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

 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

 Gerald Arthur Winter

 **Episode 6**

 

**Chapter 10**

**Isla Rameras**

 Northeast of Barranquilla, Colombia, and west of the Netherlands Antilles, Isla

Rameras had changed hands back and forth between Colombia and Venezuela for

centuries. Besides its beautiful beaches sheltered by reefs from sharks, Isla Rameras lay

south of the typical paths of hurricanes making it an ideal resort destination.

 El Locowas the Spring Break hot spot on Isla Rameras seven years ago where

Joy Sandler was last seen before she vanished. She left her best friend, Tracy Hoffman,

behind at the club, or so Tracy had told Larkin face-to-face at the Indian Trails tennis

courts last week in New Jersey. She’d merely told Larkin what the FBI, Colombian

National Police, and DAS (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*) already knew,

which had become public knowledge through mass media. For several years the internet

had covered the story but, like many hot news items competing for media attention,

disinterest eventually prevailed against the cold case without resolve.

 The three young men last seen leaving the club with Joy the night she vanished

had become well known to the public for months after Joy’s disappearance. So far Larkin

had spoken to only one of them, Brad Williams, an American Columbia University

student on Spring Break, seven years later running for U.S. Congress in New Jersey.

Larkin’s reception was stopped cold by Brad, and also by his father, Senator Williams.

His mother, “Suzie,” had been more receptive to Larkin’s inquiry, but stood by her

son’s innocence with impunity. For the present, that political brick wall was keeping

Larkin at bay.

 Tony Zano, also American, but from a connected family in New Jersey,

claimed to be on vacation and had been attracted by the hype of ubiquitous sexual

freedom during Spring Break. Though not made public due to an ongoing DEA

investigation, Zano’s primary reason for being there was making a cash delivery to

the Colombian cartel.

 Through Larkin’s continued link to the DEA and his close friendship with

Tim Barnes, retired Director of DEA Overseas Operations, Larkin had eyes and

ears from Bogota to all points north. In Larkin’s mind, Zano was too easily let

off the hook with favors owed his father by high DAS officials on the take in Isla

Rameras. Larkin wondered to what other crimes the DAS would give a pass in a

quid pro quo arrangement with the Zano family enterprises on Isla Rameras.

 Though retired, Tim Barnes still had access to poignant information he

could share with Larkin in regard to the Zano crime family’s Colombian pipeline,

which might have expanded its product beyond cocaine into human trafficking. If

there were a lot of cash to be had, Tony’s father, Carmine Zano, would be all in

and greedy for more. Larkin felt that was just a longshot related to Joy Sandler’s

disappearance, so he left that to simmer under Tim’s watchful diligence while he

focused on a suspect he knew least about.

 Julio Baquar was a Colombian exchange student tending bar at El Loco during

Spring Break that year, and during college Summer Recess as well. Apparently the

bad publicity and dark shadow of suspicion over his possible involvement with Joy’s

abduction, even if indirectly, kept Julio from returning to the States. Rightly so based

on Baquar’s dossier from Tim. Larkin assumed he could find out more about Baquar

on the remote island that seemed to attract him regardless of his past.

 “A tonic with lime,” Larkin called to the bartender.

 Leaning against the bar in the shadow of a palm tree fluttering in the sea breeze,

the bartender swiped his long black hair from his face and began to make the drink.

 “No gin, no vodka, no rum in that?” the bartender asked, ready to grab a bottle

and pour alcohol into the tall frosted glass.

 “No thanks. I’m drivin’,” Larkin said.

 The bartender smirked then said, “Worst that can happen on this island, you

drive your car into the surf.”

 “Is that what happened to Joy Sandler, Julio?”

 “Shit! Another goddam Feeb! I thought you agreed to leave me the fuck alone?”

 “I’m not the law, amigo,” Larkin said, handing him his New York PI card. “I *pay*

for information. Useful information, like step-by-step details about every minute you were

with Joy and about anyone else you saw come in contact with her while she was here on

this island, at this club, then in a car with you, Brad Williams, and Tony Zano.”

