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 A Tom Larkin Mystery

 by

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 **Episode 1**

 

**Chapter 1**

**An Old Flame**

 The story about the missing girl in the Caribbean had become stale, much like

an old flame from Tom Larkin’s past—one he preferred to forget—until Kay Farr’s

crisp, soapy scent preceded her. He sat feet-up on a maroon, leather recliner at the

eastside Manhattan condo he called home and his PI office. From the periphery of his

libido, he sensed Kay’s presence even from a distance. His nostrils flared in anticipation

of her reentry into his sordid life. He wondered if he could ever hurt Kay as much as

she’d hurt him?

 He thought of Kay as one of the more colorful threads that weaved the intricate

pattern of his life’s design. On their last parting, Larkin had believed Kay was all that

he’d ever need to hold him together. They’d been high school sweethearts, each the

other’s first love at seventeen, and in the Biblical sense, but never in the backseat of a

car. He couldn’t speak for Kay, but for him, their passionate entanglement from their

teens to early twenties had unfolded slowly, deliberately, and with a life-long purpose.

After the past twenty years without seeing Kay, that purpose now seemed pointless.

 When Kay had broken up with him in college, his head stayed unscrewed for

a long time. Yet he felt his losing Kay had kept him alive during his Gulf War hitch.

He’d already felt dead . . . buried in anger and chin-deep in sand. Two decades later,

her essence crept under his door and stirred past feelings, even from the hallway

outside his office. Her scent seemed to slither like a serpent, smothering him in

its coils and ready to swallow him whole.

 Agitated, he got up from the weathered recliner with a squeak of its rusted

hinges and went to the door. He knew nothing about her life without him; that was

too painful for him to imagine—out of sight, out of mind—till now.

 He sensed that Kay was hesitant, probably ready to change her mind and leave.

Reaching for his suit jacket hanging on the doorknob of the adjacent closet, he quickly

put it on and straightened his tie, still rumpled from his afternoon nap.

 He startled Kay when he jerked the door open as if he were on his way out and

unaware of her presence. She put her hand to her quivering lips, just as he remembered,

with a supple bottom lip that he used to clench gently in his teeth, like an equestrian’s

light grasp of the reins subtly guiding her—one more time would be great.

 He stared blankly at Kay, giving her the chance to speak first. She looked as if

she might faint as her eyelids fluttered, so he broke the awkward silence.

 “I was just leaving to meet a client,” he said, acting as though he didn’t recognize

her, an absurd idea, since she looked as great as ever with her sleek, athletic figure filled

out, but in all the right places. “My secretary’s on vacation, so you’ll have to call next

week for an appointment.”

 “Tom, it’s me—Kay,” she said, pausing cautiously for his reaction.

 With the vision of calendar years rolling back to a time before they’d broken up,

he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. He didn’t want to be twenty years old

again. Hell, he didn’t even want to be thirty again, but a part of him wanted her back,

and to a time where nothing else mattered except their being together, maybe a cure-all

for everything that ailed that him.

 “Of course it’s you,” he said with a smirk to put her at ease, but also to scare her

a little, just for her own good. Tom Larkin was *poison*—or so she’d told him when she

gave back the engagement ring. “I knew it was you the moment you stepped off the

elevator down the hall, Kay.”

 Thrown by his remark, her eyes darted nervously back and forth.

 “Do you have a surveillance camera in the hall?” she stammered. “Is that how

you knew? Did you see me on a monitor from here?”

 “No. You’re wearing the same perfume you wore the night of the prom,” he

said, grinning when her expression showed she was guilty as charged using her familiar

scent for an edge.

 “Do you expect me to believe that you could smell my perfume through some

high-tech security device?”

 Tapping his nose with his index finger, he confessed, “Call it what you like. It

was animal magnetism back then—still is. Are you staying in the hall or coming in?”

 “You said you were leaving for an appointment.”

 “Just playing hard-to-get. I’ve tried everything else in the past, with no luck. I’m

too old to beg, but I will if you insist. Please, come in.” he motioned toward the sofa.

“Coffee?”

“Only if you are.”

