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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 5**

 

**Chapter 9**

**West Palm**



 Larkin met Chief Detective Sloan at the Safe House where his two off-duty

NYPD officers were found tied up and with their mouths duct-taped. Sloan ripped

off the tape with a fury.

 “How could you be overpowered by three young girls?” Sloan shouted.

 “One offered to make us coffee, Chief,” one officer said. “It was drugged.”

 “We didn’t know what hit us, Chief,” the other said. “We woke up tied

together, and all the girls were gone. The peeper’s gal Friday, too.”

 Sloan turned to Larkin. “Mona, too? Jeezuz! Is she in danger, Larkin?”

 “They’re all in danger, but one of the girl’s was a plant. She got word to

Gisele Honeycutt that someone squealed to a cop about the ruins of Joey Harrison’s

Beach club being used in their sex trafficking pipeline.

 “Can we trace the source of the call?”

 “Disposable burner phone. My only hope for Mona is her smarts and

resourcefulness. The indication on my phone message was that with her looks,

even in her late twenties, Mona would become their merchandise. That could

buy me some time to make contact as a buyer.”

 “Contact where?” Sloan asked.

 “Can’t tell you yet, Chief, but hopefully soon.”

 “What can I do for you?”

 “Stand by ready for my call.”

 “Done.”

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 In Florida, Larkin used his main connection, Tim Barnes, retired DEA

Overseas Director. Barnes went to college with the infamous real estate mogul,

David Trask, who’d bought his luxury West Palm property from the former owner.

Trask gave Barnes personal guest passes to his West Palm Beach Golf Club.

Larkin was no duffer, but with little leisure time to play since moving to Manhattan,

anything close to “80” was a good day on the links. His longtime DEA buddy,

Barnes, had a “3” handicap from schmoozing with the DOJ for twenty-five years.

 Despite his concern about Mona’s abduction, Larkin’s instincts led

him to Florida as his best chance to find her. Between the front and back nines

they paused for refreshment. While Tim used the men’s room, Larkin went to

the bar and ordered a draft from a bartender who, except for her sculptured body,

had an innocent face that looked too young to be serving alcohol. He gave her a

Jackson, but tipped her five bucks on a ten-dollar draft.

 “Change, sir?” she asked in a voice that sounded as young as the *Brady*

*Bunch* baby sister, Cindy.

 “Not if you can tell me if a Ms. Honeycutt is on the links today.”

 “Gisele? She’s about to tee off over there at the tenth hole, sir.”

 Larkin shaded his eyes with a squint.

 “How about that. Right in front of my nose for the past nine holes.

She must be an excellent golfer. All morning I never caught up to her.”

 “I heard she was on the Australian Olympic Golf Team at seventeen.”

 “What year was that?”

 “Must’ve been more than twenty years ago. She’s in great shape in her

early forties. So I’ve heard.”

 “Hmm. What else have you heard?”

 “Well, she’s always with rich men—I mean *really* rich. I heard her say to

one of the girls she was grooming that millionaires are mere pikers.”

 “Grooming?”

 “She runs a finishing school to train young girls to find billionaire husbands.”

 “Billionaires? That must be a short list of clientele.”

 “Oh, no. She has clients all over the world. Super rich men with money to

burn looking for a young wife.”

 “You seem to know a lot about it. Has she recruited you Ms.—?”

 “Call me Leslie. Oh, no. I don’t have what it takes.”

 “You look damn cute to me, Leslie.”

 “Cute doesn’t cut it. I couldn’t pass Gisele’s IQ test.”

 “IQ?”

 “Passing the visual is step one. You’ve got to get no less than ninety-eight

on her one hundred-question test. There’s no studying for it either. You get one

shot. I had mine and came close with an ninety-five score. That’s the only reason

they even keep me on here. I guess *cute* does count for something,”

 “Do you mind if I ask how old you are, Leslie?”

 “*Shh*. This is a private club, so the owner makes his own rules. Gisele

convinced Mr. Trask to keep me on the bar just for my looks. I’ll be eighteen

next month. I graduate from Jupiter High next year. I usually just work on

weekends, but now during summer recess.”

 Tim returned from the men’s room.

 “Give us another round and keep the change,” Larkin said dropping a fifty

on the bar.”

 “Thank you, sir.”

 “Been a pleasure, Leslie.” Larkin said with a grin at Barnes with his

dumbfounded stare.”

 “Leslie? Hmm. Haven’t lost your touch, Tom.”

