin as he came

around to his chair then sat. Larkin stood in front of Brad’s desk, but received no offer

to have a seat. “Was it my party or the Democrats who hired you?”

 “Neither. Joy Sandler’s mother.”

 “To do what? Harass me?”

 “If you think this is harassing, I don’t think you’re ready for Joisey politics,

Brad. Both sides will bury you. ”

 “We’ll see about that.”

 “Sally Heidt needs closure, so I aim to please,” Larkin said, stepping towards

Brad’s desk and resting one butt cheek on the desk’s well-polished surface and leaning

closer to him. “I’ve already got a generous federal pension from the DEA, so another

half-million bucks into the till suits me just fine. But I plan to go where angels fear to

tread to get to the truth . . . maybe even find Joy Sandler alive.”

 “This is a dead issue for me,” he said, waving a hand to the chair behind Larkin

and wanting him to back away from his desk. “I told my story back then. No one has

contradicted my account of my brief encounter with Joy Sandler. Why bother me now

unless there are some covert political motives?”

 “Maybe Joy was a *dead* issue from the day you met in Isla Rameras,” he said,

holding his ground and leaning even closer. “If she were still alive, Joy would contradict

all three of your stories about the night she disappeared in the company of you, Julio,

and Tony.”

 “There are transcripts of my depositions,” he said with a shrug, leaning back

in his chair to avoid Larkin’s looming presence. Unaccustomed to having to account

for his social behavior, the political newcomer was obviously more comfortable on

the gridiron where he could hit back physically with little consequence other than

fifteen yards of turf in arrears. He wondered how long it would take Brad to shine

with his father’s polish, if ever. “Why don’t you read those depositions instead of

wasting my valuable time. May I assume you can read, or do you need pictures?”

 “I have some minor dyslexia, but I’ve read all of the depositions several

times. I need to hear some of it directly from you. And I have some questions no

one’s bothered to ask you, or the two other suspects.”

 “Former suspects. We were all cleared.”

 “And how much did that cost your father?”

 “I was innocent,” he said. “No money ever changed hands.”

 “Nothing traceable. There are ways to launder cash, especially in Joisey—maybe

through a casino.”

 “Neither my father nor I have ever gambled.”

 “You might be gambling right now,” Larkin said with a grin, but grasped for a

straw. “I know a former cop who has millions, a high-roller who could help to filter some

big bucks passing back and forth at the tables. Some of that cash could’ve worked its way

down to Isla Rameras—lots of Colombian palms to grease—cops and judges, even some

politicians to help erase the trail.”

 “I know no such person, and I’m sure my father doesn’t either,” he assured him,

but flinched when Larkin reached inside his suit jacket.

 “Then you and Dad have no reason to mourn,” he said, unfolding the newspaper

article and photo of Ray Sandler’s demise. “You’ve never seen *this* guy before?”

 His hesitation said more to Larkin than the words that followed.

 “If I did, he made no impression on me.” He seemed to bluff, but shrugged.

“I meet many people on the campaign trail. He has one of those familiar faces, but I’m

certain I’ve never spoken to him other than along with others who might have been

at one of my campaign rallies.”

 “So that’s not a definitive no, but maybe just a political hedge—in case I can

produce a photo of you with him.”

 “Do you have such a photo?” he asked, but answered his own question.

“Of course you don’t, because there never was one. It’s time for you to go, Mr.

Larkin—if that’s even your name.”

 “It is.”

 “Good. Then I’ll look forward to *never* seeing Tom Larkin again,” he said,

brushing by Larkin and opening the door for him to leave.

 “Is that a threat?”

 “It’s a promise.” He nodded for Larkin to leave. “As a congressman, it will be

important to *keep* my promises. Good-bye, Mr. Larkin.”

 “Did you make that same promise to Joy Sandler seven years ago?” Larkin

asked him, but Brad just jerked his head toward the exit. When Larkin stepped on his

toe as he passed, Brad flinched.

 Not bothering to look back, Larkin was sure someone was taking down his license

plate number as he drove away. No matter—just a rental.

 **(continued next issue)**