 Entering the apartment, Kay clutched the collar of her spring coat defensively as

if she read his mind, but when he furrowed his brow in protest, she unbuttoned the collar

revealing the creased neck of a woman over forty with too much UV exposure at Long

Beach Island Exit 63.

 “Still two sugars and heavy on the milk?” he asked as he put on the coffee pot.

 “No. Black, but not too strong,” she said, removing her bright orange coat,

probably the latest fashion, but he wasn’t one to know or care. Revealing her trim

figure, Kay draped the coat over her arm and stood awkwardly in the middle of the

room. “If you prefer yours strong, Tom, just add water to mine.”

 “You don’t look like a watered-down version of the girl I used to know,” he

said. She appeared uncomfortable with his comment, her arms folded defensively.

“Just drape your coat over the sofa,” he said, rummaging through the fridge. He

sniffed the sour milk and stifled a gag, relieved she didn’t want any.

 “Nice location,” she remarked, but paused checking her tone. “I mean. You

know, Eastside, midtown . . . view of the East River and U.N. Plaza.”

 “You sound like a realtor.”

 “I have my license in New Jersey.”

 I suppose my condo is prime property, but I never get to look out the window.”

He grimaced with a shrug. “Sorry about the housekeeping. With my secretary, Mona,

on vacation, I have no one to tend to life’s details beyond the basics of my private dick

existence. Essentially, that’s—seek and find—lock and load.”

 Tom felt that Mona had been away too long already. In just three days of her

absence, decay was already settling in. Kay looked as if she were trying not to notice.

 “You’re single, so it doesn’t matter, Tom.”

 “Still, I feel like a squatter in this high rent neighborhood.” Seeing her expression,

he finished her thought. “I know, just like in high school when I was an Oakland low-life

kept late for detention and you were a Wyckoff cheerleader with a world of promise ahead.

 “We were just kids. *Clique chicks and bad boys don’t mix* was our sorority motto.”

 “Figures.”

 “Are you and Mona—you know?” Kay’s expression showed regret for asking,

even before all the words were out of her mouth.

 “She’s great at multi-tasking,” he taunted her. “But I assure you—*I never had sex*

*with that woman*.”

 She cracked a smile at his Clinton drawl, seeming to enjoy his wit and allowing

a mournful glance at the bad boy she once loved, but was now dead and buried under the

soil of lost expectations. Mostly hers, he figured.

 He called to Kay from behind the fridge door, “Sorry, I have nothing to go with

the coffee! I could order up some doughnuts or Danish if you’re hungry!”

 “I’m fine, Tom,” she said as he brought the coffee on a tray and set it down in

front of her on the coffee table, chipped and stained with rings ranging from coffee to

bourbon, even some blood. Running her delicate fingers around the floral patterns

on the arm of the sofa, she took a sip of coffee then hesitated to put the cup down on

the table.

 Tom grinned. “Please, Kay, by all means leave your mark.” With the old

poison coming to the surface, he said over the rim of his cup, “Your stain may be

the only memento I’ll have from our past . . . especially since they’ve torn down

the Milk Barn in Jersey where I’d carved *Tom loves Kay* into one of the beams.”

 Kay froze with the cup raised to her lips as tears welled in her eyes.

 He figured she probably thought her decision to contact him was a bad

one. Part of him felt glad—payback for all the pain he’d felt over losing her—

even though so long ago when he was still a stranger to the marred spirit that now

possessed him.

 “I’m not here for the reason you probably think, Tom. This isn’t about us

. . . there is no *us*. This is business . . . important painful business . . . and crucial

to a dear friend who needs your professional help.”

 He put down his cup and took a deep breath to regain the wind she’d knocked

out of him. His imagination of any rekindled flame between them which had momentarily

flickered, suddenly fizzled.

 He snapped angrily, “You could’ve just called me for that without putting me

through this agonizing exercise in futility. I’m in the book and have a Website, so your

boyfriend didn’t need your intercession to reach me.”