 “Hardly. That’s Gisele Honeycutt I told you about. There, with the tight ass

teeing off. Down your suds cause were gonna ride her butt for the next nine holes till

I either piss her off or she decides to play with a real player.”

 “Who?”

 “Yours truly,” Larkin said, but Tim had his doubts.

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 Larkin was as natural with a golf club as he was with any firearm. Difference

was more time at a firing range than a golf course or driving range. With two more

holes to go, he kept pace with Barnes on the par 72 course, tied at 67 each. With his

binoculars, he watched Gisele tee off at 17, hoping she’d notice. She was in constant

conversation with the two older men and another, obviously younger woman, more

like a teenager. He wondered if this was a business proposition, perhaps for the girl’s

companionship.

 He figured the only way to get Gisele’s attention was to use a three-iron instead

of a seven and try to hit the ball dangerously close to her foursome.

 “Jesus, Tom. What are you trying to do with that iron? You’ll get thrown out

of the club after I finessed our passes from David Trask himself. If he finds out it’s you

I’ve invited here, my college connection to him will be severed forever. Your past with

his trophy wife could get us both tossed. You know how vengeful Trask can be.”

 “More than most. He’s a prick,” Larkin said addressing his ball then he let it rip, a

250-yard line drive that only faded slightly into a 10 mph sea breeze. “Four!” he shouted

a bit too late. He saw through his cheapo Rangefinder that his ball on its second bounce

slapped Gisele in the butt on its upturn and dropped two yards from the hole. Her shriek,

more of a chirp, carried back to him on the wind. He saw her pull out a Garmin laser

range finder to spot him. For six hundred bucks, her superior product could tell if he

needed a shave.

 He hunched his shoulders and spread his arms in surrender to her scowl as she

mimed, “Asshole!” accompanied by a middle finger and her calling attention to a grounds

official she probably knew on a first-name basis. He could tell that she could throw her

weight around the exclusive golf club and probably had more pull with David Trask than

his buddy, Tim.

 On the 18th hole, Larkin’s second drive brought him physically as close as he’d

come to Gisele, but he bowed with apology and removed his hat for her to see him a

hundred yards from the green as she prepared to stroke a fifteen-foot putt to complete

her round.

 Through his Rangefinder he watched her drop her long putt into the hole. Most

women he’d known would have jumped and hollered with joy over such a fine stroke,

but Gisele took a long breath and flipped him the bird again for good measure.

 Larkin and Barnes waited for Gisele’s foursome to finish their putts and walk

off the green before taking his next shot. Ten yards behind Larkin, Tim’s pitch to the

green hit the flapping flag and dropped two feet from the hole.

 “Nice Tim,” Larkin said. “I think you’ve got me beat as usual.”

 “I think you’ve been practicing without telling me, Tom. Nice outing for you.”

 Larkin nodded and took out a wedge, his favorite club. With a soft loft, his

ball hit a mound on the front edge of the green, bounced twice with back spin and

was swallowed by the hole.

He heard Tim whisper and grumble, “Shi-i-i-it. Lucky son of a bitch.”

 Larkin shrugged and walked to the green. He stood at the edge as Barnes fussed

over his final putt. Unnerved by Larkin’s chip in for a Birdie, his short stroke caromed

around the lip and rolled three feet away.

 “Damn it, Tom! You’ve never beat me.”

 “Must be my lucky day, Timmy-boy.”

 Barnes sunk the three-footer for a 73 while Larkin beat him with a par 72, his

best round in years, having never broken 70. His lighthearted amusement over beating

his buddy for the first time in over twenty years was suddenly distracted by the stern

expression and rigid posture of Gisele Honeycutt pointing at him and telling a club

security official, “I want that man removed at once. He hit a drive with no respect for

the foursome ahead of him and stuck me with his ball.”

 Larkin removed his hat, slouched his posture, and said with a Texas drawl,

“Please forgive me, Mam. I’m just learnin’ this game, but I do believe I did yell

four.”

 “Not nearly soon enough, you idiot! You could kill someone that way!”

she huffed with a musical Aussie lilt and a short coif like Helen Reddy.

 “Oh, dear me, darlin’, but I’d never hurt no one, let alone a fine beautiful

woman such as you. If you’re injured I’ll pay whatever it costs to make you forgive

my transgression. I am, indeed, so, so sorry, Mam.”

 She grinned at his fawning with a long dimple on her right, high-boned cheek

which softened her otherwise sculptured features with a perfect nose by a renown plastic

surgeon.