 “Under duress and after some illegal roughing up from the DAS, I told them all

that and gave my deposition to the FBI. It’s a matter of record. What? Don’t you know

how to read, dick?”

 Larkin grinned. “A Franklin says you’ll recite it all back to me, but after seven

years perspective. Ya know. Grey cells in young people have a way of percolating with

stimulation. Feeling stimulated, Julio?”

 Julio eyed the tightly rolled up Franklin Larkin held like a cigarette he was about

to light and take a drag from.

 “OK,” Julio said, grabbing at the C-note, but Larkin made it vanish with a snap

of his fingers. “What the fuh—”

 “Amateur magician,” Larkin said opening his mouth to show the hundred dollar

bill still rolled into a cylinder on his curled tongue. He took a Zippo lighter from his pocket

as if to light the bill, then said out of the corner of his mouth, “Ya gonna play for pay,

Julio? If not, I’ve got money to burn to get to the truth. Doesn’t matter to me if it’s you

or someone else gives me the info I want.”

 “If I give you all I know—and there’s plenty I never said—what’s in it for me?

I can make five hundred a night here on tips from Happy Hour till midnight.”

 “Start spilling your guts to your compadre,” Larkin said, slapping an unfurled

bill from his wallet onto the bar and pretending to swallow the one in his mouth. “The

more information you give me, the more I’ll pay.”

 “OK, Mr. Larkin, but I have an hour and a half before Happy Hour begins and

this place starts jumpin’.”

 Larkin gazed around the near vacant club at the few natives, five waiters on a

break catching some Zs between lunch and Happy Hour, and two prostitutes eying

Larkin when they saw his flash of cash to Julio. Their scent preceded their radiating

presence as they approached like cats shuffling between tables with inverted stools on

top. Like castanets, their stiletto heels clicked across the freshly mopped floor.

 Before either *puta* could open her mouth, Julio waved them off.

 Larkin grinned. “I admire your control over women, young fella.”

 “If they don’t do what I tell them, they’re fired, back on the street.”

 “You throw some weight for a barkeep.”

 “I’m the owner. Have been for five years.”

 “See what I mean, Julio. That’s news,” he slapped another hundred onto the bar

and perceived a sigh from the two young Colombianas from the shadows where they’d

retreated.

 “OK, Mr. Larkin, now I trust you.”

 “Likewise. Call me Tomaso and tell me how you bought this place and where

you got the capital to swing it.”

 “The former owner died six years ago.”

 “Natural causes?”

 “I suppose being eaten by a tiger shark is as natural as it gets, Tomaso.”

 “Not if it’s in a bathtub. C’mon. The reefs keep the sharks away from this island.

That was in all the TV commercial luring teens to come here for Spring Break.”

 “They don’t advertise that water skiers can be eaten by crocodiles in Cancun

either. Just the same, didn’t happen here.”

 “Then where?”

 Julio gestured with a nod to the Caribbean.

 Larkin shrugged. “I don’t get it.”

 Julio motioned with a wave to indicate further out, then held both fist in front of

his eyes like binoculars.

 Larkin grinned and took out his golf rangefinder from his pocket. He scanned the

horizon with many yachts, wave-runners, and speedboats pulling water skiers passing by

before he focused on a distant stationary image, which at first looked like a cruise ship.

 “What is it—a boat?” Larkin asked.

 “An island.”

 “What’s on it?”

 “Never been there.”

 “Why not?”

 “Private residence. Can’t get within a hundred yards of it without getting shot.”

 “Who lives there?”

 Julio shrugged. “Big-ass secret. I don’t know who, or anyone who does.”

 “What about the DAS? They must know.”

 Julio laughed aside. “If they do, it’s still a big fucking secret because Colombia

doesn’t own the property.”

 “What country has jurisdiction? Is it Dutch?”

 “*Los Estados Unidos*.”