 “*Girlfriend*, Tom. My roommate from college has a desperate situation,” she

scolded him. Her expression seemed to ask—*Can you still be jealous after all these*

*years?*

 “Sally?” he asked, remembering her roommate from Douglass College, but what

stuck in his mind most was Sally’s disapproval of him. “No wonder she sent you as her

emissary; she’d rather die than come to *me* for help.”

 “It must be obvious why you’re her last resort,” Kay said with puppy eyes, but

nothing registered with him. “Her tragedy’s been dragged through the news for so long.”

 “Sorry. You’ve lost me. I’ve seen nothing in the news about Sally Simon,” he

said, but realized that was her maiden name. Still, he came up empty. “I guess Sally must

be married . . . Poor bastard, whoever he is.”

 “You call yourself a detective?” she said, seeming to enjoy watching him squirm

in his misery of self-pity over lost opportunities. Then she explained, “Yes, she married

then divorced, remarried and is widowed. Her married name now is Heidt, but her

daughter’s last name is from Sally’s first marriage, Sandler . . . her daughter is Joy

Sandler.”

 He felt foolish and flattered at the same time—*foolish* because Joy Sandler had

been missing for years and everyone had their opinion about who might have killed her

—*flattered* because someone believed he, Tom Larkin, could find her, even after all

others had failed.

 “I’m sorry for Sally’s loss,” he said with a shrug. “I never made that connection.

Didn’t even recognize her from all those news interviews. She hasn’t held up as well as

you over time.”

 “Her physical deterioration started about five years ago after the first anniversary

of Joy’s disappearance on Spring Break in the Caribbean,” Kay said sadly. “Sally and I

were like sisters before that, but her loss of Joy has drained the life out of her.”

 “What can I possibly do at this point, except give Sally false hope? The FBI,

the Colombian National Police, and Isla Rameras locals exhausted all their suspects.

Even if she’d been dumped at sea, her remains should have washed up long ago.”

 “I just need you to try. That’s all.” She put her hand on his arm. “This could

give her closure, knowing you ran through it all just one more time. She needs that.”

 “I sympathize, but if I do anything at all, it won’t be for Sally and it won’t be

for you,” he assured her. “Is the half-million still in the reward pot?”

 “What?” she stood up from the sofa and scolded. “Of course! That reward

money has been in escrow for years, but I need to know you’ll take this case for a

better reason than the reward. This is personal!”

 “It’s personal for me, too, but for Joy,” he assured her. “If Sally expects me to

move mountains to find her daughter, I’ll need that pot of gold to do what’s necessary.

Whether I find Joy alive or bring her murderer to justice, it’ll cost her half a mil as my

retainer. I’ll waive my expenses against that mother lode.”

 “What makes you think Sally has *that* kind of money?”

 “Her first husband is a retired cop,” he said with a smirk. “Ray Sandler was shot

in the line of duty, but while on disability, he won the New York Mega Millions lottery

worth about fifty million after taxes. Sally Sandler had appealed for a fifty per cent

property settlement on that fortune in divorce court.”

 Kay’s nose wrinkled with repugnance. She’d learned from painful experience

that the havoc of the poison he wreaked could be deadly. She was familiar with Larkin’s

wrong-side-of-the-tracks, down-and-dirty MO.

 “I have no financial authority,” Kay said with obvious disappointment in her

expression. “I’ll have to tell Sally what you want.”

 “What I want is to find her daughter alive. That’s all she needs to know,”

he said. “When the money’s in my account, I’m hers until I find Joy or whoever

killed her.”

 “Where will you start?” Kay asked as he helped her on with her coat.

 Leading her to the door then opening it for her exit, he said, “When it comes

to theft I follow the money, but with murder, I always follow the *blood*.”

 “Will you fly to Isla Rameras where she vanished?”

 “Not yet. The blood starts here in the good ole U.S. of A.”

 “Where?”

 “Jersey.”

 “I don’t get it, Tom.”

 “Joy’s *blood* father is a high roller in Atlantic City.”

 “I don’t think Sally knows that. They’ve had no contact for years. How do you

know?”

 “Retired cops have our own network.”

 “You suspect Joy’s father?”