 “Is that your golf card? Let me see your score.” She yanked the card from

his breast pocket. “Huh! You’re no beginner if you made par on this course. Did

you hit me with your ball on purpose?”

 “Guilty as charged, Mam. I may be a decent golfer, but I ain’t much for

courtin’ women, and you was so stunning out there all afternoon, I just wanted

to find a way to meet ya.”

 She turned to Tim. “Is he for real?”

 Tim spat out the lines as Larkin had instructed: “I apologize for my

golf partner. I’m a longtime friend of David Trask since college, and he gave

me passes to play here today because Tom here is closing a two-billion-dollar

deal with David on a hot Dallas property.

 “That’s real enough for me, gentlemen. What else are you doing for

entertainment here in West Palm?”

 “I’m more than just a sportsman, Mam, but I’ll leave that choice up to

you . . . if you’re willin’?”

 “Meet me at the entrance gate to Mar-a-Lago at seven tonight. I’m a

Lifetime Member and you can be my guests. You might consider becoming

members yourselves. Only two hundred grand annual fee. Worth every dime.”

 “I own cars worth more,” Larkin said. “Pencil change.”

 Tim seemed to choke as he backed out. “Not this trip, Mam. Maybe next time.”

 “Please, call me Gisele. We’ll have cocktails then discuss your preferences

over dinner. I aim to please.”

\* \* \*

 Back at their hotel room tying their black bowties and dressing in their rented

tuxedos, Larkin and Barnes discussed their options for the evening with Gisele.

 “I’ve got to get in as deep as I can, Tim, but I want you to tell Gisele your

interested in a high class black escort later this evening. You know Mona as well as

I do. If that baits Gisele into putting her to work, you can be alone with Mona long

enough to take her to safety.”

 “That’s assuming they haven’t killed her, Tom. You’re playing a dangerous

game with these people. This charade might get us all killed.”

 “Same shit, different day, Tim. You want out? I’ll go it alone. Mona’s worth

whatever risk it takes.”

 “OK, Tom. In for a dollar in for a dime. Let’s do it.”

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 Stunning in her white, diaphanous gown, strategically braless not to shock

the elderly women, but enough to make all men crank their necks to follow her

path from the bar to the dinner table, Gisele projected an aura of elegance despite

the dark, despicable sex trade that undermined every positive appeal of her presence.

 

 They discussed golf, scuba diving, and gambling over cocktails. After sumptuous

feast of stone crabs and champagne, single malts for the threesome brought the conver-

sation to the matter at hand.

 “This is an escape jaunt for Timmy,” Larkin said to Gisele as her stiletto heel

made circles around his ankle under the table. “He can be more precise privately, but

there’s no point in denying he wants to break through the taboo of his Boston breeding

with a walk on the wild side, preferably the darkest side of street.”

 “Hmm. To each his own,” Gisele purred. “I have a new arrival that fits that bill

for you, Tim. Though she’s fresh as new fallen snow, she makes midnight look like

high noon by comparison. For a ten spot, you can have her for the night.”

 “Is she tall?” Tim asked with a flourish of feigned excitement. He’d been

out of practice since taking a desk job ten years ago, but Larkin’s former DEA team

leader in Guadalajara was the best covert operative he’d known. So convincing,

Larkin once thought Tim had gone over to the enemy. For Mona’s sake, he was

glad Tim hadn’t lost his touch.

 “Tall, yes. Why? Do you plan to climb her, or fuck her?” Gisele asked

rhetorically in such a matter-of-fact tone that was comically un-offensive in such

elegant surroundings.

 “Both,” Tim said with a nonchalance that cracked Gisele’s hard façade with

that dimple that Larkin found alluring to his own prurient interests. A strobe of

imagined acts of mutual lust fluttered through his mind with this felonious femme

fatale making his ankle throb with pain from her stiletto heel.

 “And what’s your poison, Tex” she asked. “I have something in mind for you,

but with a different use of oil than you’re accustomed to. I might enjoy making that

application myself . . . if you think you’re man enough.”

 “Whew! Gotta be honest with ya, Geezell,” I had a Thai girl give me such a

hummer in Bangkok when I was in the Navy, made my toes curled up so tight they

had to cut me out of my boots so I could walk back to my ship barefoot.”

 “Your ships come in sailor, for a deuce.”

 “Twenty Gs?”

 “You’re ordering off-menu, a delicacy not offered by The House.”

 “Gosh. Why would such a fine, sophisticated woman like you want to spend

a minute more than she had to with a dolt like me? Before I struck oil, I could hardly

read.”