 Larkin felt his chest tighten then said under his breath, “How can I get closer to

the island for a better look?”

 “If you get too close and they see you with binoculars, they’ll fire only one

warning shot. You don’t leave; they’ll shoot you. Not for the kill. They leave that to

the sharks when you bleed out.”

 “Did the club’s former owner get too close?”

 “DAS ruled it an accident. Fell out of his skiff after drinking too much while

fishing. Lot’s of sharks between our reef and that small island, or so the media said.”

 “How did you get to buy El Loco?”

 “It’s mine, Tomaso, but I don’t own it. I just keep all the profits with no liabilities.”

 “Who owns it?”

 Julio nodded towards the island.

 “Who is it?”

 He shrugged. “Never saw anyone. I’ve never been out there, and no one

from there, that I’m aware of, has ever come here. But if you come back later for

Happy Hour and stick around, you may see something I don’t. There’s much I

don’t see at El Loco—intentionally.”

 “Deal,” Larkin said, slapping three Franklins on the bar. “To be continued,

,

amigo.”

 Julio tucked the bills in his pocket with the other two and shook Larkin’s

hand. “*Hasta Luego, Tomaso.”*

\* \* \*

 Larkin took a two-hour siesta, then showered and dressed for Happy Hour.

He arrived at El Loco at 6 p.m. and nodded to Julio behind the circular bar where

the young bar crowd stood five deep all the way around. A steel drum band played

Spanish covers of Jimmy Buffet hits as well as a few Columbian standards and

current American pop hits. The crowd swayed to the music, but were already

sizing up their chances to score drugs, sex, whatever was on the menu, probably

with a list of “specials” off the standard fare, even for this Caribbean hot spot.

 He worked his way through the crowd to Julio who discretely came out from

behind the bar and took an empty barstool.

 “Your night off?” Larkin asked aside.

 “Bartender by day, host by night,” he said starting to shake Larkin’s hand, but

he shook him off with a roll of his eyes indicating he didn’t want anyone seeing them

as friends or Julio as cooperating with his investigation. They both spoke aside without

facing each other. Larkin was bumped intermittently by glistening girls in thong bikinis

and smelled like a docked banana boat at low tide—United Fruit Company merged with

StarKist.

 “You driving tonight, Tomaso?” Julio asked with a grin.

 “Twenty-four seven, so I’ll have my usual.”

 Julio nodded to the bartender, quickly handing Larkin a tonic-with-lime on cue.

 Larkin took a long gulp and said aside, “If you see anyone you don’t recognize

tonight, gimme a nod. Cheers.”

 Larkin backed away from the bar and found a dark corner to lean against the

wall and scope the joint. Over the next hour, Julio gave him several nods, but Larkin

wrote them off as American, Canadian, and European tourist checking out the notorious

scene of the crime where coed, Joy Sandler, had partied before her disappearance. Though

no longer in international headlines, the aura of crime still clung to the club like the scent

of mackerel to a cat’s whiskers.

 Then a young man entered with a young beauty on each arm. Larkin recognized

him from news photos as Tony Zano. Like Julio, he was now over twenty-five. Larkin

worked his way back towards Julio to eavesdrop on any conversation he’d have with

Zano that could be heard over the steel band. He’d become a lip-reader on DEA stakeouts

which, with their facial expressions and physical gestures said as much as their words.

 Zano came to the bar, but had no reason to recognize Larkin as he gave Julio

a hug. Larkin was close enough to smell his Aramis cologne.

 “Julio, how’s the big boss man doin’?” Tony asked him.

 “Good, Tony. Real good.”

 “This is Sonia and this is Chuchi, my entourage of two—*pero la noche es*

*mas joven, entiendes?”*

 “*Seguro*. Good evening ladies,” Julio said with a nod to each, but his eyes were

fixed on Tony as if he were silently communicating with the mob-connected patron. “If

Tony doesn’t treat you right tonight, I’m free after closing at 2 a.m.”

 “Hey, don’t fuck *con mi familia*!”