 “Not particularly, but no one ever followed that trail,” he said. “Time to look in

other directions where someone might not have successfully covered his tracks.”

 “What could be the motive?” she challenged.

 “I don’t know, Kay. But if there is one, I’ll find it,” he assured her. “When Joy

Sandler arrived at Isla Rameras, maybe in someone’s mind, she was *dead on arrival.*

**Chapter 2**

**The High Roller**

 Ray Sandler wasn’t the type to lie low, Larkin recalled as he headed south on

the Garden State Parkway. Almost seven years ago Ray had publicly put up a half-

million dollar reward for anyone who could find his daughter or bring her killer to

justice. Larkin felt certain that offer was off the table now, so he felt no guilt about

asking Sandler’s ex-wife, Sally, to cough up the same amount just to get him jump-

started on the case. After all, she’d netted over fifty million in divorce court.

 He had no personal connection to Ray, but when Larkin had been processed in

Hackensack for back vacation and sick pay due to him from his switchover from New

Jersey law enforcement to the DEA, Ray was in the news about his disability from a

a bank heist in Teaneck that had ended badly on the New Jersey Turnpike.

 Ray had shot both bank robbers after a high-speed chase that resulted in his

killing both culprits in the cattail swamps of the Meadowlands. When his partner was

killed in the chase, Ray had New Jersey State Troopers for back-up. The story became

public knowledge through the local news, but later resurfaced in the national media

when Ray’s estranged daughter had vanished on Spring Break in the Caribbean. Larkin

hadn’t made the connection to Ray’s ex-wife, the Sally Heidt he had known in high

school and college, not until Kay Farr enlightened him.

 Since the only abduction case Larkin ever worked on before was to find his

own niece, he was relieved that Joy Sandler wasn’t kin. Still, the tie to Kay Farr was

enough to make him feel comprised. Though she and Larkin had been married to other

spouses after their college break up—seeing Kay again brought back feelings he’d

thought he had put to rest. Since his wife Vera’s murder, his single life with no strings

suited him just fine. But even with his firm belief that *you can’t go home again,* that

wasn’t enough to derail the express train in his mind bringing him back to Kay.

 His first resolution on the case was to assume that Joy Sandler was alive—not

easy considering the history. So he convinced himself that Joy had vanished yesterday,

and that he was now bringing the news to her father for the first time. With that mindset

and the five hundred grand wired to his bank account that morning, Larkin believed he

could convince himself of many things that would otherwise have been impossible. One

was that Kay could love him again. It was too late to ever change who he’d become, so

all he could do now was be the best at what he was, a finder, even if not a keeper.

\* \* \*

 Margate, directly south of Atlantic City, hadn’t caught up to the casino boom

as it remained in transition as a place where much of the ethnic minorities and hired

help humbly resided.

 Not a gambler, Larkin’s only connection to Atlantic City was the Steel Pier.

When he was kid, the Miss America Pageant every September was his only other link

to AC that he could still look back on with a smile. Perhaps Ray Sandler was always a

gambler, but Larkin couldn’t fathom why a man, after winning the long shot of the

Mega Millions jackpot, would spend the next decade throwing away even a dime of

it back to the casinos. In other ways, Larkin was a big risk taker, but no fool.

 Though the concept of a high roller’s lifestyle escaped him, he was told

by friends who enjoyed recreational gambling that high rollers were a rare

combination of natural luck and perks—especially exorbitant freebies on the

house. Many a wannabe high roller had bitten the dust ransoming their souls

in the process, so the real McCoy was a curiosity Larkin looked forward to

meeting.

 As he headed south at 8:00 AM, Ventnor Avenue displayed shops on the

east side with a few boarded-up windows with FOR RENT signs displayed. Pastel

high-rise condos lined the west side facing the marina on the bay. He turned left

off Ventnor onto Benson where Mexican day-laborers lined up at a Spanish mission.

At the end of the short block, he turned right, heading south on Atlantic Avenue,

the main drag along the beach front where he caught a glimpse of a National

Historic Site, the statue of “Lucy the Elephant.”