 “We all have our fantasies and fetishes, Tex. Tonight your mine, but I have to

have the cash in advance—House Rules.”

 Tim cut in with, “David Trask let us put a hundred grand on account in his

name, just in case we chose to gamble while we’re here, so we wouldn’t be hindered

with a lengthy credit check for first timers.”

 “Dinner’s on me, fellas, a tax deduction,” Gisele said. “Go to the cashier,

meet me out front. A stretch limousine will take Tim with his escort back to your

hotel for the evening.”

 “What about us, Darlin’?”

 “I’ll take you to my place, but on one condition. This excursion is private,

so I’ll need to blindfold you in my car until we get there.”

 “Um-um, Geezell, you do know how to entice a man with mystery.”

 “I know. You can be sure it will be worth every dollar tonight—an unforgettable

experience, but promise me you’ll take off your boots first this time.”

 Larkin and Tim guffawed then went to the cashier for cash for their evening

indulgence.

\* \* \*

 A white stretch limo pulled up to the front entrance of Mar-a-Lago to take Tim

to his hotel room. The chauffeur, the size of an NFL defensive center, got out and opened

the sliding door for Tim to get in. In the wide backseat was a tall woman in a long, white

sparkling evening gown, but her face was hidden in the shadows.

 “Climb her if you like, Tim. She’s all you asked for and all yours till breakfast,”

Gisele said, as the chauffeur slid the door closed.

 Larkin waved to Tim, but the windows were tinted so he couldn’t see inside.

 “Whatever floats yer boat, is what I always say,” Larkin said waving to the

departing limo. “Hope it ain’t too far to yer place, Geezell, ’cause I’m just itchin’ to

tango till mornin’ with ya, Darlin’.”

 If she was repulsed by his stereotypical performance, Giselle gave no hint—

the mark of a true professional in her field.

 “C’mon, Tex. Let’s get to it before you pop your cork too soon.”

 The valet pulled up Giselle’s vermillion Maserati and opened the door for her

to get in and drive. Larkin came round and sat beside her.

 “Nice wheels,” he said.

 “You strike me as the type who prefers to drive, but I’m going to blindfold you,

Tex. I never disclose the location of my lair to clients.”

 Larkin nodded with a grin as she blindfolded him with a black satin scarf. She

pulled out with such torque he felt his neck crack.

 “Whoa, Honey! Don’t snap my neck ’fore I’ve even had a taste of yer fruits

. . . of . . . la . . .bor.”

 As his voice trailed off in that last moment before unconsciousness, his blindfold

gave off a subtle scent of an X 2 inhalant to knock him out for at least twelve hours.

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 “Tom! Tom!” Mona’s voice called out. “Wake up and drink some coffee.”

 Her face came gradually into focus with Tim’s face looking over her shoulder.

Larkin tried to get up but with vertigo he fell back down onto the hotel bed.

 “M-Mona? You got away? Y-you’re OK?” he stammered.

 “I’m sorry, Tom. Trying to comfort those three girls, I let my guard down.

Thanks to Tim, I got away. You should’ve seen him take down that ape driving our

limo. Never knew what hit him.”

 “That’s my Timmy. I used to call him Mighty Mouse when we were kicking

down doors.”

 “Bigger they come,” Tim said with a smirked.

 Larkin took a deep breath. “Thank God you’re OK, Mona. My hunch must’ve

been right about Giselle putting you to work. How could she help it?”

 “I know what you must be thinking—but nothing like that happened. They

wanted to use me as bait just to lure the one who interfered with their human traffic-

king network. I’m sorry I led them to you, Tom. I never told them anything. They

seemed to know who you were already and merely wanted to confirm that for some-

one even higher up in their food chain than Giselle.”

 “Don’t be hard on yourself, Mona. Two of Sloan’s best cops got fooled by

one of those girls, too. Pretending to be one of the kidnapped victims, my CI used to

do the same thing for Giselle. Her talking to me and trying to get out of that life got

her killed. I couldn’t do a thing to help her.”

 “What now?” Tim asked.

 “I’m gonna take it right to them.”

 “How?” Mona asked with anxiety in her big brown eyes.

 “Now that you’re safe, Love, the gloves are off. I’m heading to the crime scene.”

 “The Jersey shore?” Mona asked.

 “No. Where Joy Sandler vanished in the Caribbean on Isla Rameras, ironically,

Colombia’s *Island of Whores*.”

 **(continued next issue)**