 “So what? They’re your cousins? Can’t be your sisters—too young and way too

hot.”

 The girls tittered and Tony grinned giving Julio gentle slaps with the back of

his hand against his cheek.

 “When I can’t handle two at once, you’ll be the first to know, *amigo*,” Tony

said, but caught Larkin eying Chuchi. He pushed her aside and stepped close enough

for Larkin to feel his breath against his face and smell the rum he’d been drinking

before arriving at the club.

 “Whuh?” Larkin mumbled acting drunk.

 “You’re too old to be hanging out here,” Tony said. “You want young pussy,

pay for it at *El Castillo*, not in public.”

 “Just sightseein’, partner,” Larkin mumbled.

 “So ya like to watch. How’d ya like to see me kick your sorry ass out a here!”

 “Tony, stop!” Julio implored. “Leave ’m be.” He turned to Larkin. “Finish

your drink and go, old man.”

 Larkin, waved a hand in surrender, laid cash on the bar, then staggered toward

the exit. Outside he took cover in a palm tree’s shadow cast by a full moon. He waited

almost an hour for Tony and his beautiful young bookends to leave the club. Tony

waved for a taxi and got in back with the two girls who by Larkin’s assessment were

under eighteen. Another cab pulled up as Tony’s pulled out. Larkin waved and got in.

 “Take me to the closest dock to hire a boat,” he told the cabby on a hunch that

proved to be true as Tony’s cab was right in front of Larkin’s for the next two miles

winding along the beach until a brightly lit marina lay ahead.

 Larkin got out of the cab and watched Tony Zano and his two young escorts

go to a helipad at the marina. A six-passenger chopper was waiting and took off. Larkin

took out his rangefinder and flicked the night view switch. The chopper headed directly

toward the distant lights of *El Castillo*.

\* \* \*

 Larkin went to the helipad to inquire, but waited for the helicopter to return. He

hoped to catch the ground crew off guard while they were distracted. The chopper had

***Stern Rules - Weiss Minds*** in red letters on the tail of the fuselage, same as the

yacht that took Gisele Honeycutt from the Jersey Shore the night he’d rescued the girls,

at least two of them. The third was Gisele’s plant to keep an eye on the other two teens

she’d abducted. He wondered if those same two girls would be at *El Castillo* tonight?

 He aimed to find out as the chopper returned and three elderly men disembarked

onto the helipad. The youngest with a salt-and pepper beard and wearing a *keffiyeh*

aroundhis headappeared to be a Saudi petroleum sheik. Another was bald and heavyset

with eyebrows that connected. Larkin recognized him from the news as a Russian

oligarch who mined uranium. The third was a Chinese multi-billionaire featured in *The*

*Wall Street Journal a*mong a dozen other international oligarchs in competition to become

the first net trillionaire by 2030.

 Larkin wondered what connected those three other than being dirty old men seeking

underage sex. Then he realized all three, among others in their tightknit income bracket,

had assets in America that had recently been sanctioned by the current administration due

to civil rights infractions in their homelands.

 Without any prior scouting intelligence, Larkin decided to wing it as he

approached the helipad. He pulled out one of his many fake identifications for such

situations and put on a pair of glasses to match the Deutsche Bank photo ID he flashed

to a helipad security guard.

 The guard eyed the ID with a flashlight then blinded Larkin with its beam to

match his face with the card.

 “Deutsche Bank?” the guard said.

 “Ya. Ya,” Larkin said with impatience,

 “Give me the cover charge,” the guard said.

 “How much again?”

 “First time for you, Herr Schultz?” the guard asked.

 “Oh, ya-ya.”

 “Ten thousand American—cash.”

 “Of course, ya.”

 “That’s just for the roundtrip transportation fee. Hors d'oeuvres at *El Castillo*

start at twenty-five grand, main courses are fifty to a hundred grand.”

 “I’m vell avare,” Larkin said with a Bavarian whistle to his accent as he handed

him a ten thousand-dollar pack of new Franklins from his jacket’s inside pocket.