 Sizing up the neighborhood, he figured Ray must’ve done well for himself,

buying his home when the area was worth half its current value. With the price of

gas, it was probably cheaper for him to hail a cab to the casino, and also to drink

as many free cocktails as he wished without worry about a DUI heading home.

 He parked on the opposite side of the street of Sandler’s home as his

turn-by-turn navigation system let him know he’d arrived at his destination.

 “Will there be anything else, Mr. Larkin?” the female version of Hal

from *2001 Space Odyssey* inquired.

 “No thanks. But I look forward to the future when you can just beam me

up to my destination. Have a great day.”

 “You, too, Mr. Larkin.”

 Ray Sandler’s address disappeared from the screen. He got out of the car

and ambled slowly across the street, quiet with little traffic just before the beach

season started. The locals needed only five minutes to get to work at the casinos. It

appeared that Sandler recently added a second floor to the original structure of his

beach house, so Larkin assumed he still prospered from gambling.

 The house was probably worth three million a few years ago but, even with

the addition, worth less than two million since the recent real estate debacle. Larkin

wondered if that bothered a high roller, or if the mentality of a gambler even

considered the nuances of risk leveraging. He leaned on the doorbell and, after a

few seconds, half his answer stood in the open doorway.

 She was in her twenties with a perfect, though freckled, tan that accented the

long blond hair, natural and flowing—a rarity. Her bright hazel eyes took him in with

unnerving severity.

 After a paused silence of mutual assessment, she cocked her head in a gesture

for Larkin to state his business. “Vell. Who are you and vat do you vant?”

 “Tom Larkin, private investigator, I need to speak to Ray in regard to his

missing daughter . . . Joy.”

 “You vant to shpeak vit Raymont?” she asked with a whistling accent dripping

with sauerkraut.

 He kept his heels from clicking together as he said, “Ya.”

 “Vat ish your namp again?”

 “Tom Larkin. Tell him I’m a retired cop, like him.”

 “Vait here, Mr. Larkin. I vill ask if he vill see you.”

 When she turned to get Ray, she left the door open, so he stepped in and

watched from the foyer as she climbed an open staircase to the second floor. She

wore a lime green thong bikini giving Larkin a vision of ping pong balls tumbling

for a lottery drawing as her butt cheeks, bisected by a thin green line, rotated with

her ascent. He wondered if Ray kept her around as a good luck charm to remind

him of the Mega Millions bonanza he’d won.

 From the foyer, he heard Ray ranting, “What the fuck, Astrid! I don’t wanna

see anybody before I go to the casino. Bad—fucking—karma!” Then there was a long

silence and he saw Ray on the second floor landing tying his silk paisley bathrobe.

He tried to identify Larkin from a distance without his glasses, which he put on as he

lumbered on the staircase in awkward descent.

 “I’m sorry to disturb you so early in the day, Mr. Sandler,” he said in formal

mode. “But your ex-wife has hired me to assist in the case of your missing daughter,

Joy.”

 “Ya gotta be fucking kiddin’ me?” he said, pulling a crumpled pack of

cigarettes from his bathrobe pocket and lighting one with a lighter that looked like 24

karat gold. “It’s been what—almost seven years? We all need to move on. What does

Sally think anyone can do at this point? Has she gone nuts!”

 “Then why do you continue to keep the half-million-dollar reward posted on

the internet?”

 “Because I can afford to—that’s why!” Ray said proudly, as his pock-marked

cheeks turned red. “It’s a long shot, but worth the gamble to get Joy back . . . or at

least to see that her killers burn in hell.”

 “So you think she’s dead?”

 “I’m a gambler . . . so let’s just say, at this point, I wouldn’t take the odds on

her being alive.”

 He took a long drag on his bent cigarette then peered over the top of his cheapo

Walmart specs to assess Larkin from two ranges. When he came closer, the stench of

stale cologne and sweat closed Larkin’s throat with a defensive gag.

 “Where the fuck do I know you from?” he grimaced. “You we’re a cop, right?”

 Larkin nodded.

 “Yeah, I caught your drift from the second floor. I suppose if I hadn’t made my

big score on Mega Millions, I’d be a shamus now, just like you.”