 The guard pulled three one hundred-dollar bills from the pack and put his

flashlight to the back of each to see the watermark.

 “OK, sir. I see two more passengers have just pulled into the lot. Get aboard and

we’ll be departing shortly.

 Larkin got into the chopper and was soon joined by an American man in his

sixties and a Brit of similar age who looked familiar, but Larkin could place him. The

American talked sports, mostly football, on the brief flight to El Castillo, but the Brit

remained regally stoic as if he were belittled to be sharing his ride with commoners.

 The chopper came down on a roof helipad, but *El Castillo* was just as its name

proclaimed, a modern castle of feast and debauchery unseen since Caligula’s reign in

Rome some two millenniums ago. A bevvy of young nymphs scantily dressed came

to the helipad to greet them with trays of exotic fruits and champagne.

 “No schnapps, Tankyou,” Larkin said, taking a slice of cantaloupe.

 Two of the girls, one blond and blue-eyed and the other a redhead took him by

each arm and lead him to a private chamber to view a list of hors d’oeuvre delights

listed by price.

 “What’s in the pu-pu platter?” he asked blondie.

 “That’s a one-hour free-for-all in what we call ‘The Pit.” As you can see,

it’s not *free,* but you get to sample whatever appeals to you for an hour. But you

may be on someone else’s menu as well.”

 “Oh, that’s right, Gisele recommended ‘The Pit’ to me as a first-timer. Is she

here tonight?”

 “Not tonight, sir. She’s in transit. Would you like to enter The Pit now, or

would you like to speak with Gisele’s assistant?”

 Though speaking to Larkin, his guide was looking past him as if communicating

with someone behind him, either at a distance or approaching. The young girl’s distract-

ion evoked fear, but Larkin decided to play naive regarding the carnal antics at *El Castillo*.

 “If her assistant is as accommodating as Gisele, surely.”

 “Velcome,” the voice came from behind. “I tink Herr Schultz vould prefer a

private session. Yah?”

 It seemed he’d already lived a lifetime since he’d heard her voice, but it was just

over a week ago As Larkin turned to confirm his suspicion, her long arms, like a Burmese

python, took hold of him in a choke hold from behind.

 Her warm breath hissed in his ear, “You vunt it rough tonight. Yah? *Willkommen*

Herr Larkin.” He blacked out with a vision of the late Ray Sandler’s Valkyrie, Astrid,

throwing the high-roller off a high-rise balcony in Atlantic City.

**Chapter 11**

**Valkerie Liaison**

 

Larkin coughed and choked as he regained consciousness. The past week

fluttered through his mind with a strobe effect. A roulette wheel spun in his head

until the white ball bounced erratically then settled on—what else but zero.

 Her apple cinnamon scent preceded her harsh whispered scolding.

 “Vat are you thinkink?” she asked, then dropped the German accent. “You must

get off the island before Gisele returns.”

 Ears ringing and memory fuzzy, he tried to focus on the blond Amazonia

figure in front of him.

 Mocking her, he asked, “Vat happent to Vonder Voman, Astrid?”

 “Not a laughing matter. She’ll kill both of us.”

 “Me, sure. Why you?”

 “I’m FBI undercover.”

 “No shit. Why’d you toss Ray Sandler off a 30th floor balcony in AC?”

 “Wasn’t me.”

 “Then who?”

 “That’s what we’d both like to know, but I’m months ahead of you on this case.”

 “Case? You mean cold case with no jurisdiction.”

 “This may not be the place to send a postcard home to mama from but, private

property or not, it’s still America.”

 “What are you after?”

 “I’m with a special unit, the Human Trafficking Task Force. We don’t expect to

ever find Joy Sandler or learn what happened to her. Too much time has passed. Next

month makes seven years—legally dead. But we want to apprehend, prosecute, and

convict those at the top of this network.”

 “I can help.”

 “I don’t want or need your help, Larkin. I just want you gone so you don’t

fuck up all I’ve accomplished so far.”