 “I don’t think *just* like me. I’m one of kind. That’s why your ex hired me.”

 He motioned towards the staircase behind him. “A year ago I thought Astrid was

one of a kind, but I’m already tired of screwin’ her. I had a bald chick before her. I used

to rub her head before each draw at the table, my lucky charm. When I start to break

even, the charm’s over. I’m feelin’ the need for a redhead soon to sway the odds back

in my favor. Change of venue. ”

 “Personally, I’m o-for-two with redheads,” Larkin said. “and not looking for

strike three.”

 Ray nodded with an empathetic smirk.

 “Will you answer a few questions?”

 “What the hell. I’m not due at the tables till noon. I got in at four o’clock this

morning, so I’m not focused yet. Have a seat. Coffee?”

 Larkin nodded.

 “Astrid, bring us some java!” he shouted, as Larkin sat at the end of a sofa

and Ray sat in a tan, suede recliner. He cranked the chair open, making Larkin feel

like a proctologist with a view of Ray’s stained tighty-whities and varicose veins

on his hairy dimpled thighs. He was glad not to be eating or he’d puke.

 From the landing above them, Astrid snapped, “Iv you tink you can replace

me vit a redhet, you are mistakent, Raymont!”

 “Ya! Ya!” Ray smirked. “Just bring the damn coffee, weiner schnitzel!” Aside

he said, “Sometimes these Heinies forget we won the fuckin’ war . . . both of ’em.”

 “Where’d you find *her*? I must say, she’s stunning.”

 “Believe me, her looks ain’t the half of it. She could suck a cherrystone out of

its shell without shucking it.”

 That image wavered briefly in Larkin’s mind as he thought about his client,

Ray’s ex-wife, Sally. Whatever attracted that stuck-up cheerleader to this bum? His

ship hadn’t come in until after it was all over between them. Sally must’ve been bitter

about Ray’s bonanza because she’d tried to increase her alimony and child support after

his winning the lottery had hit the news. But when she remarried, money wasn’t an issue

between them, because her current husband had even bigger bucks than Ray, some kind

of mining, Larkin recalled, maybe diamonds.

 Except for the loss of her daughter, Larkin couldn’t feel sorry for Sally. Then

again, he never liked her in the first place. In college, he thought of Sally as a greyhound;

a sleek pedigree and always a fast bitch right out of the gate. He wondered, could that

mismatch have spawned the fate of a tragic end for their daughter, Joy?

 “You’ve got a great life for a retired cop with a bum leg, Ray,” Larkin said,

seeing no reason to keep up the formalities since Ray felt comfortable enough with

him to reveal his current companion’s unique sexual skill.

 “It’s a livin’ . . . a damn good livin’!” he said with a phlegmatic laugh and a

cough as he lit another cigarette. “So whaddaya want from me?”

 “I want to know your gut feeling about Joy’s disappearance . . . not as her

father, but as a cop.”

 “I wasn’t much of a cop when it came to investigations,” he shrugged with a

slap of his beer gut gradually emerging from his bathrobe, which loosened at the ties

with his hand gestures. The hairy globe looked like the top of a baby’s head emerging

from the womb. “I was good at the chase when I knew I had my perp dead to rites.”

 “Like when you tracked down the bank robbers in the Meadowlands and took

a shot in the leg,” Larkin offered, watching his round face morph to a sallow-toothed

grin. He assumed that he’d touched on Ray’s personal evaluation of that incident, which

had been less positively assessed by the department. There had been a rumor that, after

the robbers were bogged down in the swamp, Ray had disarmed one and shot himself in

the leg with the perpetrator’s weapon just to get the early retirement disability and a

commendation with a pay boost to the next grade. That was the inside department

buzz, but the blue wall never let it reach the public. IA swallowed their own gun

muzzles on the QT.

 “You heard about that in the papers, huh?” he said, rubbing the mound of his

belly.” I even got an interview on TV with *Geraldo*.”

 “I’ve seen it. The disability has put thirty pounds on you since then.”

 “And the good life from the Mega Millions,” he coughed as he lit another

cigarette. “You’re the shamus. What could I have done as a cop that I couldn’t do

as her father?”