 “Won’t you share your toys, Astrid?”

 “You’re just in this for the money. We know all about you, but so will Gisele

if you stick around much longer. I want you gone before she arrives so I can continue

my investigation here. Something big is happening soon. I must be ready.”

 “Yeah. I got half a mil start-up money, but I needed it as a flash roll to get into

this network as a potential client looking for underage sex.”

 “Maybe that’s what you’re really here for.”

 “A pretty girl at any age is like a melody, but I’m not getting intimate with

any female who doesn’t know what a cassette or VHS was. I’d be into a turntable

gal, for sure.”

 “Hmm. I think I’ve heard of those.”

 “Be kind—rewind.”

 “Am I going to have to get a bouncer to throw you out, Larkin?”

 “When’s Gisele due back?”

 “If I tell you, will you promise to leave before she gets here?”

 “Cross my heart.”

 “The last chopper leaves at 3 a.m. Otherwise, customers have to spend the

night. Gisele’s due back by early morning with some new recruits.”

 “You make it sound voluntary.”

 “It is at first. Young girls looking for a good time and money to burn. That’s

why it’s been hard to stop Gisele at the initial stage of the pipeline. She charms them

into trusting her. Shows them her empathy about how their parents don’t understand

them. Some girls never want to leave.”

 “How’d you get to be her assistant?”

 “By leading her to Ray Sandler. But I didn’t know her motive. Never thought

she’d kill him.”

 “Why did she?”

 “Too flamboyant with his gambling. Drew too much attention.”

 “Where were you when she tossed him off the balcony?”

 “In her car in front of the casino. She said she’d be back in ten minutes and wait

till she paid off Ray Sandler. If I knew she’d toss him off the balcony I would’ve tried

to divert her. He was a weak link in the network. Said she needed to give him a pep talk

was all.”

 “When did you know?”

 “Saw him hit the street. Like smashing pumpkins—not pretty. Since I didn’t

flinch, she trusted me, gave me more responsibilities. That’s why I can’t let you blow

my cover, Larkin. You’ve got to be gone before she gets here. Deal?”

 He nodded. “Meantime, can you show me around—like a sister.”

 “Believe me, there are creeps here who’d fuck their sister, daughter, and

mother at the same time.”

 “No doubt, but please tell me if you have any leads on Joy Sandler’s

disappearance.”

 “I told you, that’s not my assignment. That scope is too narrow.”

 “Still, the trickle-down effect works with evidence. I’m just looking for

a little spillage from someone like you who’s undercover at the core of this human

trafficking operation.”

 “I was following the gambling lead on the father in AC, but that took a

wrong turn.”

 “Besides Ray Sandler’s high dive onto the pavement, how?”

 “Ray Sandler, as you know, was a bad cop. That gave him underground

connections, but not just to lowlife mobsters. He had friends at the very top.”

 “Top of what?”

 “DC, one percenters, shady military in the Pentagon, whatever worked to his

advantage.”

 “You didn’t suspect him of harming his own daughter?”

 “No, but he’d been here. Gisele assigned me to him. To watch him for her.

She needed him for something, but then suddenly she didn’t. Game over.”

 “What did she need Ray Sandler for? Who was that connection?

 “That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

 “No guess?

 “Just someone with the power to keep this operation going.”

 “Who owns this island?”

 “I’ve seen him only once. He was leaving here on his yacht. Gisele calls him

‘Jerry.’ But the crew calls him ‘Mr. Sternweiss.’ He’s some hedge fund pundit on Wall

Street—a multi-billionaire.”

The image flashed in Larkin’s mind of the red letters on the chopper that had

brought him to the island and the name on the yacht that had taken Gisele Honeycutt

to and from the Jersey shore—***Stern Rules - Weiss Minds***.

 Astrid’s phone vibrated in her pocket. She checked a text and gave Larkin a

a glare. “Gisele’s back early—fuck!”

 **(continued next issue)**