 “Did you try to be objective . . . for Joy’s sake?” he asked, baiting him to

get a feel for what his emotional attachment was for Joy other than the genetic

connection.

 His smile turned into a pensive sneer. Larkin wasn’t certain if his reflective

pause was the predecessor to the gastric relief of a fart, or if something other than a

roulette wheel was actually spinning to some conclusion inside Ray’s head. When he

answered, Larkin was caught off guard.

 “Objective?” he blurted. “What kind of sick fuck are you? I take it you have

no kids, or you’re just one truly cold bastard! But I’m thinking both.”

 “Take it easy, Ray.” he held up a hand, wondering if Ray might get up and

throw a punch at him. “Just testing. You pass . . . you love Joy . . . and all this

schmaltz is your way of creating a shell around your hurt . . .”

 Ray put out his cigarette with a violent gesture that sent the crystal ashtray

sliding across the coffee table and clanking onto the hardwood floor with an echo

that brought Astrid the Valkyrie to the second floor landing.

 “Is everythink, OK, Raymont?” she shouted, her voice echoing from above

and her slender hand waving a 9mm pistol over the banister.

 “Ya-ya!” he shouted. “She’s also my bodyguard.”

 “Nice multi-tasking,” Larkin said with a wink.

 Ray waved Asrid off, but when Larkin turned back to Ray, he’d covered his

face with one hand and wept. Slowly, he raised his head, showed Larkin his tearful

eyes, and said, “You’ve got no respect for the dead. Get the fuck out of my house!”

 Larkin departed with mixed emotions, hating what it took to get his answer,

but glad for the feeling that Ray wasn’t capable of collusion to knowingly harm his

daughter. Yet, a final glance towards the second-floor landing made him wonder

about the complicities of Joy’s disappearance, and how third parties might take

advantage of the stressed emotions of a gambler, especially if his luck turned sour.

The cold stare from Astrid on the landing made Larkin think her relationship with

Ray had an ulterior motive that transcended her carnal gymnastics.

 As Larkin returned to his car and started the engine, he took a golf range-finder

from the glove compartment and scanned the second-story windows of Ray Sandler’s

beach house. He paused at the largest window that led to a balcony, probably used for

viewing sunsets on the bay. Behind the laced curtains, he saw Astrid staring back at

him with binoculars of her own.

 He put down his range-finder for a moment, cocked his head and opened his

mouth with a swirl of his tongue. When he looked to see her magnified response, he

saw her put the 9 mm pistol with an extended silencer into her mouth and fellate the

inside of her cheek.

 Yes. There was more to Miss Germany than met the eye. He was certain he’d

encounter Astrid again. He wondered how he’d go about disarming her and replacing

that pistol with a weapon of my own, and if it would have enough impact to stop her cold.

 Meantime, he needed to head north to Bergen County to talk to Tracy Hoffman,

Joy Sandler’s best friend, who’d last seen her alive before Joy vanished. From Tracy’s

news photos six years ago, Larkin saw that she was a looker, but at that time still under

age, even for his unabashed prurient interests. He figured the prospect of encounters

with two beautiful women in one day was his only perk on the long drive north.

 Later near the end of the three-hour drive back north to Bergen County, what

stunned Larkin, suddenly distracting him from Tracy Hoffman’s sallow newspaper

photo, was a CBS radio newscast, announcing that a former Mega Millions winner,

depressed from his gambling losses in Atlantic City the night before, had just plunged

to his death from the balcony of his high roller’s suite at the Trask Casino.

 Larkin felt bad for Ray Sandler, mostly because he’d been a cop, bad or

otherwise. Cops mourn for their own regardless of the circumstances. He was at his

peak when Larkin had spoken to him a few hours ago, so he had to wonder—with

his only daughter still missing and presumed dead, and he remaining divorced and

single—who were Ray’s beneficiaries? Regardless, his entry into this cold case, had

apparently struck a nerve with someone, at least giving him a glimmer of hope that

Joy Sandler might still be alive.

 **(continued next issue)**